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The Afterlife of a Classical Text: Representing Ethnicity in the Stage Productions of *Marty*

JONATHAN J. CAVALLERO

Ernest Borgnine's performance as Marty Piletti in director Delbert Mann's film *Marty* (1955) has become perhaps the most well-known fictional representation of Italian-American men from the 1950s. Originally a 1953 episode in NBC's *Philco-Goodyear Television Playhouse* (1948–1956) with Rod Steiger in the title role, the material was then adapted into a highly successful film that was released only two years after its original appearance on TV.¹ But *Marty's* presence in American popular culture extends beyond its enormous success in the 1950s. Both the television and film versions are widely available, and both are screened frequently in film and television classes. Additionally, two adaptations of *Marty* have been produced for the stage.² *Marty* was performed as a musical play in 2002, and the original television script was later featured as an invitation-only live stage reading at the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in the summer of 2012. Although both had limited exposure, they are nonetheless important to our understanding of *Marty*. This article provides critical analyses of the representations offered by each production. Additionally, through original interviews, it offers a backstage look at the production process of the stage reading and a descriptive analysis of the event, which is especially notable since copyright constraints prevented any recording of the performance.³

Taken together, the musical and the stage reading have provided an ongoing commentary about the social meaning, rhetorical use, and cultural significance of Italian-American ethnicity. As the cultural context surrounding Italian Americans has changed so too has the meaning of Italian-American representations in *Marty*. What once seemed progressive may now seem clichéd, harking back to a time when the full diversity of Italian Americana was ignored in favor of an easily defined experience characterized by an urban existence, a particular accented speech pattern, and a working-class background. Of course, these markers identified (and to a lesser degree continue to identify) many Italian Americans, but they do not and never have defined *all* Italian Americans. This is not to suggest that working-class life is an inadequate vehicle for the expression of universal themes or an understanding of American culture. I merely mean to propose that there is a great deal of diversity within the Italian-American community historically, and as scholars who concern ourselves with Italian-American ethnicity, we need to strive to speak about Italian-American experiences

rather than *the* Italian-American experience. Otherwise, we may perpetuate a very narrow definition of Italian Americans.

This problem became more pronounced when *Marty* was restaged with only minimal revisions. Political silencing and exclusionary racial practices had characterized the 1950s mediascape, and the McCarthy era's restrictive conservatism had limited the choices available to producers like *Philco-Goodyear's* Fred Coe. One of the program's regular directors (and the director of "Marty"), Delbert Mann, often lamented the ways in which the anti-Communist blacklist limited his casting choices and negatively affected not just his programs but the programming that television as a whole offered. "It was just beyond belief awful that the actors who previously had worked over and over and over again would suddenly no longer get calls," Mann wrote in his autobiography. "I feel that it was one of the major contributions to the start of the decline of the live television era" (Mann 1998, 37–38). This political silencing was exacerbated by the era's racism. Even if "Marty," under the supervision of progressives such as Coe, Mann, and screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky, worked to change the implications of ethnicity by offering a white ethnic character who represented the average everyman, the effect was tempered by the racially exclusive world in which the character lived. This was not unusual at the time, since most television programs took place in such a world, but that representation carried significant political consequences. As Judith E. Smith has written, "television drama thus became associated with a representation of universality that contributed to racial exclusion" (2006, 271). Of course, historical productions that confronted different institutional and historical conditions should not be held to modern standards, but when an opportunity arises to adjust those representations in a more modern era, producers' willingness or unwillingness to do so gives insight into notions on the general place of ethnicity in the present and also on how the meaning of Italian-American ethnicity specifically has changed.

The musical version of *Marty* seems to have offered little comment on the original, preferring instead to more or less resurrect a beloved character and narrative from the 1950s. This kind of nostalgic embrace laments a supposedly less complicated past and implicitly serves as a critique of the multicultural present where Italian-American neighborhoods and identities are not as isolated and easily defined as they once were.⁴ In order to facilitate such a critique, the musical mobilized some of the historical ethnic markers listed earlier (speech patterns, urban existence, working-class background) with apparently little regard for the generic or historical/cultural differences that surrounded the production. The live stage reading, on the other hand, downplayed the ethnic specificity of the Pilettis' neighborhood

and extended family, choosing instead to emphasize the characters' inability to conform to traditional notions of beauty, the treatment they endure as a result, and the generational conflicts that lie at the heart of the play. The live stage reading, then, moderated the play's Italianness in order to emphasize issues that cross ethnic boundaries and carry the potential to build multi-ethnic alliances.

Marty's journey from the screen to the stage was an arduous one; the first mention of such a project seems to come in 1969 when the *Wisconsin State Journal* reported that Chayefsky said he was "writing the lyrics for a musical version of his play 'Marty'" (*Wisconsin State Journal* 1969).⁵ That particular version of the narrative never came to fruition, but others did. After Chayefsky passed away in 1981, interest in a musical adaptation of *Marty* continued. Chayefsky's widow Susan and his son Dan were very protective of the writer's legacy, and together they declined several opportunities to sell the stage rights. In 1996, a team led by actor Jason Alexander finally convinced them to authorize a stage version of *Marty*. Alexander, a Broadway veteran, had risen to stardom on the strength of his Emmy-nominated role as George Costanza on *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1990–1998), and, according to trade press reports, Alexander's fame was instrumental in swaying the Chayefsky estate (Evans 1996).

