

## A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH JOHN WATERS

In the films of John Waters, “The Pope of Trash,” outrageous behavior co-exists with genuine humanism. After his genuinely shocking *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, and *Desperate Living*, he made the surprise move of directing a PG-rated musical, *Hairspray*, which placed its classic teen love story against the backdrop of early-1960s racial integration. Sadly, the movie was Waters’s last collaboration with the actor Divine, who died a week after its release. Waters spoke about *Hairspray* as part of a Moving Image retrospective of his films.

### **A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Hairspray*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (October 25, 1998):**

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome John Waters.  
(Applause)

WATERS: Thank you. I like Queens. It looks like Baltimore, kind of. I feel at home. You know, I accidentally made a family movie when I made this picture. If you haven’t seen it, it’s about how much fun music used to be before the Beatles ruined it. I remember when we got a PG rating for this film—I was totally horrified. I never thought we would get that. You know, now it’s a big renter for children’s birthday parties—believe me, something I never, ever counted on. I have little girls that come up to me and say, “You’re the doctor in *Hairspray*.” And that’s the only way they know me. They don’t think Divine’s a man. They don’t know. I mean, it’s not part of the plot. And I remember New Line at the time said, “Well, do you want to dub in some dirty words or something?” Because a PG John Waters movie was really a scary thought at the time.

Of course, you know, this was based on a real show in Baltimore called *The Buddy Deane Show*. Everywhere else in the country had the Dick Clark show, which had teenagers that became famous dancing every day, but we didn’t have that in Baltimore. We had a local version that was much more extreme, where the girls wore higher hairdos and the boys wore tighter pants. And I used to watch it every day and draw them and make up fictitious biographies of the crimes they would commit after the show and stuff. And I was

completely obsessed by it. They still have reunions today in Baltimore of the people that were stars on this show that I go to. They are mostly sixty years old now. And to see 200 sixty-year-old women doing “The Locomotion” without irony is quite a sight. They are still very serious about it. I heard one woman say, “She wasn’t on the show. She was a guest.” And they go in separate doors if they were on the committee and stuff. It’s really good. They’re real mean to the other people who weren’t on the show. I really think it’s fascinating.

It [*Hairspray*] starred Divine. Unfortunately, this was his last performance. He died a week after this film was released, after it got really good reviews. *The New York Times* said, “One of the best performances of the year.” It was a pretty amazing career. He started it as a homicidal maniac with a chainsaw, and, you know, he was the kind—drag queens were scared of him. And he ended it playing a loving mother—all as a man—which was I think a very, very good career.

It was Ricki Lake’s first picture. She had just been turned down for a job at the Gap when I cast her. (Laughter) You can see, though, in this movie that she was going to be a star. And if I hadn’t found her, someone else would have. She was totally horrified when we bleached her hair that color. That’s not a wig she’s wearing. Suddenly, she has blonde hair. So that completely freaked her out.

Also, in this was Sonny Bono, who still was, I think, a wonderful sport to be in the movie. People say to me, “How can you be friends with Sonny Bono politically?” Oh, big deal. You know? He’s against

flag-burning. Who would do that in 1998? You'd feel like a fool, you know? Who, like, thinks of the country every morning and wants to burn the flag? I don't know it seems like the stupidest idea I've ever heard of.

Also, Pia Zadora was in this movie—she is something. She's everything I believe in—why America's so good. (Laughter) She came to the set in her own private airplane that said "Here comes Pia" on the side. I love a low profile. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** This very theater that we're in, the Riklis Theater, is named after Pia Zadora's husband, who donated money.

**WATERS:** Well, I know. I took a leak, and I came back in and it said, "Riklis Theater." And I thought, "God, how great that he paid for this." Um... (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** And I think that this is the first Pia Zadora movie we've shown in there.

**WATERS:** Well, you should show the other ones. They're good. *Butterfly*—watch it today. It's the only movie where Ed McMahon and Orson Welles are together at last. And *Lonely Lady* is pretty good, too. You know, there's a scene in the end where she's going alone to the Oscars, but they didn't have enough money for a lot of extras, so it looks like twenty people went to the Oscars. And there's a song, "Lonely Lady," playing. I think it's great. I think you should have a Pia Zadora festival.

**SCHWARTZ:** Okay, well, you can curate it.

**WATERS:** It's not hard, there's only three. But she is no longer with her husband. But she's very happy. I talked to her. I still see her, and she's really a great lady. I miss her on the screen. She says, "I don't do that anymore." But I really miss her in the movies.

**SCHWARTZ:** Some of the actors that you work with, like Sonny Bono and Patty Hearst, later on. Tell us about how you convince these people to be in your movies.

**WATERS:** Well...it's easier now. Then, what could they go look at? All the films were threatening. You know, it was sort of "unsafe" to like me before *Hairspray*, but I hadn't made *Hairspray*. So Sonny

Bono said—he kept saying to me, "Are there any scenes in it that I haven't seen?" You know? I think people told him that twelve people were going to come in to eat shit when he left the room. And he did it, really because all the waiters in his restaurant liked the movie and told him he should do it. And he was a great sport. I got along with Sonny greatly. He was a real sport. He was involved in early rock-and-roll, this kind of music. He worked for Phil Spector's label—he worked for the specialty label. So he was one of the only white guys, really, and really early rhythm-and-blues behind the scenes. So he knew Ruth Brown, he knew everything about this kind of music.

