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In his new book, 'Role Models,' filmmaker John Waters reflects on those who made him such a contradiction

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BALTIMORE -- A few blocks from the local lockup, John Waters is talking about his time in prison. Not that he was incarcerated, but he has spent years visiting prisoners, even rehabilitating a few in film and writing classes he taught in cellblock rooms, where paper-covered windows protected the privacy of teacher and pupil alike. Over scallops and crab cakes on North Charles Street, the trashy auteur confides that sometimes he sees ex-con pupils on the outside and notes their progress.

Many are now gainfully employed, he explains, taking pride even in those who didn't go legit: "Before, they got welfare, and now they're coke dealers." He pauses and considers the alternative. "Wouldn't you rather your child be a drug dealer than a drug addict? Sophie's choice these days."

No one would mistake John Waters for a moralist, and he doesn't disappoint on that front. "I'm for abortion: Basically, if you can't love your children, don't have it, because it can grow up to kill ours or me," he says. "That's not immoral. It's common sense."

But it may surprise his fans and detractors alike to think of him as a decidedly responsible citizen, helping inmates earn their community-college degrees. He has written treatises on provocation ("[Shock Value: A Tasteful Book About Bad Taste](#)"), filmed paeans to fetish ("[A Dirty Shame](#)"), and even capped his career of making midnight movies by letting two films morph into family-friendly Broadway musicals ("Hairspray" and "Cry-Baby").

His most arresting work -- as a journalist and even as an educator -- may have come through those regular trips to prison. "[Role Models](#)," his latest work of nonfiction, engages like an intimate ramble in which the amped-up narrator dishes about folks he's met in his many decades exploring America.

"I get along with all types of extremes," he says, and the proof is in his pages. He brings back tales of a Charm City barmaid, an amateur porn director and assorted post-fame celebrities, but his friendship with Leslie Van Houten, convicted for her bloody role in the LaBianca murders led by Charles Manson, enlivens his most plaintive and surprising chapter. Waters describes

decades of visiting her in a California prison, his perceptions of her progress and his reckoning about having fun with something as ruinous as murder -- see also Kathleen Turner in "Serial Mom" or the "Polyester" teen who never thought she'd use macramé to kill.

As sympathetic as he is to Van Houten, who he thinks is long overdue for parole, he is mindful of the other side of the crime. "When I wrote that chapter, I wanted to be really fair to the victims," he says carefully. "They can never be wrong whatever they say . . . because they're speaking from a personal viewpoint and I'm writing from society's viewpoint, which is completely different." He swats away questions about Roman Polanski's travails, touching as they do on a separate Manson rampage. He has one Van-Houten-specific area of expertise and does not want to dishonor the dead or the grieving.

An arbiter of taste

In his postmodern maturity, Waters has been an interesting blend of free spirit and tireless worker. He has mapped out the zone between good taste (art-house cinema, books by Farrar Straus and Giroux) and bad (beehived housewives, suburban fetishists) and echoes Diana Vreeland in deploring only those with no taste -- "hair hoppers," as he calls anyone gussied up as a show of gaudy opulence. Dolly Parton, in teased and towering wigs comes up, but that's not what he means.

"She's a female female impersonator," he says. "She's different."

But that thin line between vaunted and vulgar is drawn as painstakingly as he pencils in the teeny row of bristles above his upper lip. Decades before Adam Lambert introduced guyliner to the "American Idol" mainstream, Waters was darkening his faux-sinister mustache. And he uses Maybelline. Every time. In his book, he relates how his proper Lutherville, Md., mother dropped in on him once in the hospital, bringing his designated makeup so he could apply it before confronting the nurses and the day.

He drives a Buick, loves a Johnny Mathis tune (a visit with the crooner fills another chapter in "Role Models"), goes to bed early every night except Friday. He is nearing the age when he can first collect checks from "Soasha Skurdy," as the local dialect calls the Social Security facility in nearby Woodlawn. His dining hour, 6 o'clock, is chosen not to capitalize on any early-bird special but because he needs to get to a rock show featuring John Lydon, the PiL frontman previously known as Johnny Rotten.