Despite Alexander's involvement, *Marty's* production history would be lengthy and tumultuous. By the time the musical went before audiences at the Boston University Theater in November 2002, Alexander had left the project to pursue other television work, and the original librettist Aaron Sorkin had been replaced. Nonetheless, a number of prominent names were still involved. John C. Reilly had been cast as Marty, and famed Broadway composer Charles Strouse (*Annie*, *Applause*, *Bye Bye Birdie*) and his frequent songwriting partner Lee Adams (*Golden Boy*, *Applause*, *Bye Bye Birdie*) had written the music. The involvement of these stars along with the enduring popularity of *Marty* created enormous anticipation, and the musical broke "all previous advance sales records" at the theater (Hernandez 2003).

While a video copy of the musical is not currently available, much can be discerned about the show from published reviews and Strouse's reaction to those reviews in his 2008 autobiography, *Put on a Happy Face*. As Strouse acknowledges, critical reaction to *Marty* the musical was mixed, but one review, in particular, drew the composer's ire. He writes:

The local reviews ranged from superb to constructive, but (and this was a very big BUT), the *Variety* review—the only one to reach New York—said that John was *too* perfectly cast, and wasn't it a shame we couldn't find someone more different than the character so that the results might have

been more “invigorating.” . . . My personal reading of this was that they were suggesting a black actor who was perhaps more hip-hop or rock, but I’m overly sensitive to the prevailing winds. (2008, 285)

Rather than saying Reilly was “*too* perfectly cast,” Markland Taylor’s *Variety* review read, “Mark Brokaw’s direction is never less than sensitive, but if everyone involved had taken an entirely new approach to the Chayefsky material—extending even to the casting and portrayal of Marty—the results might have been invigorating, rather than merely familiarly present” (Taylor 2002, 35). Strouse’s suggestion that this critique was somehow calling for the casting of a racially different Marty is baffling. There is no indication of that anywhere else in the review, and Taylor’s suggestion that the show break with previous iterations of *Marty* lest it seem repetitive was not unique. Carl A. Rossi, for example, had suggested something similar, writing, “the essence of Marty and Clara lies in their homeliness . . . if they’re made to sing like an angel and dance like a dream, you may wonder why they have trouble getting a date on Saturday night. Messrs. Strouse and Adams’ intentions are good: keeping their leads as plain, awkward people—Marty and Clara’s voices are kept firmly in the middle register, nor are they made to dance—but they don’t allow their misfits to bloom, either” (Rossi 2002). Both Taylor and Rossi seem to suggest that the generic expectations of a Broadway-style musical and the ordinariness of Marty and Clara seem antithetical—a situation that appears to have little, if anything, to do with the racial identity of the musical’s protagonist.

Perhaps Strouse’s comments have less to do with the *Variety* review than with the failed efforts to bring the show to Broadway after its initial run in Boston. The composer reports that Gerald Schoenfeld, who worked with the Shubert Organization, requested a meeting with the musical’s principal creative personnel to discuss the possibility of staging it on Broadway. When Schoenfeld’s suggestion to cut the cast’s size in half was rejected, he asked the producers to meet two other conditions. First, no one was allowed to use an Italian accent; and, second, there could not be “a set that represented the front of a house in Brooklyn” (Strouse 285–286).⁶ Both suggestions, but especially the one about Italian accents, attempt to downplay the show’s ethnic Italian elements in favor of a more contemporary, multicultural vision.⁷ Schoenfeld’s suggestions endeavored to move beyond a nostalgic embrace of the 1950s in order to highlight some of the play’s other themes. He seems to have wanted the musical’s representation of ethnicity to be a minor aspect of the story rather than the story itself. It is easy to see how Schoenfeld might think that the use of 1950s Italian accents could add an unintentionally comic and possibly offensive angle to

the show, especially since Italian-American organizations were at that time protesting media representations of their ethnic group on programs like *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007).

In the forty-nine years since “Marty” had first appeared on television, cultural attitudes had changed. A more diverse (though still somewhat narrow) range of Italian-American media representations was being offered, and Italian Americans had further assimilated into the American mainstream. Those sociological and cultural changes had implications for how ethnic representations would be received (Hall 2010, 77–88). As Stuart Hall has shown, the cultural, historical, and institutional norms that surround a program’s production (its “encoding,” in Hall’s language) and its reception (its “decoding”) have profound effects on the representations a production offers and how those representations are understood by an audience. In Hall’s model, the cultural surround is inextricably linked with the program and its representations. Thus, the show becomes a kind of cultural artifact that reveals aspects of the culture(s) that produced and consumed it. The concern that Schoenfeld seems to have had was that the musical’s new representations did not update the material enough. After all, “Marty” was encoded in a time with much different norms, and Schoenfeld might have worried that the ethnic representations, in particular, would not translate very well in a more modern era.⁸ Strouse rejected this position and the conditions Schoenfeld had laid out, writing that the absence of Italian accents was an “odd and unmeetable” demand. As of this writing, *Marty* the musical has yet to be performed on Broadway (Strouse 2008, 286).

