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THE BALTIMORE SUN

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## The education of John Waters

The eclectic director has many muses — from Johnny Mathis to Leslie Van Houten — but Baltimore may be his biggest



John Waters features the **Club Charles** and its original owner Esther Martin in his new book. (Jed Kirschbaum, Baltimore Sun / May 19, 2010)

By Michael Sragow, The Baltimore Sun  
*11:51 a.m. EDT, May 21, 2010*

You might think you know **John Waters**, but until you read his latest book, "**Role Models**" — well, to quote **Jeremy Irons'** Claus von Bulow, "You have no idea."

Waters avidly links his "Baltimore heroes," like the lesbian stripper Lady Zorro ("My kind of burlesque queen"), to far-flung friends and influences. They include "genius fashion dictator" Rei Kawakubo, who once brought him to Paris to model her work, and "outsider pornographers" like David Hurler. They also include artists and entertainers as popular

as Johnny Mathis and as widely acclaimed as the psychological novelist Lionel Shriver ("We Need to Talk About Kevin"). Their one common denominator is the encouragement or caution they or their work gave him as he developed and sustained a unique lifestyle and an improbable and enduring career.

Sitting in his North Baltimore house a couple of weeks before publication, Waters says "Role Models" started when the New Directions publishing house invited him to introduce the memoirs of **Tennessee Williams**, the most poetic of all American playwrights. Asking the auteur of "Pink Flamingos" and "Hairspray" to celebrate the author of "The Glass Menagerie" and "A Streetcar Named Desire" proved to be an inspired idea.

As Waters puts it in his essay, "Tennessee Williams saved my life." For the 12-year-old Waters, growing up in suburban Baltimore, Williams was more than a naughty writer whose books carried the ominous stamp "See Librarian" at the library. "Yes, Tennessee Williams was my childhood friend," writes Waters. "I yearned for a bad influence, and Tennessee was one in the best sense of the word: joyous, alarming, sexually confusing and dangerously funny."

Waters now says, "Once I wrote that piece, I knew that it was time to write a book." The idea of telling the story of his own life through the lives of role models like Williams took hold of his imagination. Waters found it elating to be frank about Williams' direct, even sweeping influence on Waters' life and sensibility. The playwright's work introduced Waters to a gay temperament that transcended stereotypes and embraced the excitement of "sexual ambiguity and turmoil."

Because "Tennessee Williams wasn't a gay cliché," Waters writes, he had "the confidence to try not to be one myself." He ended up spending his summers in Provincetown, Mass., where Williams wrote the line, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." In his own life, Waters would come to depend on close friends he's known for decades. Waters views role models as men and women to learn from, not necessarily to emulate or follow.

One of the greatest subjects in the book is Baltimore. He loves the time he spends in Provincetown. His doormen in New York's Greenwich Village and San Francisco's Nob Hill always tell him, "Welcome home." "But Baltimore *is* my home," he says, as well as the wellspring of his inspiration. It's here that he found his outrageous wit and established the work and play habits that he brings from city to city. ("An alcoholic one night of the week, a workaholic the other six," he notes.)

He pays tributes to Baltimore characters like irrepressible, foul-mouthed Esther Martin, owner of the "coolest bar" in town, the Club Charles (formerly the Wigwam), who ruled a clientele that shifted from "bums" to "artsy hillbillies, gay outcasts and cool gearheads." (Waters still adores the place. One of Martin's daughters, Joy, still runs it.) Waters says he knows where Baltimore got its creative ferment. "Poor whites came to work in the factories, blacks were

already here, and so was old money, white money. That created a typhoon of style and gallows humor."

And not just gallows humor, but *self-reflexive* gallows humor. "This city has a great ability to laugh at itself." He notes that every time the city has come up with a positive slogan, like the current "Find Your Happy Place in Baltimore," Baltimoreans have made short work of it. " 'The City that Reads' became 'The City that Bleeds,' 'Believe' became 'Be Evil,' 'Charm City' became 'Harm City.' I made up a slogan, 'Come to Baltimore and Be Shocked,' and they finally put it out as a bumper sticker."

