



# **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ANDRÉ**

**Directed by** | Kate Novack

**Cast** | André Leon Talley, with interviews from Anna Wintour, Tom Ford and Marc Jacobs

**Running time** | 93 minutes

**Certificate** | 12A

**Language** | English

**UK release date** | In cinemas and on demand 28<sup>th</sup> September 2018

## SYNOPSIS

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From the segregated American South to the fashion capitals around the world, operatic fashion editor André Leon Talley's life is on display in **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ANDRÉ**. The enigmatic personality takes us through his life; from the struggles of his youth through to his move to New York to fulfil his dream of working in the fashion industry and later, to iconic, barrier-breaking work at publications like *Women's Wear Daily*, *W* and *Vogue*.

Weaving together archival footage from the most glamorous moments in fashion history with André's poignant reflections on his life and career, the seminal film is a cinematic monument to one of the most unique figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fashion industry.

Directed by Kate Novack (*Page One: Inside the New York Times*), the film features commentary from fashion luminaries including Anna Wintour, Tom Ford and Marc Jacobs and draws fascinating and unexplored connections between his early life in the South and later work in the fashion world.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR KATE NOVACK

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### What first drew you to André Leon Talley and the idea of making a film about him?

Ultimately, it was my belief that André's life story deserved to be documented. But my grandfather was in the dress business. He manufactured clothing for designers, and I remember visiting his factory in Lowell, Massachusetts. So, fashion was kind of in my DNA. I'd seen Andre in so many fashion documentaries—I think that my last count was fourteen. And he wasn't just in them. He had these scene-stealing roles. But they always had the feel of a performance.

My producer and husband, Andrew Rossi, directed *The First Monday in May*, which André was in. I went to some of the Q&As for the film that Andrew and André did together. Afterwards, I said to Andrew, "Why has there not been a film about this man?" Andre talks about a hymn that he always loved in church, that still brings him to tears, called "Precious Memories." I listened to that song, and it was so moving. It's about the way that memory can act as a sustaining force. That was really the entry point and the vision, and that song now plays a prominent role in the film.

### How did you explain that vision to him?

I really was very sincere in approaching him. I told him that I wanted to penetrate the persona that exists in the public. I think that he has a way of being that is so effusive and volcanic because he's so passionate, but I wanted to see what was behind that. I think he was excited that I wanted to go back to Durham, that I wanted to understand where he came from. Whether he knew that the experience would bring him to tears, I don't know, but I think he knew I wasn't interested in doing something superficial.

The movie now opens with shots taken inside of his house, and his house is really his sanctuary. One of the things that almost everyone told us in interviews was how he doesn't invite anyone to his house. The first time we went up there to film, we were only allowed on the porch. Eventually he did let us into his house, which was a great visual metaphor because it really is the physical manifestation of his private side.

**There have obviously been numerous fashion documentaries and you mentioned that there have been a number of fashion documentaries that André has been in. How did you approach this film and try and carve out a little space so that it has its own identity?**

I wanted the movie to always operate on two levels, both within the genre of 'fashion documentary' but also as a piece of American history, because I think that André is an important figure in American cultural history. He is one of the very first African American men to have a position of visible importance within the fashion industry. We have a long history of African American performers in front of the camera, but many fewer behind the camera shaping the images we see. I love fashion documentaries, and so many of them are so moving. I think that fashion can be really moving, and I think that André's love of fashion is very, very pure. As a boy, he fell in love with fashion, so I think that I always wanted it to be a movie that could allow viewers to experience, say, the beauty of what Yves Saint Laurent was doing on the runway in Paris in the 1970s, but also the place where André's love for fashion came from which was the Black Church and the women in his family.

**There's something about the optics of that, of just seeing a non-white person in these spaces, that's obviously had a ton of impact on the culture at large.**

One of the things that I remember most clearly about those Q&As for *The First Monday in May* happened at the Paris Theater in New York City. A young African American man stood up and he said to André, "I moved to New York to study fashion. My parents don't believe that what I do is real, and you are the only reason that I know that this is possible, and that I can do this." Andre had done a conversation with the painter Kehinde Wiley in which they talked about this idea of *radical presence*, in which just being present represents a form of radicalism. I think this is so true for Andre. Tamron Hall doesn't work in fashion, but we see her in the film being fitted by André and she explains what it meant for her as a young woman of color growing up in Texas to just see him.

**It helps that you had this wealth of archival material to choose from. It's really illuminating to re-see fashion history with André front and center.**

I did know that I wanted to, as much as possible, take people into the different eras in which he had worked. I wanted people to be able to see what it was like. We dug very deep, and then let the material guide us. There's a scene that comes very early in the film that's in the designer Azzedine Alaïa's apartment, and in it André is a kind of cub reporter—he's young, and reporting in Paris as a young man, and we see him speaking French. It's a glimpse into what he did and how long he's been doing it for. One of my favorite moments in the film is actually in that scene. A small group is gathered in Alaïa's small apartment in Paris and as the model turns, we hear the floor *creak*. It's so indicative of how fashion was once guided by a very quiet, intimate observation that I think still informs Andre's way of looking at it.

