

# The Per Niente

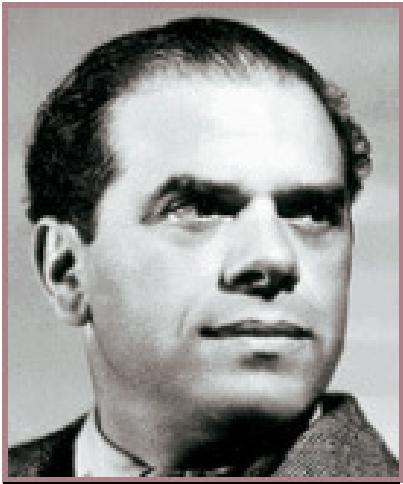
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**Frank Capra**

Although there were very few Italian Americans filmmakers in the early period of the movie industry, the first to achieve success was the remarkably talented immigrant, Frank Capra (1897-1991). Born in Bisacquino, Sicily, Capra and his family came to America in 1903 to settle in Los

Angeles. There he worked in various jobs and attended college before he entered the newly emerging movie industry working in the background as prop assistant, film cutter and gag writer for silent films.

His opportunity came in 1933 when he directed a comedy, "Lady for a Day." This opened the way for a bigger assignment in 1934 as he directed, "It Happened One Night," winner of academy awards in five categories including best director. The list of succeeding films he directed that won critical acclaim include, "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town" (1936); "Lost Horizon" (1937); "You Can't Take it With You" (1938); "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (1939); "Meet John Doe" (1941); "Arsenic and Old Lace" (1944); and "It's a Wonderful Life" (1946).

The latter film that celebrates the essential goodness of the individual, the family and the community served to reinforce fundamental values; it has become a classic that is shown regularly at Christmas time into the 21st century. Capra won Oscars for best director three times for commercial films and three times was nominated for the same. During the

Second World War Frank Capra enlisted in the Army where he produced a number of wartime propaganda movies that also won awards. Capra's films were mostly of the "feel good" type that left audiences with positive images of America in which wholesome, if naïve, crusaders were pitted against corrupt forces. They were designed to entertain and to restore mankind's faith in humanity.

Film historians also aver that Capra's films reflected his Italian heritage as, for example, key scenes unfold around the familiar kitchen table where families gather to eat and share. Even more, the sacrifices of his mother who bore 14 children, only seven of whom survived, was an example of courage. This notion of an unsentimental woman, caring and courageous, appeared in a number of his films.

Other Italian American directors of Hollywood's first half century include Gregory LaCava, known for zany comedies, and Vincente Minelli, whose lavish musicals "Meet Me in St. Louis"; "Zeigfeld Follies"; "An American in Paris"; and "Gigi" were huge favorites with movie audiences.

Interestingly, Capra's son, Frank Capra, Jr., is an accomplished filmmaker in his own right and currently serves as President of ScreenGem Studios in North Carolina.

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