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Photograph by Damien Maloney for the New Yorker

JOHN WATERS IS READY FOR HIS HOLLYWOOD CLOSEUP

BY MICHAEL SCHULMAN
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The day after John Waters's mother attended the opening of his 1969 film, "[Mondo Trasho](#)," she called him in hysterics, saying, "You are going to end up in a mental institution, die from an overdose of drugs, or commit suicide." She had reason to worry. The film, a black-and-white romp shot on a two-thousand-dollar budget, features a nude hitchhiker, a topless tap dance in an asylum, and a foot fetishist giving a woman a "shrimp job" (toe sucking). During production, in Baltimore, Waters and some of his troupe were arrested for conspiracy to commit indecent exposure. Despite the chaos, his mother's prophecy proved to be mistaken. Three years later, Waters unleashed the naughty classic "Pink Flamingos," which concludes with his fearsome drag muse, Divine, feasting on dog feces. Waters went on to become one of the preëminent cult filmmakers of his generation, racking up such honorifics as the Prince of Puke, the King of Filth, and, in the words of William S. Burroughs, "the Pope of Trash."

A born provocateur (as a child, he designed "horror houses" in his garage), Waters built his outrageous visions with little more than gumption, an instinct for what he deemed "good bad taste," and the talents of his ragtag stock company of Baltimore misfits, who called themselves the Dreamlanders, among them Divine, Mink Stole, Mary Vivian Pearce, and a chatty, dentally challenged barmaid named Edith Massey. In films like "[Female Trouble](#)" (1974) and "[Desperate Living](#)" (1977), he created a topsy-turvy cinematic universe in which filthy was fabulous, violence was virtuous, and housewives were homicidal. Eventually, the mainstream film industry caught on to his impish charms, and, in 1988, Waters released his biggest hit, "[Hairspray](#)," which gave rise to a Broadway musical and a remake starring John Travolta in drag. Still, with his pervert-chic pencil mustache and X-rated aphorisms, Waters retained the joyful, transgressive spirit of a perennial outsider.

Now, at seventy-seven, Waters is finally getting his Hollywood closeup. This weekend, the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures opens "[John Waters: Pope of Trash](#)," a full-scale exhibition exploring his "filmmaking process, key themes,

and unmatched style." The show features restorations of his little-seen early films (including his first short, called "Hag in a Black Leather Jacket"), as well as scads of costumes and props, among them the snake that bursts from Johnny Knoxville's pants in "[A Dirty Shame](#)," Johnny Depp's leather jacket from "[Cry-Baby](#)," and the leg of lamb that Kathleen Turner uses to bludgeon a woman to death in "[Serial Mom](#)." To top it off, on Monday, Waters will receive a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

When I spoke to Waters recently, over Zoom, he was in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he's often seen on his bicycle. (He's still based in Baltimore, which has embraced him as an unlikely home-town hero, and he has a place in San Francisco.) He declined to turn on his camera, saying, "I always wonder how people do porn with each other on Zoom when it's so unflattering." I reminded him that we'd met several times over the years, first at the Hamptons home of his friends Vincent and Shelly, and later at [Camp John Waters](#), a themed summer-camp weekend for adults, in Connecticut, which, since 2017, has attracted a merry band of filthy superfans. We spoke about shoplifting, the Manson family, and a big confession that I waited eighteen years to make. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Michael Schulman (MS): Between the Academy Museum and the Hollywood Walk of Fame, you're really being embraced by the Hollywood establishment. You've used the line "I'm so respectable I could puke." Does it feel strange to be coronated in this way, after being such an outsider for so much of your career?

John Waters (JW): It doesn't feel strange. I feel excited about it. I wish my parents were alive to see it. But at the same time I never thought that *couldn't* happen. I had parents who made me believe I could do whatever I wanted, even though they hated what I did. No parent would be happy their child made "Mondo Trasho." I even got arrested making it on the college campus where my father went, shooting nude *men* instead of women. So I was born lucky. I'm not saying there weren't disagreements with my parents, but the things that you grow up with that cause you some pain are how you learn to negotiate. That's how you later get through the Hollywood system.

