

FILM REVIEW: 'The Gospel According to André' Chronicles Career of Flamboyant Fashionista



By **Kam Williams**
For *The Skanner News*

André Leon Talley was born on October 16, 1949 in Washington, DC, but raised in Durham, NC by his maternal grandmother, Bennie Davis. Even though she was a housekeeper who scrubbed floors at Duke University to keep a roof over their heads, she was also aristocratic in the highest sense of the word.

Through Mamie, André cultivated the values and sense of dignity which would serve him well once he made his way out of the Jim Crow South. For, after earning his BA at North Carolina Central University and an MA at Brown in French, he headed to New York City to begin what would be an incomparable career in the world of fashion.

That impressive accomplishment is chronicled in very compelling fashion in "The Gospel According to André," an intimate retrospective directed by Kate Novack ("Eat This New York"). A profusion of pop icons pay homage to the flamboyant fashionista in the biopic, including will.i.am, supermodel Isabella Rossellini, designer Diane von Furstenberg and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, who kisses his hand.

However, the cameos

pale in comparison to André's own revealing account of how he overcame his modest roots with the help of his mentor, doyenne Diana Vreeland, as well as Andy Warhol, Karl Lagerfeld and Vogue editor-in-chief Anna Wintour. We learn that he arrived in the Big Apple a diamond-in-the-rough, given how he'd been appreciating style since childhood.

He explains that he'd been treated to a weekly fashion show by the ladies in his church's congregation. While many of these proud black women might have toiled as lowly domestic servants during the week, they would invariably arrive decked out on Sunday. André's thirst for haute couture was further whetted by magazines like *W* and *Vogue* which enabled him to mentally escape the limitations of life in racist North Carolina to a fantasy universe filled with pleasant and beautiful pictures.

On his way up the ladder, the 6'6" tall trailblazer studiously avoided the traps of drugs and indiscriminate sexual liaisons that destroyed the future of so many others in the '70s and '80s. André does confess to being a regular on Studio 54's dance floor, but he just never participated in any of the self-destructive behavior.

Instead, he parlayed successes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Warhol's *Interview* magazine and *Women's Wear Daily* into a gig as *Vogue's* Fashion News Director. In that capacity, he became a fixture on the front row of leading runway shows, cutting an imposing figure in his signature flowing capes.

And what sage advice does the trendsetting André have to offer today? "Fashion is fleeting. Style remains. Create your own universe, and share it with people you respect and love. Beauty comes in many forms. It could be a flower. it could be a gesture." Precious pearls of wisdom, indeed, from a legendary gentle giant.

Excellent ★★★★★
Rated PG-13 for mature themes and some suggestive content
In French with subtitles
Running time: 95

Wenders

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and new attitude towards nature and "our Sister Mother Earth," as he called our planet tenderly, as well as for a strong stance in creating peace among the religions. No pope had ever dared to address that legacy, and adopting the name of Francis meant nothing less. From the beginning, Pope Francis made it clear that he's willing to stand up for all these issues and take them all utterly seriously.

KW: How were you able to gain access to him?

WW: That came along with the invitation. You know, it would not have crossed my mind to make a film with Pope Francis, if the Vatican hadn't approached me, asking if I'd be open to discussing that very task.

All filmmakers probably take it for granted that this would be an impossible thing to ask, so they don't even ask. I guess that's why Dario Viganò, at the time Prefect of the Secretariat for Communication, wrote that letter to

me, asking me if I could imagine making a film about Pope Francis, and if I could possibly come by and talk about it. I was flabbergasted, yes, but I definitely could imagine it, yes, as well.

When we then talked, it became clear that he meant a film that I would develop on my own, that we would have to find independent financing for, [no, this is not a Vatican production] that I could indeed shoot with access to Pope Francis, and that I would also have full access to the Vatican's archives. And finally, that this should be entirely my film, and that the Vatican was not going to interfere with it. How could I resist?

KW: How much traveling did you do with him?

WW: I only shot the long interviews sessions with Pope Francis, the re-enactments involving Saint Francis, and everything around the city of Assisi. Traveling along would have completely blown up our small and modest budget. For all the travel footage, I had access to the Vatican archive and to the footage produced by the two really great cameramen who follow Pope Francis on all his journeys. And we used footage from TV stations from all over the

world as well.

KW: Did you find his dedication to the poor to be authentic?

WW: No question about it, definitely. He lives and impersonates this dedication. And he makes it clear that he's not just asking us to consider getting by with less, he does show how it can be done, giving an example by refusing to live in the luxurious apartment where all his predecessors lived and by refusing to drive in big limousines. His modesty and humble appearance are not a show. He is that person and doesn't have to fake his dedication to and affection for the poor. It is genuine, and he proved that already, from when he was a young priest and then a bishop.

KW: Do you think that he has raised the bar for popes in terms of following in Christ's footsteps?

WW: Yes. By following the example of Saint Francis, who did the very same in his time, really revitalizing the figure of Christ back then.

Many thousands of young men soon followed him.

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