

Interview: Andy Garcia Finds His Character ‘At Middleton’

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CHICAGO – The actor Andy Garcia has been known throughout the years as a tough-guy leading man, with memorable roles in “The Godfather: Part III” and the “Ocean’s Eleven” series. He latest role is a gentle and comic turn, as a father doing a college tour with his son, and discovering more than expected in “At Middleton.”

Andy Garcia has experienced a brilliant American Dream story. He was born in Cuba, came to America as a child, where his father developed a successful perfume company. He was an athlete in high school, and turned to acting in his senior year. After graduating college, he moved to Los Angeles and began to move up the ladder. After doing “The Godfather: Part III,” Garcia continued with leading man roles in “Internal Affairs,” “Hero” and “When a Man Loves a Woman.” He is taking on more character parts at this point in his career, and has directed (“Lost City”) and produced (“City Island”).



Andy Garcia and Vera Farmiga in ‘At Middleton’

Photo credit: Anchor Bay Films

HollywoodChicago.com talked to Andy Garcia via phone, and besides his comments on “At Middleton,” the memories of working with the great directors highlighted his passionate career.

HollywoodChicago.com: The film plays out like a symbolic stage play involving two ‘middle age’ persons at their crossroads. Where did your life and your character George Hartman’s life cross, how did you relate to his path in the film?

Andy Garcia: Well, they intersected first when they presented me the script. [laughs] I fell in love with it, and lost myself in it. I envisioned the part in my mind. Every actor would play George differently, I wanted to bring my style of emotions to it. I bring my baggage and my life experiences to it. Whatever my sensibilities were, wherever my imagination went with it, that was my George. As the great [acting instructor]

Sandy Meisner said, try to live truthfully within these imaginary circumstances, and let the imagination go.

HollywoodChicago.com: You spent a majority of the film with only one other actor, Vera Farmiga. Have you ever had a similar experience in your career, and at what point in the production process did you feel that astute or unique connection to her?

Garcia: Immediately. My first connection to her is as a fan of her work, and I've been watching her for years, that's why I called her to be in the film. She's an extraordinary actress. As an actor I want to work with the best people out there.

We didn't rehearse for the film, we met on the Sunday before the Monday we started shooting. We spoke on the phone and we had a wardrobe test. When I came out dressed as George she started laughing at me, and I thought, we're in. That's the essence of the film. He makes her laugh, and she makes him wake up.

HollywoodChicago.com: The improvisation scene in the acting class is a major breakthrough for both characters. Since acting has been a lifelong pursuit for you, what is the latest thing you've learned about the craft of acting that really surprised you?

Garcia: That's interesting, because Vera and I were talking about this yesterday. The acting teacher in that scene is Mirjana Jokovic, an actual acting teacher from California State Fullerton, and as the character she was loosening us up and telling us to relax. And I also remember in my first acting classes, there would be whole sessions on how to relax. I wondered at the time if this is what it was all about, when were we going to do some scene work?

The essence of this all was that your best work comes from a complete state of relaxation. In order to be available for scenes to happen in a spontaneous way, you have to be completely available and relaxed. The more comfortable you are, the better work you do.

HollywoodChicago.com: 'At Middleton' had elements of the mismatched screwball comedies of the past, like 'Bringing Up Baby.' What comedy elements of George did you enjoy playing the most?

Garcia: When I read the script, I had images of Jacques Tati, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, and I did homages to them throughout the film. The bow tie and the glasses were a tribute to Lloyd and the little bow I do to Vera's character is from Tati. I did talk to director Adam Rodgers about the physical comedy, not to make it silly, but connect it to truth.



Andy Garcia and Spencer LoFranco in 'At Middleton'

Photo credit: Anchor Bay Films

HollywoodChicago.com: The film also had the theme of opening the right door in life. Which was the best door you opened up in your own life, and does it have any similarities to what the characters experienced in this film?

Garcia: I did have a similar thing happened to me, when I met my wife in a bar in Coconut Grove, Florida. Right after I met her, I proposed to her that night. So I know that feeling you get when you see someone and that door opens, and after that I hung up the sword. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Which director in your career fundamentally changed you as an actor, from the time you began pre-production to the end of the filming experience, and why?

Garcia: If I had to pick one, it would be Francis Ford Coppola ["The Godfather: Part III"], because he not only gave me the opportunity for that film, but he entrusted me with that character, and it was the greatest experience of my life. He also continued to affirm and inspire me just by

having spent that time with him, because it connects to the pursuit of my life as a filmmaker. If there is a Mount Olympus of filmmakers, Francis is Zeus.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have another place in film history, having worked on the last film of the legendary director Hal Ashby, '8 Million Ways to Die.' What impressed you about his style and how do you think he will be best remembered?



Andy Garcia in '8 Million Ways to Die'
Photo credit: CBS/Fox Video

Garcia: I think Hal made some of the most extraordinary films of our time. His film 'Being There' in the lexicon of my top movies. In working with him, and I've actually since have had the opportunity to speak to a number of actors who also worked with him – and in reflecting on his style – is that basically Hal was an improvisational, exploratory cat. If you had an idea, no matter how wacky it was, he would shoot it. He always said, 99% of the time if you're giving an actor a piece of direction, you're doing them a disservice.

He started as an editor, and what he was interested in was human behavior. If you look at his films, it was about that behavior, and it was able to be captured because of the space Hal gave his actors to experiment and explore. For example, if you did a wacky or exploratory take, Hal would come up to you in his understated style and say, 'that was interesting. We got that, now try something else.' [laughs] He would never pass judgement on anything.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is a personal question because I give film tours of Chicago which includes 'The Untouchables.' How many days did it take to film the staircase sequence in Union Station, and how many times did you have to do that slide to stop the baby carriage?

Garcia: It was a long sequence, and I recall we spent at least a couple of nights there. What I can tell you about that final slide, was that the stunt coordinator knew we had to stop the baby carriage somehow, but hadn't delineated how we were going to do it. We finally got to the point when that shot came up, and the stunt coordinator, Brian [De Palma, the director], Kevin [Costner] and I got together, and the stunt guy just asked me how I would stop the carriage at the bottom of the stairs.

I looked at the floor, and it was slick marble. I had played baseball all my life, and I told him I could do a little hook slide to stop it, and just get underneath it. And before I had to slide, I also had to throw a gun to Kevin. So I did the whole action once, and it kind of worked. Brian said let's do that, and we did it. My baseball training had finally paid off. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: You seem to be trying many different types of roles at this stage of your career. What has been most satisfying about that challenge, and what type of character would you like to experience before ending your acting journey?

Garcia: I'm always open to surprises, but as actors I try to explore as many different palettes as I can. That is the excitement, to do things that I normally wouldn't think of doing. I have a film I hope to be doing this summer, tentatively titled 'Hemingway & Fuentes,' based on Ernest Hemingway's last ten years in Cuba. I'd be playing the captain of his boat. There is stuff that I'm always trying to generate, but there is room for other people to come and surprise me.

"At Middleton" has a limited release on January 31st, including Chicago. Featuring Andy Garcia, Vera Farmiga, Taissa Farmiga, Spencer Lofranco, Tom Skerritt and Peter Riegert. Written by Glenn German and Adam Rodgers. Directed by Adam Rodgers. Rated "R"



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