**SCHWARTZ:** Tell us about the music scene. Because you were a teenager at the time this movie was set. I think you were about seventeen.

**WATERS:** Yeah.

**SCHWARTZ:** And you said, while we were watching the movie, that there really was Negro Day.

**WATERS:** There was really Negro Day, and it was once a month, and the real disc jockey was named Fat Daddy. And I fictionalized him for this character. But Fat Daddy wore a crown, a cape, and talked like... You know, like—always like that. He had a song, "Fat Daddy Is Santa Claus." That was a big hit. And they called it Negro Day. It was not anything weird. People didn't watch it as much. And there were no Negro committee members. You know, they were just one day a week. And what really happened in real life—I gave the movie a happy ending. In real life, it went off the air because of integration. Because—not so much the kids, their parents wouldn't let them dance with blacks, you know? It was mostly blue-collar white kids on the show. And their parents were racist. Some. Certainly some. And it was a time...they just couldn't figure out how to do it, and the show just went off the air because of it. But the real Buddy Deane is in the movie. He plays one of the newsmen who looks [into] the limo in front of the governor's mansion. So he liked the film. And they were worried, because they thought I was going to bring up this—you know, make them look bad. And I don't really think it was his fault, either. They just didn't know how to do it at the time. And Maryland, at the real amusement park there, was very racially tense. There were big riots there and everything

racial. So a lot of this is based on the truth.

**SCHWARTZ:** What was your high school like?

**WATERS:** I went to a Catholic high school, which, to this day, I could burn down. And I got great revenge because they had their fiftieth anniversary, and the *Baltimore Sun* called me and said, "What did you think of your high school?" And I said, "They discouraged every interest I ever had." And I saw that in print. You know? I don't go to reunions or anything. I can't. You know? They wouldn't let me graduate on the stage. I'm not whiny about it. I also hated them. So at that time, school was not the place for me, at that period in my life. But they did discourage every interest, certainly. There was one kid that was on this show in my class, and he had a gold VA. They had Christian Brothers [as teachers], and they beat him up a lot. You know, you were allowed to beat up students then. It was acceptable.

**WATERS:** The teachers, I mean—not the students.

**SCHWARTZ:** You said the Beatles ruined popular music.

**WATERS:** Well, that's my opinion.

**SCHWARTZ:** Could you elaborate on that?

**WATERS:** Well, they changed it overnight. The same way Andy Warhol put the abstract expressionists out of business with the soup can, they stopped Motown in one night. And led to Herman's Hermits.

**SCHWARTZ:** You talked about Ricki Lake—discovering her, that she would've been a star anyway...

**WATERS:** Yeah. I think she would...

**SCHWARTZ:** How did you discover her? What was she doing?

**WATERS:** She was in college and dropping out of college, and there was a casting woman we were working with, named Mary Calhoun, who found her. And we were looking for a fat girl to be the star in

the movie. And it was really hard to find anybody to even try out for it, especially since it was a dance movie. And Ricki came in and just got right up and started dancing wildly. And she did the lines perfectly, and I knew it was going to be her. But then, when we did *Cry Baby* next, hundreds of fat girls tried out for the part. And there wasn't a role then, but I suddenly was like Jack Sprat, you know? (Laughter) And it was great. Well, thank God we found Ricki, because there was no second choice. I didn't know who was going to play the part. It was really hard to find someone.

**SCHWARTZ:** Did she have a performing background? She's so comfortable.

**WATERS:** Yeah. She had made some student film, and she had been in the drama department. Yeah, she very much wanted to be in show business. And looking back on it, it's odd, because, she told me then, "I want to be a TV star." And I thought, "Who wants to be a TV star? Be a movie star!" But look what happened. So she really did always want to be what happened to her.

**SCHWARTZ:** Watching Divine's performance, one thing that strikes me so much is how good he is as a comic performer. Delivering your dialogue. I mean, it's just so...

**WATERS:** I think so too. You know, he plays the man in this, too. If you didn't know, he's the head of the TV station—the racist Mr. Hodgepile is also Divine.

**SCHWARTZ:** There's a shock value in seeing him at first, and you know now there's such a great natural timing and comic sense.

**WATERS:** I think so, too. When I first saw him dressed as this character, he walked down the street, and all the women just said "hi" to him. They thought he was just another woman in the neighborhood. I didn't recognize him at first. The first day on the set, I did a double take when I realized that it was him. Because he looked very believable. He looked very much like many of the women that live in that neighborhood for real. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** And, you know, how is he as a performer? Does he get everything in one take?

Or...?