Ten years later, however, actor/producer Patricia Bethune’s decision to moderate (not erase) the 1953 teleplay’s Italianness would add considerable weight to the Television Academy’s live stage reading. Bethune’s involvement with the stage reading began during a meeting of the Academy’s Activities Committee in early 2012. At some point during the meeting, the discussion had turned to the live stage readings that Jason Reitman had been directing at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Throughout the 2011–2012 season, these one-night-only performances had brought together contemporary Hollywood stars and classic scripts.⁹

As the Activities Committee members discussed the live reads, one member wondered if similar events could be staged at the Television Academy, bringing together classic television scripts and today’s TV stars. The committee was enthusiastic about the idea and asked Bethune, a committee member, to produce the first event. Bethune immediately thought of “Marty.” “That’s the [early television show] that everyone knows and cares about,” she said in 2012, “It really broke through and changed everything” (P. Bethune, telephone interview, June 7, 2012). Bethune had

seen the film version of *Marty* years before and had been drawn to Borgnine's performance, especially since the character reminded her of her own working-class, non-Italian father. Bethune thus recognized the broad appeal of the material immediately, and as a result of that viewing, she later watched the TV version of "Marty" and *The Catered Affair* (Richard Brooks, 1956), another film that was based on a Chayefsky television script and starred Borgnine.¹⁰

But it was not just the teleplay's significance to early television history that attracted Bethune. The producer/actor also believed that the fifty-nine-year-old script continued to be relevant to contemporary audiences, not necessarily because of the ethnic representations but rather the connections between economics and family that the play presents as well as the relationship issues that the play confronts. In Bethune's estimation, a sluggish economy had led more young adults to move back in with their parents, and the ubiquitous presence of new technologies and social media sometimes enabled the kind of cruel treatment that Clara and Marty lament in Chayefsky's teleplay. "There's no difference in hurting feelings by breaking up over Twitter or pawning someone off on someone else in a dance hall," Bethune contends (P. Bethune, telephone interview, June 7, 2012). Bethune was obviously enthusiastic about *Marty*, but before the play could be performed she needed to secure the necessary rights and permissions from Paddy Chayefsky's son Dan, who co-owns the rights to *Marty* with MGM. Initially, Dan Chayefsky was hesitant about the idea. "I feel a responsibility that I can't guarantee that I can fulfill, because I'm not my father," Chayefsky says, "I don't have the consciousness that he had about the material" (D. Chayefsky, telephone interview, July 13, 2012). On one hand, the younger Chayefsky was grateful for the continued attention his father's work receives. On the other, he did not want to authorize adaptations or re-stagings that might damage the standing of the original. Bethune's insistence that the script continued to be relevant along with her assurance that her casting would modernize the material swayed Chayefsky, who had worried that *Marty* might seem dated in part because of the play's historical ethnicity.¹¹

With Chayefsky in agreement, Bethune began assembling her cast. Her choices were based on three principles. First, she wanted actors who were enthusiastic about participating in the event and ones that she believed would deliver high-quality performances. Second, she wanted actors who represented each of the major television networks. And third, she wanted actors who would not be competing in the same Emmy category. These casting practices would ensure a more democratic representation of the Television Academy's membership while lessening the chance that the

event would turn into a competition. Noticeably absent from this list is the actor's ethnic background (although, as will be shown, this does seem to have been a factor in the casting of at least two of the play's most prominent roles) or their ability to speak with an Italian accent. "I am not making anyone do Italian accents," Bethune had assured Dan Chayefsky, "It's *not* about the accent" (P. Bethune, telephone interview, June 7, 2012). For Bethune, the accents were a potential distraction from the themes that she believed continued to make the play most relevant to twenty-first-century audiences. Had the entire cast mobilized character traits that were relatively homogeneous, the distraction would have been even more apparent.

Despite the backing of the Television Academy, Bethune rarely got to speak to potential cast members directly. "I had to write my feelings about [the project] and hope that their publicist or manager would actually pass it along to them," she remembers (P. Bethune, telephone interview, June 7, 2012). Ray Romano was the first to sign on to the project. "It was a piece that was always very close to him," Bethune recalls. "He changed [his whole schedule] around to be able to be there. That's how much it meant to him" (P. Bethune, telephone interview, June 7, 2012). Next, Bethune turned to the role of Teresa, Marty's mother. While Bethune wanted a multi-ethnic cast in order to moderate both the original's ethnic specificity and the possibility that some theatergoers might see *Marty* as a play that was about *only* Italian Americans, she nonetheless recognized the importance of acknowledging and retaining some of the original teleplay's Italian/Italian-American aspects.

This desire for fidelity may have been tied to characteristics that (rightly or wrongly) continue to be attached to Italian-American ethnicity. Bethune's casting of Brenda Vaccaro, an Italian-American actress who had been friends with Paddy Chayefsky and was happy to perform one of his scripts, in the role of Marty's mother placed actors with Italian-American backgrounds in two of the play's most prominent roles.¹² This worked to "explain" the relationship dynamics. Marty's willingness to show consideration for his mother's feelings even if that means delaying his pursuit of his own desires may seem somewhat strange for an American audience, given how steeped U.S. mythology is in individualism. Perhaps, for some, it would seem less strange if the actors (and by extension their characters) were marked by a culture routinely associated with strong family backgrounds, overbearing mothers, and immature sons who cling to their adolescence rather than accepting the responsibilities of adulthood.¹³ This is not to suggest that the stage reading crudely mobilized all of these clichés, but the long-standing history of their existence may have informed the representations that the stage reading offered.

