

The Friars Epistle

WWVH - SCHIMIZZI TV

By BARRY DOUGHERTY

In the film *Adaptation*, Nicholas Cage's character is adapting a book into a screenplay and winds up writing himself into the plot. I suppose you could say that my profile of Friars Greg and Ernie Schimizzi is my own little *Adaptation*. Of course, in my world Meryl Streep never makes an entrance—damn! When I approached the brothers to write about their television station WWVH-TV Hamptons Television, they were thrilled. They took it one step further and invited me to appear on one of their original programs called *American Dream Show*.

While their studios are located in Wainscott, near Southampton, this particular show tapes at Gurney's Inn, in Montauk, at the tip of Long Island. I thought, such a wonderful place to be in July, only this was in January. But Gurney's is this fabulous resort and spa so who cares that it's snowing outside and ten below, it was warm and toasty in the sauna. Yes, I ventured into the sauna, looking for Meryl.

WWVH-TV is an FCC licensed TV station for all of Long Island, seen on broadcast channel 50 and on East End Cablevision Channel 78. It is the last New York television station to be licensed so it's nothing to sneeze at in the broadcasting world. The Schimizzis were destined to work in televi-



Greg and Ernie Schimizzi playing many roles

sion, as Greg says, "We have always been fascinated with TV. Growing up in the 50s, in Brooklyn, we truly believed for instance that Jackie Gleason was not only a fixture on television but actually was a neighbor, he reminded us of a cousin. And the same with Milton Berle and Jack Benny and those people we identify with television."

For the brothers, the TV personalities were only as good as the technology that beamed them into their living room. "As children, the idea of the magic of television through electronics was always fascinating. How did it work? How does a signal go through the air? In the old days it was verboten to go in the back of a television set and open it up. The only thing you were allowed to do was plug it in and attach the antennae, and never open up the box and look in. But we were always curious, we always opened up the box and looked in." What they found inside was a future in this amazing medium.

After a few side trips to other careers—Greg worked as a psychologist for the Veterans Administration and Ernie worked for a motion picture production and distribution company—they eventually formed Video Voice, Inc. "We went into business to sell the software of television, the movies and all of that stuff, being avid movie fans," says Greg. In 1994 an opportunity came up that allowed them to purchase a real honest-to-goodness TV station. With Ernie racing down the Long Island Expressway one afternoon to put a bid on a station in the Hamptons that was about to fold, they wound up adding TV Station Owner to their resumes. "There are very few individuals in major markets that actually launched a television station. And since we're in the number one market, that puts us in the company of Paley and Sarnoff and those characters," laughs Greg. Hey, maybe that means that my writing about them puts me in the company of Walter Winchell! Ok maybe not.

The station has been on an upward spiral in the ten years the Schimizzis have owned it. As Ernie



On the set of American Dream Show (Ernie and Greg are working behind the lights) with Barry Dougherty and Ingrid Lemme

notes, "The programming schedule is a free-wheeling mix of quality family movies, news, and sports but WWVH-TV's signature programming is local events. WWVH-TV is the official station for the Hampton Classic Horse Show, the Hamptons' International Film Festival, Mercedes-Benz Polo Challenge, Bridgehampton Road Rallye, and the Folio Awards that honors the best media coverage of Long Island News." As if that wasn't enough for this little station that could they also produce *Hangen' Out* which won first place for Best Series in competition against all other New York stations.

My particular favorite, obviously, is *American Dream Show*, hosted by Ingrid Lemme. The show demonstrates the American Dream by emphasizing one's family heritage, struggles, goals, dreams, and accomplishments. Of course, I had no idea that I had a heritage, much less gave any thought to my struggles, dreams, and accomplishments. But I do have a book or two to hawk, so what the hell.

"We were always curious, we always opened up the box and looked in"

Ingrid Lemme, who can best be described as a cross between Zsa Zsa Gabor and Barbara Walters, belts the show as steadily as Captain Stoubling does the *Love Boat*. She's gracious, charming, and her German accent lends her a mystique akin to a James Bond girl. From my vantage point on the set I took comfort in seeing the two station owners working in the trenches alongside the crew. Greg manning one of the two cameras used for taping and Ernie seated desk center in a directing capacity let me know that my closeups were in capable hands.



Friar Greg Schimizzi in control at the WWVH-TV control room

"I do that for Ingrid's show," says Greg discussing his leap from suit to jeans. "It keeps me in tune to what's going on and the idea of the creative aspect of it is extremely important to us. Knowing that craft and knowing what it takes to

do a shoot makes us better broadcasters. I trust the guy that builds a plane that is also a pilot. If something goes wrong he knows how to take the plane up and certainly how to land the thing." As I was flying by the seat of my Irish-heritage pants it was comforting to know that Greg and Ernie would take me through a safe taping.

While these Friar siblings currently bring quality programming to the Hamptons, they have also proven skills in other areas. The brothers' father died when they were young and Ernie says that the motivation to become accomplished was because they wanted to make their mother happy and to try to give her the good life she deserved. One direct result of that determination was obtaining a patent. In 1971, they invented an Automobile Trunk Lock Mechanism (Anti-Theft Device). Yes, thanks to the Schimizzis you can breathe easier when you leave your car unattended. "We invented the thing in our basement in Brooklyn. Since we were students and not able to afford a patent attorney, we filed on our own. I did



Friar Ernie Schimizzi working the news front for WWVH-TV, interviewing Friar Al Roker

the legal and Greg did all the drawing. The patent examiner said that less than half, or one percent, of all patents filed without legal assistance get awarded. Our patent was awarded in June of 1973." Thus proving these boys can pretty much do anything they set their minds to.

They also wrote a book, *The Staten Island Peace Conference* September 11, 1776, is based on the US delegation that was sent from congress to meet with the British in a house on Staten Island. It was an event that could conceivably have ended the Revolutionary War and one that fascinated these apparent renaissance brothers enough to immortalize in print.

In spite of their being East-enders, Greg and Ernie make frequent visits to the Monastery, a place they love coming to. "On any given day you can come into the Friars Club and see the brothers Schimizzi. They're usually alone, which doesn't say too much for the amount of friends we have," laughs Ernie, showing that true Friar wit. But he does admit, "There's actual conversation going on at our table which indicates that we haven't exhausted our time together."

The Schimizzis are in the process of expanding WWVH-TV's horizons in various ways, both broadcast and cable and from their track record it's only a matter of time before that comes to fruition. In the meantime, the Hamptons and its surrounding area continue to reap the benefits from these visionaries. I can now say that I too am a part of the Schimizzis vision. Forever in their archives, my interview with Ingrid will live on in reruns. Even the part where she mentioned my hair—or lack thereof—oh yes, Zsa Zsa is truly holding court at Gurney's.

According to Ernie, "We always say the best is yet to come and it all begins with the fact that my brother and I love each other very much, we work with each other, and we admire each other. My mother would always say, 'If one of you does anything wrong, both of you are gonna get hit.' So we always have this fear of a slipper coming at us at a hundred miles an hour, even from the head of the FCC, we're always ready." For two brothers who dared to open up the box and look in, that slipper has a long way to fly before it, or anything else, stops them.