

JOHN WATERS: 'I don't want to go to jail for making a movie'

LARRY GROBEL

Just before I hung up the phone with John Waters, he asked me if I read the *Free Press* review of his mini-classic film, *Pink Flamingo*, when it opened in L.A. I told him I didn't. "Oh," he laughed, "they hated it."

It was the laugh — low-key, genuine, uncaring, good-natured — that made me respond in kind. I said had I review-

ed it for the *Free Press*, it definitely wouldn't have been negative. Then I told him how I went to the Elgin in New York one night three years ago to see it, thinking it was a Japanese film. Japanese! If they showed *Pink Flamingo* in Japan, it would be one long bleep. Just like in Waters' hometown, Baltimore.

"Not really a movie town," he

says, mimicking the censor board and how they'd announce: "This part can't be shown because it's cunnilingus."

John Waters is a film maker. An important film maker who makes movies "to be humorous." His latest work is *Female Trouble*, which first opened in New York on 59th Street on the same day *Shampoo* opened, and which was reviewed the next day in the New York papers the same way *Shampoo* was. That kind of knocked Waters out: he still sees himself as a semi-delinquent kid from the Baltimore suburbs who couldn't cut it as a puppeteer so got into underground films.

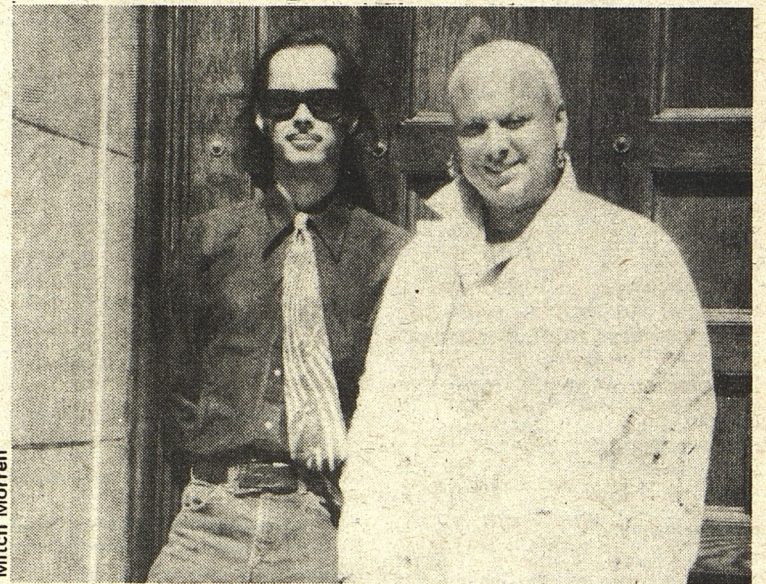
The first one he made, 11 years ago, was called *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*, which very few people saw, or will ever see. Next came *Roman Candle*, which he made when he was 17. That's when Divine was named Divine.

Grotesque Transvestite

Divine, for anyone who has heard or seen *Pink Flamingo* or *Female Trouble* and doesn't already know this, is a man. A high school buddy of Waters "who was Divine before she was named." She isn't exactly a slip of the tongue, since the world will know Divine as a grotesque and nightmarish transvestite with a circus face even a mother would find hard to love and falsies the size of two rolls of absorbent paper towels.

Walters says that when they're not filming, Divine doesn't dress in drag but wears white overalls and short hair cut up the middle. "Divine doesn't act the way she does on the screen," he says. "She'd be in prison if she did." Out of drag, according to Waters, Divine looks stranger than in. Which must be very strange, since in drag Divine looks like a cross between a cartoon and a catastrophe.

Since 1971, when it was released, *Pink Flamingo* has been shown, usually at midnight, in most major cities. The reaction to it has been mixed — from people stomping out in



Mitch Morrell

disgust to people stomping for more, also in disgust. Waters doesn't care what people think, as long as they react.

"It's pretty hard to get a reaction from an audience," he says, "so I have to go to pretty ridiculous lengths." He laughs, I laugh — anyone who has seen his films knows why we laugh. "As long as I can make people feel one way or the other, I'm satisfied."

'Trash With a Difference'

Pink Flamingo set out to be the trashiest, "dirty" movie ever made. But it's trash with a difference. The film is funny, often very funny. There are sex scenes which are so revoltingly absurd they're impossible to take seriously, and since the movie is a pyramid of perversity, the entire production becomes a put-on. In this sense, Waters' work is the opposite of some of the Warhol-Morrissey films: there are people who live like the ones portrayed in, say, *Women in Revolt*; there are no people who live the way they do in *Pink Flamingo*.

Waters, as I see him, is a modern-day Swift. When I tell him this he sounds almost embarrassed. "I try to be modest," he says.

"Modest? You!" I say.

He laughs. "The last thing I want people to think is that there is a message in my films. I'm not trying to say anything, just give people a good time and be more hideous than anything they've ever seen. I think I deliver."

"But I think that there are messages and that you're aware of it," I counter.

Performance Art

He agrees, but he'd rather not put words into his own mouth. "*Female Trouble* is about publicity, I guess. About wanting to be famous no matter how." (Divine becomes a criminal, strangles her

daughter, appears in front of an audience and asks, "Who wants to be killed for art?", shooting the first person who answer "I do.") "Fame is getting out of control," Waters says. "The easiest way to become famous is shooting someone."

The transition is an easy one: Oswald, Ruby, Sirhan, Ray, et al. And, too, Chris Burden, the performance artist who lives in Venice and is known internationally for one piece: having someone shoot him in his arm with a rifle in an art gallery.

I ask Waters if he is parodying performance art. "I think what I did in *Female Trouble* is a positive statement," he answers, "because it's really about things I like. I'm not putting it down. What Chris Burden does is certainly art."

So is what Waters does. I mention that I see traces of Godard and Duchamp in his films. He says that the piece of film which influenced him the most was an ad shown at drive-ins between the features which depicted a family eating meatball sandwiches as a voice-over lured people to visit the concession stalls.

'A Real Trouper'

"So that's where you got your ending for *Pink Flamingo*," I say, only half-joking. That's where Divine scoops up a plopping poodle turd and swallows it. Waters still laughs about it. "We talked about that scene for a year before we shot it," he says. "It wasn't easy for Divine to eat dog shit, but she's a real trouper. It's a first, and probably a last, in film history. It's one scene that will always be remembered."

I recall another well-remembered scene from that film, where a guy drops his pants, sticks his backside to the camera and does an incredible dance exercising the muscles of

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