Edward Andrews
A Character of an Actor

After almost 50 years in show business, this bespectacled veteran is still "inventing himself," whether undergoing the trials of "The Twilight Zone" or the horrors of "Gremlins."

By JIM GEORGE

STARLOG INTERVIEW

When Dave had a curating eye out for someone to portray the town banker in his summer blockbuster Gremlins, he knew just the actor who could say those lines better than anyone else.

"I've never met him before, let alone worked with him," says Andrews, "but he called and wanted to talk to me. He's a relatively young man, but a real movie buff. He said, "You're one of those people I grew up with. When I was a kid in school..." and he went back and started to name movies. I said, 'A kid in school?' You were in Kindergarten when you saw that?"

"He said, "I've always wanted you in a picture of mine, and now I've got a part for you, and I hope you do it. I'm not going to ask you to read anything for me, I just want to know if you would like to do this."

"Of course, from that moment on, what are you gonna do when a man says that to you and has thrown his homework on you and gives you chapter and verse? And he wasn't kidding, because he would mention specific scenes I had done, and specific lines of dialogue!"

"He had to win me over, because the part is not all that much. There ain't no use in kid-ding, it's a small role. But I enjoyed myself thoroughly and had a chance to play it for its comedy value. Joe has an oh-shit-all-sense of comedy that really appeals to me. He likes to make something up at the last moment, and he loves to have actors invent themselves."

Although Andrews began his screen career playing heavies—in 1956 in The Phoenix City Story ("I think I did six or seven films the first year. One heavy after another.")—comedy has always been his first love. He juggles his theatrical marks masterfully, frequently bringing subtle comic nuances to otherwise dramatic roles.

Behind the ever-present trademark black frame glasses is a mischievous eye-twinkle which can shift from playful to nefarious literally in the bat of an eyelash. The slightest curling in the corners of one of those wonderfully wacky little smiles can completely alter the tone of a characterization. Andrews may look like your Uncle Ed, but one is never quite certain what’s truly happening behind the silly smirk.

Under Dante’s direction in Gremlins, Andrews managed to have his banker role padded. Revealing one of his favorite tricks, Andrews says, “My device is to say, ‘Hey Joe, I just thought of something—Oh, no, I don’t gonna that would do it.’ And the directors say, ‘Well, what? What? What?’ ‘No, I’m not sure it would work.’ And they say, ‘Well, let’s see it. Let’s try it!’ It’s a terrible, childish device, but it works. It’s the way I work all the time.”

"By the time we finished, as I remember, Joe gave me six or seven added scenes. He said, ‘Now, we gotta shoot these early in the morning, because if you don’t ’em late in the day, somebody’s gonna gonna biff, ‘Come on, you’re shooting something that’s not in the script!’"

"But I can’t say enough about Joe Dante. The communication gap between us, but it made no difference at all, I found myself absolutely crazy about him. I’d kid with him all the time, and he with me and everybody else. But boy oh boy, did he get the work done. Joe Dante is a wonderful director, awfully good. I would like to work with him again.”

Andrews also expresses a desire to work under Steven Spielberg’s direction, calling every facet of his films first class. As an ex-ecutive producer of Gremlins, Spielberg did not obliviously peer over Dante’s shoulder during the shooting. Andrews confirms, "He was not in evidence on the set,” he says.
"Not while I was there anyway. Although I'm sure I saw every shot of that movie that was shot, I only just got him."

'Twilight Zone' Fun

Gremillon is Andrews' first fantasy film ("Unless you want to call the current Sinner Candee fantasy," she says, laughing), and he has never appeared in an SF movie ("Science fiction always kind of leaves me cold.").

Ah, but there were those two classic 'Twilight Zone' episodes: "Third from the Sun" (1960), with Andrews deliciously sinister as a robot who masquerades as a government worker, and "You Drive!" (1964), in which he started as a renegade hit and run driver Oliver Pope.

"There was one that people still talk about," Andrews says, "and that's the one about the car. I go into a supermarket or somewhere, and the check-out girl says, 'Oh gee, I just saw you on 'Twilight Zone'. That was great fun. It was a wonderful idea... really well done."