With Romano and Vaccaro in place, Bethune began filling the other roles. She approached Anna Gunn after a Television Academy event that featured the cast of *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013). Gunn, who was familiar with *Marty*, was happy to play the role of Clara/The Girl telling Bethune, “Just tell me the day and when, and I’ll be there.” Dermot Mulroney was also enthusiastic about being included. The actor had studied *Marty* in college, and he jumped at the chance to play Angie. Bethune later cast Loretta Devine in the role of Aunt Catherine; Pauley Perrette and Raymond Cruz in the roles of Virginia and Tommy, the married couple who struggle with Catherine’s constant presence; and Max Adler, Joel McHale, and Cleo King in a variety of bit parts. With her cast assembled, Bethune made a bold decision. She felt that the actors were already being “very generous” with their time, and she believed that it would be difficult to schedule rehearsals given the variety of scheduling conflicts that might arise. As a result, the live stage reading at the Television Academy would be the first time the cast would read the script together (P. Bethune, telephone interview, June 7, 2012). In order to allow them to prepare, Bethune sent each of the actors a copy of the script along with a note that described how she saw the character and what function she thought the character served in the play. Over the next several weeks, Bethune informed her actors which stage directions she would be reading, which ones she would not, and who the other members of the cast were so that the actors could “get a visual of who they were talking to” (P. Bethune, telephone interview, June 7, 2012).¹⁴

The live stage reading of *Marty* took place at the Academy’s Leonard Goldenson Theater on June 4, 2012. Upon entering at the rear of the theater, attendees saw a stage that featured eleven white chairs arranged in a semi-circle. Nametags lined the front of the stage, identifying each of the actors, and images of 1950s New York were projected on a large screen behind and slightly above the chairs while music from the likes of Frank Sinatra (a noticeable Italian-American marker) and others played over the sound system. The event began with a nearly seven-minute video, assembled by Bethune and Bob Telford from the Academy Archives. Featuring Mann, Borgnine, Max Wilk, James L. Brooks, and Nancy Marchand, the video (which as of this writing is available on YouTube) provided a brief history of the production of both the television and film versions of *Marty* along with a discussion of the TV program’s historical and artistic significance. After the video, an Academy representative acknowledged the sponsors who had helped to make the event possible, thanked Dan Chayefsky for allowing the reading to take place, and then introduced the cast. Each actor walked onstage to applause and carried a black binder with a color insert cover that identified the binder as the *Marty* script.

With all of the actors seated, Bethune began: “FADE IN: A butcher shop in the Italian district of New York City.” Romano sat with his script in his lap, pretending to use a meat slicer, as he spoke *Marty*’s first lines. The reading progressed smoothly, and it became clear that *Marty* still resonated with an audience. Theatergoers sat rapt throughout the entire performance, listening intently to the dialog. On multiple occasions, the audience went from laughing in one moment to being on the verge of tears in the next—a demonstration of just how powerful Chayefsky’s artistry remained. To varying degrees, Bethune and Dan Chayefsky had been concerned that the material would seem dated to the audience, but whenever something of that nature came up during the reading, it seemed to enhance rather than diminish the audience’s enjoyment. In one such example, during the play’s second act, Teresa and Aunt Catherine discuss getting older. “What shall become of me?” asked Loretta Devine in the role of Aunt Catherine. “These are terrible years. I’m afraid to look in the mirror. I’m afraid to see an old lady with white hair, just like the old ladies in the park. Little buns and black shawls waiting for the coffin. I’m fifty-six years old. What am I to do with myself?” Devine, who was sixty-two at the time, and Vaccaro, who was seventy-two, laughed with each other as an audience that included several individuals who had passed the age of fifty-six joined with them. Importantly, it was not the representation of ethnicity that was humorous or dated here but the representation of age.¹⁵

The cast, despite this being the first time that they had read together, demonstrated a detailed knowledge of the script. In between acts, cast members would swap chairs, allowing actors who shared upcoming scenes to sit next to one another. Rather than recycling previous performances of the material, each actor played his or her part in a unique way. For example, Ray Romano, well known as a comic actor from his Emmy Award-winning performance as Ray Barone on *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS, 1996–2005), played *Marty* in an emotionally restrained manner. Neither as melancholy and weepy as Steiger nor as ebullient as Borgnine, Romano’s performance conveyed *Marty*’s complex and conflicting emotions without resorting to parody or leaning too heavily on Romano’s obvious comic gifts. Romano’s performance then worked against the notion that Italian Americans are overly emotional and foreshadowed his performance as the more serious and socially awkward photographer Hank Rizzoli on *Parenthood* (NBC, 2010–2015).

