

## But here on earth ...

### Man on the Moon, directed by Milos Forman, written by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski

By David Walsh  
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Andy Kaufman, the American comic and performer whose life and career are treated in Milos Forman's *Man on the Moon*, was obviously an unusual and gifted individual. Best known for his role on the television series *Taxi*, he disliked traditional comedy and attempted to create something more disruptive.

Kaufman died tragically in 1984 at the age of thirty-five, from a rare form of lung cancer. Forman's film essentially treats the last decade in his life, the period in which he was a public figure. Kaufman specialized in a kind of absurdist performance. He would mount a stage, for example, and stand silently, nervously before an audience, mumbling a few words in a thick, foreign accent. He might then break into an extravagant impression of Elvis Presley. For the first broadcast of the television program "Saturday Night Live" in 1975, he lip-synched to "The Theme from Mighty Mouse." When he began performing on college campuses, he would occasionally read entire chapters from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Other times he appeared on stage in a sleeping bag and slept throughout his show. He sang an entire version of "One Hundred Bottles of Beer," and so forth.

It would seem that an exploration of the source of his desire to disturb and even incite audiences might be a central concern of a scenarist or director working on a treatment of Kaufman's life. Marty Feldman, the comic actor, who directed Kaufman in a film, noted "something underneath the playfulness, a sense of danger, a kind of general anger, as if the way we wearily come to see the world is simply insufficient." Unfortunately, these issues are given short shrift in *Man on the Moon*. The film is content simply to delineate the different roles Kaufman played and the immediate motives that apparently lay behind each one.

It begins with a short sequence from his childhood in New York City's suburbs. Young Andy puts on his own television program in front of a bedroom wall he pretends is a camera. The film jumps to a performance in the 1970s. Kaufman (Jim Carrey) fails miserably, perhaps intentionally, in a seedy bar. We next see him, performing some of the same eccentric material, more successfully. An agent, George Shapiro (Danny DeVito), gives him his card. When they meet Kaufman tells Shapiro that he wants to be the "greatest performer" in the world. He's not a comic, he insists, but a song and dance man.

When Shapiro tells him of the role on *Taxi*, Kaufman balks at first. He thinks television situation comedy is garbage and only agrees when the network promises him his own special, a promise which the network reneges upon.

Teaming up with sidekick Bob Zmuda (Paul Giamatti), Kaufman creates Tony Clifton, a boorish Las Vegas lounge singer, who can't sing and spends most of his time insulting audience members. As part of his deal with the producers of *Taxi*, Kaufman insists that Clifton appear on four shows. Showing up on the set with a couple of hookers on his arm, Clifton (Kaufman in disguise) causes a scene and gets himself thrown out

by security guards.

Then Kaufman launches his remarkable career wrestling women. I appreciate women, he tells a crowd, without a hint of apparent irony, they're wonderful at cooking, doing the laundry, raising children. He challenges the infuriated females in the audience to wrestle him. After defeating dozens of opponents, he proclaims himself the "Inter-Gender Wrestling Champion." In the course of this, he meets Lynne Margulies (Courtney Love), the woman with whom he lived toward the end of his life. Kaufman's matches with women lead to a feud with Jerry Lawler, a professional wrestler, and he eventually faces the latter in the ring. Kaufman is carried off on a stretcher. During a joint appearance on a talk show, he throws a glass of water on Lawler, who promptly knocks him down. All this, of course, is a hoax.

In another hoax, Kaufman disrupts a performance of a live television program, "Fridays." He manages to antagonize television audiences to the point that "Saturday Night Live" holds a viewer poll to determine whether Kaufman should be banned from the program; he loses 195,544 to 169,186.

There is the discovery of his cancer and his sad, final days. The filmmakers rearrange events so that a 1979 concert at Carnegie Hall in New York, after which Kaufman invited the audience of 2,800 to board buses and join him for milk and cookies, takes place toward the end of his life. He travels to the Philippines to undergo a quack "miracle cure," and, back in the US, dies shortly afterward.

Screenwriter Larry Karaszewski explains that he and his partner, Scott Alexander, spent months trying to figure out the "real" Kaufman. Lynne Margulies, observes Karaszewski, finally explained to them that "there was no real Andy." Karaszewski continues: "No matter how many times Andy took off a mask, there was another mask underneath and he consistently left everyone, including everyone who loved him and everyone who was close to him, scratching their heads. So we gave up trying to get under his skin, because that was impossible."

This seems to me an example of giving up before you begin. Every human being is, at some level, a mystery, both to him or herself and to others. But what purpose is our power of analysis, artistic or otherwise, if it can't assist us in arriving at some *general understanding* of a human personality, particularly such a public one? If the creators of *Man in the Moon* started from the premise that they could not get under their subject's skin, what *were* they trying to do? This may help explain why the film is essentially a series of set pieces, in which Jim Carrey does his best, with varying degrees of success, to capture the spirit of Kaufman's performance art.

Paul Giamatti is fine as Zmuda, Kaufman's co-conspirator, and Courtney Love is Courtney Love as Margulies. Danny DeVito is simply irritating as Shapiro.

Milos Forman, born in 1932, began making films in Czechoslovakia in

the 1960s and continued in the American film industry after the 1968 Soviet invasion pushed him into exile. His best known films from the Czech period are *Loves of a Blonde* (1965) and *The Firemen's Ball* (1967); from the American period: *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), *Ragtime* (1981), *Amadeus* (1984) and *The People vs. Larry Flynt* (1996).

A victim of both fascism—his parents died in Auschwitz—and Stalinism, Forman imparts to his films a feeling for the predicament of the individual in conflict with rigid or even monstrous institutions. His humanism values eccentricity and idiosyncrasy. One might make the case that Forman, on the whole, has fared better than the vast majority of refugee or former dissident artists from the Stalinist countries. There is something to him.