In the episode, written by Earl Hamner Jr. (who would later create The Waltons), Andrews is pursued by his own car—an auto possessed of the consciousness he lacks. Fleeting, he trips and falls. The speeding vehicle jinks to a halt just short of his head.

Asked if he recalls the scene, Andrews says, "Yeah, sure I do, but that wasn't me. That was a guy named Bill Clark, who doubled me as well as Dan Blocker.) They cut to a close-up of my face, of course."

"At the time, I thought, 'Ed! Don't worry about this. We're gonna put the car in reverse and it will back up real fast, and we'll reverse the camera so it looks like the car's coming up on you. I said, 'Yeah, but how do I know it's in reverse?' Well, you get it in reverse,' I said. 'No, no, call Bill Clark.' Bill came over and picked up a quick $100 for jumping down there."

Another vintage TV series Andrews remembers fondly is Thriller, hosted by Boris Karloff. He recalls, "I did three or four segments. There was a wonderful guy—he's dead now—named Sobelman, and it was this state where you'd play a character on a horse, and Sobelman would say, 'You're the gentleman who does this,' and then you'd do this for a few dollars."

Episode television today holds no interest for Andrews, but he'd love to pop up tomorrow, maybe, sales-pitching for the phone company. Besides providing him with "a terribly pleasant anxiety," the spots are quietly classic Andrews fare. In seconds flat, with a scant few words and expressions, he breathes life into the character and turns it in a memorable mini-performance as a company man.

Gremillon and Sinner Candee notwithstanding, the actor admits that he's offered fewer and fewer scripts as the years pass. "And the parts begin to get a little smaller," he says good-naturedly. "I have to play pretty much my age and what I am, and there aren't that many parts written. And Burgen Meredith plays all the good ones! The rest of us are sort of sitting around."

The exposure as grandfather in Sinner Candee and the banker in Gremillon could change all that. Is Andrews, once conductor on Supertrain, ready to be part of a pop phenomenon?

"Of course," he says. "Who in the world would say 'no' to that? If you hit a real good one, everyone connected with it profits. Your stock in the business always goes up when you're associated with a box-office hit."

We all know for those.

The roles he is proud of are few in number of films. "I really loved playing George Babbitt in Elmer Gantry," he says. "Just the idea of actually character a where a word has come into the language—you know, 'He's a Babbitt.' It's all sounds for something. That I thought was fun and challenging. That's one of my favorites. Tea and Sympathy is another."

"My daughter dug up some old stills and gave 'em to me for Christmas. There's a courtroom scene in one from Those Wicked Years, and I'm cross-examining Jimmy Cagney on the stand. And in the background of this four-shot is Walter Pidgeon and Barbara Stanwyck. It's just a treasure to me."

"And I worked with Humphrey Bogart in the last film he ever made, The Harder They Fall. I had a wonderful relationship with him. He had heard I was a sailor and had a boat, so he invited me out on Santiana, his ocean racing yawl, for the weekend with a couple of other guys. I had never met the man in my life, and just worked with him for a few days. Bogart said, 'Well, if you're a sailor, you can't be all bad.' It was terrific."

A partial list of Andrews' other credits includes roles in Advice and Consent, The Young Savages, The Unadjusted Moment ("The only film Esther Williams did any.") Kisses for My President, Youngblood Hawke, Send Me No Flowers, Toa! Toa! Toa! and Avanti.

He's a Babbitt. That's Edward Andrews making a point to evangelist Elmer Gantry (Burt Lancaster) in the Oscar-winning 1960 film.

Like Dante, most directors no longer re- quest readings from Andrews. One notable exception was Billy Wilder during the casting of Avant. Andrews explains: "I thought that there was a man who was so distinguish ed that if he wanted me to read, I would." Assuming a verbal equivalent of that devilish glint he gets in his eyes, Andrews continues: "Said, 'Now, if I'm gonna read, I'm gonna read the whole thing.' Which was the last third of the picture. And I did, and got the job. He wanted Walter Matthau, of course, but the part wasn't big enough for Walter."

"That's one of my times—occasionally, somebody will ask, 'Would you mind reading for us?' And I say, 'Well, you know, nobody's asked me to do that since Billy Wilder.' And very often, they say, 'Oh well, it's not necessary."

