



KITSCH AND TELL

John Waters is 'the Pope of Trash', the film-maker who made *Hairspray* a hit and who has built a career on shattering taboos. Now that almost anything goes, his latest act of rebellion is to get sensible. By Ariel Leve. Photographs: Jonathan Torgovnik

It is a warm afternoon and John Waters is dressed inappropriately for the temperature. His off-kilter elegance, a look that he describes as "disaster at the dry cleaners", is a statement of his appreciation of all things that are purposefully wrong. His crisp shirt has large splotches of pastel pink that look as if someone has ironed bits of cotton candy onto his torso. That one would mistake them for stains is the desired effect.

William Burroughs anointed Waters "the Pope of Trash", a title he has

embraced with gusto. He is known mostly as a film-maker who has made 16 movies — cult classics such as *Pink Flamingos*, *Cecil B DeMented* and *Cry-Baby* — a body of work that has stayed loyal to his subversive and gleefully indecent perspective.

Even with the sound turned off, a John Waters film would be recognisable. But it's *Hairspray* that made him a mainstream name. The 1988 movie was adapted as a Broadway musical that won eight Tony awards, went on to be a successful West End production and ►►►





Waters in his bijou home in Provincetown, Massachusetts, a town he first travelled to 46 years ago after hearing it was 'a weird place' 67



Above: John Travolta (left) in the 2007 remake of *Hairspray*. Left: the original movie starring Divine (second right)

a 2007 remake that starred John Travolta in drag. John Waters made camp commercial.

What distinguishes his work is largely what distinguishes him as a person: taste. It is filthy! Outrageous! And, above all, entertaining. Taste — in particular, bad taste — is a subject that looms large with John Waters. Drawn, proudly, to what he calls “second-rate” work, he likes Alvin and the Chipmunks better than the Beatles; prefers Jayne Mansfield to Marilyn Monroe, and thinks the Three Stooges are funnier than Charlie Chaplin.

He describes himself as “a cult film-maker whose core audience consists of minorities who

The first thing Waters does when I meet him is take my picture. He keeps a Polaroid of everyone who enters his house. He first came to the seaside town of Provincetown in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, 46 years ago. He hitchhiked here because he’d heard it was “a weird place”. He now rents the top floor of a weatherbeaten house on the beach. It’s a small room, a studio, with a lot of life packed into it and a view of the sea.

Everywhere you look there are carefully selected mementos: framed photos (with Andy Warhol, the fashion designer Valentino and Patty Hearst, the newspaper heiress, kidnapping

through them. “Halibut with Veg” is circled. One of the most sensible things about him, on what is becoming an increasingly long list, is his orderliness. He is extremely organised. “Like a Swiss person!” he cries out. He keeps the same schedule every day. Monday to Friday he’s up at 6am and reads the papers until 8am. He works until lunchtime. “I think up something in the morning and in the afternoon I try to sell it.”

Does he ever deviate? Never. On Friday night he will drink. On Saturday night he’ll recover. He tries not to work at the weekend. Apart from the occasional dinner party, he will usually either read or go to the movies by himself. He splits his time between four homes (Provincetown, San Francisco, Baltimore and Manhattan), has four sets of friends, four pairs of boxer shorts, and four routines — one for each home.

Every year, he goes to London for a week and visits galleries and book shops; he feels valued by British fans who understand his sense of irony: he doesn’t target people, he satirises them.

Since the early 1970s, Waters has covered nearly every type of depraved and debauched subject matter — porn, drugs, murder, abortion, religion, lesbian strippers — and handled it all with an insider’s knowledge of what it feels like to be an outsider. He sees beauty where others perceive ugliness. But the world has changed. In an age of celebrity sex tapes and teenage girls dressing like hookers, is there any rebellion left? And what about the fact that John Waters, writing about the role models who informed his outsider status, has landed on *The New York Times* bestseller list? It doesn’t get more ➤➤➤ 69

‘PEOPLE DIDN’T WANT TO BE OUTSIDERS. THESE DAYS NO ONE WANTS TO FIT IN. EVERYBODY BELIEVES THAT THEY’RE AN OUTSIDER’

can’t even fit in with their *own* minorities”. And in his third book, a memoir called *Role Models*, he writes thoughtfully and humorously about the people who have inspired him throughout his life, personally and professionally.

They include Tennessee Williams, Leslie Van Houten — one of Charles Manson’s “family” — the Wicked Witch of the West (who inspired his obsession with striped socks), the pornographer Bobby Garcia and, of all people, Johnny Mathis, the sweater-wearing, smooth and conservative singer. That they are opposites is precisely the point. Contradictions play out everywhere with Waters. He is willing to say anything, but is firmly in control of what he says. He pushes boundaries, yet is a sensible man committed to routine.

victim and convicted bank robber), flyers, posters and personal notes tacked to the walls. There is a vintage book with a black-and-white photograph of a naked man with a very large penis on the cover, and an axe with “Happy 60th!” written on the handle. His shoes are lined up in a neat row. Four pairs of identical white jeans are draped over the rail of the porch, drying in the sun. There is little furniture, apart from a bed in the corner, a small desk, and a table covered with folders, his laptop, and books piled high.

