Interviews: Armand Assante, Lori Petty, Richard Roeper at the 2009 BMAs

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CHICAGO – The 2009 Best of the Midwest Awards, at Rockit Bar and Grill in Chicago on December 1st, had many notable attendees. Actors Armand Assante and Lori Petty, along with film critic Richard Roeper, were among them.

The 2009 BMAs celebrate the best of the Midwest Independent Film Festival, and stars, directors and the film press mingled at the awards event. HollywoodChicago was there, and scored interviews with Emmy Winner Armand Assante, Lori Petty, Best Director at the BMAs and featured in “A League of Their Own” and local celebrity critic Richard Roeper. Also lending some perspective was the producer of the Best Feature, Steven A. Jones of “The Merry Gentleman.”

Armand Assante, Actor, Emmy Winner for the Miniseries “Gotti”

The veteran character actor, who first made a big splash in 1980’s “Private Benjamin,” continues to smolder the screen with his distinctive style and look. He just wrapped up another Chicago-based film, “The Return of Joe Rich” and is developing a comedy here.

Reflections: Patrick McDonald and Armand Assante at the Best of the Midwest Awards, Chicago, December 1st, 2009.
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: When you play a distinctive Italian character, how do you best honor your heritage when you do such a role?

Armand Assante: I’ve played Italian characters, even one with Sophia Loren. I played a myriad of different characters throughout my career. Basically I’m a artist at heart and honor my heritage through my work.

HC: Do you have a memory of filming 1974’s “The Lords of Flatbush” and did you realize that so many notable actors – Sylvester Stallone, Henry Winkler among them – would break out of it?

AA: I was just an extra in the film, although there was an instinct that there was a lot of talented people involved. In fact, they spelled my name

wrong in the credits (laughs). But I did do a lovely film years later with the director, Marty Davidson, 'Looking for an Echo.' Marty is a very talented man.

HC: You played opposite many major stars. What is the best advice one of those co-stars gave you?

AA: The one thing I've took away from most of them is that being an actor, whether in major or minor projects, is a enormous responsibility. You really do have to take it in stride, and have a great sense of humor about it.

HC: Which of your roles are your favorites and why?

AA: When I look back I've had so many wonderful roles that I played. But also when I look back I remember the relationships rather than the role. I had so many incredible relationships with directors, writers and fellow actors that my memory doesn't go to the role, it goes to the creative experience. And if that experience has great synergy, then not just my role – but all the roles – come to life.

Lori Petty, Director and Actor

Lori Petty was best known for her plucky character roles in her early career like "A League of Their Own" and "In the Army Now." Recently, she has branched out behind the camera, winning the Best of the Midwest Award for Best Director for "The Poker House."

HC: 'The Poker House' is a very personal film for you. As the director and co-writer, how did you do to make the tone was correct and to complete the vision you had for it?

Lori Petty: After working in the film industry since 1985, I've been on enough sets to know that as a director I set the bar where I want it. The bar was very high. I know that I set the tone.

No one believes this but it's true. I had forty-four speaking parts in my film and not one person missed a line. Ever. No one. Because the bar was high.

Lori Petty and Patrick McDonald at the BMAs.
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HC: What is the most difficult aspect of making or performing in movies within your perspective?

LP: Money. That's it. Everything else is a breeze. That's what is funny, people with the money don't have the talent and people with the talent don't have the money.

HC: Do you have any stories of Chicago when you filmed 'A League of Their Own' here?

LP: It was awesome. I was at Wrigley Field on the mound for two months. Tom Hanks and David Strathairn slept in their dressing rooms at Wrigley for a month, because they could go on the field at midnight, turn on the lights and play catch. They never went back to the Four Seasons, where the cast was staying. They just slept in their trailers.

We knew how lucky we were, it was so cool. Again, I remember when Tom Hanks and I were playing catch and he goes, 'Are you here right now?' And I would say, 'Yep.' And he would say, 'Don't forget this.' And I said, 'I won't.' And then he said, 'This is as good as it gets, girl!' And it was. It was very magical and I am very grateful I was involved.

HC: Finally, do you have a dream project right now?

LP: I hope to have a dream and make a project out of it (laughs). I know I can do anything I want to do, I just need to figure out what I'm going to do.

Richard Roeper, Chicago Sun-Times Columnist and Film Critic

Richard Roeper, a Chicago area native and newspaper columnist, hit the national scene when he earned the co-host chair opposite Roger Ebert on the TV film review show “At the Movies” (after Gene Siskel passed away in 1999). After leaving the show recently, he has since branched out on the Starz Network and is developing several film related projects.

He is the author of several books, including “Sox and the City,” a chronicle of his lifelong fandom and journey with the 2005 Chicago White Sox World Series Championship.

HC: What is your favorite memory involving your partnership with the great Roger Ebert?

