The Rotowhirl

Laurie Anderson

Around 1978, I met a comedian, Andy Kaufmann. And he was performing his avant-garde Elise act in a club in Queens. The performance started with Andy playing the bongos, and for some unknown reason, sobbing. We became friends and I acted as Andy's straight man in clubs and field trips. At the Improv in New York Andy would begin his show by insulting women and saying, "I won't respect them until one of them comes up here and wrestles me down." This was supposed to be my job. I sat in the club drinking whiskies trying to get up the nerve. In the meantime I was also supposed to be heckling him. And after three whiskies I managed to get pretty abusive. Wrestling him down though was really hard because Andy really fought. On our field trips we would go to Coney Island to try out some of Andy's theories on cutting-edge comedy.
We'd stand around the "test your strength" games, the one with the big sledgehammer in the bell, and Andy would make fun of all the guys who were swinging away. And I was supposed to beg him for one of the huge stuffed bunnies. "Oh Andy Honey, please get me a bunny, please, please." Finally Andy would step up to the big thermometer and take a swing. The indicator would rise a few inches and "Try again, weakling!" would flash. At this point Andy would start yelling that the game was wicked and demanding to see the manager.We also went at the rotowhirl, the ride that plasters everyone against the walls of a spinning cylinder, and stretches their bodies into Dopplered blobs. Before the ride actually starts, there are a couple of awkward minutes while the attendant checks the motor and the riders, bound head and foot, stare at each other. This was the moment that Andy seized. He would start by looking around in a panick and then he would start to cry. "I don't wanna be on this ride, I've changed my mind; we're all gonna die." The other riders would look around self-consciously. Should they help? He would then begin to sob uncontrollably.I loved Andy. He would come over to my house and read from a novel he was writing; he would read all night. And I don't know if any of this book was ever even published.I have never been one that hoped that Elvis is still hanging around somewhere, hiding, but I will probably always expect to see Andy reappear, someday.

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