**Did the archival help in making a film about somebody who is a critic, a tastemaker...a kind of curator? These aren't necessarily the most cinematic activities.**

It's funny, because, when we made *Page One*, that was also a challenge. How do you cover reporters just reporting? Today, André doesn't go into *Vogue* every day and work, so we couldn't rely on just going in and filming him there. It was important to me that people see some of his work, some of his spreads. You learn about him through the work. There's a spread he did in *Vanity Fair* called Scarlett N' the Hood, in which he reversed the roles of the blacks and the whites, and I think that work is informed in many ways by Andre's experience in the Black Church. André's story spans many different eras and is a story about visual culture in many ways. I wanted viewers to be able to experience things like how the film stock looked at the moment, and how it changed over time.

**Has André seen the film?**

Yes. I think he was really, really nervous, because he did not have any idea what it was going to be. It ended up being really emotional for him. He was crying. He was so moved by some of the fashion in the film. He always refers to the Golden Era of Fashion, which, for him, is the 1970s, and a lot of those people aren't around anymore. I think it was emotional to go back, and to reconnect to his childhood with his grandmother and process her loss. When we talked about Durham early on, one of the first things he talked about was walking through the woods to the baptismal pool, and then the second thing was how he and his grandmother were just like Truman Capote's short story *Christmas Memory*. It's so interesting to me that those are the first things that came to his mind. I think we captured certain vulnerabilities in the film that he really doesn't usually show.

I think often about the scene where he is in the archive and he became very emotional when he talks about the racism he's had to internalize over the years. We went there not only to look at all of his work, but all of the

*Vogues* he's been looking at since he was a 12-year-old boy. Clearly it stirred something in him. That was a real moment where we penetrated his persona. Something about looking at those images opened some kind of floodgate in him.

**He seems similarly vulnerable when you're with him on Election Day, and the morning after.**

I was going through my own despair, and frankly it has only gotten worse since then. It didn't emerge until a little later into filming that the election was going to be crucial to the film's structure. I don't feel lucky at the outcome, but I feel lucky that I was able to film with André during a time in American history that was so relevant to his personal story. Hopefully people will understand something about André after seeing how he grew up in the Jim Crow South, became a success in the fashion world, saw the first African American President, and then witnessed the election of Trump. In focusing on the 2016 election and its aftermath, I felt that at least I was able to capture André's experience in processing it, and, hopefully, by connecting it to his personal story, it can bring more meaning and perhaps understanding to a shift in our country that I think that everyone, in all corners, is still having so much difficulty processing.

**This is the first film you've directed solo. How did you make that decision?**

There were always different ideas that Andrew and I, in our production company, had discussed as possible movies that I would direct. But I really was inspired by André's story, and it just felt like the right story at the right moment. It felt like a moment where the story of this African American man—because, in many ways, I view the movie as being as much about one African American man's experience in America as it is about fashion—was important and urgent. There's a line from *Eboni* at the beginning of the movie about how André is a legend in mainstream culture, and he's also a tall Black man in America from the American South and that there would always be great tension there. That really became an organizing principle in the film.

**Was it a leap for you to take the reins yourself?**

Having Andrew as my producer was really key to getting this film going and going quickly, and to making me feel comfortable as a director throughout the entire process. But every documentary is so different and is so dependent on the subject. André is such a unique character and he has this volcanic energy. We met before Labor Day of 2016, and I pitched him my vision and it just kind of took off.

## **AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDRÉ LEON TALLEY**

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**When Kate first approached you about the documentary, how did she explain what she wanted to do?**

Well, first, Kate and I met through *Vogue*—first they went through *Vogue*, because I had been interviewed by Andrew for *The First Monday in May*, and I had been the sort of ambassador for that film at a few screenings. So, it was through the auspices of *Vogue* that Kate came to me with Andrew. I loved *The First Monday in May*, and so I felt it was the perfect fit. If Kate had not come through *Vogue*, I might not have said 'yes' so quickly, and I don't regret that I said yes.

**Did you have any idea of what to expect from the experience?**

No. I did not have any idea about what to expect from the experience, and it was a rough going at first. It's very intrusive, it's like you are exposed, like chest surgery. It's like you open the cavity of your chest and you expose yourself on a surgical table. I had no idea what it was going to be. I just trusted Kate enough and became very trusting of her, and her trajectory, her sophisticated research, and respect of my story, of my life. She delved into the past enough to impress me to continue to go through with it.