Richard Roeper: As much as I loved doing the show with him, what I really loved was spending time with him off camera, behind the scenes, hearing his stories, picking up wisdom from him and just watching the way he conducted himself. So my lasting memory of the show was Roger behind the scenes. It was an honor.

Richard Roeper Announces the Best Feature Award at the BMAs
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HC: In all your travels and experiences in show business, was there one moment or one individual that said to the kid in you from Dolton, IL, ‘how the hell did I get here?’

RR: The one that I best remember happened during one of the first years I covered the Oscars. This guy comes up to me at the post party and he says, ‘I have to introduce myself, I’m such a fan of the show and I think you’re the funniest guy in the world, and I want you to meet my wife.’ Then he said, ‘by the way, my name is Ray.’ And I go, ‘Yeah, you’re Ray Liotta, I know who you are.’

So he calls his wife over, and he says, ‘it’s Richard Roeper.’ And she said to him, ‘I know, I know.’ Ray gets all excited and says, ‘tell him how much I laugh at this guy, tell him, tell him.’

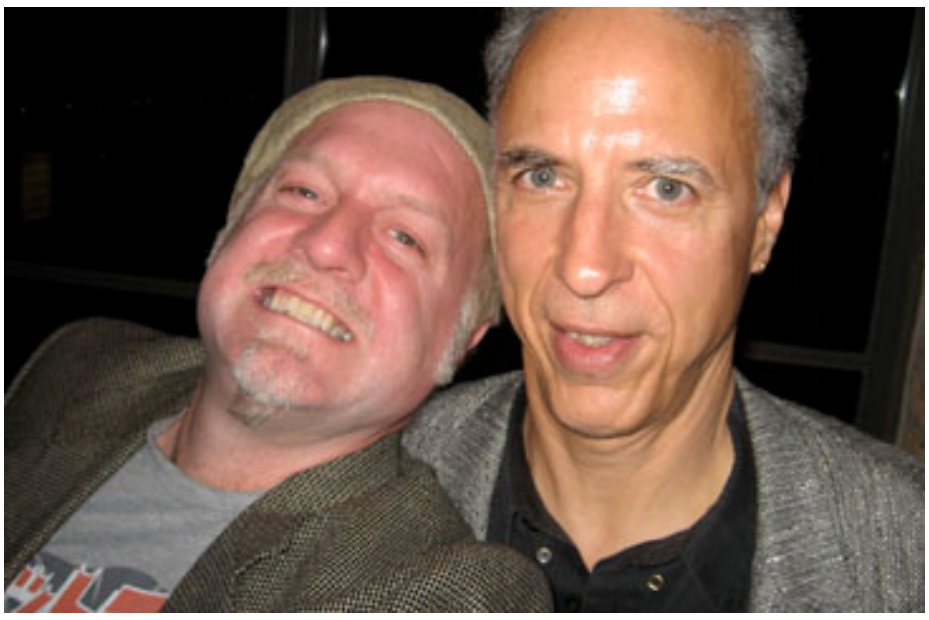
So I’m thinking, ‘I’m funny how? Do I amuse you?’ That was definitely one of those moments where I thought, ‘how did I get here?’

HC: Finally, what do the Chicago White Sox need to do to get back to the World Series in 2010?

RR: They need to get some middle relief. They’ve got a great starting staff and I like the acquisitions they’ve made in the off-season so far, although with the Andruw Jones and Omar Vizquel pick ups they did make me think that instead of getting Prince Fielder, they could sign Cecil Fielder (laughs).

Steven A. Jones, Producer of BMA Winner “The Merry Gentleman”

It’s two in a row for producer Steven A. Jones. Last year, it was “The Promotion” that won the Best Feature at the Best of the Midwest Awards, and this year his production team scored again with ‘The Merry Gentleman’



Patrick McDonald and Steven A. Jones at the BMAs
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HC: At what point did your feel you had an award winner during the making of 'The Merry Gentleman?'

Steven A. Jones: When I first read the script by I thought it was unusual and special, so it became a issue of just don't screw it up.

HC: Who you do appreciate the most in the making of this film, what was the role of that person and why were they so instrumental ?

SAJ: It is sort of the same answer. It starts with a unique script and Ron Lazzeretti did a great job. It's easier to make a good picture with a good script, you can't make a good picture from a bad script. Ron's was a unique perspective, something I hadn't seen before and I really enjoyed it. Tom Bastounes was also the driving force behind getting all the money raised for the film.

HC: How is the Midwest Independent Film Festival good for the local film community?

SAJ: It's important to do good work and have an audience recognize that good work can be done in Chicago. That we have the talent pool in both acting and crew to make good films that can stand on their own. I'm not talking about the marketplace, but artistically the type of films that stand and hold their own with movies made anywhere else.

The Midwest Independent Film Festival kicks off again on the first Tuesday of February (02/02/10). Click here for details *[12] about the festival and how you can participate in what Chicago Magazine called "the place to be and be seen for veteran pros and up-and-comers."*

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