

Loni Anderson sizzles in fact-based 'White Hot'

Film probes cover-up of starlet's death

Amy Schmidt

"She was a real party girl. I think probably because alcohol is a downer, and she was flying around so high on diet pills," tells Loni Anderson of the woman she is to portray Sunday, May 5, on NBC. "I wear so many gowns in this movie because all she did was go from one party to another, and one man to another—and several at the same time!"

No, Anderson isn't talking about Marilyn Monroe, Janis Joplin or Vivien Leigh. She's talking about the subject of her title role in "White Hot: The Mysterious Death of Thelma Todd." "Thelma who?" you might ask.

Bold, blond and beautiful, Thelma Todd was fast becoming Hollywood's queen of comedy in the early 1930s. Genuinely funny and talented, she starred opposite the Marx Brothers in "Monkey Business" and "Horse Feathers," as well as in her own comedy shorts. But the actress led a dangerously wild life, flirting with alcohol, drugs and mobsters, such as Lucky Luciano. On a chilly night in December 1935, her battered body was discovered slumped behind the wheel of her Lincoln Phaeton convertible in a garage above the restaurant that bore her name, Thelma Todd's Sidewalk Cafe. In spite of the bruises on her face and body, authorities immediately declared her death a suicide, and the case was closed—or so they thought.

For the last 14 years, author Andy

Edmond has researched Todd's tragic demise. Sunday's film conclusion leans toward Edmond's conclusion—and the gossip of the day regarding one of Hollywood's greatest unsolved mysteries.

But Loni Anderson isn't giving the ending away. The former "WKRP" bombshell is so enamored of the project she's milking it for all it's worth. "This movie has been kind of a wonderful monster," she says, describing the "fabulous" gowns she wore on the set and the film sites such as Thelma Todd's Sidewalk Cafe on Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu and the famous Coconut Grove, restored to its 1930's look.

"I must say that I had to work out and work out trying not to get an ounce of fat on my body, because these gowns are very unforgiving," confesses Anderson, explaining that all of the dresses she wore were originals that had been remade to fit her. "I ate dry lettuce leaves the whole time I made the movie!" she laughs.

Even more enthralled is Anderson by Todd, herself. "She was so lovely and so funny, and playing someone with that sense of humor couldn't be more exciting. Everyone I talked to said, 'Oh she was so much fun. We just loved her.' But I think her dealings with men were her downfall."

Anderson's own life couldn't be less like her character's though. "I'm so very content," she says warmly, if not downright giddily, of her relationship with husband Burt Reynolds. "I'm married to my best friend." And of the couple's 2-year-old son, she adds affectionately, "he's quite a little hell-raiser - all boy - just like his daddy."

Emmy nominee Loni Anderson portrays a Hollywood starlet whose

life on the wild side ended suddenly in 1935. The docudrama, titled "White Hot: The Mysterious Death of Thelma Todd," is said to expose the cover-up that shrouded the talented comedian's death for over 50 years.

CABLE NEWS

Hunt no more for 'Red October'

By Amy Schmidt

Sean Connery and Alec Baldwin star in the submarine thriller *The Hunt for Red October*, Saturday, May 4, on HBO. Last summer's box-office hit dramatizes a U.S. Intelligence officer's dilemma of initiating a first strike against a nuclear Soviet sub headed for American shores.

Milo the Kitten sails downstream while Olly, his bull-dog friend, gives chase in *The Adventures of Milo and Olly*, a heart-rending children's tale premiering Wednesday, May 1, on HBO. Dudley Moore narrates.

Anthony Denison (*Crime Story*) and Sela Ward (*Hello Again*) co-star in *Child of Darkness, Child of Light*, airing on the USA Network Wednesday. A Vietnam priest is assigned the chilling task of investigating the virgin pregnancies of two women.

I Love You to Death is based on a true story about a woman who lured thugs to kill her, womanizing pizza-shop-owner husband. Kevin Kline plays the Casanova in jeopardy of loving more than his sex life. Traces Ullman is his jealous wife. William Hurt, River Phoenix and Krasta Reeves depict the hoodlums hired to do the dirty deed. The comedy premieres Wednesday on Showtime.

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