



No. 139 Alexander Payne

November 2013

Food with a Greek flavor. Humor with hometown and Hollywood flourishes. A sellout crowd primed for Friday night lights, cameras -- and fun. Combine all that with the star power of Alexander Payne, and you have one of the most memorable events in Omaha Press Club history.

The Nov. 22 roast of movie director Payne escalated from gentle needling about Payne's Omaha boyhood to a roaring Forte finish. That was Forte as in Will, the actor-comedian who stars in Payne's newest film, "Nebraska."

Forte fired both barrels at the double Oscar winner in a hilarious (and profanity-spiced) routine. Forte barrel No. 1 discharged loud insults toward Payne. Barrel No. 2 followed each offensive remark with a whispered and fawning endearment.

Emcee Tom Johnson got the roast off to a rollicking start. Johnson, retired communications director of the Nebraska Lottery, worked at radio station KFAB and mentored high schooler Payne in the late 1970s as part of the Creighton Prep student's Junior Achievement project.

Payne, Johnson recalled, became a BBF (bookie's best friend), as part of the most-listened-to scoreboard show in the state. Alexander gathered scores for the show's "games of interest," the contests that appeared on the bookie sheets.

Some highlights from the other roasters:

Mike Decker, Omaha attorney and a Prep classmate – "In his early days in Los Angeles, Alexander would routinely go to the beach . . . to achieve the perfect golden tan he thought was needed to get ahead in Hollywood. Sadly, today a tanning-maintenance day for him is just 50 shades of grey."

Kurt Andersen, novelist, host of NPR's "Studio 360" and a native Omahan -- "I can say with no fear of contradiction that Alexander is the greatest filmmaker of our time -- of movies about eastern Nebraska."

Dr. Ann Beeder, professor of psychiatry at Cornell University's medical college and also a former Omahan -- "Instead of me, Alexander could have had anybody here tonight, including George Clooney. I think you all should get a partial refund."

After the dust settled, Payne emerged intact for the "Face" unveiling. Artist Jim Horan's caricature places the honoree in a director's chair, working on a script. In the background are titles and illustrations of Payne's six movies: "Citizen Ruth," "Election," "About Schmidt," "Sideways," "The Descendants" and "Nebraska."

The Oscar for "Descendants" wears a hula skirt and a Hawaiian lei around his neck. Payne's Oscar for "Sideways" looks tipsy. Probably because of the almost empty bottle of wine he's holding.

In closing remarks, Payne fired a few darts at the roasters before thanking one and all. In particular, he got some measure of revenge against Forte:

“People ask me why I cast Will in ‘Nebraska.’ I had my standard answer, but really I was looking for an actor who wouldn’t overshadow Bruce Dern’s performance.”

As for being Face No 139, Payne concluded: “This means a lot to me. Thank you all for coming; just thanks.”