The best slogan for "Role Models" comes not from the Baltimore Chamber of Commerce, or from Tennessee Williams, but from another great American gay poet, **Walt Whitman**. It was Whitman who famously wrote, "I contain multitudes." The characters in "Role Models" reflect wildly different aspects of Waters' heart and mind. They include the impeccably wholesome and inscrutable Mathis and the wild-and-crazy **Little Richard**.

"I'm amazed by Mathis myself," says Waters; "he is so opposite [from me]." But Mathis the creamy pop singer turned out to be a lovely guy when Waters visited him in Los Angeles and then backstage, after a Christmas show, at Baltimore's **Lyric Opera House**. Waters fantasizes that Mathis understands the parallel lives they lead as happy single men: "He's a gentleman who lives alone, and he's from another era."

By contrast, Little Richard, the all-out rock 'n' roller, in his own day as transgressive as Waters — and in many ways the shocking man the young Waters wanted to be — proved impossible for Waters to relate to as a human being.

He freaked out when he realized that Waters, who was interviewing him for *Playboy*, would cover the racier aspects of his just-published "The Life and Times of Little Richard," which Waters dubs "the best and most-shocking celebrity tell-all book ever written."

Now smiling at the jarring encounter from the comfort of his Baltimore home, Waters says that the problem with Little Richard is that "he wants two lives. He wants to be a successful minister and a successful rock 'n' roller, and it's hard to please both worlds. And he seems to think it's fine as long as one world doesn't know about the other world. I thought his book was great, it was what rock-and-roll biography is supposed to be. But then he got nervous when I asked him about it, I guess since I was coming from *Playboy*."

"Still," Waters hastens to add, "Little Richard was a huge influence when I was young. He really was outrageous, and so ahead of his time, and so talented. And he really scared the white folk for every reason. But a lot of what scared people was never spoken about. The word they used for Little Richard was 'flamboyant.' "

At the comical highpoint of the book, Waters, like Little Richard, imagines himself as a preacher, but one with a

unified sensibility, holy-rolling in "a rapture of rottenness," soaring from cult filmmaker to cult leader. But his treatment of his friend Leslie Van Houten is completely different: touching in its compassion and overwhelming in its impact. Van Houten, a former Manson cultist, has spent decades in prison trying to rehabilitate herself as a citizen after her participation in the "Manson Family's" murders of Leno and Rosemary LaBianca. "I hope Leslie Van Houten can be given a second chance," he writes. "The best gift I can give her is a promise that she doesn't ever have to see me again once she is released."

Waters says, "They've all had more extreme lives than I've had, in good and bad ways. They've had to live with something in their lives that is completely outside the personalities or experiences of most people, including mine. There are no easy answers to the questions about them, and I will never totally understand them. That's why I'm interested. And I'm not judging them. That's one reason why people tell me things. They know I won't judge them, and I usually don't."

Documentation and source material were never problems for Waters, a born pack rat. Rivaling even Nicholson Baker as the last rabid fan of the printed word, Waters is a one-man Publishers Clearing-House. He loves periodicals as well as books, often for specific reasons: He has long subscribed to Jet magazine, but these days he treasures it because it keeps him abreast of **Aretha Franklin's** fashion choices.

He's also an unabashed admirer of outsider pornography. He writes, "Without the pioneering pornographers who changed what we thought was indecent, and on rare occasion, subverted artistic lust, I could never have had the nerve to make my movies." Waters is curating a show of David Hurles' work at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York in June. Hurles' forte is photographing men who scare him. Waters loves Hurles' work as porn. But he also loves finding "secret codes" or driving obsessions in all creative efforts, high and low, whether in the difficult grammar and obscure word choices of Ivy Compton-Burnett, the maddening scrawls and scribbles of contemporary artist Cy Twombly, or the verbal-abuse audiotapes of Hurles.

The day I spoke to Waters, he got a note from Hurles, who is ill and in a hospital. When the chapter was read aloud to him, Hurles broke into tears because he loved it.

Waters says, "I want people to like what I've written about them, and so far everyone I've given the book to has liked it. The Leslie Van Houten part was very hard for her to read. Fourteen thousand words about the worst night of her life. But I didn't write about anybody I didn't like. If you are interested in these stories, you can learn from them; you can learn from what happened to Leslie and not have your own life screwed up."

