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AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN WATERS

By Larry Jaffee

CRACKPOT

The Obsessions of
JOHN WATERS

BOOKS

For a self-proclaimed crackpot and a known trafficker in deliberate bad taste, strange-film director John Waters has been pretty much dabbling in the mainstream lately. Fifteen years ago, his film *Pink Flamingos* served him up a taste of more than minor fame, largely due to an excrement-eating scene featuring 300-lb. transvestite Divine. His last film, the '81 release *Polyester*, debuted the scratch-'n'-sniff sensory enhancement called Odo-rama. But right after that, Waters quit the film biz and turned to writing.

Since then, he has accumulated a puzzling string of ultra-respectable credits, as an autobiographer (*Shock Value: A Taste-ful Book About Bad Taste*), an essayist (*Vogue*, *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*) and, most recently, as a Book of the Month club author with his new hardcover collection, *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters* (Macmillan). Two years ago, he was invited to the White House (Reagan, however, was out at the time). Last year, the mayor of his hometown, Baltimore, where he has made all his films, declared February 7 "John Waters Day." Heck, he even made it to the cover of the *Wall Street Journal*.

So what gives? Has Waters completely abandoned the sleazy, trashy side of the American Dream for limo rides, first-class treatment and New York City literary circle shmoozing?

Not at all, he assures us: "I want to sneak my most pernicious ideas into the most mainstream product I can." To set the record straight, *Graffiti* met the man in his posh hotel suite across from the United Nations in New York — the first and last place you'd expect to find him . . .

GR: Why are people fascinated with strange things?

JW: I think that people's sensibilities are so brutalized that their sense of humor is improving instead of getting worse. They'll laugh at things that aren't funny, because what else can you do about it? You can't change it. My books and films comment on that in a way, but I don't want to get too intellectual about it. Humor is a good weapon; it's better than a gun.

GR: How did the new book come about?

JW: I was writing these essays, and then realized after the third one that there could be a book. It took about a year to do the whole thing, which is about what it took to write *Shock Value*. I told those stories so many times that it came out like diarrhea. But this one was a little more fun to write