MS: I don't even think of you as a Hollywood person.

JW: I do, in a way. "Hairspray" was the first Hollywood movie I made, with New Line, and then "Cry-Baby" was Universal Pictures. Every one of them, right up to "A Dirty Shame," was pitched to a Hollywood studio. I had a development deal. I had test screenings. I had the whole experience. Looking back, I have no bitterness. If you don't want traumas, make a film with your cell phone! I ended up making the movies I wanted, and those movies are still being shown and being discovered by a new generation.

MS: The Academy—that's quite the pinnacle. Have you ever been to the Academy Awards?

JW: No, but I've never not watched them in my whole life. I think I watched them coming out of my mother's vagina. I was born in April, so I could have! At the same time, I've been *in* the Academy for a long time. David Lynch was my sponsor.

MS: Oh, cool! For the Walk of Fame, do you know where your star is going to be?

JW: I am really thrilled, because I did say in one article that I very much wanted to be in front of [Larry Edmunds Bookshop](#), on Hollywood Boulevard. They've been there forever. I think the guy who runs it now may have lobbied them, and that is where it is. When the news came out, somebody commented in some comment section, "Finally, he's closer to the gutter than ever."

MS: I'm sure that some of your hard-core fans are going to take their dogs to relieve themselves on your star.

JW: Oh, I hope not, but it's not up to me. I'm just glad it's not near Trump's, because his always has vandalism and stuff. There was some trouble where Divine is buried, in Baltimore, and where I'm going to be buried—Pat Moran, Mink Stole, we're all going to be buried there. We call it Disgraceland. People wrote tributes all over Divine's grave: "The Filthiest Person Alive" and "Cunt Eyes," which is an expression of affection that Crackers says to Cotton in "Pink Flamingos." The families of the people who have the graves next door to Divine's would go on Mother's Day and see

"Cunt Eyes" and maybe not understand the reference, so the graveyard put up a sign saying "Please Respect the Dead Nearby."

MS: Let's talk about the exhibition. There are some amazing items, like Debbie Harry's beehive wig from "Hairspray" and Mink Stole's cat-eye glasses from "Pink Flamingos." The curators went on a huge scavenger hunt. What kind of things did you give to the museum from your own collection?

JW: See, all my stuff is at Wesleyan's film archives. I forgot some of the stuff that was there. I didn't even realize Debbie Harry's wig was there. And Mink's glasses—I never knew she had them, and they were falling apart. They're being restored. We have the fake leg of lamb that my friend Pat Moran's son, who was the prop master, made.

MS: This is the leg of lamb that serial mom **beats someone to death with?**

JW: In time to the song "Tomorrow," from "Annie"! Boy, did we have to pay to get the rights to *that* one.

MS: I heard that you have a collection of fake food?

JW: I do. I have it all over my house. I like the worst kind, like an old, dirty piece of carrot. Or I have a bowl of cereal next to my bed with a spoon. It looks like I just forgot to take it downstairs. I kind of live in a joke shop. I always loved joke shops when I was young. So I have a lot of spilled food or things that look like something bad happened just sitting around to delight me when I walk up the steps.

MS: What are some of the weirdest objects in your house?

JW: Oh, God. Well, I have the electric chair from "Female Trouble." I believe it's in the show. Divine gets the electric chair at the end. We carried it through the yard of a real prison in Maryland to film it, and the prisoners were yelling out, "They're bringing that back?" They had the gas chamber there. "Not the electric chair, too!" Divine was very nervous, walking in drag and carrying an electric chair across the yards of the Maryland prison. That's pretty ballsy.

MS: When you were making these movies, did you keep these props with any sort of idea that they would be important for posterity?

JW: Well, they were important to me and my friends. And, at Wesleyan, it's like the ultimate John Waters Yard Sale, basically. I have everything from every movie, every communication, every drawing. And I have great roommates, Martin Scorsese and Clint Eastwood. I met Clint Eastwood, and I said, "Just think! Divine's fake vagina might be next to Dirty Harry's police badge forever!"

MS: The show also has some objects that are not from your movies but were inspirations, like an issue of *Hustler* from 1977 with a scratch-and-sniff centerfold.