**You're someone who has spent a great deal of time on camera but being in a documentary is not the same thing.**

It's not the same. I've opened my heart and my soul and my life. And I am a very private and shy person, although I come off as a very flamboyant person. I use clothes as armour, clothes are my security blanket and my

clothes and outfits are my armour against the world of the chiffon trenches. So, the documentary has been a very enriching experience. I think it's a very sensitive and extraordinary and yet elegant story of my life, as told by Kate, but it was very, very brutal for me to continue to go through all the machinations and all the sit-down talks and everything. It's totally different from being on a talk-show or panel or being interviewed by Charlie Rose on PBS with Karl Lagerfeld. It's all very different and it's very, very challenging and overwhelming, but I think that it's a document that she wanted to do, a story she wanted to tell and I'm glad that I did it.

### **What was it like the first time you saw the film?**

Oh, the first time that I saw it, I was just elated to be there with friends, to see some of the glorious images and see the way Kate threaded the narratives through the sophisticated research she had done. Her research is phenomenal! She had gone back and researched, contextually, my life story from its humble beginnings all the way to Brown [University], my theses and reviews from when I went to Paris and the great shows of Yves Saint Laurent in 1978. That was very wonderful for me; it was an enchantment, but, at the same time, an experience that I would consider—I'm not a vain person—microscopic. A documentary is meant to be truthful and it is Kate's story, it is definitely her story, but, being so creative in my life, and an editor, I would have, in hindsight, made a contract to have a full make-up artist on hand at all times! Having come from the world of *Vogue*, part of the armour is that you are professionally groomed and, on a cold, bitter morning in North Carolina, that was just me coming out and I would have had a makeup artist.

### **I think a lot of documentary subjects would agree with you on that.**

Now, I think you think that's funny, but that's not funny! That's a very important point. In the world of style, in the world of *Vogue*, of what that world stands for. But, nevertheless, I opened my heart and I opened my life and I opened my home and I opened my history and opened all my friends. The people that are in the doc are the people that are of great value to my life.

### **The film does dig amazingly deep. But it never tries to pigeonhole what it is you actually do. I wonder how you describe your career.**

As I've always said, I am like an upgraded airline associate. This is me being superficial about who I am. I look at myself as "coffee, tea or me." I always try to create, in the environment of whatever I'm doing, be it fashion editorial or a talk in front of 400 people or whatever it is that I do, it has to come from a world of grace. I try to create a style moment through grace. The grace of great manners, the grace of politeness, the grace of kindness. I tried to create a world of grace in my assignments at *Vogue*, in my editorial essays. I always look for a moment of grace. The documentary, and I don't just mean mine, but documentaries are brutal, they are honest and candid. I think that I accepted that I had to feel that I was going through that.

And what is it that I do? The world doesn't keep me here for my looks; they keep me in the world of *Vogue* and in the world of Martha Graham, where I performed "The Owl and the Pussycat," the world of *Numero Russia*, where I was Editor-in-Chief for a year, they keep me for my knowledge and my ability to create a zone or a zen moment within the framework of my assignment. I approach the world with a sense of grace. Grace is a very important word in my life, and I try to express that to others, a sense of grace, and grace is style. Grace is not a lack of sensitivity. Grace does not exist in our culture today. Everyone today is uncivil to each other, rude, bombastically rude, insulting. The culture has been seriously affected by "45"—that's the 45th President of the United States—45's cultural attitude, and his stance on insulting people. Women, men, gold-star mothers—it all comes from the culture. And I mourn that culture, I mourn the lack of civility.

When I came up in fashion in 1974, the fashion world was different; it was a world of extraordinary style and grace. It is no longer a world of style and grace and civility. It is a rude world of commerciality, power and—that's fine—people have forgotten how to stay in touch with each other as friends. Loyal friends have sometimes marginalized each other and they're too busy to emotionalize and say to friends, "How are you?" and respond to emails. And I'm guilty of the same thing. And, so, what I do is that I am a conveyer of grace through the world of style, and I can't say what it is that I do. I do many things, and I don't do everything the same every day. I do podcasts for *Vogue*, I interview the celebrities on the red carpet at the Met Gala, I'm a historian of contemporary couture. I'm walking through grace and I'm on this earth because of grace, and I try to project that. That's what I've always been, and always strive for, and I learned that from my grandmother and my family, my immediate family—my aunts and uncles, my mother and father, all my kin—we grew up in a world of grace.

**It does seem like, as a culture, we've forgotten the value of things that are elegant, that are well-made.**

Elegance is always right at your fingertips. I learned from my mentors—Mrs. Vreeland and Mr. Fairchild—I learned the luxury of clothes from Mrs. Vreeland, the luxury from inside out. The most luxurious thing about a garment is the lining. I learned from Mr. Fairchild, a great man, a brilliant man who was my boss, how to analyze and look at clothes and quickly analyze clothes the way an art critic would analyze paintings. You have to read and read and read everything, from Balzac to Jean Cocteau to Gustave Flaubert. You have to listen to all of the great musicians—Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Duke Ellington, Mr. Coltrane, Billie Holiday. Everything is of great worth in the inspirational moment of achieving a state of grace through knowledge!