**WATERS:** Oh, in the old days it was much harder. In the earlier movies, like *Multiple Maniacs* and stuff, there was a shot that lasted four minutes. They had to memorize two pages of dialogue without making one mistake. So they were trained from that, which is much harder than, you know, making movies now, where you say three sentences and cut, and do it from a different angle. No, Divine was always the best. Divine in the beginning of my movies didn't have top billing—he clawed his way to the top. Audiences liked him very much right from the beginning. And he wanted to do it, but in the beginning he didn't really believe anything would come from this. I did.

I was very ambitious and wanted to do it, but he never thought it would really catch on. Until the movies caught on in San Francisco, way before they ever played in New York and in Los Angeles. And he flew out there for *Multiple Maniacs* and hooked up with the Cockettes, which were then a big group that worshipped Divine. And Divine never went back in his mind. He never was Glenn Milstead again. Because I told him, "Come to California. They really like you in the movies." He had not one penny. Ben Smith shaved his hair back like that. He got on an airplane in full drag, alone, looking like, you know, Divine—with not one thing in his pocketbook, and flew to California. And he never went back mentally, physically, in any way really as the person who got on the plane that first time because he was met at the airport by a hundred fans screaming, "Divine!" He was speechless.

**SCHWARTZ:** Wow. Of course, his most famous scene is in *Pink Flamingos* when he eats dog shit...

**WATERS:** Well, he never got over that, you know? I mean, it became a hassle for him. And you know, it's the only competition I have, too. I notice that on *Pecker*, the bad reviews, half of them were about *Pink Flamingos*. You know? It's really a competition, your past. I'm glad I have that past. I'm very, very proud of that film. And it worked better than I ever thought, certainly. When it came out last year on video, it was the number two best-selling video in the country. Number one was *Jerry Maguire*. (Laughter) Number two was *Pink Flamingos*, and what was number three? That's amazing to me.

Number three was *The Rock*. (Laughter) So how could that be? But certainly, Divine very much liked the movie.

I think *Female Trouble* is a much better movie. And I think it's the best Divine vehicle I made, was *Female Trouble*. But later, it scared people. People really could never get over it with Divine, for being in other movies. And casting people were so frightened by him—that he did that—that they believed that he was truly insane. You know, I think the weird thing he did in that movie was not so much eating shit—that scene was in the script; we did it. But that I said to him—you know the scene where he opens a bowel movement and I said to him, "Shit in a box and bring it," and he said, "Okay." To hell with prop masters. I mean, could you imagine saying to Kathleen Turner, "Shit in a box and bring it"? It just was no big deal at the time.

**SCHWARTZ:** We can put that in the museum.

**WATERS:** Well it's no longer.

**SCHWARTZ:** But what I was going to ask you about that scene was, in an interview, you said that you knew this would get notoriety, that it might help...

**WATERS:** Well, I didn't know...

**SCHWARTZ:** ...get attention. I was wondering what he thought it was going to do for him.

**WATERS:** He said, "You know, I think you need to do something really bizarre..." I don't really remember what I said. I said, "Will you eat shit?" And he said, "Yes." That is all that happened. And we never talked about it. It was no big deal. I mean, it was the last thing we shot, and we got it that day. And he did it. I did one take. The problem was the dog wouldn't cooperate, you know? I mean, Divine was ready and willing. It was the dog that had star fits. I knew, though, the very first time that it was ever shown, when people were stunned literally, like, staggering out of the theater, like, running from us, that it worked beyond my wildest imagination.

But you have to remember, that was a time very influenced by left-wing politics. I had just come from the Manson trial when I wrote that movie, that I went to for many weeks. It was a period of extreme political radicalism. People joined that movie to

make a crime, not for their career. It was like joining up to commit a cultural crime—that was the attitude, kind of. And it's hard to imagine today how insane, and fun left-wing politics was at the time. And that is what influenced *Pink Flamingos*, and that's something that I think is very hard for people to see today because it's so very, very different. There is no cultural war now. All film critics are hip, you know? And the very fact that the mainstream film critics hated *Pink Flamingos* so much—we used all the negative reviews in the ads. But they were the right kind of negative reviews: "Like a septic tank explosion, it must be seen to be believed." (Laughter) They don't write them like that anymore.

**SCHWARTZ:** With *Polyester*, you made what's called a mainstream film.

**WATERS:** It would be kind of stupid to keep making midnight movies.

**SCHWARTZ:** Yeah. And then, after you made that, there was a period when you were doing a lot of writing, and it was about seven years...

**WATERS:** I was trying to make the sequel to *Pink Flamingos*.

**SCHWARTZ:** Really?

**WATERS:** Yeah. And nobody would, and that's why it took so long. And then I wrote a book. But generally, it was very hard, and I got very bogged down. I learned that if a movie you're trying to make doesn't happen right away, don't get stuck with it—that's what I learned from that. It usually won't happen. Or you have to wait five years, or something. So I kept trying, and I kept trying, and nobody would ever do it.

