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Extreme vision

Director John Waters takes to the small screen to share his ideas about some movies that are so bad, they're good

By Mary Carole McCauley
Sun Reporter

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John Waters might have a Baltimore ZIP code, but his true address is somewhere over the rainbow.

Waters, of course, is the taboo-trouncing filmmaker whose movies, which are set in Charm City (Crybaby, Pink Flamingo, Hairspray, etc.), are distinguished as much by their high gross-out content as their underlying sweetness, a kind of warped optimism.

Now, the 59-year-old auteur is taking his larger-than-life persona to the small screen. Beginning Feb. 3, here!, the nation's first gay television network, will broadcast John Waters Presents Movies That Will Corrupt You, the filmmaker's first foray into television.

Waters selected and will introduce each film featured in the 13 weekly segments, which will range from 1996's Freeway, a creepy spin on Little Red Riding Hood (involving a teen headed to grandma's and a killer, and starring Kiefer Sutherland and Reese Witherspoon) to such little-known gigglefests as 1995's Sissy Boy Slap Party, which is about pretty much what you would expect it to be about. Each show will begin with Waters inviting the audience into his Baltimore home, and each weekly segment will be shot in a different room.

"We are not going to be showing any touching, coming-out films," Waters says. "And not all of the movies have gay themes. We will be showing movies that are on the edge. My audience is gay and straight people who have extreme taste, no matter what they do in bed."

Sometime this spring, Waters also is scheduled to act as the host of a new true-crime series of domestic murder mysteries on Court TV called Til Death Do Us Part. (A debut date has yet to be set.)

Court TV envisages the series as a cross between the Movie Macabre shows from the 1980s, and the low-budget horror films that starred Vincent Price. Each episode will focus on a single spousal murder and will begin with a re-enactment of the wedding.

"I've always coveted Vincent Price's career," Waters says. "I get to be the Groom Reaper, who attends every wedding and knows what's going to happen."

All of which raises the question: Can the man who proudly traces his progression from "Filth Intern" to "Filth Elder," the man who once filmed an actor eating dog droppings, conform to the tamer dictates of television? Will TV water down John Waters?

He answers the question in a roundabout way:

"Who is going to turn on premium cable to a gay network and buy a show called John Waters Presents Movies That Will Corrupt You and expect to see *It's A Wonderful Life*? If you're that dumb, and you've gone to all that trouble, you probably deserve to see *Irreversible*."

Though Waters made his reputation with his films, it's not surprising that he'd want to venture into television, especially since the tube, not celluloid, was his first love.

"When I was 6 years old, my mother took me to see a broadcast of *The Howdy Doody Show*," he says. "It was the first time I'd seen behind the magic curtain of show business. When I saw the puppets and the set, I realized immediately that it all was a wonderful fake, and I thought: 'This is what I want to do for the rest of my life.'"

Howdy Doody even influenced Waters' first show biz gig; from age 9 to 15, he worked as a puppeteer for children's parties, earning the then-princely sum of \$25 per show.

Positive images

Waters makes it sound as though the path leading from *Howdy Doody* to *Sissy Boy Slap Party* was short, well-marked and smooth.

"They're at both ends of the creative spectrum," he says. "It's the ultimate irony that I can show 13 movies in my home today that 10 years ago would have gotten me arrested. But it's not surprising to me anymore. That's why I'm a good American; I believe anything can happen in America."

In addition, he says, television will give "these 13 extreme, intelligent movies" exposure to a much-wider audience than has previously seen them.

Of his two incursions into television, the filmmaker is vastly more invested in *John Waters Presents*. Not only did he select the 13 movies, he wrote the introductory and closing segments.

"Basically, I do a stand-up comedy routine before each movie," he says. "Writing them took me half the summer."

His relationship with here! also is a boost for the burgeoning popularity of gay television.

The network here! is the first and the largest widely available gay television network. Though it was founded barely two years ago, it already is available to nearly 50 million households in most major markets, network founder Paul Colichman says. The network's programs are available in the Baltimore area on a pay-per-view basis on Comcast, DirecTV and Dish Network. (The fledgling network's success can be difficult to gauge, because officials contractually are prohibited from revealing how many people buy their programs, and, like most cable channels, here! doesn't release profit figures.)

In the future, the network plans to switch from pay-per-view to a subscription service. "Our mission is to provide positive images for people in our community," Colichman says. "What the gay programs on the networks have in

common is that they are sanitized for people who are not part of our community. They are desexualized and safe.

"You won't see prancing sissies running around on our channel. You'll see doctors, lawyers, schoolteachers, mothers and fathers."

House is the set

It was Waters' reputation as a provocateur that initially attracted here! executives.

"John Waters has never compromised, not once, not ever," Colichman says. "He is a man who moves the medium forward every day he breathes."

A beautiful afternoon last August found Waters literally moving the medium forward; he nudged a cable with his foot while maneuvering a camera crew set up in a hallway outside his guest bedrooms.

"I know what it's like to shoot in my house," he says, moaning theatrically. "And yet, when they asked if they could do the show here, I said, 'OK.'"

"Am I insane? Last night, to get to my bed, I had to climb over lights and cable, equipment. I can't cook dinner even. The kitchen is the dressing room."

The only rooms not seen in the series are Waters' front hall, kitchen, upstairs hall and the garage.

"So I guess that's half of the second season," he says. "If they get really desperate, they could shoot one episode in my car."