Nevertheless, at times, some members of the audience struggled to shake the memory of Romano’s comic past, laughing at lines that were not meant to be funny. One such moment came during the play’s famous “blue suit-gray suit” monolog. In the scene, *Marty*’s mother badgers him about

going to a dance at the Waverly Ballroom. Marty, who privately wants to avoid the pain of rejection, is resistant, publicly saying he would rather stay home and watch Sid Caesar on television. However, his mother is insistent, saying that he should put on his blue suit or gray suit and find his future wife lest he “die without a son.” After much hounding, Romano as Marty snapped, “Ma, the blue suit or the gray suit. I’m a fat, little man. A fat, ugly little man.” A few audience members could be heard chuckling, if only briefly. Romano’s fine performance and the seriousness of the line make it likely that such reactions were inspired by the memory of Romano’s past roles (or the fact that Romano himself hardly appeared fat, ugly, or little onstage). But when the actor barked Marty’s next line, “That’s what I am!” the laughter quickly subsided and the script’s seriousness won out. It seems that initially some audience members were reading new material through an old lens. Not yet familiar with Romano’s more serious, dramatic work, these theatergoers (at least initially) decoded his performance as another iteration of his more famous comic persona.

While Romano’s Italian-American roots are a prominent aspect of many of his fictional characters as well as his star image, most of the reading’s other actors do not claim Italian heritage.¹⁶ By freeing the actors of the need to conform to working-class Italian-American accents and overly expressive body language, Bethune allowed them to move beyond ethnic imitation. Using their own voices made it less likely that audience members would be distracted by the spectacle of known actors mobilizing accents that were foreign to them, and the play benefited as a result.¹⁷

For example, in the second act, Gunn sat silently for several minutes while two unnamed male characters (one played by Joel McHale and the other by Max Adler) discussed who would take Clara (Gunn’s character) home. At this point in the script, McHale’s character has been set up on a blind date with Clara, but he does not find her attractive. After seeing a female friend with whom he would rather spend the evening, he offers Marty \$5 to take Clara home. Marty, who has endured similar treatment in the past, is appalled by the cruel nature of the offer and says as much to McHale’s character, who quickly shuns our hero and approaches the more agreeable Adler. In both the TV program and the movie, the character played by McHale is performed as a selfish, disinterested individual who, like Marty, seems to be in his mid-thirties. McHale played him in a much more dynamic, youthful way, and Adler followed suit. In McHale’s and Adler’s hands, the characters were not just trying to get rid of a date, they delighted in the (to them) brilliant plan that they had hatched. McHale’s voice was crisp and strong and his body language was dynamic rather than the more mumbled, secretive tones and lethargic body language of

the character's film and TV counterparts. The young characters were so bound up in their own cleverness that they were blissfully unaware of the emotional damage they were causing. The audience responded to them in kind. While the characters were not entirely likable, they carried a kind of repulsive charm—more misguided young boys than malicious men fully aware of their treachery.¹⁸

As Gunn continued to sit quietly, Bethune's stage directions described how Clara (who Marty's mother says "doesn't look Italian") silently rejected the offer of a walk home, how Marty witnessed the entire scene from afar, how a shaken Clara scurried out of an exit and onto a fire escape, and how Marty followed her and eventually asked her to dance. As the scene unfolded, Gunn, who had yet to speak, began crying silently. Pulling a tissue from her pocket, she softly dabbed her face as the tears fell from her eyes. Reviewers of earlier versions of *Marty* have been quick to criticize the casting of Clara. Both Marchand (in the TV version of "Marty") and Betsy Blair (in the film version) were deemed too traditionally attractive to be believable in the role of a homely woman in her late twenties. A similar statement could be made about Gunn. But that criticism is predicated on the notion that physically attractive people's looks have allowed them to avoid insecurities and cruel treatment of any kind. Gunn's physical presence in the theater stripped away the glitz and glamour associated with the big and small screens. Her genuine reactions to the scene had the effect of humanizing the character and allowing the audience to identify with her pain.

Gunn's unique take on the character also led to a slightly less assertive Clara, especially in the scene where she and Mrs. Piletti meet for the first time. After some initial pleasantries, it becomes clear that Mrs. Piletti's notion that a mother should continue to live with her son after he is married cannot be reconciled with Clara's more modern idea that married couples should have a home to themselves. As Vaccaro hurled questions at Gunn, Gunn almost immediately retreated to a more conciliatory tone. Marchand and Blair had both been more assured and assertive in their performances of this scene. Gunn spoke the same lines, but she was more timid. Her voice was softer, and she made less eye contact with Vaccaro. Almost sixty years had passed since Chayefsky penned *Marty*, but Gunn's performance rendered a less modern if perhaps more believable Clara. Here the insecurities that Clara would feel not just in her interactions with potential suitors but also with other women were emphasized. Clara's recognition of and deference to Mrs. Piletti's cultural norms—norms with which Clara disagrees but of which she wants to be respectful and sensitive—only intensified the situation and added another layer to Clara's uneasiness.

