

Low Budget Hell: Making Underground Movies with John Waters

By Robert Maier

Chapter 1 Out on the Edge

I paid people to take off their clothes. I didn't mean to. I went to private school, and a good college, but I was a child of the 60s.

Summer, 1969. I was a scruffy college kid from Towson, Maryland, toting a backpack and hitch-hiking out Cape Cod's Route 6 to the very end, Provincetown. I wanted to be a hippie, and this was the summer of Woodstock, the upstate New York rock music festival and gathering of the hippie tribes. I had to be there.

First, I took a long detour to Provincetown, MA. A friend from college, Stoney, said it was a can't miss stop on my hippie haj. Provincetown, he claimed, was a village full of freaks, drug experimenters, and free souls. I knew nothing about it, but its remoteness probably enabled desirable hippie activities like pot smoking, public nudity, and head shops with vast arrays of drug paraphernalia,—a hippie theme park.

Arriving very late in the evening, in the communal spirit of the time, I knocked on the door of a guy Stoney recommended, asking if I could crash there. He was not happy, but let me flop in a corner. It had been a long day and I slept into the next evening when the house's residents banded together and in an un-hippie like manner, kicked me out. On the street, I was greeted with a Disneyland culture, but not the one I expected.

Provincetown was the gay Disneyland. Instead of hippies, gaggles of gay men, hugging and holding hands, dressed in colorful Hawaiian shirts (or colorful dresses with perfect hair and makeup) packed the streets. Provincetown was a full-time gay pride parade, but gay culture was so totally foreign to me, I didn't get what was going on at all. One group, more colorful and flamboyant than the others, handed out flyers. One of them, a big woman with huge hair, gigantic tits, and thick makeup shoved one into my hand.

"Come to our movie premier tonight young man. You won't believe your eyes. I'll be expecting you," he growled in a husky voice, then winked, and rejoined his crew. Was that was a man? What kind of place *was* this?

"That was Lady Divine," a guy on the street told me. "The others are John Waters and his acting troupe, the Dreamlanders, like in Dreamland Studios, the name of his movie company. They make movies in Baltimore and show them here in the summer."

From a distance, I watched the leader, a tall skinny guy with shoulder-length hair and a thin mustache pasted on his upper lip. He wore big black sunglasses, even though it was night. Baltimore? That's where I'm from. Movies? But movies are made in Hollywood. Dreamland Studios? Never heard of it. What a bunch of weirdos.

I watched them move down the street for another minute, and then stuck my thumb out headed for the Aquarian gathering at Woodstock. If someone had told me that four years later I would be working shoulder-to-shoulder with John Waters on five movies, talking to him on the phone for hours every night, gossiping with him on bar stools for hours, and would be his movie date several nights a week, I would have dropped dead in the street.

We Meet Again, Four Years Later

I met John formally four years later at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC)'s tidy business park campus. He had come by UMBC hungry to find people who would help make his next movie, *Female Trouble*.

I had completely forgotten the Provincetown encounter. To prepare for this meeting, I had just seen his notorious gross-out movie, *Pink Flamingos*. When released in 1972, it was dubbed "the sickest film ever made." People would dare you to see it. It was beyond X-rated. They gave out vomit bags with tickets. Mainstream critics hurled the worst epithets at it, naming its most disgusting scenes, like an actor eating real dog poop, a beautiful woman with a real penis, and a man with a singing asshole. This of course only drew bigger crowds.

With this "Prince of Puke" reputation, when he held out his hand I wondered would he shake it or would he lick it? He warmly shook it, and it was the beginning of a hair-raising eighteen year ride through the world of low-budget, underground filmmaking.

