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Democrat Photo by Ted Waddell

SC COURT JUDGE Frank LaBuda, left, goes over details of the Richard Castellano case with Castellano's lawyer, Jeffrey Schwartz (center) and SC District Attorney Steve Lungen.

Plot Thickens (Again) In Castellano Case

By Ted Waddell

MONTICELLO — April 17, 2001 – Richard “Richie” Castellano was supposed to show up in court on Friday the 13th.

The raspy voiced actor was scheduled to be sentenced to a year in jail for scamming some local folks out of about \$12,000 after promising to get them cards in the Screen Actors Guild (SAG).

Instead, the actor, who gained a few minutes of screentime alongside Robert DeNiro and Billy Crystal in “Analyze This,” upstaged the court with a surprise “no-show” appearance. Castellano’s move ticked off the local DA and several victims of his SAG scam who were in court to see him sentenced.

On October 4, the actor was indicted on four counts of fourth-degree grand larceny and one count of scheme to defraud. He was charged with taking more than \$12,000 from four people with promises to get them SAG cards, thus opening the doors to lucrative roles in the film

industry.

Castellano didn't deliver and later admitted he spent the money.

On February 7, he pleaded guilty to attempted grand larceny, a misdemeanor. Castellano agreed to pay back the money and was looking at a year in the county lockup. If the actor didn't come up with the money, he'd face another year in jail.

On Friday, Castellano's Manhattan-based attorney, Jeffrey Schwartz, visibly frustrated Sullivan County Court Judge Frank LaBuda when a message arrived in the courtroom, advising the judge that the lawyer was running 15 minutes late. Schwartz appeared in court, minus his client, about 45 minutes later.

Schwartz told the skeptical court that Castellano "recently started to manifest symptoms of Parkinson's disease," has high blood pressure, circulation problems and bipolar disorder. He told Judge LaBuda and Sullivan County District Attorney Steve Lungen that his client was admitted to a rehab center two days before he was to appear for sentencing.

Schwartz claimed Castellano is now in a drug rehab program at New York Presbyterian Hospital.

"He's addicted to three kinds of painkillers," said Schwartz. "He's popping 20 pills a day . . . he's basically a mess . . . he's in real bad shape."

According to Schwartz, the pressure of Castellano's current situation has made things worse for his client, "exacerbating certain injuries that he has from a long time ago when he was a professional boxer."

"He took a lot of shots to the head," said Schwartz after the court proceedings.

Lungen was incredulous at Castellano's no-show. In a conference before the bench, the local DA laid it on the line for Castellano's attorney, as he told Schwartz his client has "no credibility with this office . . . he's a con artist."

As proof of Castellano's being admitted to a medical facility, Schwartz handed the court a letter apparently written on hospital letterhead, signed by a physician. According to Schwartz, he was given the letter by Castellano's wife, Jocelyn Rousseau. She was not in court.

According to Lungen, his office will verify Castellano's whereabouts. If he's not in a hospital for legitimate reasons, a bench warrant will be issued. If Castellano gets out of rehab, he will be sentenced within 24 hours. Formal sentencing was postponed until May 11.

Schwartz said Castellano has paid \$4,000 of the more than \$12,000 he owes in restitution to his victims, with another \$4,000 on the way.

Lungen strongly disputed those numbers, saying his office has received a total of \$1,000 (a couple of \$500 money orders) from the actor.

Richard Castellano (aka Castaldo) briefly gained local exposure while making a yet-to-be-released independent film called "Four Deadly Reasons," operating an acting studio, and being involved with the Narrowsburg Independent International Film Festival (NIIFF).

The founders of the film festival (Castellano and his wife, Jocelyne) have been sued in numerous courts.

"Richard Castellano has no credibility with this office, based upon all the scams he pulled as a con artist," said Lungen. "He's a known con artist . . . he has a history of it."

Several of Castellano's victims sat in the courtroom, waiting quietly for Castellano to face his judgment day.

Matt Nelson enrolled in Castellano's now-defunct acting studio, hoping to further his ambitions for a career in the film industry. He borrowed \$2,100 from his parents, Bob and

Beatrice Nelson of Barryville, which he gave Castellano for a SAG card.

Nelson's parents were on hand to watch Castellano get sentenced, but they will apparently have to wait a while.

"He's trying to scam the legal system here in the county [the] same way he scammed everyone else for those SAG cards," said Bob Nelson. "There was no reason for him not to be here."

Beatrice Nelson's reaction to Castellano's no-show court appearance?

"I don't believe any of it," she said. "This man has no sympathy for us – he could care less. "Matt really got screwed," she added.

Two years ago, Armondo "Mondo" Bilancione, a beefy ex-cop, was Castellano's bodyguard and acting school student. Since then, the actor and his former bodyguard have been exchanging charges in various local justice courts.

On Friday, Bilancione was in the courtroom awaiting Castellano's sentencing. After Judge LaBuda adjourned the session, Bilancione walked over to Castellano's attorney, put his arm around Schwartz's shoulders, pulled him close and said, "Tell your client he's nothing but a piece of s--t."

"This case is not forgotten – it's coming back," said Lungen during a brief meeting with the local press after court. "We're coming back to court.

"Because he's a con artist, and because he scammed these people, if he tells us something and it's not verified, it's not believed," Lungen said.