**It occurs to me, when you mention our current President, that he is the antithesis of this idea of grace. Which makes it so important that the film shows you on Election Day and after. It almost feels like two worldviews crashing against each other.**

Absolutely. I am silent on Inauguration Day, I am stupefied, but I am resilient, and it shows on my face the deep emotion. The only thing I can say is that because the First Lady represented the role of role of the First Lady beautifully in the Ralph Lauren couture and the gloves and the shoes—everything was perfect—that's all I can say about that.

## **ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS**

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### **Kate Novack (Director/Producer)**

Kate Novack is an Emmy-nominated producer and director of documentary films. Her feature film *Page One: Inside the New York Times* (producer), about that paper's media columnist David Carr and the upheavals in print journalism, has been called "a film anyone who cares about the future should see" by CNN, and "a vital, indispensable hell-raiser," by *Rolling Stone*. *Page One* premiered at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival, where it was acquired by Magnolia Pictures and Participant Media. It went on to become one of the highest-grossing documentaries of the year and was nominated for two News & Documentary Emmy Awards and a Critics Choice Award.

Kate produced the HBO feature film *A Table in Heaven* (2008), about the family that owns the legendary French restaurant Le Cirque, in New York City. The *Los Angeles Times* described the film as "buoyant, affectionate," and "an Italian-American family comedy in the form of a documentary about a restaurant." *The New York Times'* Neil Genzlinger called protagonist Sirio Maccioni "a joy to watch."

With her longtime producing partner Andrew Rossi, Kate has worked as a story consultant on several films, including CNN's *Ivory Tower* (2014, co-producer), about the escalating cost of higher education, which premiered at Sundance and was named one of *Indiewire's* best documentaries of the year; and *The First Monday In May* (2016), an inside look at the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute and annual Gala, which was the Opening Night film at the Tribeca Film Festival.

Kate's first feature screenplay, "Raker," about a law student recruited to survey fellow classmates, was selected for the Independent Filmmaker Project's Emerging Storytellers Program. Prior to making films, Kate was a reporter at *Time*, where she covered film, design, television and the arts. She also worked as part of a small editorial staff at *Time's* fashion and design publication, *Time Style & Design*.

Kate lives in Brooklyn, NY with her husband and two children.

### **Andrew Rossi (Producer)**

Andrew Rossi is the Emmy-nominated director and producer of documentary films including *Page One: Inside The New York Times* (2011), following the inner working of the *New York Times* media desk; *Ivory Tower* (2014), about the challenges facing higher education; *A Table In Heaven* (2008), following the Italian family behind Le Cirque restaurant; *Bronx Gothic* (2017) about performance artist Okwui Okpokwasili; and *The First Monday In May* (2016) about the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute.

Andrew has been nominated for three Emmy awards, including two for *Page One*, which was one of the highest grossing theatrical documentaries of 2011. Premiering in competition at the Sundance Film Festival, *Page One* looks at the crisis in the newspaper industry to understand how competition from online media and the decline in print advertising is leading to a contraction in traditional journalism. As Hendrik Hertzberg wrote in the *New Yorker*, “*Page One* is surprisingly moving, and not a little chilling, because of the way it shows the *Times*’ reporters and editors bravely upholding their noble craft against an ominous backdrop of business-side global warming.”

*Ivory Tower* was nominated for an Emmy for Best Business and Financial reporting following its broadcast on CNN. Co-distributed by Participant Media (*An Inconvenient Truth*, *Spotlight*), *Ivory Tower* was ranked as one of the best documentaries of 2014 by *Indiewire* and premiered at the Sundance Film Festival.

A look behind the scenes of two of New York’s premier cultural institutions, *The First Monday in May* follows the creation of “China: Through the Looking Glass,” the most attended fashion exhibition in the history of The Costume Institute at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the 2015 Met Gala, the star-studded fundraiser that celebrates the opening of the exhibition. *First Monday* debuted as the Opening Night film at the Tribeca Film Festival, 2016.

Through his New York based production company Abstract, Andrew produces content for film and television. Currently he is executive producing a Netflix series with Sony TV. Most recently he produced multiple true crime documentaries for HBO directed by Erin Lee Carr including *Thought Crimes* (2014), about law enforcement’s attempt to police online activity, which the *New York Times* described as “a primer for the century ahead,” and *Mommy Dead and Dearest* (2017), about the shocking murder of Dee Dee Blanchard, which CNN.com described as “a twisted and twisty documentary that’s...true crime at its best.”

## **CREW**

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