I had worked in the UMBC film department for about a year; my first job after graduating from American University in Washington DC. American U. had one of the few film and TV production departments in the country. I majored in literature, and as an aspirant to the hippie counter-culture, loved the books of Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Ken Kesey. Half-way through I got interested in film when a roommate showed me his TV production textbook. Leafing through pages of lights, cameras, and microphones, I was blown away that you could actually study something interesting in college. I always loved messing around with stereos, electric guitars, cameras, and walkie-talkies. I experimented with the 60's drug culture—had even smoked banana skins—and signaled it with my long hair and scraggly beard.

John and I hit it off well. Surprising to me, he was extremely well-read, unlike most of his Baltimore friends at the time. He thought a techie lit major was an interesting combination, and he could relate to a fellow traveler in the drug culture.

He immediately engaged me by asking friendly questions; what did I do at UMBC, where did I live and grow up, and was I doing anything fun that summer? This engagement endears John to everybody he meets. You expect a monster, but he could pass for an assistant Presbyterian minister trolling for church members. Even my father, a hard-headed arch conservative, liked him immediately—except for his haircut.

John, Divine, and I grew up in the Towson, Maryland area, a few miles north of the Baltimore city line. I delivered the daily *Baltimore News-American* newspaper to an old mansion behind my house in Towson where Divine lived and his parents ran a nursery school. The mansion was famous because F. Scott Fitzgerald drank himself silly there while his wife Zelda was treated at the Shepherd Pratt Mental Hospital next door. I had my first cigarettes, beer and French kiss in the nearby woods where Divine's junior high school classmates kicked the shit out of him every day for acting like a queer. It was a historic neighborhood.

John and I ate in the same downtown beatnik restaurants. We were both regulars at Baltimore's Communist bookstore, and had graduated from religious boys high schools—he from the Catholic Calvert Hall and me from the Episcopal St. Paul's. We even had a few friends in common, including Mark Isherwood, who made national news when he was arrested for public nudity during the filming of *Multiple Maniacs*. John was so pleasant it was impossible to believe he had made the weird *Pink Flamingos* I had seen the night before, in preparation for this meeting. He was an astute artist-businessman; an actor-showman who had his finger on the pulse of something and intended to go places with it. We hit it off like old friends, talking for a half-hour about Towson, movies, books, and Baltimore, (“Bumberg” he called it). I think I was especially endearing to him because I laughed enthusiastically at all his jokes and funny stories.

All About Me

Though I had aspired to the greatness of New York City since I was a young teen, I still lived in the Baltimore suburbs. My goal was to be a filmmaker, but I didn't have a clue how. It was an exotic career in 1972. Baltimore was not considered a place to make films—it was a place to flee.

I had made three short silent films in The American University's film program, but they didn't involve lights, sound, or even a tripod. They were like super-8 home movies, but shot with a 16mm wind-up Bolex camera and 300 feet of black and white film (seven minutes worth)—all you were allowed. We edited the original film with hand-cranked viewers—great training for how films were made in 1910.

When I was eight years old, I joined the professional boys' choir of Baltimore's Episcopal Cathedral, which rehearsed four days a week and performed on

Sundays. It set me on a career as an entertainer. In high school, I sang and played guitar in a garage band that played mostly drunken bacchanals at Lumbee Indian weddings and gay Johns Hopkins University frat parties. As a techie, radios, miniature TVs, tape recorders, and 16mm film projectors were beautiful art objects. After graduating from college, I applied for an audio-visual technician job in the Arts and Humanities Division at UMBC, which seemed to be a nice combination.

The dean was a laid-back, poker-playing former English professor and we hit it off well. He was impressed with my degree in literature, and not concerned with my technical abilities. Hell, I had been editor-in-chief of my college literary magazine, so I was perfectly qualified to be an AV tech.

The main part of the job was to watch the brand new arts and humanities building in the evenings to protect its millions of dollars worth of equipment. The most important thing was a package of the best professional 16mm film production gear money could buy. To justify these grandiose digs, they couldn't just shut the building at 5 o'clock; an art school must be open late, so budding young artists could create (and procreate) into the wee hours.

