

A Panache for Sleaze — the Waters Aesthetic

By Adam Eisenstat

In the church of sleaze, John Waters is a high priest, if not a bishop. Best known as the auteur of such "celluloid atrocities" as *Pink Flamingos* and *Polyester*, he is also a regular contributor to *Rolling Stone*, *American Film* and other publication receptive to his unique brand of domestic decadence.

Waters, a Baltimore native, is obsessed by the grotesque, gruesome, artificial and incredibly cheap. He is an avid reader of *The National Enquirer* ("Bad taste has never been so naked and cheap.") and he regularly attends murder trials around the country, favoring the most extreme and sensational. These obsessions are filtered through his distinctly American brand of absurdism, rendering the vast mosaic of indigenous human and cultural waste very laughable, if not tinged with a trace of horror.

Among Waters' main film influences are those enshrined in the pantheon of sleaze/camp/pop cinema like New Yorkers Jack Smith, the Kuchar brothers and doyen of grotesque voyeurism Andy Warhol. Waters' favorite filmmaker of all time is Russ Meyer, the creator of such massive mammary-laden pre-porn classics as *Vixens*, *Beyond the Valley of the Ultravixens* and *Faster Pussycat, Kill Kill* ("My *Citizen Kane*," says Waters). Other influences Waters cites are gore king Hershell Gordon Lewis (*Bloodfeast*, *Gore Gore Girls*) and gimmick master William Castle (*The Tingler*).

In Waters' films a panoply of outcasts, sexual mutants and cartoonishly

good times together, as documented in Waters' funny and intelligent biography *Shock Value*. He exploits their deformities and unusual talents in a way that seems mutually beneficial to both this connoisseur of the outrageous and these outrageous exhibitionists.

Waters' films are huge cult classics, which is understandable considering how hilarious and shocking they can be. His most popular film, *Pink Flamingos*, depicts things on screen that most people could never even imagine, that is until after seeing this super low budget (\$12,000) tale of "the filthiest people alive." Although Waters is a very good screenwriter with a flair for the extravagant plot twist and brilliant dialogue, it's his sense of pyrotechnic freakishness that makes a film like *Pink Flamingos* stand out. Such intriguing and/or revolting occurrences in the film include bestiality (with a chicken and a couple), an egg fetishist, a malformed transsexual, cannibalism, mass murder and the coprophilic finale in which Divine eats a newly laid dog turd. No mirrors here. This scene gives new meaning to the phrase "eat shit."

There's a decidedly anti-Hollywood ambience to Waters' films, which are often shot badly, wretchedly acted and generally pervaded by the crude and cheap. But like all original celluloid subversives, his films engage in an ongoing dialogue with Hollywood forms and archetypes. Divine's simply outrageous parodies of 1940s starlet digs and her/his hyper-camp interpretation of screen babe glamour and melodrama illustrate the homage to/parody of Hollywood that goes on in



blares Little Richard's "The Girl Can't Help It." This nifty little collage attests to Waters' deep understanding of the sleazy sexual essence of proto-rock 'n' roll. It also presents a parallel between Divine's beef deviance and the Manson Family's deviance. This scene shows the influence of Jack Smith, whose 1963 seminal classic *Flaming Creatures* features frenzied shots of transvestites in postwar Hollywood costumes having orgies and masturbating while pop songs, fragments from phony commercials and tango music buzz away on the soundtrack.

In his articles and book, Waters emerges as a master theoretician of underground/B movies and bad taste in general. He makes a distinction between good bad taste and plain bad taste. "Good bad taste," he says, "has wit and irony. Bad taste has neither." Good bad taste is Waters' forte. He says he makes such grotesque films to amuse himself and to allow his audience to laugh at their own worst fears as well as things which they are unable to change. Waters himself is not interested in changing anything despite the extremely harsh light in which he casts some of America's more repulsive characteristics. "If everything was good and fair in America, I wouldn't have any subject matter," he says.

Tonight at Filmmakers at the Fulton Waters will be on hand to screen *The Diane Linkletter Story*, a 1970 black and white atrocity starring Divine as Diane, *Tribute to Edie*, a charming portrait of Edith Massey by Robert Maier and the feature *Polyester* in Odorama, a scratch and sniff (odor cards provided) homage to 3-D, *Sensurround* and William Castle. It's the story of a disturbed suburban housewife, Francine Fishpaw (Divine), whose husband runs a porno theater and is cheating on her while her daughter is an unwed

mother-to-be (punk Stiv Bators done the deed), her son is a psychotic glue-sniffing JD and a would-be sultor, Tod Tomorrow (Tab Hunter), is an utter knave after far more than Divine's luscious bod. It's a bit slicker (read more expensive) and tamer than Waters' earlier films, but his caricaturing of suburban desperation, the anti-abortion lunatic fringe and teen-age rebellion are highpoints in his oeuvre. It's also one of Waters' most thematically coherent works. Wafting up from this cinematic stench is a pungent, if not downright vicious, satire of bourgeois/suburban values. Plus the man himself will be there in all his pimp mustachioed glory. I know I'll be there or wherever he sets up his mobile absurdist altar, so I can drink from his overflowing gutter of a mind, a mind from which flows a decadently positive affirmation of the American way.



despicable people hurt and kill one another, engage in deviant sex and eat dog shit. Great fun in other words. Part of the reason Waters' treatment of such lowly and seemingly grim subjects is so light and funny is because of his childishly scatological sense of humor. Vomit, feces and other bodily functions play a major role in his film aesthetic. Also, the repertory cast he uses in his films, which includes 300-lb. transvestite Divine and the late Edith Massey (the egg lady in *Pink Flamingos*), are like one big happy family and have shared many wild

all of Waters' films.

For all of his appreciation of Hollywood tackiness and artificiality, Waters is certainly not Hollywood. He completely sidesteps this Babylon and creates his own in mise en scene juxtapositions like the one in *Pink Flamingos* where Divine struts provocatively down the street with a just-shopped steak between her legs, past a wall which has spraypainted on it in huge letters "Free Tex Watson," (there's a Manson Family reference in all of Waters' films) while the soundtrack