JW: That certainly gave me the idea for Odorama [in "Polyester"]. Yeah, Larry Flynt did it first. But it was the smell of lilac. You can imagine other smells he could have done. He went highbrow.

MS: And there's a poster for "The Tingler," the William Castle horror film from the fifties. Why was that an inspirational film for you?

JW: I love "The Tingler"! I have a lot of "Tingler" memorabilia. They would say, "The Tingler is loose in the theatre!" and then buzzers would go off under your seat. When it came to my theatre, in Towson, Maryland, they maybe wired four of the seats. So I'd run in early and find where the seat was. One year for my birthday, Dennis Dermody gave me the manual of how to put in Percepto! buzzers in your theatre, and it was really complicated. Each buzzer had two motors with wires that ran up to the booth, and the projectionist would hit the switch. It was pretty amazing. I think they should do it today, with all sorts of different rude things that could pop up into your seat.

MS: What are they selling in the museum gift shop?

JW: Oh, we have a lot of swag. We have soap that says “Filthy” on it. We have bathmats that say “Filthy.” A beautiful catalogue. There’s a thing where you can go in and your face can become Divine.

MS: Having been to Camp John Waters, I wonder if the museum is prepared for the kind of John Waters diehards who are about to descend on it.

JW: Well, my fans are respectful. I always say to curators, “My fans steal, so just put an extra nail in there.” But nobody’s going to steal anything—they better hadn’t, because it’s mine!

MS: You’ve had a long career as a shoplifter.

JW: Well, I haven’t done any of that recently. I probably *could* do it now. I could just walk right into Comme des Garçons, smash the window, and run out the front door.

MS: There’s been an uptick in shoplifting lately. Do you have any tips for shoplifters?

JW: Let me think. Once I did something terrible. I was shoplifting, and I saw that the store detective saw me do it, so I put it back. I knew she didn’t *see* me put it back, and she stopped me out front. I sued and got five thousand dollars.

MS: How did you get into shoplifting as a youth?

JW: It was different then. Every kid shoplifted. I shoplifted records, I shoplifted books. I had a special coat. But I never shoplifted from little stores. I shoplifted from big chains, like Doubleday.

MS: You were setting the precedent for the CVS gangs of today.

JW: I hope not. It’s a different spirit. Remember Abbie Hoffman had the book “Steal This Book”? It’s ridiculous, looking back, that shoplifting was political.

MS: Is shoplifting what got you interested in crime more generally? In the seventies, you became a “trial groupie” and travelled the country to watch courtroom cases.

JW: No, I taught in prison—that’s what very much got my interest in that. If you go to prison, I’ll be the first person to call you and visit. I still have a few friends I visit in prison. But I like teaching in prison. And I saw it from both sides: the victim’s side, the family’s side. If I wasn’t [a filmmaker], I’ve always said I’d be a defense lawyer or a psychiatrist.

MS: Was the first trial you went to the Manson trial?

JW: Probably yes.

MS: You’ve written about your interest in the Manson family and how it’s changed over the years. [*After using Sharon Tate’s murder as a running gag in “Multiple Maniacs” and dedicating “Pink Flamingos” to three of the Manson killers, Waters apologized for insensitivity. He formed a decades-long friendship with Leslie Van Houten, who spent fifty-three years in prison for her role in the LaBianca murders, and advocated for her release. She was let out on parole in July.*] Can you describe at the time what grabbed you about it?

JW: I have to be careful here. What grabbed me about it was that it was full anarchy. They *were* the filthiest people alive, and they were scary, and they were hippies. I think it was how they frightened everybody at the time, and we were doing the same thing—but in our movies, so it was different. We made it up; it was fiction.

MS: There are a number of overlaps between the Manson family and the Dreamlanders. You were a bunch of troublemakers. There was a lot of LSD involved. Did you see the similarities at the time?

