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Art Of The Prank

By Gary Wien



One of the most intriguing films at the New Jersey Film Festival Spring 2017 is *Art of the Prank*, a documentary about Joey Skaggs that was directed by Andrea Marini. Skaggs is both an artist and a professional prankster. As this documentary follows his escapades, it offers a simultaneously funny and very alarming look at the propaganda and disinformation fed to the unsuspecting public every day by the mainstream media. Skaggs' work is as relevant today--if not more so--as it was when he launched his artistic hoaxes 50 years ago. Audiences are inspired to question the very core of their beliefs.

Marini studied film and television production at Cinecittà in Rome. From 2012 to 2015, he produced, directed, shot, and edited *Art of the Prank* - his first feature film. Marini's film gives us a unique view into the mind of a very unconventional artist. He recalls how the project got started.

"It was in early 2012, I was living in Rome and working with a producer who's now a producer on *Art of the Prank*," said Marini. "He had attended a lecture by Joey and that same night they went out for a tour of the Eternal City. A short while later he said to me, 'There might be a possibility to make a film about this media prankster, what do you think?' He showed me a beautiful ABC 20/20 piece about Joey. I was awed! A couple of months later we went to New York and started shooting the film."

The film has been playing at film festivals since late 2015. In that time, the term "fake news" has taken on a life of its own. Essentially Skaggs made fake news into its own art form.

"This is a very interesting and timely moment for this film," said Marini. "What is going on with the media right now is almost overwhelming. Yet, Joey would say it has always been this way. The film shows that everything can be manipulated in one way or another, and this is what he wants us to understand in a visceral way. We all feel very vulnerable when it comes to fake news simply because it's so hard to get to the truth. What's important is who is saying what, for what reason, and what are they trying to achieve?"

Art of the Prank is an emotional and often humorous journey that follows the evolution of an artist who quickly learned he could reach far more people through satire than with his paintings. The film shows how the goal of his work is not just creating the "gotcha" moment, but the revelation that comes with the "aha" moment. The realization that you can't believe everything you see, read, and hear in the media.

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The documentary was filmed in New York, London, Hawaii, Los Angeles, and Kentucky. Skaggs provided unprecedented access to the artist and his personal archive. This leads to an incredible peer behind the curtain, interweaving a currently unfolding hoax (which is revealed in the movie) with a look behind the scenes at some of his classic performance pieces.

“How can you not be inspired to make a documentary on a great character with a cause like his?” asks Marini. “It seemed to me to be a story that anyone can relate to, and as a filmmaker that is what you try to achieve. Most of the time you are forced to narrow your target down, but *Art of the Prank* has all the ingredients to reach a large audience with a very important message, and also make them laugh!”

The film dives into some of Skaggs’ most memorable pranks like the Celebrity Sperm Bank and Cathouse for Dogs, but Marini’s personal favorite is not included in the film. He says his favorite is Bad Guys Talent Management Agency and it wasn’t included in the documentary because Marini believes it deserves a film of its own. He describes the agency:

The story is sensational and very layered. In addition to Joey, the other main character is his old friend Verne Williams (who is no longer with us). Verne wanted to be an actor. But, New York is over populated with actors. One day Verne goes to his friend Joey, who is more like a magician to him than an artist, and asks him to come up with something. “You gotta help me. I wanna be an actor,” he says.

Joey is not an agent or a producer, but something lights up in his imagination. Verne looks like a tough guy, not really like a model, and he has no acting skills. So, Joey comes up with a concept for an unusual and provocative, actually revolutionary, agency, Bad Guys Talent Management Agency!

Verne is his first client, but, the idea skyrockets in the media and, to deal with the demand, Joey soon gathers lots of friends--tough, mean looking people--takes some pictures, makes some FBI Wanted posters (instead of headshots) and suddenly, the agency exists!

Long story short, Verne got several jobs as an actor, other aspiring actors got parts, and Joey stood right on the edge of that fine line between fiction and reality.

When Marini is asked how he thinks Skaggs will be remembered he says, “As the messenger of truth and as an honorable man who devoted his life to art that is meant to shine a light on a very dark corner of our society... And as a very funny guy!”

Art of the Prank will be screened at the New Jersey Film Festival Spring 2017 on Sunday, January 29. The evening begins at 7:00pm with a screening of *Cavities* (a 25-minute film) by Michael Chan about a troubled 16-year-old reconnecting with his mother after he returns home unexpectedly. *Art of the Prank* will then be screened with an introduction and Q&A with Joey Skaggs.



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Art of the Prank (TRAILER)