The doorman job was boring. Maybe a dozen students a night signed in, and I just had to make sure no one walked out with a stereo. But it was a good time to read. The film department had stacks of *American Cinematographer* magazines, which I devoured each night, learning ten times more about movie making than I had from my college classes. After reading a hundred or so magazines, I was itching to make movies. I had to get into the film department and get my hands on the real deal. I explained to the Dean I could be more effective if I came in earlier, and helped professors with various A/V projects. He agreed. I was off the door and free to do more important things like learn to operate the new \$10,000 French 16mm movie camera.

The film department was purpose-built by the film professor, Lee, to produce professional quality Hollywood-style movies—stuff he wanted to make. He and his outside partner, Joe, partly inspired by Waters' success, planned to make low-budget movies, and maybe even break into Hollywood. Free access to UMBC's equipment would help them get there. This included the camera, a \$4,000 Swiss tape recorder, camera dollies, light kits, and the best German-made film editing machines. The idea was that students, by working on these films would learn more than listening to boring lectures, or stumbling through their own painful films. Plus they'd be free crew.

In reality, students rarely used the good stuff. They were banished to a cabinet of rickety super 8 cameras and hand-cranked home movie viewers. If a student actually cobbled together a film, it was a miracle. A film got an "A" if it ran through the projector without catching fire. Classes consisted of watching weird experimental films while lying on a water bed Lee had secretly installed in the

screening room. For the most part the students were quite content with the arrangement.

UMBC was a good bus stop for John. The gear was there and the people were open for anything. I was ready to jump into the world of movies, especially rebellious movies. I was hungry to help John Waters on the road to fame and fortune.

An Intro to John Waters

I got to know John better over several months. By the end of *Female Trouble*, we were spending many work and social hours together, and he happily regaled me with his life story. He grew up in Lutherville, Maryland, a few miles from my house. He started his entertainment career as a pre-teen giving puppet shows at local kiddie birthday parties, but did not fit so well with the upper crust neighborhood. As a confirmed homosexual in his early teens, John was labeled a misfit who read books during phys ed class softball games, ignoring the occasional ball that happened to plunk down next to him. His response to screaming team mates was a disinterested, “You get it.” John hungered for the edgy elements of the gay community. He did not hang out with secretive queers who ran hair salons and cooked fondue dinners for gay friends. That was too normal.

Though John was not a secretive queer, he didn’t wear gay pride buttons either. John seemed asexual when I first met him. It never occurred to me he was gay—naïve little me. He was just an odd character who worked hard to project an image—both in his personal life and in his films. I would accuse him of being enigmatic and most enigmatic when he’d fervently deny there was the slightest enigma about him. But there was that little wry smirk.

John was slightly effeminate, though not more than many heterosexual men I’ve known. His deep, authoritative voice contradicted the girly-man stereotype. His hair was Jesus Christ long; but greasy and uncared for. He called it his “bacon.” John was bulimic-thin and tall, and moved like a bony house cat. Add his thin Latin lover-boy pencil mustache and you thought maybe the guy is a little swish, but maybe not. John wanted to be an outsider—a dangerous gay artist. His favorite coat was a ludicrous dog handler’s jacket with a portrait of a smiling German shepherd’s face, whose massive red tongue hung out like a “Hollywood loaf.”

John’s attention to his trademark pencil mustache was meticulous. If you thought this guy was your average hippie stoner, notice please the immaculately kept mustache, highlighted with eyebrow pencil that was the exact opposite of fashionably unkempt hippie beards.

John’s huge bug-eye sunglasses hid his face as if he had running sores for eyes and had searched the world for the hugest pair to hide them. They added B-movie mystery to his look, suggesting he might be an incognito celebrity. When asked by anyone where he found such glasses he had a ready answer.

“Los Angeles. That’s the only place I buy sunglasses. They have all the sun, so they have the best sunglasses.”

