

My Breakfast with Andy

by Lynne Margulies

In 1979, Andy Kaufman wrestled a woman on NBC's *Saturday Night Live* and, after disparaging the intelligence and abilities of all women, challenged women in the television audience to a similar wrestling match, offering to shave his head and pay \$1,000 to the woman who could beat him. He later added that she would "get to marry him." In the following pages you'll see some of the hundreds of replies he received.

When I met Andy in 1982, he had stopped wrestling women and moved on to a larger moving target — Jerry "The King" Lawler. Andy had parlayed his intergender wrestling gimmick into a full-fledged "career" as a professional wrestler, which had been his lifelong dream. He and Lawler had already had several altercations, both verbal and physical, one of which had left Andy in a neck brace, culminating in the infamous *Late Night with David Letterman* appearance wherein Lawler gave Kaufman a tremendous slap to the floor in front of a national audience. (This is all chronicled in my documentary film, *I'm From Hollywood*.)

I came into the picture because my brother Johnny Legend had met Andy at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles, where Johnny had regularly attended wrestling matches from the time he was a skinny kid — our mother would drive him there every week. Andy had come to the Olympic to meet the grand patriarch of professional wrestling, the fabulous "Classy" Freddie Blassie. Andy had idolized wrestlers since childhood; in fact, his entire act was based on the wrestler's credo of *the angrier and more rabid the audience gets, the more successful you are at your job*. Andy patterned his "bad guy" performance after 1950s East Coast wrestler "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers. Now that Andy lived in Los Angeles, he was out to meet his West Coast heroes. Johnny Legend and Blassie were old buddies. Freddy had recorded Johnny's songs "Pencil Neck Geek" and "Blassie, King of Men," which, it turned out, Andy had memorized, word for word.

Sometime after this meeting, Johnny and his partner, Linda Lautrec, somehow convinced Andy that it would be a great idea to do a satire on the pretentious art-house hit, *My Dinner With Andre*, calling it *My Breakfast With Blassie*. Johnny and Linda took Andy's interest at face value, put together a cut-rate crew, got a local Sambo's restaurant to agree to let them film there for free, got Fred on board and called Andy to tell him it was all set and ready to go. Amazingly, Andy showed up.

At this moment in time, I had been living in the woods in Northern California, having scorned my hometown of Los Angeles. I had no television set and hadn't stayed up to date with anything that was happening in the "outside" world, so I hadn't seen *Saturday Night Live*, *Taxi*, or any of the other shows where Andy had been famously "putting on" the entire human race. I'd never heard of the guy. But at this propitious moment, I had just decided to move back to L.A. I hadn't even unpacked my '63 Volkswagen Beetle, crammed full of my belongings, when I showed up at "the set" to see if I could be of any use.

I had long known Fred Blassie, having been raised from a pup under the auspices of Johnny Legend, who, early on, inducted me into the L.A. wrestling scene. Every week, Johnny and I watched the Olympic Auditorium matches on TV, and I was enthralled when inevitably Blassie would smash announcer Dick Lane's horn-rimmed glasses to the floor, grinding them under his heel. Johnny taught me some key wrestling moves, like the one where, with my hands planted on the floor, I kicked my legs into the air and landed my knee firmly on my opponent's throat. He took me to some of the matches at the Olympic too, so I had met Freddy when I was just a tot. But Andy Kaufman? Johnny told me (probably disgusted at my current ignorance of all things media), "Oh, he's some guy on TV."

It turned out that Sambo's had put us in their back room, and, with the place devoid of customers, Linda Lautrec, her sister Laura, Andy's friend Linda Mitchell and I were placed at a table behind Andy and Fred. We were told to "just eat and keep your voices down," so that's what we did. We forgot that they were shooting around us and just settled down to breakfast. At some point in the proceedings, Andy started talking to us with the cameras rolling, and we became active participants in the film. Somehow I ended up sitting at Andy and Fred's table for a bit and started riffing with Andy, playing off the fact that I honestly had never heard of him. We hit it off on camera, and, as it turned out, off camera as well. That was the beginning of my swift but amazing two years spent with the hurricane that was Andy Kaufman.

I quickly caught up with his career. I found his performance art amazing—right up my alley. Luckily for me, when I met him he was starting to travel regularly to Memphis to get his "revenge" on Jerry Lawler, and I went with him most of the time. Being a wrestling aficionado myself, I was having a blast. Life with Andy was crazy. We'd stay up all night going to restaurants and pinball arcades, go to bed after dawn and get up as the sun was setting. There was a period when I didn't see daylight for two weeks.

I wasn't around for Andy's intergender wrestling heyday—that happened earlier and was Bob Zmuda's territory. According to Bob, he and Andy would go through the letters he received from women challenging him to wrestle, they'd pick the cutest ones, and then Bob would book a college performance for Andy in their town.

Gee, what a coincidence! You write Andy Kaufman a letter, and soon thereafter he's performing in your town! Bob claims Andy bedded 70 percent of them. Could be true, I don't know. I do know that Andy and Bob had a blast traveling around the country together, screwing with women in both senses of the word.

So why did Andy start wrestling women in the first place? In his own words: "I'm not really a wrestler. Through the last couple of years that I've been doing it in my concerts, I've learned a lot about it by just doing it. But I wanted to recapture the old days of the carnivals...before television, you know, wrestlers used to go from town to town in carnivals and offer \$500 to any man who could last in the ring with them for three minutes. So I figured if I could make it like a prize, and make it a contest, it could get very, very exciting. And it turned out to be one of the highlights, one of the most exciting parts of the concert. But I couldn't very well challenge a man in the audience, because I'd get beaten right away. I mean, most men are bigger than me, and stronger than me. So I figured if I challenged women, there are enough women who are almost as big or as big as me who would have a good chance to beat me. Whenever I play a role, whether it's good or bad, an evil person or a nice person, I believe in being a purist and going all the way with the role. If I'm going to be a villainous wrestler, I believe in going all the way with it, I believe in playing it straight to the hilt."

In Bob Zmuda's words, "He wanted to get laid."

I think both are equally correct.

When Andy appeared on *Saturday Night Live*, wrestled a woman from the audience, then challenged women around the country by mocking them with, "Why don't you go back to the kitchen where you belong, wash the pots and pans, scrub the potatoes and raise the little babies," well, some women got the joke, but the majority of them hated his guts. The letters came in by the hundreds. Andy saved them all, and had them in manila folders labeled with such categories such as *Rejects* and *Possibles*. He intended to publish them in a book. Andy passed away from a rare form of cancer in 1984, and I've been lugging this box of letters around with me from home to home, storage unit to storage unit, for the past 25 years. I'm very happy to be able to finally fulfill his wish.

Lynne Margulies is an artist and filmmaker, and was fortunate to have shared a couple of wild years with Andy Kaufman. Very sincere thanks to my pal Dave Shulman, without whom you wouldn't be reading this.



For more about Andy's life and art, Lynne highly recommends Bob Zmuda's book *Andy Kaufman Revealed: Best Friend Tells All*, and, of course, the aforementioned documentary, *I'm From Hollywood*, available on DVD.