Dermot Mulroney's performance as Angie made the character smarmier and less pathetic. Whereas Adler and McHale had worked to make their unappealing characters more young and likable, Mulroney endeavored to make Angie more repellent. In the TV and film versions, Marty's best friend, played by Joe Mantell, struggled with the possibility that Clara might soon replace him. While Angie's actions were self-serving, they seemed to garner some sympathy from the audience since he did not seem fully aware of the emotions that were driving him.¹⁹ In Mulroney's hands, Angie became more aware of his selfishness. The actor played the character with a near constant smirk on his face, slouching in his chair at times, and sighing frequently to convey his impatience with Marty and Marty's attraction to Clara. The absence of an ethnically specific world made it less likely that audiences would dismiss Angie's actions as culturally specific. In other words, the material moved closer to non-Italian-American viewers who could not use ethnic difference to distance themselves from the material. This was an important move for the play to make since movies and television shows from *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977) to *Jersey Shore* (MTV, 2009–2012) to the more recent *Don Jon* (Joseph Gordon-Levitt, 2013) often frame Italian-American men as undesirably chauvinistic, sexist, and aggressive. By stripping *Marty* of some of its Italian-American specificity, the character of Angie became a comment on some forms of American masculinity and avoided the clichéd, often derogatory representation of Italian-American men. Thus, the stage reading bucked the media's willingness to divide individuals along ethnic lines and highlighted our shared struggles.

Raymond Cruz's performance as Tommy (Marty's cousin and Catherine's son) and Pauley Perrette's as Virginia (Tommy's wife and Catherine's daughter-in-law/nemesis) also emphasized aspects of the characters that were not apparent in previous versions of *Marty*. In a scene from Act I, Virginia and Tommy ask Mrs. Piletti to allow Aunt Catherine to live with her. Perrette played Virginia as an anxious, unsure-of-herself young wife with a mother-in-law problem. Sitting in her chair, she bent at the waist and moved in a somewhat sporadic manner, as she leaned inconsistently toward and away from the other characters. She stammered over her words as she relayed her problems with Catherine's constant presence, appearing both edgy and unsure of herself. The performance simultaneously conveyed how frazzled Catherine had made Virginia and how desperate Virginia was to have the problem addressed. Cruz (Perrette's on-stage husband) sat in his chair, bent at the waist, his legs spread wide apart as he looked down at the script he held in both hands. His performance as Tommy seesawed from vitriolic rants to comments spoken in whispered, secretive tones to Marty, the only male relative in the scene

and the individual to whom he feels he can confide. Cruz played Tommy as the henpecked husband, who is simultaneously fearful and annoyed at the prospect of brokering a peace between his wife and his mother. As Virginia/Perrette became more flustered, Tommy/Cruz struggled to contain his own nervousness and sometimes failed to subdue the anger that rested just below the surface.

In the 1953 television version of “Marty,” Betsy Palmer had played Virginia as irritated and angry, speaking in a sharp voice and gesturing heatedly with her hands. Lee Phillips had played Tommy nervously, constantly fidgeting with his fingers, only speaking in mumbled, muted tones, and looking down at the table in an effort to avoid eye contact. In the live stage reading, Perrette and Cruz played the roles in a radically different way. Now Virginia was nervous, and Tommy was irritated and angry. At times, Cruz as Tommy became so enraged that he stumbled over the words he was speaking. The performance was one of Bethune’s favorites. “I loved the spin he put on his role,” she recalls. “I thought, ‘That was something that wasn’t played in either of the previous versions, and should have been’” (P. Bethune, telephone interview, June 7, 2012). While Romano played Marty in a manner that diverged from his comic persona, both Perrette and Cruz’s performances drew energy from some of their most well-known roles. Cruz’s anger hinted at his prior performance as Tuco Salamanca, an unstable Mexican drug lord on *Breaking Bad*, while Perrette’s high-energy Virginia echoed her performance as the overcaffeinated tech geek Abby Sciuto on *NCIS* (CBS, 2003–present).

In the play’s final scene, Marty meets with Angie and two of his other male friends. The guys make fun of Clara and tell Marty he should not call her, but eventually our eponymous hero discounts their objections. With the receiver in hand, Marty turns to Angie. “Hey, Angie, listen,” Marty says. “When are you going to get married? You know, I mean, you’re thirty four years of age. All your brothers and sisters are married. When are you going to get married? You better get married, because if you don’t you should be ashamed of yourself you know.” Clara comes on the line (although we do not hear her voice), and Marty closes the phone booth’s door. With the dialog concluded, Bethune read the play’s last stage directions, and the audience burst into applause giving the performance a standing ovation.

Bethune had promised Dan Chayefsky that she would use her casting choices to make the piece more relevant to a 2012 audience, and she had followed through by deliberately assembling a multiethnic cast and allowing them to speak in their own voices. As a result, none of the cast members felt the need to cater to exaggerated patterns of accented speech in order to be “true” to the original material. From the stage came a cascade

of accents—African American, Latino, Italian American—creating a kind of harmony that carried transformative potential—a potential that is seldom realized in a world and an industry that still often seeks to divide individuals by classifying them into different racial and ethnic groups. Bethune’s choices allowed the play to shift some of its attention from the way the actors spoke to the problems they faced, thus highlighting issues that are prevalent within, yet stretch beyond, Italian-American families and communities. Here the markers that were once used to identify Italian Americans as obviously different were subdued in favor of multiethnic representations that subtly recognized differences but stressed commonalities. Further, Bethune’s revisions created a stage reading that rejected the notion that the past was preferable—an admirable move since the so-called simplicity of the 1950s ethnic landscape was often built on racially exclusive policies.

