

A Conversation with BIFF honoree Andie MacDowell



By Mark Shaffer



The Beaufort International Film Festival pays special tribute this year to Palmetto State native, Andie MacDowell. The former Elite model and long time face of L'Oreal grew up in Gaffney. MacDowell's breakout performance in Steven Soderbergh's debut feature, *Sex, Lies and Videotape* earned widespread critical acclaim and a slew of awards. The film helped to redefine American independent cinema. She is best known for films like *Groundhog Day*, *Four Weddings and a Funera* I, *Michael* and *Short Cuts*.

She's shared the screen with an A-list of leading men including Bruce Willis, John Travolta,

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Liam Neeson, Michael Keaton and Bill Murray.

Author and Beaufort resident Pat Conroy presents MacDowell with the inaugural Spirit & Pride of South Carolina Award at the 9th annual BIFF. I spoke to her by phone from Los Angeles. The timing was sheer bloody coincidence.

Mark Shaffer: First of all, Happy Groundhog Day. How does it feel to be a classic like that?

Andie MacDowell: Harold Ramis was an amazing director. And the movie is perfect; its one of those films that makes you feel really good and makes you think and have a good time and I love being part of it. It's fun to walk down the street and everybody is so surprised to see me on Groundhog Day; it makes people happy (chuckles).

MS: AMC is running a marathon of the film as we speak.

AM: Yeah, it's timeless; it's ageless. Someone's compared it to *It's A Wonderful Life*, which is another amazing classic that's still wonderful to watch: it touches you, it makes you cry, it's got a similar vibe going on.

MS: Yes, I think that works. What was it like being on the set with those guys? I mean, you've got Chris Elliot, Bill Murray, Harold Ramis: was it like being the girl in the Mad Cap Boys Club?

AM: (laughs) No, you know, really I didn't feel that. I felt like a comrade. We were all having a great time. The writing was wonderful and the location was beautiful and Harold was a very upbeat kind of person. There was also, because of Harold, a sense of wholesomeness. Harold was one of the greatest men I ever worked with. He was always doing a *New York Times* cross word puzzle with a smile on his face – that's how smart he was. He would time himself. And, the set was very family oriented: his kids were around, my kids were around. It was a really

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wonderful, great set to work on. There was a surreal feeling of actually *making* the movie because it was so pleasant, and we were always on schedule; we got things done.

MS: You were just at the Santa Barbara film festival, right?



AM: Yes, I just showed up to do an introduction to a multi-faceted film clip of Michael Keaton's because he was getting the Master's Award.

MS: It's been a long time coming for him to get the recognition that he deserves. I guess it was pretty special to be a part of that.

AM: Well he got a great role! I mean that's what it always takes: getting a role that let's you show your abilities. The hardest part of being an actor is getting the roles that let people see what you're capable of doing. And Michael hasn't had one of those in a while, though he's done many, many great roles. This one was something that really shook everybody up. Everybody was like, oh yeah, Michael Keaton. We'd forgotten how great he really is! He's matured, and this role takes a mature man. He's got all the equipment now, so yes, perfect timing.

MS: Let's get to the Beaufort International Film Festival. First of all, congratulations on

the first ever Spirit and Pride of South Carolina Award. What was your reaction to that and what does that mean to a kid who grew up in Gaffney

AM: Thank you! (laughs) You know the surreal thing is that Pat Conroy is going to give me the award. I wrote that to my sister (both laughing). That's the big deal. I mean who cares that I get an award – Pat Conroy is giving it to me (laughs again)!

MS: Pat's a friend of ours. He's [an occasional] contributor to the magazine. And he's actually a big fan of yours.

AM: That's wonderful! See, how about that! That makes me feel special (laughs).

MS: Do you have a favorite by Conroy?

AM: I like his memoirs. I thought the latest one was great. There are so many characters that I know in his books. I know those people. That's why it affects me so strongly. My family's just as nuts as his, but I don't have the courage to write about them. (Mark laughs) But, I want to be friends with my family (she laughs). I don't know how he's maintained his relationships. Plus, I'd have to tell the truth about myself and I don't know if I'm willing to do that (laughs).

MS: I think Pat believes in the old adage that Southerners don't hide their eccentricity, we sit it on the porch and pour it a cocktail.

AM: (laughing) Yes, we just let 'em all hang out there! And the thing of it is his words. I want to know if he speaks the way he writes. Does he really talk like that?

MS: He does.

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AM: Does he?

MS: He does.

AM: Oh well I can't wait for that!

MS: He tells great stories.

AM: I imagine he does.

MS: You will have fun. And while we're talking about this, is there a character that you identify with, or maybe wanted to play at some point?

AM: (Amused) A crazy southern woman with a lot of skeletons - that would be fun. I would love to play an outrageous southern woman who pretends to the world that she's perfect, but we all know that she's not. The audience gets to see the truth. That would be fun (laughing).

MS: You did an essay for my friend, Wendy Pollitzer's book, *South*.

AM: Oh yeah, I did!

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Steel Magnolia is a 1997 American film directed by Howard Zieff. It stars Sally Field as Leticia Mushter, a woman who is the only person in her town who is not a member of the local church. The film is a comedy-drama that explores themes of religion, community, and the power of love.



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