

Cu'Fu is what's good for you



JOE FIORITO
City columnist

I'm walking down the street the other day with Calogero — "Call me Charly!" — Chiarelli, the Sicilian-Canadian actor, blues harpist, storyteller, librettist and playwright.

You don't know him?

Where've you been?

We're on our way to Little Italy; Charly's going to pass around some leaflets for his one-man show, *Cu'Fu*. He does that a lot, by the way; handing out leaflets is a good and inexpensive way to spread the word; recently, he stood on the sidewalk outside the Royal Alex, urging bums and swells alike to see his show; hey, why not? I mean, it isn't every day you get to meet an actual living, breathing playwright on the street.

Where was I?

Oh, yeah.

Walking with Charly is all starts and stops, a lot like reading this column — see, when he's coming to the point of a story, or — hold that thought — if he needs to take a verbal tangent — why, he just naturally stops, takes you by the forearm and makes his point — no, savours his point — and looks you in the eye to see if you do, too. Charly's a village talker, an old-fashioned walker, a Sicilian guy.

The play?

I'll get to that.

We're at College St. now; Charly makes the rounds in the Cafe Diplomatico. "Here," he says to a man in the midst of a cappuccino,

"if you like things Italian, you'll like my play!" The man looks up from his cup. He's cool; if he's really cool, he's seen the play by now.

Next, Charly leaves some leaflets in an Italian music store, then drops into CHIN and asks to see whoever's on air — "Hey," he says, "maybe we can have a little fun!" Umberto Manca saunters out of the studio, curious; the two men size each other up; Charly leaves with a Saturday morning interview.

No big deal, this stuff.

It's what he does. It's who he is. It's life, and life is an occasion; what have you got to lose?

We end up in a Sicilian — there are no coincidences here — coffee bar and we continue — actually, we never stop — talking.

Oh, the play.

It's about growing up in a Sicilian neighbourhood in Hamilton ... what, you got a problem with that? Maybe you don't know there are more people in that neighbourhood who come from Charly's village in Italy than there are people left in that Italian village; so many that the mayor of Racalmuto invites the mayor of Hamilton for a visit every year because — think about this, now — the mayor of Hamilton rules over more Racalmutese than the mayor of Racalmuto; and hey, sometimes the mayor of Hamilton goes.

Oh, the play.

See, Charly grew up in this big, noisy, impoverished Sicilian family; his mother can't speak English too well, so as a kid, Charly stays home to translate for her, and his father gets really sick, and I'm not going to tell you the rest because you won't believe it from me, and I'm not going to spoil it by telling you what happens; take my word, it resonates.

Oh, and there are songs.

Charly sings.

He's got a voice.

We finish our espresso, finally, and then we do this thing — he's

going to pay; no I'm going to pay — no, he is; no, I am — hey, sometimes a man just needs to pay. In the end neither one of us pays because the owner of the café has seen the play. He treats Charly and me, too.

Is *Cu'Fu* any good?

I'll tell you a story: A Sicilian woman from that neighbourhood saw the play, and told Charly later she didn't remember him, but when she saw him do Mrs. Chiarelli on stage, the old lady said, "Hey, I know that woman."

The play's that good.

OK, you say, but it's about Italians, Sicilians, and you're neither? Wise up; when Charly performed in Edmonton, a crowd of Ukrainians gave him a standing ovation. You will, too.

What's *Cu'Fu* mean?

Go see the play.

In fact if you don't go see this play I'm coming over to your house to twist your ear; what's the matter with you anyway? Have I ever tipped you wrong before?

Cu'Fu is at the Artword Theatre, 75 Portland Ave; Thurs.-Fri. at 8:00 p.m.; Sat. at 4:00 and 8:30 p.m.; and Sun. at 3:00 p.m.

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Joe Fiorito's e-mail address is jfiorito@nationalpost.com