

VARIETY



Photo: Greg Gorman

JOHN WATERS TALKS TRASH, DIVINE INSPIRATIONS AND WHY ANTI-DRUG LAWS ARE DOOMED TO FAIL

BY PETER DEBRUGE
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[John Waters](#) looks positive giddy as he perches on the edge of his chair at the Provincetown Film Festival, chuckling as he recalls the bad review *Variety* gave him back in the day.

I recall one from the 1974 write-up for “Female Trouble” — “‘Camp’ is too elegant a word to describe it all” — and he rolls his eyes at the word “camp.” “No one says that word anymore,” he laughs. “To me, ‘camp’ is like two older gay gentlemen talking about Tiffany lampshades in an antique shop. We were never that. We used ‘trash’ or ‘filth,’ which was more punk, to describe our style.”

Trade reviews offered a strange sort of validation for the budding “smut-ur,” who would take the put-downs and twist them to his advantage back in the early ‘70s, turning bad blurbs into good publicity for his gonzo stunts. When Fine Line rereleased Waters’ most notorious film, 1972’s “Pink Flamingos,” for its 25th anniversary, the poster proudly quoted *Variety*: “One of the most vile, stupid and repulsive films ever made.” A quarter century later, the squalid comedy about shameless deviants competing for the title of “filthiest person alive” was inducted into the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry.

“The most hurtful one was ‘Desperate Living.’ All it said was ‘Amateur night in the psycho ward.’ I couldn’t use that one,” says Waters of the blurb for his scandalous 1977 film that follows a pair of unrepentant killers toward a fate worse than prison.

Now the 77-year-old miscreant is watching the world catch up to his underground spirit. This month, the Academy Museum opens a career-spanning retrospective that dubs Waters “The Pope of Trash.” Then he’ll be getting his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, between Ray Bradbury’s and Gene Autry’s.

"I haven't changed," says Waters. "It's the culture that's come around." Or has it? "To watch 'Pink Flamingos' now is worse because of political correctness," he says. "You can't say 'fat' anymore. You can't do anything." He adds, "But I don't want to retire. I'm busier than I've ever been in my entire life." (Waters travels to roughly 45 speaking engagements each year, including off-color Christmas and Easter shows. He hosts the John Waters Summer Camp, where fans come dressed as favorite characters, and does voice work for Disney cartoons and kids shows, of all things.)

The writer-director has spent practically every summer since 1964 in P-Town, but his real home is Baltimore. He and Barry Levinson are the two most famous filmmakers to have emerged from that city, but only Waters wears a pencil-thin mustache, which he traces with Maybelline Velvet Black every morning. Also, Levinson never asked his star to eat a fresh dog turd, as his childhood friend Harris Glenn Milstead — aka Divine — did in "Pink Flamingos."



The cast of 1972's "Pink Flamingos"
Courtesy of Laurence Irvine/Warner Bros

From 1981 smell-odrama satire "Polyester" to 1988 hit "Hairspray," most of Waters' films are irreverent homages to his hometown. "There was a department store, Hutzler's, which was the best department store in Baltimore, and for some reason, they carried one copy of *Variety*. And every week I got it — I think I stole it in the beginning, and then I read the grosses," Waters says. "I learned the movie business from *Variety*."

By age 14 or 15, he had taken out a subscription (Waters' parents paid for it). He devoured the box-office charts and thrilled to full-page ads for Russ Meyer and Herschell Gordon Lewis movies, delighting in news of obscure projects no one else had heard of — films that occasionally inspired pilgrimages to New York. That's how he discovered Armando Bo ("the Argentinian Russ Meyer") and his voluptuous muse, Isabel Sarli: by reading about "Carne" and "Fuego" in the pages of *Variety*. It was Sarli's exaggerated acting style, crossed with Elizabeth Taylor's more elegant screen persona, that motivated Divine's early performances.

"Those movies played sexploitation Spanish theaters in New York. They were hugely hip, and they were such an influence on me," Waters says. So were Andy Warhol and the Kuchar brothers, whose underground movies inspired the long-haired rebel to round up his friends — Mink Stole, Steve Yeager and "Egg Lady" Edith Massey — and compel them to do crazy things on camera. "Like every kid that makes their first movie," he laughs. "Now they make it with their cell phone. I had to make it with one of those huge, heavy cameras with the Mickey Mouse ears that they used to film the news then. The acting is shrill and loud because we had such bad sound equipment, and I just wanted to make sure people heard my dialogue."

From the beginning, the idea was to shock and offend, to cut through whatever notions of decency the general public might have. "In Baltimore, we had a censor board that was internationally famous, run by Mary Avara. She was a great press agent for me, without realizing," he says. Compared with her, submitting his films to the MPAA was a cake walk. "I didn't fight with them, ever. Except on the name of 'Pecker,' which I won, and 'A Dirty Shame,' which I very much lost."

The exasperated director asked MPAA honcho Joan Graves what exactly he had to cut from "A Dirty Shame," and she told him, "We stopped taking notes." In the end, he cobbled together a "neuter" cut, made up entirely of the innocuous substitute lines he'd been obliged to shoot for the airline version. "It's the perfect movie," he says, "if you're having a children's birthday party and you want to show them a movie about sex addicts."