**SCHWARTZ:** And so, how did *Hairspray* come about? How did you...

**WATERS:** I just made the next movie. You know? I don't really plot, like, "Oh, this time I'm going to do this." I just think, "What's the next movie that would make me laugh, that I could be interested in for the next two-and-a-half years to talk about without getting sick of it? What's my new obsession that I hope I could spread to other people?" And I always

knew this very, very well. You know? And this period—and I knew the dances. And I knew that it could, I hope, work. You know? It was certainly a nostalgia piece. You know? And I'll never make another movie that takes place in the 1960s or the 1950s. With *Cry Baby*, I think the 1950s are completely used up. It's really hard trying to make a movie about the 1950s, because *Grease* and all those things have so influenced it. But those were the two periods I remembered. So I made the movies about [them]. I don't think I'll make any movie again in nostalgia because I've used up all the decades that I remember.

**SCHWARTZ:** Do you—when you're watching the movie now, does it bring back memories of the time, making it more than the period that you're depicting?

**WATERS:** Oh, much more. You know, I was thinking, reading some of the names at the end again, "God, who is that person?" And [it's] very, very sad about Divine. Divine died a week after this movie opened at the height of his career. But I see how huge he was in this movie—it was really the largest he ever was, and that is why he died. And so it's very sad for that reason for me to watch, not sad but, like, melancholy; it's not sad—the fact that he's still up there, and you all are seeing him today. But it's still shocking to me, ten years later, that he is dead. I remember when the phone call came, I was like—it was like another movie we had to go through, the funeral and everything. And it didn't hit till way later. But at his grave in Baltimore—people go all the time and leave, like, dresses, doughnuts, eye makeup. (Laughter) They leave pies at his tomb. I think it's great.

**SCHWARTZ:** How did he enjoy the release of the film?

**WATERS:** He got a week. I guess it's better than [if he had died] a week before it. But he was very proud of it. He took his mother to the premiere, and they had been estranged for about ten years, and they certainly got back together. And that was very important to him, I think. He was very, very proud of it. Vincent Canby said it was one of the best performances of the year. And he was very, very honored. And the last time I saw him was in the Odeon restaurant, and I walked up to the limo and kissed him on the cheek goodbye. And that was it.

**SCHWARTZ:** One of the things that is so clear in this film is your affection towards all the characters, pretty much. And I just wanted...a [term] that gets tagged to your films is "white trash." Like you're depicting "white trash."

**WATERS:** I never said that [term]. That term is the last politically correct racist term to say. I never say that term. It is a racist term, basically. "Blue-collar" is all right.

**SCHWARTZ:** Right.

**WATERS:** I don't think anyone...certainly, in *Pecker*, there were some people who said "white trash." I think they were a loving, very functional family. I don't think white trash at all. Blue-collar, yeah.

**SCHWARTZ:** Yeah.

**WATERS:** I don't use the term. "Trailer trash," they call it now. It's the same thing—that's offensive, too. That's the L.A. version of that [term].

**SCHWARTZ:** The culture has changed a lot since *Pink Flamingos*—the culture, and what's in the news. *Female Trouble*, which we're showing later this afternoon, is about the fascination with crime, and that sort of comes from your fascination with sensational trials. And it's sort of amazing to think what's going on in the 1990s with all these incredible trials on Court TV and...And what's going on with the Clinton scandals. People have commented that life sort of caught up with you, and became a John Waters movie, in a way.

**WATERS:** Well, in some ways. I mean, I don't take responsibility for Monica [Lewinsky], certainly. I don't know. She took—I don't know, patriotism to a new level. (Laughter) You know, people say, "*The Jerry Springer Show*, like a John Waters..." I think, not at all. I don't have anything against *The Jerry Springer Show*. But I don't think it's especially witty, and I don't think it's very funny. So I don't think my characters would go on *The Jerry Springer Show*, and certainly I know [that] the people that watch Jerry Springer every day don't like my movies. My movies never worked in real exploitation theaters. We tried them, and they always did terribly, and they never worked in the drive-in, and they worked best in the richest, smartest neighborhood[s]. And they still do. The nearest I am to water. The further I

get away from water, the less the grosses are. (Laughter) It's true...even a puddle. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** I want to ask you about the 1960s film scene in which you—now, in some ways, it seems so long ago and so far...

**WATERS:** It was long ago.

**SCHWARTZ:** Yeah. But we've done series here on George Kuchar and Jack Smith, and I just want to ask you about the influence of this scene, because you would come up to New York and watch...

**WATERS:** Huge influence. I lived in Baltimore then. I lived with my parents. I was in high school, and *Film Culture* was my Bible, that magazine. And Jonas Mekas's column in the *Village Voice*...those were the only two things—and *Variety* sometimes wrote about it. And that scene was very New York. You could not—they wouldn't even look at your movie if you weren't from New York. It was...now today, you know, they look at any film coming from anywhere. But then it was impossible. I never got any of my films shown until after *Pink Flamingos* became a hit. *Multiple Maniacs*, *Mondo Trasho*...never showed. They showed [them] outside, everywhere else in America.