Most of all, Waters wants readers "to like some of my friends, even when there are some issues. Even when their issues make their experiences so out of the norm, I'm always fascinated by how they deal with that."

His friends' negotiations can be as moving as Van Houten's example of taking full responsibility for the Manson Family atrocities and becoming a whole woman. Or they can be as practical as Mathis' explanation that when you fill concerts with golden oldies like "When Sunny Gets Blue," "you have to learn to be the audience! That way it will always seem new."

Waters is also the last unabashed admirer of Sigmund Freud. Waters writes that he made "friends with his neuroses through psychiatry." In person, he riffs, "Freud was wrong about a couple of things, but he was right about a lot, and he got a lot of ideas all at once. I love what I quote in the book, where he says psychotherapy is 'turning hysterical misery into common unhappiness.' They don't do that any more! I know pills make you 'even,' which saves peoples' lives, I know. But many people don't need them. It's appropriate to be depressed sometimes. You just killed somebody in a DWI accident, you *should* be depressed. You're not supposed to never feel sad."

One wonders what Freud would have made of this book's panoply of mothers, who often raised healthy children in spite of themselves. Waters' own mother seems terrific. He writes, "My mom used to drive me down from our safe, then almost country-like neighborhood to Martick's, a bar known (at the time) for its bohemian customers. 'Well,' she'd sigh as she dropped me off outside, knowing I couldn't get in because the owner was aware I wasn't twenty-one, 'at least here you might meet some people you could get along with.' "

Now he says, "When I look back on that, it was amazing. And it *is* amazing. And even though everything I've made, even this book, [my parents] probably wish I didn't, they're proud that other people like it. They were encouraging and tolerant and, now that I look back on it, scared. And they made me feel safe. And that's why I could write this book; that's why I'm here today. No matter how insane I was, there was something inside me that I knew: I knew that I had them."

These days, he thinks that Baltimore is "doing great," too. His current "favorite place" (if not his "happy place") is Lithuanian Hall, which has Soul Night the first Friday of every month.

"It's all young kids dancing to their grandparents' music, not their parents'. It's a great club. I still go out and find places. I just like to watch the new kids and see what 's going on. Baltimore still has really great bars; it has more edge than New York. It's always been a town of beauty parlors, churches and bars. Still is."

### **Waters' neighborhoods to watch**

When John Waters' mother dropped him off at Martick's, he says today, "It was a great place, but the big thing was just coming downtown, where I could really see all the things I was listening to or reading about."

Downtown didn't just mean the area Waters refers to with affection and awe as "Baltimore's notorious red-light district, The Block." It also meant " **Lenny Bruce**, and Bohemia," and roaming characters like the "drag freak" named Pencil — "a great influence on me," he writes, "defiantly courageous in the face of hatred, rabidly enticing despite his repellent packaging, and soooo happy to be living a life totally against the laws of the times."

I asked Waters to characterize comparable Baltimore neighborhoods today. This is what he came up with:

### **Hampden**

"If there is a demimonde today like the kind at Martick's, it's in Hampden. Hampden is an uneasy mixture of redneck culture and hipster culture, which I love. Hampden is definitely the hipster neighborhood and a *great* neighborhood. It's become what Fells Point was for a while, but it moved."

### **Remington**

"Walmartt will kill Remington from ever being a hipster neighborhood. I hate Walmart. I know it gives people jobs, which is a good thing, but I don't think it treats its employees well, and it's one of the biggest censors of R-rated or NC 17 movies, or cutting-edge CDs, in the world."

### **Westport**

"Westport could have been the next Hampden, but now that'll be like Harbor Place."

### **Highlandtown**

"Now, Highlandtown has room. The recession has stopped the forest fire of yuppiness from jumping from block to block. The Creative Alliance is a good thing!"

### **Station North**

"Who would have ever thought we'd have hipster bars on North Avenue? It was actually going to be named James Brown Boulevard before he went to prison. I think that they should name it that again. Imagine your address being 2214 James Brown Boulevard!"