Once inside his guest bedroom, he waits for his cues from Eve Brandstein, here!'s executive producer, and Anne Beatts, the show's director.

Take 8. Ready. Cameras. Action.

Waters launches into his schtick:

"This is my guest bedroom, where I put my weirdest things:

"True crime books, weather porn, extreme Catholic behavior before the Reformation, psychiatric disorders, sexual pathologies, Nazis, debutantes."

He raises one eyebrow in mock-sinister fashion.

"I don't want the guest to feel too comfortable."

Directing directors

For someone who claims to be more at home behind the camera than in front of it, Waters is a natural: funny, seemingly spontaneous and relaxed.

Perhaps that's because in the past, he has played bit parts in films: in Woody Allen's 1999 *Sweet and Lowdown*, in 2004's horror comedy, *Seed of Chucky*, even in his own *Hairspray*, released in 1988, which he also directed.

But for all Waters' quick intellect and disarming humor, the director in him keeps popping out. After decades of making movies, giving orders is second nature to him. Really, he can't help himself.

During the film shoot, Waters directs the directors directing him. He directs the newspaper photographers angling for the best shot. When one woman tries to take a picture of Waters descending a staircase, he objects because the shooter is standing above him on the landing. He fears his thinning crown will be on display.

"No," he says, and holds up a hand. "No, not the bald shot. I'll come up to you."

But then, Waters knows what he wants when he sees it. Take his house.

As a boy, he used to walk through the North Baltimore neighborhood on his way to school, and he thought that a gracious stucco villa designed by Lawrence Hall Fowler was the most beautiful home he'd ever seen.

As a grown man, he introduced himself to the elderly owner. "I nagged her for five years until she was ready to sell," he says. In 1990, he moved in.

Waters' house, like Waters, wittily incorporates a multitude of influences, from the red velvet Victorian-style sofa and matching curtains to an extensive and very fine collection of modern art (some of it homoerotic) that includes works by Andy Warhol, Cy Twombly, Tom Friedman and Richard Artschwager.

While the filmmaker painted the walls in his New York apartment a color he dubbed "puke green," the walls in the main living spaces of his Baltimore home are white. The overall effect is simultaneously cluttered and spare, fanciful and elegant.

There are books everywhere - piled on the coffee table, behind the sofa, possibly inside the microwave. But the house is not overdecorated, so each of Waters' very singular furnishings can shine in its own right. Those furnishings range from walls of impeccably framed movie posters (including 1998's *Beefcake* and 1999's *Criminal Minded*) to a large and rather scary paper doll created by Waters' friend, Baltimore actress Sue Lowe.

A grand staircase made of dark wood sweeps majestically up several flights like a dowager in an evening dress with a long train. And there, just above the baseboards and between the second and third floors, is a mural of kittens.

Naturally, being at home with John Waters isn't like being at home with anyone else, even without the electric chair. (Made for the set of *Female Trouble*, it has been described by observers as being uncomfortably like the real thing. Tragically, it has been stashed in the attic for this shoot.)

For starters, there's Waters' wardrobe.

He favors the cutting-edge designs of Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons, and his shirt, for instance, is a conservative wing-collar with subtle pinstripes - printed over with large blotches that resemble vivid pink lipstick.

"It's made to resemble a disaster at the dry cleaners," he says. "When I take my shirt in to be cleaned, they always try to fix it."

His socks have wide black and white stripes like piano keys, and his shoes bring to mind the ruby slippers worn by Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, except that his are bright gold.

"I modeled for Rei once in France," he says. "I'm 6-foot-1 and I weigh 155 pounds, and I was the fattest person there. After the show, I had models in my limo howling at the moon. It was a fun night in Paris."

A generous spirit

Waters seems to careen from comic encounter to comic encounter. Some he sets up, while others are a natural outgrowth of his ebullience and charm, of his cockeyed outlook and shrewd observations of just about everything.

To complain, as some do, that Waters' movies are in questionable taste is beside the point. Occasional scenes in the films he's made (and in the films he likes) might be - OK, are - disgusting. But his films are never mean. His work can be vulgar (in fact, he revels in it), but it is not ugly. Malice seems as foreign to him as delivering a straight line.

John Waters' world is animated by a spirit of inclusiveness - a generous, expansive spirit that celebrates two-ton transvestites, porn stars and heiresses-turned-gun-toting-revolutionaries.

But poking fun at the Establishment and lampooning convention traditionally is a young person's game, and in April, this enfant terrible will turn 60. Does he plan to, ever, um, mature?

He considers that notion for a moment, then blithely waves it away.

"I try to always be one step ahead," he says. "I'm trying to make you laugh and see something in a new way. I'm not really trying to be shocking so much as surprising. I make fun of things I love."

And for emphasis, Waters taps the toe of one of his size 8 1/2 gold-colored leather slippers on the ground:

Once. Twice. Three times.

And once again, we're off to see the Wizard.

John Waters

Age: 59

Born: Baltimore

Lives: Baltimore and New York, summers in Provincetown, Mass.

Early adventures in filmmaking: As a teen, he staged a re-enactment of the Kennedy assassination on his parents' front lawn.

Films: He has written and directed 16 films, beginning with 1964's *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*.

Major awards: None in his name, but *Hairspray*, the Broadway musical adapted from Waters' 1988 film of the same title, racked up eight Tony Awards in 2003, including Best Musical.

Framed: An exhibit of still photographs, *John Waters: Change of Life*, has been mounted in a New York museum and has toured the United States and Europe.

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