But the Kuchar brothers were a huge influence, and certainly those great big, you know—they made Co-op City, with those lurid melodramas with stolen soundtracks and Douglas Sirk lighting. And Warhol, who was really, really smart to finally put gay people and drugs together, which was a really good combination. (Laughter) And Kenneth Anger, who still hates me, puts curses on me. I don't know why; I've never even met him. I'll just be gone before someone else drops a house on you. (Laughter) But I really like his movies very much, and they were a huge influence on me and on everybody. He was the first person who ever used the ironic use of pop music—before anybody. He invented that, and I salute his films. I think they're wonderful. And those were the three, I think, that were the biggest. Jack Smith some, but I only saw them later because *Flaming Creatures* was banned in New York, so I couldn't see that then. And I read [that] somebody said that *Multiple Maniacs* was a tribute to Jack Smith, and I promise you it wasn't. The lobster, I think, is what they meant. I don't even

know about the lobster in Jack Smith's work. The lobster came from Provincetown, where I wrote the movie, where there was a postcard with a lobster in the sky. I always thought it was a lobster attacking tourists. And I became obsessed by that postcard...that was where that came from. You know? The lobster that raped Divine. But I'm sure Jack Smith wouldn't have minded.

**SCHWARTZ:** Now, what about Hollywood influences? And in the case of *Hairspray*, doing a musical, what was it like? Were you thinking of older musicals when you were making that? Or referring to them...

**WATERS:** No.

**SCHWARTZ:** And then, what was it like to do a musical? Choreography...

**WATERS:** Well, I think *Cry Baby* was more a musical, actually. And that was where people started singing for no apparent reason.

**SCHWARTZ:** Right.

**WATERS:** I think *Hairspray* was more of a dance movie, actually. Certainly, I liked Elvis movies. I mean, that was certainly the biggest influence on *Cry Baby*. This was more of a dance movie, I think. Certainly, the Busby Berkeley movies were my favorite. I don't think this is like one, but I really love them. But I didn't see them until I was in New York, during the underground in the 1960s when there was a big revival of his stuff. Old movies in the 1960s were popular, too—1930s kind of melodramas and stuff were always revived. Certainly in San Francisco at the Palace Theatre, which had a really good underground scene, and all the places in New York, too. Not only were they showing underground movies, they would revive Busby Berkeley. And *Freaks* and movies like that, that had never been seen, certainly by my generation.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What was your reaction to the American Film Institute's 100-best list ignoring your films?

**WATERS:** Well, it was fine. You know, a lot of those movies I can't stand. You know? But I didn't vote,

so somebody voted. So, whatever they want is fine with me. You know? But *Around the World in Eighty Days*? I mean, some of those ones that my parents dragged me to I guess I was prejudiced against. That'd be fine. Somebody voted for them. I don't care, you know? I certainly didn't expect to be on it. I mean, I didn't think *Multiple Maniacs* was going to be next to *Shane*. You know? (Laughter)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** With your increasing success commercially, are studios now trying to knock down your door?

**WATERS:** No. No studio has ever tried to knock down my door. (Laughter) Well, once, maybe. Right after *Hairspray* came out, yes. It was fairly easy. I made the first Hollywood movie, and about three or four of them wanted to do it. But that's the only time that's ever happened. Um, no. It's still hard for me to get my movies made. I manage to, but it is never, ever easy. It wasn't easy to get *Pecker* made. It won't be easy to get the next one made. It's hard for almost everybody to get any movie made. But my films do play—it's mostly because of foreign money that my films do get made, because they do play in all the different countries, and they're like, you know, like a successful art film is here. It's not a big hit. But all my films—*Pecker* will make money, because it didn't cost that much, and we do very, very well on video. You know, middle-America does not come to see my movies in the theaters. But they do see [them] on video. But they've heard of it by the time it comes out. I hope. I mean, they have [with] the last three. But no—no one's knocking down my door. For that reason.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Are you ever going to release the script for *Flamingos*?

**WATERS:** It is. It's in a book, *Trash Trio*. It's been out for a long time. It's in that book, yeah. Now if I were going to make it today, I've always thought that Anthony Hopkins should play Divine. And I did Roseanne's show recently, and she started doing Edith Massey imitations, which took my breath away. And she said that her kids love *Desperate Living*. And every time she tells them to do something, they say, "We honor you, Queen Carlotta." (Laughter) And she'd be good as Edith. Roseanne as Edith? But then it would really be a big-budget movie. It'd have all these people playing the memories that you all remember from the old

films. Which would be the only way you could really do it.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Are you planning another book?

**WATERS:** Yeah. I have two books. You know, I sort want to do, you know, *Shock Value On*. You know? Which I'll definitely do. And I have another book in mind. But I have to keep making movies while they let me. Because you don't know how long they will. And it's harder to get a movie deal than a book deal, for me, at least. I know I can probably get those books done fairly easily. It's just—it takes me at least a year to write a book. And I just don't want to get away from the movie business for a year right now, because they don't remember. It's twelve-year-olds running it, you know? And I don't mind about that, you know, other people my age—they still think I'm too old; they still think I'm too crazy, even if they're twenty, the executive that I have to pitch. That isn't such an issue. But if you wait a year, everybody changes so much, and all the studios that it's starting over, in a way.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Can you tell us what [film] you're working on [at the moment]?