John’s contradictions made him difficult to typecast. Some were definitely practiced. Over the years I had learned he recited the same jokes and shocking comments to everyone he met, learning which punch lines worked and milking them for months—or years—even decades. This was his Shecky Green persona, he told me. Others seemed to come straight from the heart as truly spontaneous wit with no ulterior motive of projecting a certain image. This was John at his most promising and human.

John had made films since 1964, more than eight years before *Pink Flamingos* became a hit. *Pink* showed that one person could make a movie, get it distributed, and find a national audience—but, most importantly, get the mainstream press to write about it. John’s films are proof that there’s no such thing as bad publicity. In the defiant atmosphere of the 70s, a scandalized review from a main-stream critic could be sarcastically emblazoned on a poster to fire up the counter-culture. *Pink Flamingos* was a gas can thrown into the smoldering fire of counter-culturalism.

Before *Pink*, John carried his 16mm movie prints around the country in the trunk of his car, showing them at student film societies, church basements, and coffee houses. He lived off the meager ticket sales, and sometimes sleeping in his car to save money. His films, *Eat Your Make-up*, *Multiple Maniacs*, and *Mondo Trasho* were booked because the young and hip liked the term “underground movies,” but unless you liked John’s cockeyed view of the world, you’d likely leave halfway through, bored with the atrocious acting, the shaky, grainy, out-of-focus, black and white images, and distorted sound tracks. Most people went to underground movies to see bare breasts or psychedelia, not puking, murdering, and dressing in drag.

Pink Flamingos is obsessive and not so funny to me. The Nazism, torture, bestiality, and meanness are not meant to be funny, but to be leered at. The most memorable scenes involved the nudity underground audiences craved—David Lochary’s sausage-lengthened penis, Elizabeth Coffey’s soon to be removed penis, and the singing asshole guy. The most memorable scene, of Divine eating dog shit, was bad taste that shocked every single viewer, and was impossible not to talk or write about.

Because the pre-*Pink* audiences were small and scattered, the mainstream press did not write much about John. But when New Line Cinema, an honest-to-goodness distributor, decided to open *Pink* in a real New York theatre, the press exploded. Real money rolled in, and he no longer had to work out of the trunk of his car. He gave well-practiced interviews and public appearances, which were often more interesting than his films.

The early John was a frugal artist, in the hippie vein—though he despised the hippie ethos. He drove a big beat-up Buick, wore bizarre clothes purchased for spare

change from thrift stores, and lived in bad areas of Baltimore where rents were ridiculously cheap, just like the hippies. He didn't eat much, saying he only ate because it made cigarettes taste better. His only extravagances were books and magazine subscriptions. With the real money from *Pink*, he could move to this next more complicated movie, *Female Trouble*.

Low Budget Hell is an unauthorized insider's story of outrageous 70s and 80s low budget filmmaking where every rule was broken in a crazy world of sex, drugs, and rock & roll. In his journey through the underground, Maier rubs shoulders with folks like Johnny Depp, Divine, Ricki Lake, Andy Warhol, Jack Palance, Tab Hunter, Bill Murray, Sonny Bono, the Coen. Be the first to ask a question about Low Budget Hell Making Underground Movies with John Waters. Lists with This Book. This book is not yet featured on Listopia. Robert Maier worked with John Waters on Female Trouble through to Crybaby and along the way saw Waters evolve from an amateurish guerrilla filmmaker to a professional Hollywood director. Check out these low budget movies that turned into massive hits. The final movie is sure to surprise any movie fan! 20) ~Juno~™. Budget: \$7.5M Box Office: \$231M. Juno is played by the brilliant Ellen Page, and is faced with an unplanned pregnancy. Her already unusual life takes a turn as she makes a decision regarding her unborn child. Page is incredible in this film, and her dad is played by Oscar winner J.K. Simmons, what more could one ask for? It made an enormous fortune at the box office. Rumors of a sequel have been around for a while, but a film hasn't entered production yet. Next ».