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FILM REVIEW: Joseph Puleoâ??s â??Americaâ??s Last Little Italy: The Hillâ•

Description

Posted and reviewed by Larry Gleeson.



Americaâ??s Last Little Italy: The Hill, directed by Joseph Puleo and based on Rio Vitaleâ??s book, *St. Louisâ??s The Hill,* was a walk down memory lane for me as a history buff with family ties to the area around The Hill, an Italian enclave and the last remaining Litlle Italy in the United States. *Americaâ??s Last Little Italy: The Hill* explores the deep historic roots of the iconic St. Louis neighborhood and the Italians who immigrated to The Hill in pursuit of the American Dream of owning a home and starting a family. This is a project I imagine the likes of Martin Scorcese making â?? only Marty tends to stick to his own neighborhood in New York City (*Mean Streets*, and *The Oratorio*). Nevertheless, when he sees this film, I hallucinate heâ??ll be beaming with Italian Pride. *Americaâ??s Last Little Italy: The Hill* which screened at the recent St. Louis International Film Festival (SLIFF) is Joseph Puleoâ??s first feature and was the recipient of the Audience Choice Award at this yearâ??s Cinema St. Louis Showcase. Rio Vitale is credited as the filmâ??s Executive Producer.

With a smooth opening black screen coupled with non-diegetic chimes, the film meanders in the darkness before it reveals an interview with Msgr. Salvatore Polizzi. Msgr. Polizzi, a Roman Catholic priest and former associate pastor of The Hill neighborhoodâ??s St. Ambrose Catholic Church in the late 1960s and early 1970s, begins speaking about the general fear many Americans experienced going into an Italian community, â??And we were kind of happy there was a fear also.â?• The film transitioned as introduction titles rolled and the historical documentary was off and running informing the viewer of the setting with home videos and a still photograph of the most recognizable landmark in St. Louis, Missouri, The Gateway Arch. The editing and soundtrack are seamless and spot-on as both aspects enhanced the filmâ??s narrative.

With *Americaâ??s Last Little Italy: The Hill* Puleo provides an eloquent treatment of the Italian immigrant coming to America and settling into the area and becoming a part of the social fabric. Puleo utilized a plethora of black and white photographs, newspaper articles as well as a multitude of interviews with a wide-ranging assortment of Hill residents and extended family members sharing their experiences, strength, and hope. Fr. Polizzi arrived at St. Ambrose Parish in the late 1960s immediately immersing himself in the community. The early 1970s was a time of great social and cultural upheaval and brought changes to the area â?? think of Travis Bickleâ??s opening voice-over monologue in Scorseseâ??s *Taxi Drive*r. Fr. Polizzi and the men of The Hill neighborhood took matters into their own hands to ensure the neighborhood was kept intact and the darker elements were kept out. The women did the same (and more), to keep their Italian heritage alive and thriving. The nearby Shaw neighborhood by comparison (a war zone) didnâ??t fare so well.

For me, growing up in the Metro-East area of St. Louis and being a long-time St. Louis Cardinal baseball fan, my mother had friends on The Hill, notably Eleanor Berra Marfisi, a Berra family member, and author of *The Hill: Its History â?? Its Recipes*. Naturally, Mother informed me Lawrence â??Yogiâ?• Berra, a brilliant baseball player and manager, was from The Hill. Most baseball fans have heard of Yogi Berra and his Yogiisms as had I (â??When you come to a fork in the road, take it.â?•). However, I wasnâ??t aware of his 10 World Series Championships and the three Most Valuable Player Awards he earned while playing baseball for the New York Yankees. I was probably more familiar with The Hillâ??s Peabody Award-winning, and recipient of the Baseball Hall of Fameâ??s Ford C. Frick Award for outstanding broadcasting achievement, Joe Garagiola. Garagiola broke into the MLB with the 1946 World Champion St. Louis Cardinals Baseball Team. Within a runtime of seventy minutes, Puleo covers all this and much more including how and why The Hill, named for its proximity to the highest point in St. Louis, is Americaâ??s last Little Italy today.

Viewing *Americaâ??s Last Little Italy: The Hill* brought back a lot of memories including the above mentioned. Others included learning about St. Ambrose from my dear friend Mike Cucchi (pronounced Ë?koĺ•okÄ?), a standout soccer player and local college soccer coach who made gossip fodder when he â??finally moved off The Hill.â?• Niki Cusamano and Alisa Santangelo remain and are a part of the new generation of Italian-Americans who want to be a part of The Hillâ??s St. Louis Italian traditions. I can tell you whenever I visit family in St. Louis, I visit The Hill and Cunettoâ??s House of Pasta. Last visit my oldest brother Jim introduced me to Frank Cunetto, who is featured in the film as one of The Hillâ??s restaurateurs, and to our server at Cunettoâ??s, Vicki, a Hill resident of Sicilian heritage.

Americaâ??s Last Little Italy: The Hill TV premiere is scheduled for Monday, November 30th, 7 PM, with a second showing on December 6th, 4 PM on Nine Network PBS. DVDâ??s are also available in limited quantities on the filmâ??s Facebook page. Iâ??ve seen a lot of films this year and *Americaâ??s*

Last Little Italy: The Hill sits at the top!

Highly recommended!

Category

1. Documentary
2. St. Louis International Film Festival

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