**WATERS:** Well, I'm trying to do, uh, this movie that I wrote before *Pecker* called *Cecil B. Demented* that was all developed by French money. And it's a hard movie to get made because it's about teen terrorism against the movie business. And it's my *Die Hard*, so it's not cheap, and it's very insane. So, we'll see. I don't know if it's going to get made or not. If it doesn't, I'll have to think up a new one soon. And I have to go to Europe for *Pecker* in November. I'm going to, like, seven countries. So I'm going to promote it there when it opens, which will be, oh, God, I'll talk about it more. But it's okay. It'll be in a different language. So... I can't read what they say about it. You know, I judge, "How'd it go?" "I don't know. The articles were big." It's like *Pecker's* dad: "This is a big article." It could be the meanest article in the world, I don't know.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Your soundtracks have always had interesting, less-than-obvious choices. Were those tunes that you listened to on the radio growing up and envisioned for specific scenes, or wanted to see in a movie and added to that? Are there any tunes or artists that you would love to see

in future films?

**WATERS:** Well, certainly, every one of those tunes I've done drunk only for friends at those dances in my apartment for years before I made that movie. All my soundtracks are two drawers in my house of 45s that I got when I was a teenager. Certainly, I knew all those dances. I mean, I wanted to put them all in. On *Cry Baby*, I did a lot of research about new music. Even on *Pecker*. I found new music to put in there. I always think the soundtracks are very, very important for my movies. And I do like music. I listen to new music. I play music constantly in my house. So basically, the soundtrack is also another character in my movies. It's very, very important. And in *Pink Flamingos*, it's also the music that most people had never heard of at the time or couldn't remember, flip sides or very obscure hits. I don't put in, just like, oldies you're sick of the second time around that are now in ketchup commercials.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** You did a voice on *The Simpsons*. I was wondering, why did you decide to do that? And how was the experience, and what was it like?

**WATERS:** It was great. I did it because they asked me. I figured, if Elizabeth Taylor did it, I guess I can. And it was fun. You know, the only thing that was a little weird—because I played a character that looked like me named John that was sort of a gay antiques dealer. I'm not an antiques dealer. So, I said to them, "Fine, I'll be happy to do this as long...if I look like Richard Simmons I'm going to kill you." You do the voice first, and you have no idea how they're going to draw you. So that's what I was worried about. But I had a good time. You go there, and you do it. It's like doing a radio show in a way. You have a table reading where everyone goes around and reads through it once. And then each person goes to a microphone, and you do a page or two at a time. There is a director, and he'll say, sometimes, "Do that line over separately." But it only took one day. And all the people that worked on it were great, it was fun. I had a great time doing that. The show won the Emmy, that episode. And it's amazing to me; that that show was really subversive, that [it] can be about gay rights for families watching it at seven o'clock at night, certainly is very, very different [from] when I was growing up. My nephew, who's twelve, said, "Can I



interview you for the school paper about it.?" And I thought, boy, times have really changed. But they've changed so much now that I do the college lecture circuit and I think, "Is everyone gay at college?" It's only rich-kid schools. And I tell them—I see them struggling with their heterosexuality. They feel so guilty. (Laughter) They're all going to come *in*.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I saw *Hairspray* many times when I was a kid, and I really loved it. And I was very fascinated with Michael St. Gerard. And I was wondering, like, is there something especially funny about, like, something that's so archetypically beautiful? And then the way he gets beaten up is really funny. And I was wondering if that's something that's part of your aesthetic. Like, taking something very beautiful and then messing it up.

**WATERS:** Well, I like complete beauty with one flaw, yeah. It's like one scar or one [wrong] thing, I think, is the sexiest look possible. You know, he went on to play Elvis in the TV series about young Elvis. And he's played Elvis in about four movies. And when we first saw his picture we thought there was an uncanny kind of resemblance to Elvis. I liked Michael very much in the movie. I thought he was a great leading man for Ricki, and they're still very, very good friends.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I must tell you, I saw *Pink Flamingos* when I was fourteen years old...

**WATERS:** That's illegal. (Laughter)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** ...when I was tripping on acid. I had a laughing fit which just... you know, lasted... I mean, it was just the funniest thing. I'd never seen anything like it before in my life.

**WATERS:** That's the difference when it was rereleased—everyone was on drugs when they saw it when it first came out. Not as many were on the re-release.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I was curious—was that your first feature? And how did you get the funding to, uh, to produce that?

**WATERS:** It wasn't the first feature. The first feature I made was *Mondo Trasho*, which was ninety minutes and should be ten. And then *Multiple*

*Maniacs*. But it was the first color one. It was certainly the most successful one. And my father paid for it. And my father has never seen it, to this day. He's forbidden to. My father lent me the money to make those early movies, and I paid him back with interest, and he was so shocked that he would get the money back. Because I would go around the country with them in the trunk of my car—this was *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple*—during the 1960s and look and say, "Where did they just have a riot? Oh, they burned the Bank of America down. Let's go there." (Laughter) We'd go to that city. I had the films in the trunk. We'd go to whatever was the weirdest little theater and say, "Can we have a midnight show?," and rent the place for, like, \$50 or something. Stand on the corner, give out fliers, show the movie, and maybe make \$60. And move on to the next town.