Waters' Catholic mother and conservative dad may not have shared his sense of humor, but they supported his work. Waters reenacted the Kennedy assassination on their street for 1968's "Eat Your Makeup," one of his first shorts, and filmed "Lady Divine's Cavalcade of Perversions" on their front lawn for 1970 shocker "Multiple Maniacs."

"I was so driven to do this," he says. "What else could they do? Same way they never asked me if I was gay. They always thought the answer might be worse!"



From Waters' 1990 teen musical "Cry Baby"
Courtesy of Universal City Studios, Inc./ Imagine Films Entertainment, Inc.

His parents may have financed "Pink Flamingos," but they declined to watch it when it was done. Years later, after watching "A Dirty Shame" (Waters' last film, but hopefully not his last film), his father told him, "It was funny. I hope I never see it again though." But Waters wasn't seeking his mom and dad's approval. Far from it. "We were just trying to make our friends laugh," he says. "The idea was to make fun of yourself first, and then maybe you can make fun of others. And rules — we'd make fun of rules. In 'Multiple Maniacs,' it was hippie rules. We made a violent movie in the height of peace and love."

Nothing irks Waters quite like others telling him what's appropriate. "I look back on my work, and it was almost a political act, a strike against the tyranny of good taste. I always say I couldn't have done that if my parents didn't teach me those rules." Mom and Dad took Waters to Disney movies. Later, he and Divine dropped acid and watched Ingmar Bergman films. "Here's the thing: All the things I made fun of were things I idolized. I didn't make fun of stuff I hated, like romantic comedies."

In the '70s, Waters convinced the minister at a local church to show his X-rated movies. And the people who turned up weren't part of the counterculture, he says, but those who rebelled against the counterculture's rules. "It was angry people who didn't even fit in their own minority. The first time I went to a gay bar, I thought, 'I might be queer, but I ain't this. This is so square.' So it was gay people who didn't fit in with gay people, hippies who didn't fit in with hippies. Bikers always liked me. They would be Proud Boys today."

Eventually, Waters convinced Bob Shaye, founder of New Line, to distribute his films. Waters showed him "Multiple Maniacs," and Shaye said, "Come back when you have something more polished." "If you can imagine, that was 'Pink Flamingos,'" snickers Waters, who credits Shaye with finding a wider audience for his outsider sensibility. "I fought with him, but I love him," Waters says. It was Shaye who backed "Hairspray," Waters' only PG-rated feature, and the one that became his top earner, spawning a Broadway musical and a big-studio remake in which John Travolta appeared in drag.



Ricki Lake in "Hairspray" from 1988
Courtesy of Henny Gartfunkel/Warner Bros.

Waters was surprised by the audiences' reaction to "Hairspray," in which an unpopular teen tries to integrate an "American Bandstand"-style dance show. "Even racists like it, because they liked the music. 'Hairspray' legitimized me to people." Finally, Waters had made a movie his parents could watch. Still, after that he went right back to disemboweling the sacred cow with films like "Serial Mom," "Cecil B. Demented" and "A Dirty Shame," enlisting such notorious figures as Patty Hearst, Traci Lords and Johnny Knoxville to appear in his films.

Next up is an adaptation of his 2022 novel "Liarmouth," which is by far the most profane thing he has written since "Pink Flamingos." The book, which chronicles the exploits of a kinky kleptomaniac, has been optioned for the screen, but has stalled due to the strikes.

In the early days, he didn't need to wait for someone's permission to shoot. Still, he says, "It was really hard to make those movies. We worked 14-hour days, and then sometimes I'd get the film back and none of it would have turned out, so we'd have to shoot over. It was freezing cold. You can see Edith's breath. Divine swam across the river in full drag in November and hit his mark. That was stunt work! Eating shit was the ultimate stunt work. It was about showing things that Hollywood wouldn't show, and that's no longer the case. Now they'll show anything. Even Steven Spielberg. The opening of 'Saving Private Ryan' is Herschell Gordon Lewis — I mean, full gore."

So what can the next generation do to shock people? Waters gets that question a lot. "The whole trans/nonbinary thing," he says, "gets on everyone's nerves, left and right. Now they have come up with a new way to make both sides nervous."

And of course, Waters was there, paving the way, with Divine: "He wanted to play everything," Waters says. "And the times he got great reviews were when he went against type, which always happens. It's called 'acting.'" He adds, "I think a man or a woman or a trans should be able to play any sex, an animal, a tree, anything you want."

When he says things like that, it's clear that Waters hasn't lost his edge. The way he sees it, "The edge has always been: How far can we go to be funny? Lenny Bruce started that, or Doug Clark and the Hot Nuts. Lenny Bruce went to jail for saying 'fuck,' and now 'fuck' is on television. Is it refreshing to anybody that the censors are now left-wing rather than right?"

Waters considers himself an equal-opportunity offender. As far as he's concerned, history seems to be moving in the right direction, even with conservatives trying to restrict drag in certain states.

"I think they're helping, the way Anita Bryant was the best thing for gay rights ever. She killed her career because of her stupidity, trying to attack something that had already been accepted," he says. "RuPaul has done great work. She has made drag acceptable for Middle America. It ain't going back."