

Interview: Andy Garcia on Acting, His New Film ‘City Island’

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CHICAGO – Andy Garcia has a movie star presence, combined with a true appreciation for his profession and craft. He takes on a character role in the upcoming film “City Island,” as a New York borough prison guard who longs to be an actor.

That desire is not too far off from Garcia’s actual life. The son of Cuban expatriates who escaped the island during the early days of Fidel Castro, Garcia climbed up the show business ladder, beginning his acting journey by taking bit parts in 1980s television programs such as “Hill Street Blues.” He was noticed by director Brian De Palma in the 1986 film “8 Million Ways to Die,” which led to his breakthrough role in De Palma’s “The Untouchables.”

Stardom was next, as Francis Ford Coppola cast him over several others as Vincent Mancini in 1990’s “The Godfather, Part III.” His performance garnered him a nomination for Best Supporting Actor and a successful career thereafter, including parts in “Hero” [1992], “Things to Do in Denver When You’re Dead” [1995] and “Ocean’s Eleven” [2001].



The Audition: Andy Garcia as Vince Rizzo in ‘City Island’
Photo Credit: Phil Caruso for © City Island, Inc.

HollywoodChicago.com sat down with Andy Garcia recently as he talked about City Island and the steps he has taken as an actor in his long career.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is a character role, as you play a true native New Yorker. What was appealing to you about Vince Rizzo and how did you personally connect to him?

Andy Garcia: Obviously we share the same dream of acting. When I think back to when I first started, that whole conceit of that acting virus

that hits you and you have to tend to it or else you're in pain, literally. The problem with Vince is that he's never really taken the responsibility to pursue it. He's taking baby steps now but he's in his middle age, so he's lived with the dream his whole life and didn't really want to pursue it until now.

Plus there is the son that he knows is out there but he's never taken responsibility for, that's a very heavy thing. There is a lot of humor in this film, but there is a reason in the end where it makes you cry. Because subconsciously you understand what is really going on underneath the characters and underneath Vincent's reality. This is a guy whose nose is barely above water and he's about to really drown. He's come to the point in his life where if you doesn't make the right move, he's going down.

HC: Regarding Vince's repressed dream to become an actor. Don't the practical elements in life – family, making a living – often conspire against that dream?

AG: In any family it occurs. My two oldest daughters have gone on that track. Dominik [García-Lorido] was in the movie with us. Even though I'm an actor I still go, 'oh god, all right.' I'm not going to change their mind, it's their dream. If they want to change their minds it has to be on their own, it's not coming from me. But the practical side of me thinks, 'I wish they were architects.' [laughs]

If you happen to come from a family who has no experience in how you make a living as an actor, like my own parents. It is one thing to say come see me a play, it's another to say I'm moving to Los Angeles to start a career. Their reaction was, people get paid to act, how does that happen? I could just picture my Dad thinking, 'I love my son, but he's no Humphrey Bogart.' [laughs] They didn't have a concept about it. They had one word for me, 'accounting.' [laughs]

HC: Did you have any input with the script or dialogue for City Island?

AG: It pretty much stayed what it is. But one thing I brought up right away was that in [screenwriter/director] Raymond De Felitta's script, in terms of Vince, when we first see him in the correctional office in the beginning, there were posters of 'Taxi Driver,' 'The Godfather,' 'Raging Bull,' all the New York movies, it was his obsession. I told him the guy wouldn't put anything on the wall, especially at his job at the prison. I felt that Vince was embarrassed about his acting interest and it was very private. And then I said I think it should be one person, I think it should be Brando. Because all the films and those people he had on the walls in the script were gods, and then there is Zeus.

So then you see him all the time with the Brando biography, and he sneaks around with it. His son later discovers all the Brando VHS films in the outside shed. And then finally when Vince auditions, unconsciously out of nervousness he starts imitating Brando, without realizing he's doing it. When I did that imitation for Raymond, he fell out of the chair, and he put that set-up and joke in the film.



Coupling: Andy Garcia as Vince and Julianna Margulies as Joyce in 'City Island'
Photo Credit: Phil Caruso for © City Island, Inc.

HC: Did any of the other actors make suggestions?

AG: Alan Arkin asked Raymond if he could add something in his speech in his role as the acting instructor. Raymond said he could rewrite anything he wanted, he's Alan Arkin. [laughs] So Alan tells him when he teaches classes in real life, he has this thing about pauses. The Brando thing was in the script by this time, so when Alan rewrote it he dismantles Brando. So it puts my character in a further dilemma. The script is an ever-evolving organism.

HC: Your video audition in City Island is a highlight of the film. Did that scene feel like any other audition in your career and why?

AG: Early on, there were many auditions where I felt like a complete idiot. You leave the room and think, 'I hope nobody talks about what I just did.' But it is a process and eventually you do get it. You do throw yourself in situations that you know are insensitive, you tend to over-act, you want to please too much ultimately. I understand that feeling, and I've been in that situation.

HC: The character had a breakthrough in the actual audition itself. Had you ever had a similar breakthrough in an audition in your career?

AG: Not in the middle of an audition like Vince. I would have a breakthrough prior to different auditions, and that would help the next one. I had acting breakthroughs in my life, but never in the middle of an audition. If it was off, it was off badly. If it started well, it went well. There was no in-between.

In many of my early auditions, it was the cliché of [starts a soliloquy]... 'To be, or not to be....thank you, next.' [laughs]

HC: What message would you like the audience to take away from this film?

AG: I think the message is in the last speech of the film, where Vince talks about getting second chances to atone for your sins and screw-ups. It's all there, that's the message of the film. Let the chips fall where they fall, but people appreciate when you're upfront and put yourself against the firing line.



Patrick McDonald and Andy Garcia, March 23, 2010
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HC: You directed the film "Lost City" a couple years ago. Are you going to direct again?

AG: I have a film I've written with Hilary Hemingway, who is Ernest Hemingway's niece, entitled 'Hemingway & Fuentes.' It deals with Hemingway, and several of his relationships, one being Gregorio Fuentes, who was the captain of his boat for the last twenty years of his life. I would play Fuentes, and Sir Anthony Hopkins is attached to play Hemingway. I in process with the financial part of the project right now.

HC: Was there any pressure on the set of 'The Godfather, Part III' because it has been a number of years since Coppola had revisited his most famous film series?

AG: I'm sure there were expectations, but I never felt any pressure. When you connect to a part, you understand it and you're ready to go then you just want to get to work. At that part of my career I was insecure, but I felt I was there because I was suppose to be there and I had earned the part. I was ready to play.

On a personal level, it was the culmination of an extraordinary dream I had. Not only to be an actor, but maybe one day to work with Francis. The reason I decided to become an actor was due to the original Godfather movie. The fact that I was on that set was utopia. I was in paradise.

"City Island" continues its limited nationwide release in Chicago on April 2nd. Check local listings for theater locations and show times. Featuring Andy Garcia, Julianna Margulies, Alan Arkin, Emily Mortimer and Dominik García-Lorido, written/directed by Raymond De Felitta. Rated "PG-13"



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