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One man's path: Good fashion, good manners and good preparation

Documentary 'Gospel of Andre' shares tale of an outsider's climb to the top of design

Andre Leon Talley is monumental in his corporal form, his personal journey and his fashion eminence.

His story, as told by producer/director Kate Novack in her documentary, "The Gospel According to Andre," represents a specific kind of American experience — of an outsider, a gay man and a black man at the apex of the fashion industry — an American dream come true.

When his parents' marriage fell apart, Andre was sent to live with his despotic-but-dotting churchgoing grandmother in Durham, N.C.

As a young boy, Andre would sit alone in the public library and read "Vogue," which was published twice a month during the 1950s and 1960s. The colorful, blithe and wondrous pages of the magazine were a portal through which the lonely child could enter the worlds of art, literature, culture (Mailer, Capote, Nureyev!) and, most of all, fashion.

Obsessed by fashion and 6-foot-6, Talley would stride across the still-segregated Duke campus to buy copies of the New York Times, Harper's Bazaar and Vogue

(British and Italian) at the international newsstand. Students of the southern university, who found this well-tailored and towering black apparition too exotic to tolerate would pelt him with rocks.

Talley, fluent in French, became enamored with the language because it is the language of couture. He watched Julia Child on the black-and-white TV in his grandmother's living room not to learn cooking but because she represented French culture.

Planning to teach, he was a French major at North Carolina State, then won a scholarship to Brown where he received a master's degree in French literature.

How is it possible that such a towering, flamboyant, black man from the segregated South rose to such prominence in the Darwinian world of fashion?

Talley's time in Providence, R.I., marks the turning point of the movie. Brown was transformational for him primarily because of its proximity to the Rhode Island School of Design.



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Away from home for the first time, he was unshackled (but not psychologically) from his conservative church community to join a free-spirited bohemian coterie of artists and designers. He wrote a fashion column for the design school newspaper in the early 1970s and explored the boundaries of creativity and sexuality.

Letters of introduction in hand, Talley followed Brown with an internship at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, where Diana Vreeland, the eccentric fashion deity and former editor-in-chief of Vogue, mentored him. Vreeland, as

He never did.

Even as he danced away nights at Studio 54, wrote for Andy Warhol's Interview magazine, became the Paris bureau chief for Women's Wear Daily and spent decades as editor-at-large of Vogue, Talley remained Vreeland's dutiful devotee until her death in 1989.

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He survived because he was well-informed. His passions fueled his immense talent. A tireless researcher, he was an encyclopedia of fashion. Anna Wintour, the current, famously chilly editor-in-chief of Vogue since 1988, confesses to the camera that she needed him. Her knowledge of fashion history was "pretty poor," she says, but "Andre knew everything."

Talley resigned from his 30-year Vogue perch in 2013. Times had changed. Publishing had changed. Life had changed.

"The Gospel According to Andre" doesn't shy away from the melancholy of a bon vivant after the good times have rolled away. The filmmakers show us how the clothes, the camp and the surfeit of "daaarlings" were Talley's armor against the sleights and humiliations he swallowed along the way.

To Talley, good fashion, good manners and good preparation are moral imperatives. These are the tools he wielded to become the international icon that Black Eyed Peas frontman Will.i.am describes as "the Nelson Mandela of fashion."

"He's the Kofi Annan," the rapper elaborates, "of what you got on."