It's part of his job, the maintenance of his fame, the tour-guiding duties by a celebrity for other celebrities when they pass through town. Their only other option, he notes, might be jazz singer Ethel Ennis, who probably wouldn't know the bar where the lesbians dress up like the prison-era Johnny Cash.

In "Role Models," Waters talks mostly about others but in so doing elaborates on his controlled, precise persona, even reserving some of himself for himself. Both a committed reader (six newspapers a day!) and a Coachella headliner, he is a performer but not an emotional exhibitionist.

He has an ear for outliers, as if he is the Alan Lomax of American freaklore -- his chapter on Little Richard, for instance, finds meaning in babbling. Back in Crabtown, he appreciates not just the uninventable outlaws, but also the ingeniously succinct statements that sum each up as an entirely distinct Baltimorean.

"I trade deer meat for crack," one barfly famously confided to him, and he savors the sentence like a truffle collector might, as something delicious stuck in the muck. "Who could make this stuff up?" he wonders.

Bad boy, good manners

So here he is, one of the most successful visionaries, nestled in a restaurant as cozy as an Anne Tyler novel, in a home town untouched by time and unwittingly cool. "It's the only town where people say, 'What school did you go to?' and they mean high school," he says.

The family who runs Sascha's eatery on North Charles Street treats Waters like family. A little girl comes by to greet him, and soon Sascha Wolhandler herself. The restaurant prepares meals for his movie sets -- no, not the early ones in which his best friend and cross-dressing muse, Divine, was violating taste-bud taboos, but the bigger-budgeted star vehicles. Wolhandler has been careful not to poison the talent or mess up the scene when a new plate of bivalves needs to arrive for the next take.

"Oyster continuity is very difficult," he says, sympathetically.

The bad-boy bona fides comes packaged with good Baltimore manners. He is solicitous of new acquaintances, makes courteous introductions, wears a jacket to dinner. He is faithful to core friends in four places where he keeps homes (New York, San Francisco, Provincetown, Mass., and here), and when in his home town, he would *never* berate dry cleaners who tie up deliberately dangling threads on his Japanese couture pieces in an attempt to reconstruct that which was deconstructed.

Waters has worn head-to-toe Comme des Garçons in the runway show of Rei Kawakubo, the designer's designer from Japan, also profiled in "Role Models." But his favorite place to sport Kawakubo pieces is at any dive bar, where fellow tavern patrons often attempt to console him: "That's a shame about that coat, John." No reaction could make him happier.

"That's the best way to wear fashion where you did spend money. It's the opposite of being a hair hopper because you're not bragging in any way. Matter of fact, you're wearing it in reverse. You're wearing it in places where they think you're poor."

His collection of art, property and Comme des Garçons sneakers signals otherwise. At Sascha's, he has on a dark, simple pair of the latter, wearing Kawakubo's brand in solidarity with deposed White House social secretary Desirée Rogers. "She was fired for wearing Comme des Garçons," he says, reducing the Salahi imbroglio to Rogers's gotta-be-me sartorial statement during the first state dinner. "She's a martyr for fashion."

He doesn't understand why anyone young would wear couture when looks alone should be enough. He suggests fashion is a shtick you grow into, trends are best worn as rebellion for the age group just ahead. And good looks have quite a power over him, he admits.

He is openly gay, but he scoffs at the "openly" distinction. In fact, he scoffs at the fumbling early definitions of gay culture, in politics and in cinema alike: "Certainly some gay movies are like early black cinema -- all embarrassing."

A hipster friend shows up -- scruffy and young -- ready to take in the rock show with this icon three times his age. Waters is accepted here just as he is, just another regular, not as the gay pioneer known for transgressive artistry and purposeful outrage.

"Sometimes if you're around too much gay culture, you can be homophobic," he confesses, but it's not the intolerant locals influencing him, it's the claustrophobia of groupthink. "I like minorities that don't even fit in their own minorities. That's who I get along with best."

John Waters discusses his life's work, and his new memoir, "Role Models," at 6:45 p.m. as part of the Smithsonian Resident Associate Program. A book signing follows. Tickets are \$25 for nonmembers; call 202-633-3030 202-633-3030 or visit <http://www.smithsonianassociates.org>.