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Barbeau talks 'Escape from New York'

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Posted: Friday, November 4, 2011 2:15 am | Updated: 5:42 pm, Mon Nov 7, 2011.

By Scott Tady stady@timesonline.com | 0 comments

PITTSBURGH -- While filming "Escape from New York" 30 years ago, actress Adrienne Barbeau didn't foresee the sci-fi flick becoming a cult classic.

"I don't know if anyone ever thinks in those terms," Barbeau said. "I just knew I had a great role, and that it was a fun movie to make."

Barbeau will share her memories when she and fellow "Escape from New York" cast member Tom Atkins of Pittsburgh host a sold-out screening of the film tonight at the Andy Warhol Museum. The two friends will swap a few tales beforehand, then stick around afterward for an audience Q&A, providing insight on the 1981 movie that was a box office hit, an early cable TV staple, and influence on future filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino.

Barbeau looks forward to returning to Pittsburgh.

"Pittsburgh is one of my favorite cities," Barbeau said. "I've had wonderful experiences there starting with my first visit filming 'Creepshow' with George (Romero). When we weren't filming, I was hitting the antique stores. I was into antique quilts then," she said, recalling one of her first suppliers was a Mrs. McCloud. "That's also where I started my Fiestaware collection."

About six years ago, Barbeau starred in the Pittsburgh CLO's "Fiddler on the Roof," which gave her time to explore the city. She'll be hanging on the North Side tonight for the Warhol event honoring the 30th anniversary of "Escape from New York."

Set in a crime-ridden future (1997), the movie revolves around eye-patch-wearing anti-hero Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell) who's hired to rescue the president after Air Force One crashes into a Manhattan that had been converted into a maximum security prison.

"The studio didn't want Kurt; he was a Disney actor," Barbeau said. "Charles Bronson was interested in it, and some people at the studio were pushing for Tommy Lee Jones."

But director John Carpenter, Barbeau's husband at the time, had directed Russell in a TV film on Elvis Presley, and knew the actor would do well.

"He said it would be Kurt, or nobody," Barbeau said.

Filming took place in St. Louis, with the cast staying in a

Barbeau at Andy Warhol Museum

Adrienne Barbeau will share her memories when she and fellow "Escape from New York" cast member Tom Atkins of Pittsburgh host a screening of the film Friday at the Andy Warhol Museum. The two friends will swap a few tales beforehand, then stick around afterward for an audience Q&A, providing insight on the 1981 movie that was a box office hit, an early cable TV staple, and influence on future filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino.

What's Up

What: "Escape from New York," screening and insight from actress Adrienne Barbeau and fellow cast member Tom Atkins of Pittsburgh.

When: 7 p.m. today.

Where: Andy Warhol Museum, 117 Sandusky Ave., Pittsburgh.

Tickets: Sold out.

Information: (412) 237-8300 or www.warhol.org.

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downtown hotel.

"They warned us repeatedly it was not a good area of town to go walking," the 66-year-old Barbeau remembered.

Fresh off her film debut in Carpenter's "The Fog" and her eye-candy role in Burt Reynolds' "The Cannonball Run," one of Barbeau's biggest challenges on "Escape from New York" was keeping a straight-face, particularly in scenes with a certain actor.

"Donald Pleasence kept me on the floor laughing," Barbeau said. "He's one of the funniest men I've ever worked with. John would say, 'OK: We're rolling,' but I'd have to say, 'Wait, wait' because Donald had me laughing uncontrollably."

Barbeau, a Sacramento, Calif., native, had started in comedy, first as the wisecracking Rizzo in Broadway's original production of "Grease," then from 1972 to 1978 as Bea Arthur's divorced daughter on the TV sitcom "Maude."

"That was a wonderful TV show, just fantastic, but I didn't have anything to compare it to," Barbeau said. "I didn't realize until after the fact how incredibly fortunate I was to work with that group of people and that material."

She stayed friends with the "Maude" cast through the years while expanding a career that encompassed voice-over work (Catwoman in "Batman: The Animated Series"); fiction writing (vampire books "Love Bites" and "Vampyres of Hollywood"); and choice support roles on TV (the snake-charmer in HBO's "Carnivale.")

She's been married since 1992 to playwright Billy Van Zandt, brother of Bruce Springsteen guitarist and "Sopranos" cast member Steven Van Zandt, who has a successful new play, "You've Got Hate Mail," playing at New York's Triad Theater.

Barbeau made off-screen headlines -- and a few TV talk show punchlines -- in 1997, when at age 51, she gave birth to identical twins, Walker and William.

The teenage twins are doing great, Barbeau said, active in music and sports and perhaps most impressed with their mom for the gigs she gets doing voiceovers for video games, such as Greek goddess Hera in "God of War III."

"I have been fortunate enough to love what I do and pick-and-choose my projects," she said. "It's been great."

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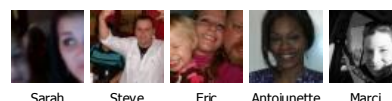
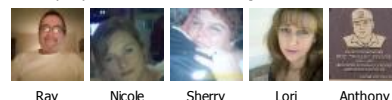
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