And I really learned from doing that. It was really hard, and it was really a struggle. But I paid my father back. And he was so shocked. And then I'd come say, "Can I have twice as much?" And finally, with *Pink Flamingos*, he—and these films were against everything he ever believed in. My father is like George Bush—and doesn't get mad when I say that. (Laughter) And I paid him back. And each time I asked if I could get more money. With *Pink Flamingos*, he said, "Well, you don't have to pay me back, but put all that into the next one and don't ask me again. You're set up in the business now." Well, I didn't realize how loving that was until I was an adult. Really. I look back and I think, "Why wouldn't he help me? He's my father." Well, I'm making movies about everything that he would be against. And there were hideous articles in the paper about me always, like—we didn't get good reviews, believe me, especially where I lived. They said, "This person is sick and needs psychiatric help..." But my father is named John Waters also. (Laughter) I'm a junior. So I had made his life hell, in a way.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What were the budgets for those films?

**WATERS:** Well, *Mondo Trasho* was \$2500, and *Multiple Maniacs* was \$5000, and *Pink Flamingos* was \$12,000, and *Female Trouble* was \$27,000. That would all be, with inflation, I think, you know—*Pink Flamingos* today probably would've been \$50,000. I think that's what \$12,000 probably would

have been then.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** How did you get to meet Divine, or how did you come across Divine?

**WATERS:** Divine moved with his parents near where my parents lived when he was about sixteen. And we met because there was a girl named Carol Warning who I knew, who had bleached blonde hair that had turned green from swimming pools. And I used to see her cutting the lawn, and I had to meet her—and she had on short shorts, and this really trashy green hair. So she used to play—gamble—with Divine for pimple medicine. They used to play cards, so she knew him, and I met him that way—as a neighbor, really. He was my neighbor. And he had a very hard time at school because he got beat up every day. The police—and he wasn't flamboyant. He was, like, a nerd. You know, they could see the divinity lurking, I think. (Laughter)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** You liked to model your work after the films they showed before they show movies of what they have at the concession stand.

**WATERS:** Well, that was an influence, certainly, yes.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** And when you made *Hairspray*, what...were you still thinking along those lines?

**WATERS:** No. Certainly, it was kind of a joke in a way. But basically, I mean, the way those movies looked like—those meatball subs and the color's all gone from being so old, the print. And like, you know, the beauty of when they start at the drive-in, the first feature before it's dark, and nobody can see it. That horrible moment. All those kind of things I notice, I think, emotionally—is what I want to reproduce, not so much... I always tried to make the movies look as good as I could. I mean, I didn't—people say, "the rawness, primitive..." That just means how shitty it looks. (Laughter) But I thought it looked great then, because that's the biggest budget I ever had at that point. It wasn't low-budget to me. It was the biggest we ever had when I made that movie.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** How did Cindy Sherman end up in your latest film, and did you have in mind a couple of contemporary photographers that you work with?

**WATERS:** Well, I knew Cindy a little bit, and I knew she was certainly the most famous contemporary photographer. Nan Goldin and her, either one, you could argue. And she was a great sport, I thought, to come do the movie, and certainly, in the movie that makes, I think, loving fun of the art world. I think she added a great authenticity to it by playing herself. And I was just thrilled she was in it. I really liked her movie [*Office Killer*]. I don't get why people were so hateful. I thought it was really fun and really good. I liked it. You should see it. Don't believe anything you heard about it. It's a good movie.

**SCHWARTZ:** I just wanted to ask you about your photography. With *Hairspray*, this moment when Divine takes a picture of a TV camera...

**WATERS:** Right. But you see you don't do it with a flash. It doesn't come out...

**SCHWARTZ:** But you've been doing that...

**WATERS:** You know, what I do in the art world is, I take photos off the TV monitors—of other people's movies—and re-direct them the way I think they should be in mock storyboards.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What's your favorite Little Richard song?

**WATERS:** My favorite Little Richard song—I guess "Lucille," because I used to play that, and my parents would get so uptight. Don't meet your idols. I mean, I grew this mustache because I love Little Richard. I interviewed Little Richard for *Playboy*, and he was a monster. I had such trouble. And he had a bodyguard I could've beaten up. (Laughter) But he was difficult; he wasn't a monster. His biography had just come out, which is a great biography, if any of you have ever read it. He sent people bowel movements. I didn't even know that, but [this was] after I wrote *Pink Flamingos*. He used to do that, too—it was a trend, I guess. But he wouldn't let me ask him any questions, because he didn't want his religious following to know any of that. I said, "Well, you can't put a book out and not expect to be asked questions about it." And then he said, "Well, you can't leave the room with this tape," and then his bodyguard stood up, and I thought, "Plbbt." You know, this bodyguard was really a joke. Richard Simmons could've beat[en] him up.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Most eccentric types usually seem to hate their hometown because they encountered intolerance there. Why do you use Baltimore? Why do you still seem to have an affection...