The previous night, he tells me, he had a dinner party where he cooked for 12 people. He has a folder filled with photocopies of hundreds of recipes from *Cooking Light* magazine. I leaf

Interview

Right: with his parents at the Broadway opening of *Hairspray* in 2002. Below: Johnny Depp in Waters' 1990 movie, *Cry-Baby*

inside than that. How does he feel? Thrilled. "Who wants to be an outsider for 40 years?" he declares. "The word 'outsider' now is ruined. It doesn't mean what it used to mean. People didn't want to be outsiders. It was a dirty word. You wanted to fit in. These days, no one wants to fit in. Everybody believes that they're unique and that they're an outsider. So to me, the final humour of it all was to be the establishment!"

In the mid-1960s Waters began making underground shorts such as *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*, which was 17 minutes long, shot at his parents' house, cost \$30 and was shown once at a Baltimore coffee house. His first full-length feature was 1969's *Mondo Trasho*, the lead character of which is dead through most of the film. But it was 1972's *Pink Flamingos* that made him a recognisable name. It's been called the greatest gross-out movie of all time and features the drag queen Divine — Waters' close friend from his hometown of Baltimore, who died in 1988 just after playing the original Edna Turnblad in *Hairspray* — eating dog poo.

"The fact that so many people hated it helped," he reflects on *Pink Flamingos*. "That couldn't happen today. There is no cultural war going on. There's no rebellion."

What was once considered subversive is now mainstream. So what, if anything, is shocking to him now? Recently Waters returned to Baltimore where he visited a redneck bar with a black friend. As they were leaving, people made racist comments.

"Now that shocked me! When we left the bar and a man said 'keep on walking' to the black woman I was with, I couldn't believe it! And she couldn't either."

Which is worse — thinking it or saying it?

"They're about equal but the people who say it are just... dumber. Smart people who are racist are a lot scarier to me. Dumb people have an excuse. But smart people who are racist but don't say it..." he pauses to think of something really scary. "That's like liberal censors."

His career has been both plagued and buoyed by critics and censorship, but he feels that



'MY FATHER LENT ME THE MONEY TO MAKE MOVIES — WE WORKED OUT A LOT OF ISSUES. AND THE ONES WE DIDN'T I TURNED INTO A CAREER'

the negativity has sanctioned the work. "As soon as you tell someone not to do it, of course they want to do it, and you bring attention to it. The Catholic church is like that. Them telling me the movies I couldn't see when I was in Sunday school is why I'm sitting here today."

He was born in 1946 and raised in a middle-class Catholic household. Growing up in the Baltimore suburbs, he longed for a less conventional world. "My mother is Catholic and it brings her comfort. But to me, the Catholic Church is my enemy. They're against everything I believe in: women, gay people... When you read that after all this child molesting stuff the Pope came out and said it's because of *gay people* — they don't even know the difference between paedophilia and homosexuality and they really should have figured that out by now."

From early on in life Waters knew he didn't fit in, but credits his parents for being loving and making him feel safe. So, what does his mother make of the book? Has she read it? "No, she's not allowed to. She wasn't allowed to see *Pink Flamingos* either. She would be horrified."

Waters' father died a few years ago aged 91. In the book, he treats his parents with respect — but there is a line about him being angry while growing up. And if it was not with his parents, then with whom or what?

"I don't know," he says swiftly. "There was anger about the '50s. I always knew I was gay, but in the '50s gay people were too square. I went to a gay bar in Maryland and thought, 'I might be queer but I'm not *this*. Oh my god, are they all like this?'" He laughs.

"Did I have homophobic remarks in school? Sure. But the ones that would have really beaten me up and been against me knew that I hated authority more than they did. So they left me alone. They knew I was angry too."

Waters' school was "very white and very Republican" and he was obsessed with rock'n'roll. His parents, he recalls, were mortified. "I had a Top 10 board over my bed and would call out the songs — Number 10! Number Eight! — and dance around. I had my own dance show in my bedroom. I had a stage in my house."

He was industrious and entrepreneurial and worked as a puppeteer at children's birthday parties, going through his parents' address book and sending out ads that said "book it today". His father would drop him off with the stage and he'd make \$25 a party. He stopped doing it at 13 because it was embarrassing and he wanted to be a cool teenager.