JW: Yeah, but we didn't harm anybody. People said no to me. Divine ate shit because he thought it was funny. Mink said no to setting her hair on fire. Cookie Mueller said no to smashing a television when it was turned on. If we were a cult, it was an artistic cult that was doing almost a political action against the tyranny of good taste. That's me today looking back on it, trying to explain it. But we were just trying to make ourselves laugh. I've always made fun of the rules, of whatever people think the outlaw world is. We made fun of every genre. "Hairspray" was a dance movie. "Cry-Baby" was a musical. "Serial Mom" was true crime. "Pecker" was an artistic bio. "A Dirty Shame" was exploitation. "Cecil B. Demented" was, well, my "Battle of Algiers."

MS: It's interesting that you bring up the mind-control aspect of being a cult leader.

JW: I don't think I had mind control on people. I don't.

MS: But you were also very interested in Patricia Hearst and went to her trial, and then put her in a bunch of your movies.

JW: Well, who wants to be famous as a kidnap victim? People would ask her for autographs. She said, "Why would you ask me for my autograph? I got kidnapped!" So I think she came with us to make fun of it, to make people stop bringing it up. And it worked. I still love her. She's good in all my movies.

MS: She's in "Cecil B. Demented," a movie about a gang of outlaws who kidnaps someone and then converts her to their cause.

JW: Well, isn't that the ultimate way to say "fuck you" about being known as a famous kidnap victim—to make a comedy about it? It's the same reason Johnny Depp made "Cry-Baby," because he didn't want to be a teen idol. And Traci [Lords] didn't want to be [known for] adult movies. You embrace and make fun of what they use against you. That's what I did from the very beginning, calling [my movies] a "trash epic" or a "gutter film." One critic in Baltimore who hated me said, How do you beat us to the typewriter?

MS: Going back to the Manson family, you wrote about your changing feelings about it, really compellingly, in your book "Role Models." What were the points along the way that made you reconsider your "jokey, smart-ass way" of using it in your films?

JW: Teaching in prison and seeing victims' families and families [of convicts] who said, "Do you think we ever planned that this could happen to our kid?" I've always been really interested in that. Suppose you do something terrible—how can you ever make up for that? The only way is to become a better person than you would have become if that hadn't happened. That is rehabilitation to me.

MS: This reminds me of your long friendship with Leslie Van Houten.

JW: I'm not going to talk about that. I don't talk about that anymore. She's out. It's over. You're never going to hear from her again. And only her lawyer speaks for her now.

MS: Have you been following any recent famous trials? Has anything grabbed you?

JW: The woman who grabs me the most is Judy Clarke, [the defense attorney for such figures as Ted Kaczynski and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev]. She's the person I'm the most fascinated by, and she almost never gives interviews. She handles the worst capital cases, and she wins if she gets you life and not death. She's the only person I want to meet. And Eminem, who has no desire to meet me.

MS: Why not?

JW: I don't know. I've said that for years. He's never called. That's fine. I love that he's standoffish.

MS: What do you think of the true-crime boom? People are listening to podcasts about gruesome murders. Do you feel like you were ahead of the curve?

JW: “Serial Mom” satirizing that definitely was ahead of the curve, because we made fun of the whole genre before it even happened. I do read true crime, but the books aren’t as good anymore. I always love that the True Crime section is back beyond Gay, near the bathroom. It’s always in the worst location in a store. I’m always looking for good true-crime books.

MS: Do you have any recommendations?

JW: The last good one I read was “Preacher’s Girl,” about this woman [Blanche Taylor Moore] who poisoned everybody. I just looked her up, and she’s the oldest woman on death row. She’s ninety!

MS: In your book “Shock Value,” you wrote, “All people look better under arrest.” Do you have any thoughts on Donald Trump’s mug shot?

JW: I am convinced he does his hair himself with Just for Men—the worst dye any man can ever put on his head—and his color wheel is Honey Blond. It’s one long strand, and only he has ever seen it. But, if he ever goes to jail, they’ll delouse him, and that hairdo will come down like Rapunzel.

MS: That’s something to look forward to. Staying on Trump for a minute, to me the January 6th rioters would not be out of place in “Pink Flamingos.”