Nevertheless, Bethune’s approach may raise concerns, especially on the part of some Italian Americanists. After all, the ethnic specificity of *Marty* is perhaps the most important aspect of the material for those of us who specialize in ethnic representations, and toning down the play’s Italian markers might offer the impression that the “twilight” of ethnicity has indeed been reached. Relatedly, it could be argued that Italian-American specificity had been replaced with the middle-class homogenization of cultural life. It is important to remember, however, that the stage reading included actors from various ethnic backgrounds and allowed them to preserve their ethnic accents. In this way, Bethune embraced ethnicity while showing that some struggles transcend ethnic difference. The performance was best classified as an instance of ethnic plurality, rather than ethnic homogenization or erasure.

When it was first written in 1953, both the Jewish-American Paddy Chayefsky and the southerner Delbert Mann saw *Marty*’s ethnicity as incidental. Throughout his life, Mann would insist that the character’s experiences not be reduced to his ethnic background. “[Chayefsky] arbitrarily chose an Italian background,” Mann had written in his autobiography. “The story would work equally well with almost any specific setting where tradition, family values and concerns are strong” (Mann 1998, 60). It is difficult to imagine Mann returning to the point so frequently if most viewers recognized the program’s/film’s universal aspects already. Chayefsky, in fact, had based the characters on various Jewish Americans that he knew, and, for decades, Mann had kept fan letters (which are now available in the archives at Vanderbilt University) that recognized the story’s universal appeal. *Marty* may be a story about Italian Americans, but it is not *just* a story about Italian Americans. Despite its ethnic foundation, it is (and always has been) a story that appeals to individuals of various

backgrounds, and Bethune's decision to use an ethnically diverse cast was motivated by a desire to emphasize that cross-ethnic appeal.

Still, Bethune's decision to cast Romano and Vaccaro at the core of the stage reading carried significant meaning. Certainly, there was an effort to preserve some of the most well-known and identifiable aspects of the original play. But Bethune also seemed to recognize that despite the play's universal appeal there remain some dynamics that appear quite specific to Italian-American culture—or perhaps more broadly some ethnic cultures. Would Marty's commitment to his mother and his desire to respect her opinions, even if he disagreed with them, be as believable if he were nonethnic? Perhaps, but Bethune was not willing to take that risk. By keeping Italian-American ethnicity at the core of the stage reading's most prominent, familial relationship, Bethune ensured not just a sense of fidelity to the original but also the ethnic dynamics of the original's mother-son relationship.

Ultimately, Italian-American ethnicity is still very relevant today, just not in the same way it was in 1953 or 1955. Italian Americans as a group have progressed to a higher socioeconomic standing that includes positions of power in the media industries, and with that power has come a greater diversity of ethnic representations (although it still remains somewhat narrow) and a better understanding on the part of the general public of the kinds of diversity that exist within the community, making representations simply resurrected from the 1950s seem far more alien than they once were. Additionally, the multicultural adaptation of a text that once had a strong sense of ethnic specificity not only carries the potential to make the text more relevant to an increasingly multicultural world but also more relevant to many modern-day Italian Americans. After all, the majority of Italian Americans now live or work in multicultural environments where they interact with individuals of many different ethnic backgrounds. This was less the case in the 1950s when urban ethnic enclaves such as the one featured in *Marty* were more prevalent and isolated. By carefully moderating the specificity of Italian-American ethnicity, media-makers can help us to see the struggles that reach across ethnic lines while still acknowledging the importance of ethnicity today.

The specifics may change—Facebook and Twitter may replace some forms of face-to-face contact, for example—but the general struggles that we face remain relatively consistent. Perhaps this is why *Marty* continues to be of interest to artists from an array of ethnic and social backgrounds. Dan Chayefsky reports that “a popular television/stage actor” has approached him about a nonmusical stage version of the material, and “a prominent rap star/actor inquired about a movie remake” (D. Chayefsky, email comm.,

July 29, 2012). In 2006, Fox was developing a comedy series titled *Call Me Marty*, written by Danny Jacobson who had been a writer on *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988–1997) and *Mad about You* (NBC, 1992–1999). The series was to focus on “a blue-collar butcher from Yonkers, who winds up joining a snooty Westchester country club” (Schneider 2006, 5).²⁰ None of these versions have been realized, but one hopes that if and when they are, the artists will see the continued relevance of Marty and Clara’s stories today rather than trying to relegate their tale to a nostalgic notion of an ethnically specific past.

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Notes

1. When referring to the film version of *Marty* (and its script), this article will place the title in italics. The TV version of “Marty” (and its script) will be placed in quotation marks. If both versions are being referenced at the same time, the title will again appear in italics.
2. The appearance of live television-era plays on stage is not altogether unusual. Rod Serling’s television work has been performed onstage at both Ithaca College’s biennial conference on the writer and at Binghamton High School in Serling’s hometown of Binghamton, New York. In 2008, the Ithaca College Department of Theatre Arts helped to put on *Noon on Doomsday*. Binghamton High hosted a live stage reading of Serling’s television classic *Patterns* in 2012, which was produced by the Rod Serling Video Festival in association with S.T.A.R. (Southern Tier Actors Read). Additionally, although *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–1957) and *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969–1974) were not live programs, they too have been adapted to the stage. Scripts from *Lucy* were staged live in Los Angeles starting in 2011, and *The Real Live Brady Bunch* was staged in Chicago and Los Angeles in the 1990s.
3. Presently, reportage on the stage reading has been relegated to abbreviated writeups in the Television Academy’s magazine, *Emmy*, photos from the red carpet (or very rarely the actual reading), and online red-carpet videos that feature short interviews with Ray Romano and the reading’s other stars. See “Bringing back Classic TV with ‘Marty’ ” (2012) and Slate (2012, 80–81).
4. For a discussion of how immigrant neighborhoods have changed, see Kosta (2014). For a discussion on the dynamics of nostalgia, see Cook (2005) and Jameson (1991).
5. This clipping is typewritten on a notecard in the Paddy Chayefsky Papers at the Wisconsin State Historical Society. No author or headline is listed. The clipping is identified only as coming from the *Wisconsin State Journal* (July 23, 1969). The notecard reads, “Paddy Chayefsky said at Camelot he’s writing the lyrics for a musical version of his play ‘Marty.’”