Rock 'n Roll Rubbish

Edward Andrews differs from the majority of his acting brethren in that he has never had a dollar doing anything but acting. He is, justifiably, proud of that fact. Born in Griffiths, George in 1915, he joined a stock company at age 20, fresh from the University of Virginia, hitting the boards for a two-decade stretch of stage acting.
There is a small austere to his clean record: that one season many years ago when he wore a producer's hat at a summer theater. "I hated that," he adds. "It was terrible, what you must go through if you're trying to run a theater. I found myself worried more about what happened when the Indians overflowed in the women's toilet than what was going on on stage."

"If anyone qualified as a mentor to Andrew it was the late Clay Clement, a well-established New York actor whom Andrews met when he first began acting. "I was just playing a writer's assistant," Andrews says. "I'm from New York and think they're talented. I was rehearsing a play in New York, and Clay and I met for lunch. I was very disturbed. I said, 'Clay, this morning I asked the director.' He said, 'I beg your pardon?' I said, 'I asked the director.' He said, 'You asked the director?' Yes. He said, 'Dear boy, the only thing you ever ask a director is 'When do we break for lunch?'

"Then, he continued, 'In the first place, it's bad manners. He's the director, and must answer you. But how would he know, dear boy? Chances are if he could play the part, he would be playing it himself?'

"This mustn't be taken the wrong way. But I just found through the years that it's best not to ask the director anything. Just go ahead and do it, and if he tells you quickly enough he doesn't like it, do it. But if you ask him, you open a whole big can of worms, and now he must make a decision."

Andrews illustrates the validity of this policy in recounting an incident that occurred while shooting Sixteen Candles. The genre juvenile comedy isn't his "cup of tea," although he did enjoy himself during the six-weeks' location filming in Illinois.

The somewhat raucous language uttered freely throughout the movie is something Andrews adamantly feels should not cross the lips of his character. "It's very popular these days," he says, "but it somehow doesn't fit the way I look or the way I act or anything else."

"I had a line—it was simple, but it was vulgar, and I didn't want to say it. 'I can't stand that rock 'n' roll crap!' That was my line. I never discussed it with John Hughes, the writer-director—and a very nice guy. When we got to shoot it, I just said, 'I can't stand that rock 'n' roll rubbish!' And it gets a laugh. 'Crap' wouldn't, John bought it."

"If I find it is a line, I simply drop it out. And the amazing thing is that no one—no director—has ever corrected me. I have never had an unpleasant experience by simply skipping it. Now, I can visualize situations in which vulgarity would be absolutely essential, where it was a real point. Usually, I don't get those kinds of roles."

"Andrews' roles are invariably men of power or authority, like the town banker in Gremlins or professionals (doctors, lawyers). While he looks the part(s), the ultimate test of any actor's worth is his believability, and Andrews' characterization always ring true. Believability, he would agree, consists of innate talent and experience in equal parts."

He says, "Everything hasn't been rosy, and it took a long time coming, but much of it was learning my business. And when the opportunities came, I was ready. By the time I got a chance to play a role like Babbit in Babbitt in Babbitt, I knew exactly how to do it."

"Sometimes I'll be playing comedy with young actors and they'll say, 'You do that bit and it's so funny—how did you know it would work?' I tell them, 'I'm really not taking any chance at all, because I played on the stage for so long, and I've done some variation of that particular piece of business, that I know that it works for me. You just learn what works.'"

And the best piece of acting advice he ever received? Andrews pause, then says, "Clay Clement told me one time: 'Are you ready for an abrasive role? I've been working on this for about forty years and I'm finally ready to put it on to you. He was doing a picture with Ella Kean at the time, and he said, 'Just two days ago, I did it again, and it worked beautifully. I'll tell you what to do in one sentence when any director says anything to you at any time. You do just what you were doing, except a little bit lower.'"

"And if you substitute for the word 'loud,' convictions, I've thought you've got it made," Edward Andrews explains. "I think that's a lovely piece of advice. He used to always say, 'Remember, it's conviction, conviction, conviction. Sweeps all before it. If you're ever in a situation where you're stuck and the theatrical tradition or your own technique doesn't tell you what to do, just make up anything—within reason—and then do it with all the conviction in the world, and believe me, it'll work.'"