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Christopher Maloney: The Death of Andy Kaufman

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Christopher Maloney

The Death of Andy Kaufman

Wild Eye Releasing

"What's real? What's not? That's what I do in my act, test how other people deal with reality." —Andy Kaufman

Andy Kaufman—unique, inventive, enigmatic, ultimately polarizing—was as singular a stand-up comic and actor as they came, pushing the comedic envelope until he imploded under his own creative vision, dying at age 35, seemingly having reached the physical limitations of his meteoric being. Or did he? Christopher Maloney, in his first documentary, "The Death of Andy Kaufman," investigates the long held rumor that the performer carefully faked his own death in 1984 and is merely waiting for the right moment to return to the spotlight, perpetrator of the greatest hoax in the entertainment industry.

A warning: as intriguing as the subject-matter is, this effort is low-budget. Video is shaky. Audio sounds like it was recorded inside a tin can when it can be heard at all. Drop outs are frequent, Maloney even resorting to captions when the screen goes inexplicably silent. If you have any interest in the technical side of this production, prepare to be underwhelmed.

The first portion of this 80-minute documentary charts Kaufman's rise to fame, beginning with a clip from a lip-synching rendition of "Old McDonald's Farm," Kaufman deftly manipulating a small group of audience participants around the stage as they moo, oink, and quack, insistent that they "sing" into the microphone, albeit dead, each verse. His utter devotion to carrying off this brand of humor with complete conviction hints at a career to come. This scene is followed by video of his most well-known incarnations: wide-eyed Foreign Man, the innocent immigrant of unknown origin with a knack for imitation (who can forget his lip-synching the Mighty Mouse theme?), this beloved character the basis for Latka Gravas from the venerable sitcom "Taxi;" the abrasive, puffed up lounge singer, Tony Clifton; a spot-on Elvis; and his misogynistic professional wrestler. Viewers witness a brilliant, visionary Kaufman flame out as audiences, increasingly uncomfortable with the actor's ability to blur the lines between reality and performance, turn against him, resulting in numerous cancelled jobs.

At this point in his seemingly self-destructive career, Kaufman, unable to both shock and entertain, developed a rare and virulent lung cancer, despite never smoking. Here the documentary catalogues his futile search for a cure, taking him to a psychic healer in the Philippines, and then his public and private attempts at saying goodbye and making amends.

Beginning the day of his funeral, rumors of a faked death conspiracy, at first deemed tasteless and obscene, began to circulate as close friends and family members emerged with stories of private conversations with Kaufman in which he discussed the possibility of the hoax. Though filmmaker Mahoney provides some compelling arguments, including a body double named Nathan McCoy, curious photographs, questionable funeral procedures, spurious social security data, and numerous sightings in the intervening years, Mahoney himself calls that evidence "flimsy," opting midway through the film to search, instead, for the heart of Kaufman, for his *raison d'être*. That search extends around the country, from a cemetery in New York to the isolated Lama Foundation in New Mexico to a lengthy interview with Kaufman's brother, Michael, who coyly suggests that, though the idea of a cover-up was fun for a while, too much time had passed, adding, however, that "nothing's impossible."

By film's end, the viewer is no closer to finding answers, and that may be the point. Through this hoax, Kaufman is, in effect, still performing, still getting a rise out of the audience, still tampering with reality, still inviting us to be a part of his act.

I am confident that "Elvis has left the building." Still, wouldn't Kaufman's resurrection be real Must See TV?

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