JW: Here’s the thing I feel about them. First of all, they sure got prosecuted. In the seventies, we bombed the Capitol—I didn’t personally—hijacked airplanes, set off bombs. You know, we *would* have taken a shit in Agnew’s office. When I saw the picture of the Proud Boys, I thought it was the Cockettes! The guy with the horns looks exactly like Hibiscus.

MS: Some of the right is still very puritan, like this uproar over Drag Queen Story Hours at libraries.

JW: You heard what happened with the Academy Museum and my exhibition, right? There was kind of a mistake, because they always have drag hour for kids with almost all their exhibitions, and accidentally it was released that they were going to have it for my movies. Of course, Fox News called in one second. And I said, “Here’s the thing. My drag queens were thought up to *scare* adults, not comfort children.” But then I thought, It would be kind of great—Peaches Christ telling the kids, “You can sing with your asshole, too!” Or Dina Martina saying, “Romper, stomper, bomper, boo. Come on, kids, let’s eat dog poo!”

MS: What do you think of this idea that Gen Z is turned off by sex scenes in movies, especially gratuitous ones? There basically isn’t a scene in any of your movies that *isn’t* gratuitous.

JW: No one has ever jerked off watching my movies from the sex scenes! If they have, they’re in real trouble. The sex scenes in my movies are parodies. They’re always making fun of the idea of being horny. Sometimes I’m against instinct. Sex—I didn’t get to think it up. I’m mad I didn’t. I’m mad I have to take a shit every day. That’s wrong! I didn’t think it up! I am such a control freak.

MS: But the idea of young people being prudish now is so warped to me.

JW: The young people I know aren’t that prudish. We’ll see. I have a new show called “Devil’s Advocate.” We’ll see what I can get away with this time. My fans are smart and nice, but they *want* to be shocked. Comedy is about walking on the edge. I mean, Lenny Bruce went to jail for saying “cocksucker” in San Francisco. Can you imagine? Words have changed so much. You have to keep up with the new rules to make fun of them. To me, there is a new sexual revolution happening right now, and it’s pretty astounding. As long as you can laugh at yourself first, you can get away with most everything.

MS: How did you feel about the sexual revolution of the sixties?

JW: It's hard to imagine that every night you had sex with somebody different, and it was normal. That will never happen in anyone who's alive today's lifetime ever again, I don't think.

MS: I want to ask you about your early Dreamland days. It seemed almost like a fun-house-mirror version of the old Hollywood studio system. You had Divine as the queen of the lot, and she modelled herself on Elizabeth Taylor. Mary Vivian Pearce was the Jean Harlow ingénue. Did you think of yourselves in that sense at the time?

JW: Well, we knew about all that. Divine loved Elizabeth Taylor. And, when I finally met Elizabeth Taylor, she kind of looked like Divine. Edith Massey was my Gracie Allen. Mary Vivian Pearce had the glamour. And then I always had a redneck star, like Danny Mills as Crackers [in "Pink Flamingos"]. My mother, poor thing, had to watch "Female Trouble," and she said, "That character Gator, is that the kind of man you find attractive?" I lied and said no.

MS: So many of them weren't actors in any traditional sense. I'm fascinated by the acting style in those movies.

JW: That was my fault. I didn't have good sound, so I said, "Scream!" But Mink said once, "They can never call us amateurs, because we memorize fourteen pages of dialogue for one take, and if one word was wrong you would stop and do it again." I was influenced by the Theatre of the Ridiculous. I was influenced by the Theatre of Cruelty, all that yelling and screaming and nightmare kind of stuff. Then, later in life, I very much changed that kind of direction. But at the time it was extreme. It was just what exploded from us working together. It was hard to make those movies, and everybody really gave their all. It was twenty-hour shooting days, and the film wouldn't turn out. We'd have to do it again in the winter, and with the police after us. Nobody was really on our side, except the crazy audiences that came. We always had a packed audience.

MS: When you started getting bigger budgets in the eighties, for "Polyester" and "Hairspray," was there any inhibiting factor? You weren't just making your own crazy renegade movie.

JW: No, I was thrilled by it. I wanted each cent. I always wanted to make hit movies. I always wanted them to be commercially successful. I always thought they *could* be. And the Hollywood situation was gradual. I've made every kind of movie. I started underground, and then did midnight movies, then independent, then Hollywood. And then I slid right back down to independent and then Hollywood underground, and that's where I am now.

