

Film Reviews

Confessions of an Italian American.

By Fred Zara.

A Sketchbook Productions Film, 2007.

16 minutes. DVD format, color.

Average Community.

By Fred Zara.

A Sketchbook Productions Film, 2009.

86 minutes. DVD format, color.

Fred Zara's documentaries *Confessions of an Italian American* and *Average Community* provide vivid evidence of the post-baby-boomer Italian American's increasingly articulate, if troubled, sense of ethnicity and a willingness to turn this understanding into art. Both films are edited crisply and make sparing use of effects, preferring to allow their subjects, in one case a man and in the other a city, to speak for themselves. The former film begins with Fred Zara describing his father Joseph's unwillingness to speak before a camera and the means by which he was finally made to feel comfortable answering some questions about himself. What follows is a moving impressionistic portrait of a man as he discusses his past, his family, and his life lessons. Born in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1934, Joseph Zara, Sr., was raised by a strict, taciturn Calabrese-American father who himself was born in 1880. As Joseph Zara talks about his experiences growing up, his limited knowledge of the Italian language, and his opinions about proper behavior, the viewer who has had any contact at all with Italian Americans of Joseph Zara's generation can't help but think they've met this guy before. In other words, his – and by extension the film's – appeal comes not so much from its specificity as from its universality. Those well versed in the social history of Italian Americans will recognize the tacit generational conflict between Joseph, Sr., and his father, just as they will recognize the attitudinal similarities between the two – perhaps most notably in Joseph's opinions on proper female conduct. However, those viewers who know little about Italian Americans will be able to appreciate the fluctuation between continuity and discontinuity that characterizes *all* intergenerational exchange, Italian American or not. In another example of the complexity this has the potential to foster, Joseph Zara says that while he remains Catholic in spiritual belief, he would stop short of calling himself *Roman* Catholic because he doesn't like the idea of confessing his sins to a priest. Yet in the context of a film titled *Confessions of an Italian American*, here he is making the very sorts of confessions emblematic of his reticence to speak before a camera. However, precisely due to the self-conscious nature of the film's title, the viewer is not led to feel so much like a confessor doling out penance as another human being learning what it means to be human. The viewer of this documentary simply is not afforded the opportunity to sit in harsh judgment of Joseph Zara, Sr., but rather is welcomed into a sympathetic, intimate conversation with him – almost side by side with him on the living room sofa.

Average Community is another documentary whose universality emerges in spite of, indeed by virtue of, its specificity. The film chronicles Fred Zara's homecoming to the 2008 Trenton Film Festival, in which *Confessions of an Italian American* was a successful entry. During the homecoming, he engineers a reunion with all five members of Prisoners of War, a punk band in which he played with his brothers Joe and Chris as a teenager. The viewer learns about Trenton's former industrial glory — emblemized by the "Trenton Makes, The World Takes" slogan emblazoned on the Lower Free Bridge over the Delaware River — long since turned into postindustrial blight as a city once with a population of 128,000 has shrunk to 85,000 and still loses people with each census. Still, the city had a fervid punk rock scene in the 1980s, and Fred Zara and his gang of misfits found a home there, practicing in his parents' basement, playing shows for the punk rock faithful, and generally raising hell. During the moving reunion scenes, the viewer is invited to draw connections between the men as they are now in their thirties with the often troubled, disaffected boys they once were in their teens. The film packs a strong narrative punch, capturing the viewer's attention as the details of their old friend Stephanie's tragic death are learned and as Chris and Fred hire a private investigator in an attempt to locate their homeless friend Dave. In a voiceover, Fred Zara concludes that while Trenton doesn't really make industrial products anymore, it does still make people. It is here that the viewer is tacitly invited to compare Trenton with other small cities of the Northeast's industrial past. And just like *Confessions* might lead you to think that you know Joseph Zara, Sr., so does *Average Community* make you think you know Trenton. Those viewers who grew up in similarly rusted-out second-tier cities might be reminded of the titular average communities of their own past, places they may have left but that still hold a considerable influence over them, an influence that may not even be fully understood.

Although *Average Community* — unlike *Confessions* — does not explicitly reference the Italian-American identity of the Zaras, both films would make welcome additions to any course on Italian-American history, culture, or film. While the form and content of *Confessions* might remind the viewer of Martin Scorsese's explicitly ethnic *Italianamerican* (1974), *Average Community* would be most helpful in opening up a discussion on the production of the recent Italian-American artist, for whom an Italian-American identity may not be continually felt or regularly expressed but is still somehow present, just as it continues to be present in those average communities we never can fully leave behind.

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