

**Friday, June 12, 2009**

**[On DVD: "My Breakfast with Blassie \(Commemorative Edition\)"](#)**



“The life of a part-time wrestler is no laughing matter.” These are the first lines of Andy Kaufman’s peculiar hour-long 1983 film *My Breakfast with Blassie*, an oddball send-up of *My Dinner with Andre* in which he meets up with retired wrestler “Classy” Freddie Blassie at a Sambo’s restaurant in Los Angeles (yep, there was still one left) for breakfast and awkward conversation. The new “commemorative edition” DVD is being released, according to the box copy, to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Kaufman’s “(supposed) death,” though it also lines up with Criterion’s June DVD release of *My Dinner with Andre*. Coincidence? Perhaps. Either way it goes, it’s a nice bit of symmetry.

The film itself, a low-budget, shot-on-video affair, was conceived and directed by rockabilly musician/filmmaker/wrestling manager Johnny Legend and Linda Lautrec. While all of the dialogue was improvised (and sounds like it), certain encounters were set up in advanced and staged for the camera (although Blassie appears to be in the dark about them). Kaufman was in the midst of the strange period in which he reimagined himself as a wrestling supervillain, taking on women (and only women) for wrestling bouts during his act and pronouncing himself “Inter-Gender Wrestling Champion of the World.” This led to an extended faux-feud with pro wrestler Jerry “The King” Lawler, and the famous *Letterman* appearance, and the pile-driving—well, look, I’ll assume that if you’re reading this review, you’re familiar with all this background (and if not, see *Man on the Moon*).

In *Breakfast*, Kaufman (still wearing his reportedly unnecessary neck brace) and wrestling legend Blassie discuss breakfast food (Blassie recommends turkey), autographs, germs, and herpes (when they're distracted, Kaufman brings the conversation back with the priceless rejoinder, "Yeah, what about herpes?"). They discuss Kaufman's wrestling, his broken neck, and the Shah of Iran. Blassie reminisces about his career and his friendship with Kaufman's idol Elvis Presley ("I don't believe all those things they say about his drug habit," Blassie insists. "They'll never convince me about that").



Kaufman takes on a deferential tone with Blassie, who is certainly an interesting presence—growling, grouchy, and occasionally ugly. His tender tone with their pregnant Asian waitress gives way to a cringe-worthy comment about her child going on welfare. When Kaufman begins to taunt a nearby table of female autograph-seekers, he begins spewing sexist rhetoric; it's part of the wrestling persona, but Blassie eats it up and cheers him on. In those moments, the film resembles an early prototype for the Sasha Baron Cohen faux-docs; they place Blassie into a situation in which his ugliness is allowed and encouraged. Or was he in on the joke?

The encounters with the other diners are also awkward and uncomfortable—again, we know (now, at least) that some of this is set up, but how much? And how far will Kaufman push it? We know from the films and books about him that this was the place he liked to go to—the comedy of discomfort, in which conventional notions of professionalism and likability are beaten to a pulp. As "Latka" on *Taxi*, Kaufman was lovable and charismatic; he had to puncture that image, first with the downright strangeness of his nightclub act (featuring his horrifying lounge-act alter ego, Tony Clifton) and other television appearances, and then with the turn to outright hostility that he both presented and brought out of his audience with the female wrestler.

So *Breakfast with Blassie* is interesting as a social experiment and as part of the broad psychological portrait of its star. But does it work, on any level, as entertainment? Not really. It is intriguing to watch the first, on-camera meeting of Kaufman and future girlfriend Lynn Marguiles (played by Courtney Love in *Man on the Moon*); she's billed as "Lynn Elaine" in the credits, since she's billed under her real name as a production assistant and co-editor. And there are funny lines here and there. But when the encounter with Marguiles and the other women escalates, it degenerates (as improvisations often do) into clumsy messiness and unintelligible overlapping dialogue (everyone's trying to get in on the action); by the time Kaufman's partner-in-crime Bob Zmuda shows up, playing a repugnant fan, it turns to gross-out humor and just plain runs out of gas. There's something strangely fascinating about *My Breakfast with Blassie*, but it's ultimately an oddity, a novelty, and little more.

I'm a Kaufman enthusiast, and am glad that I finally had the chance to see *My Breakfast with Blassie*. But it's more a film that you experience than one that you actively engage in. The box copy for calls it "a classic piece of performance art." I'm not enough of an expert on the form to speak to the accuracy of that statement. But what I can say is that like most performance art, even that which draws you in or works on its own specific level, it's nothing that you'll probably want to sit through more than once.

*"My Breakfast with Blassie (Commemorative Edition)" hits DVD on Tuesday, June 16th.*

Posted by bailey at [9:58 PM](#)  

Labels: [andy kaufman](#), [DVD](#), [my breakfast with blassie](#)