MS: There's a line in "Cecil B. Demented" where Cecil says, "We believe technique to be nothing more than failed style."

JW: That is one hundred per cent the most perfect line of any of my movies. It's true.

MS: Can you elaborate?

JW: Because we didn't know what we were doing, but, hey, they're still playing, aren't they? I always said that if people say it's raw, that means they love it. If they say it's amateurish, it means they hate it. And it's the exact same thing. If someone comes out of a movie and says, "Boy, that cinematography was great," you know that it was not a great movie. I don't think any movement in movies or art or anything has ever been about looking perfect. It's about wrecking what came before.

MS: You're planning to direct your first film since 2004, based on your novel, "Liarmouth." Why has it taken so long to get another movie off the ground?

JW: I've had many, many projects that were put in turnaround. Since "A Dirty Shame," there have been five other movies that didn't happen. But I was paid—it was a whole development process. And during that time I've written books. I do forty standup shows a year. So it's not like I've been slacking.

MS: Oh, you're obviously extremely hardworking. But do you feel you wouldn't be able to just go out and make a movie for ten thousand dollars, like you did with "Pink Flamingos"?

JW: No, I wouldn't want to do that. I'm not shittin' in the woods anymore! I'm not going to go look for an animal, kill it, cook it, and eat it for lunch. I have no desire to do that again, at seventy-seven.

MS: When you were in your fifties, you wrote, "Being insane when you're young is sexy; insane at fifty is pitiful." How do you feel about turning eighty in three years?

JW: When I said "insane," I meant you can't act insane. You can *think* insane. You can think up insane movies, insane poetry. But you have to carry yourself with a certain dignity. Even if you're over fifty and go to the gym, we still don't want to see you naked on an airplane.

MS: Is there anything really wholesome you're into that would shock people?

JW: I use two whole water picks every night before I go to sleep to brush my teeth, so I don't get tooth decay. The second one is what keeps your teeth in. It squirts between your gums.

MS: In "Shock Value," you wrote that if you could pick your own death it would be on a roller coaster that careens into a cotton-candy stand at the state fair. Now that you're a "filth elder," have you reconsidered?

JW: Yes. If I had to die, it would be in three-tier Air France, first class, where they have only, like, two rows, and you get a full apartment. And you have a woman that comes in and just smiles. That's her job. That's the flight I'd like to die on, going to Paris.

MS: John, I would like to take this moment to confess something. This is kind of strange. You know how I mentioned Vincent and Shelly at the beginning? In 2005, I was in my twenties, and I was at a gallery opening at Glenn Horowitz Bookseller, on the Upper East Side. It was an exhibition of Brigid Berlin's needlepoints. I saw you coming toward me, and I gave you a look of recognition, because I knew you were John Waters. Then you gave *me* a look of recognition and said, "We've met before, haven't we?" And I just said, "Yeah!" And then you said, "At Vincent and Shelly's, in the Hamptons last summer." And I said, "Yeah!" And that was a lie. I've never met them. I think you were confusing me with someone else. But, every time I've seen you since, I've tried to bring up Vincent and Shelly.

JW: And you did again today! And you don't know them?

MS: No. Who are they?

JW: Ha! Vincent and Shelly Fremont. They made the movie about Brigid Berlin, "Pie in the Sky." Vincent worked for Warhol. The only straight man I know that worked for Warhol, and then his foundation, for probably thirty, forty years. Shelly's his great wife. They make movies together, they're dealers, and they're my great friends. So that's funny. So you're an impersonator of Vincent and Shelly's friend?

MS: I guess someone who looked like me was at their house in the Hamptons, and you thought that was me. I just played along with it for eighteen years.

JW: Don't feel bad about it. Vincent and Shelly would be thrilled. They'll love this interview. But I forgive you. We have to do a penance. What could it be? Go watch Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" three times backward and say how sorry you are. That's your penance.

MS: This was so much fun. Thank you.

JW: I'll give Vincent and Shelly your love.