Was he close to his father? "No, but we worked out a lot of issues. And the ones we didn't I long ago turned into a career. My father was proud of me. He lent me the money to make those early movies and I would send him \$100 a week when I had the money. When he died, I went through a safety-deposit box and I was very touched to see he'd kept the

Interview

Waters' flat is filled with ephemera, including a photograph (top left) of the Manson family's Leslie Van Houten

notes I sent." He credits his father, who started his own business selling fire-protection equipment, with giving him solid values. Before he died, Waters said to him: "You sold fire extinguishers, I sold shock."

Though his parents might have been disgusted with his earlier films, they came to the opening night of *Hairspray* on Broadway and loved it. "It was the only time their noses didn't grow when they said they liked it," Waters says. "They were proud."

Now 64, he has become a patron saint for misfits. He tells me that when he tours as a spoken-word performer, delivering monologues on his life and career, parents will bring him their children and say: "What can I do with these kids?" They will ask for help.

Such as? "They will bring me a young son who is basically a girl. You can see it. Or a mother will bring a daughter with tattoos and bolts in her face — all punk rock and pissed off. I just tell them they look great. What can I do? I give the parents so much credit though. It's touching. Very new. When I was young, the parents found out about my work and called the police. Or called me Beelzebub."

Waters lives alone but he is not lonely. He has had long-term boyfriends, but they always lived apart. A self-confessed "control freak", he would find it difficult to have someone sharing his space.

He doesn't have a serious boyfriend now and says without sentiment that he doesn't expect that to happen. Unsurprisingly, the idea of marriage does not appeal to him.

"I see people. I think you need sex — but that traditional kind of thing? I have no interest in it."

Just then, he looks at the clock and announces that he has an appointment. "Do you need me to move it back?" he asks courteously. While he makes the call, I use the loo. It's the size of a cupboard. Hanging on the shower-rail are a dozen long-sleeved Oxford shirts in various colours.

Waters has a mischievous, childlike enthusiasm for controversy and it punctuates his work. It often provides a refuge for scandalous figures in his films — a way for them to escape their victimhood and be vocationally rehabilitated. In 1990, *Cry-Baby*, a parody of teen musicals, included both the teenage porn star Traci Lords, and Patty Hearst. It starred the then teen idol,



Johnny Depp. All three were subsequently able to reinvent themselves. "If you hate what the public thinks about you, make a movie with me," he says, half-jokingly. "If you make fun of what they use against you, they can't do it any more."

He has remained friends with many of the people he has worked with, including Depp, who he says "has the finest career of any American actor. Both commercial and arty".

When *Cry-Baby* was made, using a porn star in a feature film was a big deal. But now porn in fashion, TV and film is ubiquitous. "I was a judge at the porno Oscars and it is now a legitimate industry," he says. "I do think that heterosexual porn is really hideous," he adds, referring to the

pauses. "That's the new feminism? That's worse than when I was younger."

What a sensible point he makes. It occurs to me as we're having this matter-of-fact conversation that it's possible there are no taboos left. What's left? Where is the line?

"Well, the line is in London. In the UK, Pink Flamingos is still illegal. You cannot show them eating shit. It's still edited." How does he feel about the ban? He shrugs. "Seems dated to me. When I did it, it was the only thing they hadn't thought up a law about. Now, it's the only thing that is illegal!" He laughs. "I did it before anyone! And if I hadn't done it, Johnny Knoxville would have. They eat puke hamburgers — and it's

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animosity of it. "But I've always said we must put up with the extremes of the worst pornography for artistic freedom, because those people have mafia lawyers that can afford to fight the law so that we can later use it for art."

"Pornographers are our friends. Even when they make hideous pornography. I believe in the extremes of freedom — you *should* be allowed to yell 'fire!' in a public theatre!"

And what about pre-teen girls who think that dressing like a stripper is fun and trendy — do they understand the implications?

"They say that 13-year-old girls now give blow jobs. Well, first of all, I want to know: do they swallow? It's the thing that no-one ever mentions — the follow-up questions — and it has a lot to do with safety! But they never ask that. And the girls don't demand oral sex in return." He

hilarious!" Jackass is a show he adores. He calls it "Candid Camera with anarchy".

A few hours have passed and our time is winding down. He is eager, I can tell, to get the photos done — where he will pose on the beach outside his home in his pointy *Comme des Garçons* shoes before going to his appointment.

While most people try to erase the embarrassing moments from the past, he will continue to mine them for material for his work. I ask what he hopes that people will take from his films. The answer is fitting from someone who has always championed the underdog: "The desire to not judge other people." ■ *Role Models by John Waters* (Beautiful Books Ltd, £15.99) is published on December 2. It is available at the Sunday Times Bookshop price of £14.39, including p&p. Telephone: 0845 2712 135