6. Strouse suggests that the latter condition was motivated by Schoenfeld having seen similar house fronts in other shows (Strouse 2008, 286).
7. *Jersey Boys* opened on Broadway in 2005, not long after the discussions about *Marty* would have taken place. *Jersey Boys'* use of Italian accents and nostalgia for the 1950s and 1960s certainly did not impede its success. Nonetheless, that show's biographical/historical roots and its documentary impulse necessitate a somewhat different critical lens than the one used for *Marty*.
8. Hall recognizes that this is an imperfect process where a variety of meanings are often ascribed to these representations, but he is adamant that the processes of encoding and decoding are grounded in cultural, historical, and industrial contexts.
9. The first season consisted of six events, including nights that featured Steve Carrell, Pierce Brosnan, and Natalie Portman reading *The Apartment*; Laurence Fishburne, Cuba Gooding, Jr., and Terence Howard reading *Reservoir Dogs*; and Kate Hudson, Bradley Cooper, and Olivia Wilde reading *Shampoo*. The stage readings became so popular that later in the year *The Apartment* reading was restaged in New York with a cast that now featured Paul Rudd, James Woods, and Emma Stone, and a live reading of *American Beauty* featuring Bryan Cranston, Christina Hendricks, and Mae Whitman was performed at the Toronto International Film Festival.
10. While Bethune saw the universal appeal, it seems that not all viewers did. As will be developed later in the article, Mann's lifelong efforts to highlight the arbitrariness of *Marty's* Italianness indicate that some viewers still needed to be convinced of the character's cross-ethnic relevance.
11. In fact, Bethune and the Television Academy were not allowed to record or broadcast the live reading in any way.
12. Brenda Vaccaro played Gloria Tribbiani (Joey's mother) on *Friends*. She appeared in only one episode, "The One with the Boobies" (Episode 1.13).
13. See, for example, the representation of Italian and Italian-American man-children in *I vitelloni* (Federico Fellini, 1953) and *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973), respectively.
14. Bethune had seen other stage readings where the stage directions told the actors how to act. She believed that the best thing for the play would be to free up the actors to express themselves in any way they wished, and so she cut any lines that carried this potential. She was also mindful of the fact that stage directions might create unintentionally comic moments where the actors' choices would contradict the lines read by the stage director.
15. At another point in the performance, Mrs. Piletti offers Clara a late-night snack of either lasagna or a half of a chicken during their first meeting. The audience barely chuckled. Similar reactions accompanied many of the play's other ethnically grounded jokes.
16. For more on "star theory," see Dyer (2008).
17. Whether or not it is fair to obsess over an actor's performance of an accent is debatable. After all, doing so often allows a critic to focus intently on one small part of an actor's performance while ignoring the whole. Nevertheless, discussions of "good" and "bad" accents seem to be a favorite pastime of moviegoers and critics, as a 2009 *All Things Considered* story on National Public Radio made clear. During the piece, film critic Bob Mondello quoted a *New York Times* article in which George Clooney discussed his reasons for eschewing a Boston accent in *The Perfect Storm* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2000). "I'm a fairly famous guy," Clooney said. "When you suddenly hear me with a weird accent, it'll take away from everything else. I don't want the audience spending the first 15 minutes of this movie like the RCA Victor dog, trying to figure out what I'm doing." Fair or not, the use of an unusual accent can detract from a narrative and its themes by focusing audience attention on the actor's star image and real-life voice rather than the thoughts and emotions of the character they are playing. See "Awful and Astounding Movie" (2009) and Kennedy (2000).
18. Since recent television programs like *Jersey Shore* have generated a resurgence of the Italian-American Guido, it is possible that these characters from *Marty* might have

perpetuated that currently *en vogue* representation of Italian-American masculinity. Donald Tricarico has argued that the Guido not only works to narrate the history of Italian Americans but also represents a form of cultural resistance (2010, 163–199). Nevertheless, young, Italian-American, male characters such as Mike “The Situation” Sorrentino are sexist and self-centered to an extreme and lack any sense of self-awareness (or at least they are represented that way). The show’s aesthetics and its narratives highlight the characters’ supposed stupidity with audiences seemingly in on a joke of which the characters themselves seem ignorant.

19. Chayefsky acknowledged the play’s homoerotic elements, and Jon Kraszewski has provided an analysis of them. See Kraszewski (2010, 76–78 and 89–91) and Chayefsky (1955, 174–175).
20. The program never aired, and after a brief note in *Daily Variety* it was never again mentioned in the trade press.

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