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Acting Ethnic

George De Stefano (June 6, 2015)



Photo by George de Stefano

"It can be a rude awakening to see how you are seen."

Anthony De Vito talks about being "off-white" and saying no to Mob roles

Anthony DeVito has appeared in TV commercials for Dunkin' Donuts, American Express, Caesar's Atlantic City, and other brands. But the Brooklyn-based actor and sometime standup comedian recently passed on an audition for another commercial, and he's glad he did.

As DeVito informed his Facebook followers, the ad agency was looking for someone to play "a mob guy" in a spot for a brand of sausages. "The casting specs went on and on about how it was going to be smart comedy, not over the top, etc. Because there's a lot of room for subtlety in a 30-second commercial for sausages that hinges on the guy being a gangster."

When De Vito saw the commercial, he was appalled – but he also felt vindicated. The actor who got the

part "was in full Goomba regalia: shirt open, 'guinea tee' showing, two heavy gold chains, slicked back hair. The very essence of sophisticated humour. (Note British spelling.) And what made it even more clever was the double meaning of the word Family. Like, grill sausages for your family, which is also what they call the Mafia!"

"Bravo to everyone who worked on this project," DeVito sardonically concluded. "Be proud of yourselves."

DeVito says he has often encountered similar situations, in which casting directors seek actors of his ethnicity and blue-collar origins for stereotypical, even caricatured parts. His policy, he says, is "to just say I'm unavailable." He has gone on auditions for what he calls "mobster #2 parts, the guy dressed in black standing around in the background looking mean." He played a small role as one of Al Capone's bodyguards in an episode of the HBO series "Boardwalk Empire." Those experiences, he says, "led me to say to myself that this particular avenue wasn't for me."

"When you're an actor, they tell you you're not allowed to say no, if it's work you have to do it," he says. DeVito's agent told him that refusing gangster roles would hurt his career. It is advice he rejects. "You have to let go of that worry that if you say no you'll never work again," he says. "If you do a couple of those parts, then that's all you're seen for and seen as. I left a job in advertising that I hated, and I didn't want to create a new career that I also hated."

DeVito says that he has gone on auditions where Italian American actors "are performing their ethnicity for each other, using the most obvious signifiers of what an Italian American is like. It's all broad strokes and primary colors."

"I'm not judging anybody," he says of such colleagues, before adding, "Well, I kind of am. If that's what people want to do, that's fine. Everybody has to make their own decisions. I came to acting from a different point in my life. I'd already had decades of experience in the advertising industry. If I had started acting when I was 18, and that's all I did, and had no other way to make a living, then I might feel more compelled to take anything that came to me."

"I've read articles where Italian American actors take great offense that people are offended by mob roles. Well, you don't get to have it both ways. You're allowed to do whatever you want, and people are allowed to have a problem with it."

In DeVito's experience, ethnicity and class usually are intertwined, at least in the minds of casting directors.

"It can be a rude awakening to see how you are seen," he remarks. He says he has been called almost exclusively for blue-collar parts – "construction worker, plumber, but not lawyer, doctor, senator."

"It's been hard to get used to the fact that the way I look told people I didn't go to college," he says.

"I did play a doctor once, in an Italian movie." ("Natale a New York," [4] 2006). "I gave a Heimlich to Christian De Sica. It was the only time I got paid to wear a suit and tie."

DeVito, 49, is a big guy, six-foot-three and burly of frame, and he is a recognizably Italian American "type," with a broad face, close-cropped salt and pepper hair, and dark eyes framed by thick brows. Born and raised in Brooklyn, he currently lives in Bay Ridge, a neighborhood with a sizeable Italian American population. After working in advertising, he became a standup comedian, sometimes performing in shows with other Italian American comics. But he didn't like "going out on the road, which is the only way to make money as a standup comedian." About 10 years ago, he began auditioning for acting roles, first in commercials, then in TV series and films.

He says there are a "unique set of challenges for the 'white ethnic' actor," or rather, the "off-white" actor, as he describes himself. In the minds of casting directors, this means, "you're white, but not quite white enough for our purpose at the moment."

"When you're in the bucket of 'white' but the type you are isn't the traditional white with a capital 'W' – from Northern Europe or the British Isles – I think it limits the type of stuff you are considered for. I'm an actor and I audition for a lot of things, and like all actors I don't get most of them. I am always curious to see who got the parts, but more in terms of what they look like than anything else. I have yet to see a commercial that I didn't get where the actor looked like my physical type."

"If you're not really the 'white guy' it's kind of a limbo you're in," he says. "I've spoken to other Italian American actors who feel the same way, who have been doing this longer than me. It's just the way it is. It's frustrating, but from an actor's point of view, I'd rather know I didn't get the part because I looked wrong than because I wasn't a good enough actor."

Lately, though, DeVito's offers have improved. In May, he made his network TV debut in the Debra Messing NBC series, "[The Mysteries of Laura](#)," [5] playing a janitor. "My mother said she thought I should've had more lines," he laughs. "And I agree." He described the role as one "that helped move the story along, but it had a little personality, too." He will soon shoot a new Web series, "Labeled," playing the arrogant and obnoxious CEO of a Milanese fashion company. His character speaks English but refuses to because he despises Americans, so DeVito will speak only Italian in the series.

He also landed a role in "Future 38," an independent feature directed by New York filmmaker Jamie Greenberg. The film is a time-travel comedy about a man who must save the world by traveling from 1938 to 2015. "I'm playing Bitter Herb," DeVito says. "He's a tough guy who works for his nogoodnik boss, Matzoh."

DeVito also has shot a pilot for a TV version of the popular storytelling podcast, "RISK!"

Besides acting, DeVito is the communications director for [The Art of Brooklyn](#) [6], an arts and culture nonprofit he co-founded. The company produces the annual [Art of Brooklyn Film Festival](#) [7], the only independent festival focused entirely on Brooklyn-centric films and filmmakers. This year's edition, held in May, was its fifth and most successful, having screened 53 films – narrative features, documentaries, shorts, and animation. "It's grown every year," DeVito proudly remarks. Art of Brooklyn also produces Brooklyn on Demand, a streaming video on demand hub devoted to Brooklyn-centric indie films.

DeVito notes that an actor's life is "feast or famine, with long dry periods of nothing going. Then you will suddenly get a flurry of auditions." He says he is working on building relationships with casting directors – it's crucial that they "know you're reliable and not insane."

"It takes a while to build those kinds of relationships with people who know you're good and who will keep calling you in, and hopefully you'll get the parts."

"In the past couple of years," he adds, "I've also made it a point to be much more on top of promoting myself in social media so people will know I'm working. When people know you're working, they'll work with you."

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