**WATERS:** I didn't get any intolerance. In high school, nobody hassled me. They just thought I was nuts. And they knew that I hated authority. So that's the key to not getting beaten up. If bullies know that you also hate authority, they're a little...they leave you alone, I think. If you can make them laugh—and laughter was always my protection. I didn't get beat[en] up because I would make the people who were beating up laugh first. You got to see the people who are going to beat you up, and then make them laugh before they think of beating you up. It's really the key to high-school life.

But I always liked Baltimore, and they liked me, my films, right from the beginning. The critics didn't or anything, but the public did. I don't know that most eccentrics hate their—maybe they do. Maybe they do. But I still like it there. It's what inspires me. I still live there. I live in New York, too. But in Baltimore, I overhear things. I get inspired. You know? I heard a woman—I listen to dialogue, and I heard a woman recently say, "She's needy. She's nasty. She's a bitch. But that's who she is." (Laughter) I know I'll use that somewhere.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Tell us more about how you got involved in the whole New York art world and how that connects with *Pecker*.

**WATERS:** Well, I used to be in it a lot in the 1960s, and then I [wasn't] for a while, and then I started reading about it again and just started going to it. It's a world that I really love because it's the opposite of the movie business. I mean, in the movie business, they say, "It has to play in Peoria." You know, regular people have to like it. In the art world, if regular people like it, it's bad. (Laughter) Which I'm all for. It's like joining a biker gang. You have to learn to see in a different way, you have to learn how to talk in a different way; it's a very rarified world. But I like all extreme worlds. It's just the middle I have trouble with.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Speaking of Baltimore, it occurred to me—I was wondering whether you ever

had any contact with Barry Levinson, or what you thought of his films.

**WATERS:** I like Barry. You know, I didn't meet Barry until we were on the cover of *Baltimore Magazine* together, maybe ten years ago. Certainly, *Homicide* is filmed there now, which, you know, it's his show, and basically Pat Moran, who has worked with me forever casting, just won the Emmy for that show. Vincent Peranio, who does the sets...everybody I know that works with me that lives in Baltimore works on *Homicide*. I like Barry's Baltimore films very, very much. They're my favorite of the work he does. He's making one there now called *Liberty Heights*. In Baltimore, all the time, people yell at me, "Barry! Barry Levinson!" (Laughter) I just wave and say, "*Homicide*, Friday night, ten o'clock!" (Laughter) I like his films. He makes films about a very different extreme part of Baltimore than I do, but still, we celebrate the same thing—the oddness of Baltimore and just different oddnesses.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Back to the budget. How...what was the budget on *Hairspray* and how...

**WATERS:** The *Hairspray* budget, I think it was about \$2.7 million, I think.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** And how long was the shoot?

**WATERS:** Oh, I don't remember. Not long, certainly. I don't know. I bet twenty-some days.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** And do you storyboard?

**WATERS:** Then, I don't think we storyboarded. The only time I ever storyboarded was in an action sequence. It *Cry Baby*, like, the chicken race and that kind of stuff. But, um...

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** And the choreography of the film, was that your vision?

**WATERS:** Well, it was my vision. I could get up right now—I'm not (Laughter)—and do all those dances, but I hired a guy named Ed Love who was the choreographer. And I also hired a woman in Baltimore who was really good, named Linda Snyder, who was one of the queens of *The Buddy Deane Show*, and she knew how to do all the dances. And she taught, really, the kids how to do them. And then the choreographer took over. But

she really worked with them every day.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** And do you—one last—do you...

**WATERS:** Yes.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** The video tap, do you use that in that film? The video tap. Like, the continuity...

**WATERS:** I did for the very first time in *Polyester*. Yes, I always used that. Yes.

**SCHWARTZ:** I just wanted to give you the chance to say something about *Female Trouble*, which we're seeing at five.

**WATERS:** Well, that's my favorite movie I ever made. And it's been unavailable on video. We've been holding it back like Disney held back *Fantasia*. It has never completely been released correctly. 35 mm print—New Line decided it was too long. So they took out the scene where Divine swims across the river in full drag. But they forgot to take it out of the video—one of the videos. So they put it in the video. But then, all three video companies that ever put *Female Trouble* out—*Female Trouble* is something like 95 or 96 minutes long. Videotape

comes in—no, it was 93 minutes, let's say. Videotape comes in 90 minutes. They were too cheap to put in the extra 115 minutes of blank tape, so they radically cut out scenes for no reason, just to make it shorter. So basically, *Female Trouble* has never, ever been released the right way. And it's going to be, next spring. But if you've seen it over the years, you probably have seen it all, in different versions. Never all at once though, I think.

When I made the movie, you know, it seemed, like, very, you know, it was about somebody who wanted to get the electric chair, because to them, it was like getting the Oscar in their chosen profession. It seemed radical then. Now, it seems like it could very easily be very true. We shot that in a real penitentiary and carried the electric chair across, and they were screaming, "No!" Now in Maryland they're very liberal. They give you the choice of lethal injection or the gas chamber. Well, who wouldn't take the gas chamber? It's so much more dramatic. You can bang your head and scream, "I want to live!" (Laughter) But *Female Trouble* is the best Divine vehicle I ever made, and I think it was made—I always said it was to show Divine's extreme beauty and my mental illness. It's just my favorite of the old films.

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