At the same time there seem to be definite limits beyond which he is not prepared to go. While he has criticized aspects of American life, he has never taken a sharp look at social relations in his adopted country. Nor has he exhibited any interest in probing the most devastating emotional problems. Forman displays an attraction for certain types of extreme behavior, but he resolutely refuses to probe it for its more general significance.

In *Amadeus*, through the vehicle of Peter Shaffer's play and script, Forman advances the argument that genius is an inexplicable phenomenon, a gift, perhaps an affliction, with no necessary connection to the development of other parts of the personality and intellect. There is a grain of truth in this view, but pushed beyond certain limits it simply becomes the self-justification of every mediocrity: "I wasn't one of those favored by God or Nature."

Unhappily, in similar fashion, Forman sets Kaufman's particular "genius" outside the bounds of the comprehensible—Kaufman is the "man on the moon," after all—and limits himself, for all intents and purposes, to representing its manifestations. At that point, frankly, why watch Carrey do his imitation, why not simply seek out filmed versions of Kaufman's own performances?

Although it has moments of sensitivity and humanity and one feels traces of Kaufman in Carrey, as a whole *Man on the Moon* is an effort to make a complex life fit a formula. The various obligatory nodal points are included: initial efforts and setbacks, a breakthrough, new frustrations, ultimate triumph, final tragedy. These dramatic moments are organized around a series of hoaxes or stunts. Karaszewski: "We wanted to include as many Kaufman stunts as we could and we wanted to give each of those stunts some kind of dramatic meaning."

The film makes disappointingly little of what is quite suggestive material.

Kaufman's family was one of many that made the move from New York City to Great Neck, Long Island in the 1950s. This was more than a trip of a few miles, nor was it merely a journey upward on the economic scale, made possible by postwar American conditions. It also served, in many cases, as a means of erasing the city and everything that was associated with it from the collective memory: the immigrant experience; the Depression; the struggles of the 1930s; the war and the discovery of the horrors of the Holocaust; in some cases, a radical past.

Scrubbing all that history away wasn't so easy to do and the less thick-skinned inevitably paid a psychic price. "My mother sent me to psychiatrists since the age of four," Kaufman once remarked, "because she didn't think a little boy should be sad." People can be sad for any number of reasons. We don't know the family circumstances. But is it so difficult to imagine a sensitive child receiving all sorts of conflicting messages—perhaps in the first place from his parents themselves—about affluent Eisenhower America, a time and place which did not, in fact, make everyone happy? Is it so difficult to see why a sensitive Jewish child in particular might feel sad, only eight years after the end of World War II?

No one is obliged to swallow the argument that this was the best of all

possible worlds, but many contemporary artists, and others, apparently do. Historical trauma, a repressive atmosphere, strangled social and political expectations, these, many apparently believe, had no consequences. And for most of the population, as long as economic life in the postwar decades retained a certain stability, this appeared to be the case. Others, a minority, felt inexplicably sad or angry, or felt a need for a quite distinct existence, a need which was mysterious to everyone, including themselves.

In Kaufman's case, for example, even as he attended elementary and high school in Great Neck, he was developing a dream of something else. In 1959 he saw a performance by the famous West African percussionist Olatunji and learned to play the congas. A year later he developed what was to be a lifelong fascination with Elvis Presley. In 1962, with his grandmother, he saw "Turko the Half Man" at a store-front freak show in New York's Times Square. It made a strong impression on him. The following year he attended a "World Championship" wrestling match at Madison Square Garden and decided he wanted to become a professional wrestler.

At 16, he completed his first novel and began spending time in Manhattan's bohemian Greenwich Village. In 1967-68, Kaufman hung out in a local park with friends and "persons of ill repute." He drank heavily and used drugs, earning money from odd jobs. In August 1968 he enrolled at a junior college in Boston to study film and television production and later in the year took his first Transcendental Meditation course. Over the next couple of years Kaufman began performing in public at comedy clubs and so forth.

Wouldn't it have been possible to make something more interesting out of these facts alone?

One senses, in addition to the playfulness and the imagination, a fascination with whatever was the opposite of Great Neck, with the Other, even the freakish and the despised. Kaufman went to great and uncompromising lengths in his performance life to convince audiences that he was someone other than himself. He refused to go out of character, even when it endangered him or meant the loss of work or popularity. There is an incipiently anarchistic and subversive element to his work.

The deep, unassuageable anger and dissatisfaction he obviously felt were combined perhaps—in someone to whom social or political questions were apparently a closed book—with a great deal of ambivalence about the origin or validity of those feelings. In Transcendental Meditation one accepts the notion that the turbulence inside is a problem and an individual one, something to be overcome by force of will, and one submits to an entirely artificial calm. In performance, on the other hand, Kaufman often "acted" angry and stirred up those present until they were as furious as he "pretended" to be. I suspect that neither the artificial calm nor the artificial storm was a satisfying state of being, and that he gravitated back and forth in some degree of confusion between the two.

As a performer, Kaufman seemed engaged in a desperate, perhaps losing battle *not* to give audiences what they wanted, at a time when the entertainment industry was entering the era of the blockbuster film (Spielberg, Lucas) and thoroughly packaged material. He deserves credit for sometimes heroic attempts, although I'm not sure they were ever sufficiently pointed. His obsession with the clichés of the entertainment business suggests some of his own limitations.

It's not astonishing, under the present conditions, that it occurred to neither the screenwriters nor Forman to delve more deeply into Kaufman's life and times. Such things are rarely done. That knowledge, however, is no consolation. The result is a weakened and inadequate film.

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