

A Review of “Man on the Moon”

by
Randy C. Finch
(2000)

The magician waves his hands stealthily over the limp body of his beautiful female assistant. Suddenly, the magician’s hands change their motion as if they are lifting an invisible entity into the air. Telekinetically, the female assistant begins floating upward, suspended on nothing but air. She continues to move upward until her prone body is above the magician’s head. The magician gracefully slides large hoops around the floating assistant to show that no wires are attached. A look of wonderment floods the faces of the audience. Deep down they know it is an illusion, but what technique is being used? In the recesses of many minds, the possibility that the assistant is really floating is considered, as no other explanation is forthcoming.

Just as the magician makes the unreal appear to be real, so did Andy Kaufman the comedian and entertainer. But in addition, Andy sometimes made the real appear to be unreal. In the movie “Man on the Moon”, Jim Carrey does a masterful job of portraying the late Andy Kaufman. A few years ago, Mr. Carrey played the role of E. Nygma (a.k.a. The Riddler) in “Batman Forever”. In this offering, he plays a real-life enigma. He was brilliant in both roles, perhaps because he is a bit of an enigma himself.

If anyone could make Ayn Rand turn over in her grave, I believe Andy Kaufman could. His life was an infusion of the real and the unreal. This was true both on stage and off. As his girlfriend says to him in the movie, “There is no *real* you.” Not only did he have his fans confused about who he really was, he also had his own friends and family confused. When he announced to the people closest to him that he had cancer, no one believed him. They thought it was just another antic he was about to perpetrate on the public like his wrestling with women. Keeping his fans on their toes wondering what he would do next and then being puzzled as to whether he was for real or not was the apparent goal of Andy Kaufman.

However, even as Ms. Rand is turning over, she must also recognize many of the same traits in Andy Kaufman that she wrote into her fictional character, Howard Roark. Andy was fiercely independent, wanting to entertain his way without regard to what other people thought. When presented with the opportunity to portray Latka in the TV series “Taxi”, he was uninterested as it would require him to perform from a script that was not his own. He only relented when ABC agreed to his terms, which included several TV specials where he had artistic license. At one point in the movie, George Shapiro (Andy’s agent) asks Andy what the purpose behind his entertainment was, to make the audience laugh or to make himself laugh. It was obvious throughout the movie that the latter was the case.

You have most likely known of a practical joker that hated having practical jokes played on himself. Apparently, Andy Kaufman was not one of those people. When he traveled to the Philippines in a last ditch effort to be cured of his cancer, he was expecting a miracle. The healers there were burying their hands in the bodies of the sick and pulling out the offending matter without surgery. As Andy lay on the table, he noticed that the offending matter was already in the healer's hand *before* the procedure began. He is then shown laughing his head off as he realizes that this healer had duped him just as he had duped people throughout his career. Yet, in the throes of death, he found the ability to make the unreal real to be extremely funny, even when perpetrated by others.

Yes, Andy Kaufman was an enigma. People typically either hated him or loved him. If you are one of the former, you will probably find this movie stupid or boring or both. However, if you are one of the latter, as I am, you will be spellbound by it. In either case, the movie is a good study in how people view that which is real and that which is unreal, and how it can be difficult at times distinguishing the two, especially when an accomplished artist is purposefully confusing them.

Finally, be aware that the movie was produced in a style that would have been pleasing to Andy. Although it answered many questions about what was real and unreal in his life, it left many unanswered and even presented new ones for the audience's consideration. In fact, as the movie ended, I was questioning whether or not Andy was even dead or not. It would be his style to fake his death and remain in character for 16 years. Consider this. Most people know how great Andy was at imitating Elvis Presley. What if all those Elvis sightings are the "late" Andy Kaufman messing with our minds as only he could. It's a thought.

Thinkyoovedymuch.

Randy Finch is an engineer living and working in Alabama. He earned his BS and MS from the University of Louisville. He enjoys creating computer software and writing articles about computer programming. He has had over 60 articles published in magazines, journals, newsletters, and conference proceedings. He also enjoys reading, writing, and discussing philosophy, particularly Objectivism. Interestingly, Randy was born on February 2, 1955, exactly 50 years to the day after Ayn Rand was born. Also, notice that the name Ayn Rand can be created with just the letters in his first name (if the "a" and "n" are used twice). If anyone knows of any significance to these coincidences, please let him know.