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JOHN WATERS ON CAMP, POLITICAL INCORRECTNESS, AND HIS ENDURING PASSION FOR JUSTIN BIEBER

By Stephanie Eckardt – May 20, 2019



The last time that John Waters performed with Ballroom Marfa, the pioneering art nonprofit space that helped make Marfa, Texas, what it is today, was in 2004—a different political time, to say the least. And yet Waters’s “filthy” one-man show at the Times Square Edition in New York City on Friday night, during Ballroom Marfa’s Spring Party, could have easily come straight from the Bush era. Even Waters seemed to think so: “But what did I say that wasn’t politically correct?” the artist-director, apparently nonplussed, asked me after he’d left the stage where he’d been serving up jokes about everything from Donald Trump’s cunnilingus skills to what is suitable fashion for a goat sacrifice.

Not that the crowd, including members of Ballroom Marfa’s new International Surf Club patron group, seemed to object—nor, no doubt, will the crowds that will soon greet Waters at each of the 10 stops of his upcoming tour for the publication of his ninth book, *Mr. Know-It-All*, this week. There’s probably only one way he’d end up offending his fans: by failing to show up, as he did with the camp-themed red carpet of this year’s Met Gala, where his presence was sorely missed. He explains his absence—and gushes about Justin Bieber—in his culture diet, here.

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It's been more than a decade since you last performed for Ballroom Marfa. Looking back, have you felt more pressure to be politically correct with your sets since?

Well, here's the thing—I think I am politically correct. I understand that people go pshhh when I say that. But I'll argue the point: What thing did I say that wasn't politically correct? I'm curious what you think.

I mean, I loved the joke about gay people needing to audition, because there are too many now.

Well, I've always made fun of gay culture. They have more rules than my parents do now. I don't think I've ever gotten in too much trouble with that, even when I get awards. I'm gay for pay—they have to book my comedy show, if I'm going to be queer of the year. [Laughs.]

You're about to go on another book tour. How many have you done at this point?

I think I've done nine books total—nine books and 17 movies—and I think I've done one for each. And I'm thankful there is a book tour, because book tours are vanishing—publishers will arrange them for you, but they want you to pay for them. Everybody thought book tours were going to die from all the chains, but the chains died. Well, most—I have one coming up at Barnes & Noble in Union Square, which is still the best place to do them in a way. The one that usually sells even more books in the country, though, is a tiny little bookstore in Baltimore [where Waters lives] called Atomic Books, which is where I get all my fan mail. The line goes for, like, three blocks down.

Will you be making a stop there, too?

I'm going there, and to my favorite book shop in L.A., Book Soup. I go to all the same ones every time. I think of it as part of my book deals—they know I'll go out there and promote it and sell it. I signed a thousand books or something today, and

I felt like Jackie Susann, who wrote *Valley of the Dolls*—she was the first to go to the warehouses and pose with all the books. And I got such a good review for my book in the Times today, too. I'm so relieved.

Had you been worrying about it?

I'm always worried. It was by Alan Cumming, who's a good writer. But it used to be the mean one, who's also a good writer.

Michiko Kakutani?

Yes. Look: When you're young, bad reviews, you're happy someone knows. When you're old, bad reviews are a pain.

Do you always read your reviews?

I don't believe it when people say they don't. I fight with some people. I've asked Anne Tyler, who's my friend, "So if you know that you got a rave review in the New York Times that day, and you get that paper delivered, you don't look at it?" She says, "Yeah, I don't look at it." She had the best line ever when she won the Pulitzer [for fiction]. She doesn't get press, and the Baltimore Sun knocked on her door and she said, "Excuse me, I'm in the middle of writing a sentence." [Laughs.] That's such a great line.

Getting into the culture diet questions, what books are on your bedside table right now?

I'm really obsessed by this writer from Brazil, Clarice Lispector. I love her because she writes whole novels where not one thing happens—she describes the air. I think she's such a great, great novelist. And I think *Say Nothing* was my favorite nonfiction book this year, which is about the Troubles. What an understated name, the Troubles! That's like calling the second World War "The Issue." You know, I have issues.

What's the first thing you read in the morning?

The six papers I get delivered every day: the New

John Waters (center) with performers from the House of Yes (Juan Pablo Alba Dennis, Josie Austin, Nik Alexander, Gabby Grywalski, Matthew Dailey, Angela Cascone, D'vass Charles) at Ballroom Marfa's Spring Celebration inside the Paradise Club at the Times Square Edition in New York City, May 2019.

Yvonne Tnt/BFA



York Times, the Washington Post, the Baltimore Sun, USA Today, the Wall Street Journal, and the New York Post. No matter what you think about it, no writer doesn't read the New York Post.

Do you really go through all six?

Oh yeah. I read what I need to read. And on my cell phone, I read the L.A. Times and the Daily News, because I can't get them delivered in Baltimore.

What TV shows have been keeping you up at night?

My favorite TV show in the last five years is the prison one, *Escape at Dannemora*. That and Gregg Araki's TV show [*Now Apocalypse*] are probably the last things I obsessively watched.

Do you stream things too?

No, I don't have a streamer. I get screeners of any art film I want, because of my column in *Artforum*. I sometimes watch TV, but I read every night.

What's the last movie you watched?

The punk documentary that Iggy [Pop] produced. It's really good.

I imagine you knew some of the people in it.

Yeah, are you kidding? I run this punk rock festival every year in Oakland called *Burger Boogaloo*, and I was around then. I've been around since the Beatniks! [Laughs.] I just saw this movie at the Maryland Film Festival about *Creem* magazine, with all the people I know, and I thought, Woah—that's that person?! They look old. But so do I. I'm sure people think that about me, too.

Do you remember the last thing that you googled?

Let me think—what's the last thing I googled that isn't porn? [Laughs.] I only have one or two of them. I'm really embarrassed to admit this, but I looked on Amazon to see what the rating of my book was after I did two national television shows, and it was

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shocking to me. They were good, but you know, you think, Why do you do this? And the book's not even out yet—they're preorders, which is great.

Speaking of, there's a photo of you in the book with Justin Bieber.

Yeah, I love him a lot. I was on the Graham Norton Show with him in the beginning of his career, when he was like the Beatles, with 10,000 girls outside. He was so great. I didn't even understand what he meant, but he said, live on the show, "Your 'stache is the jam." So later, when we went out to dinner, I gave him the eyebrow pencil and he drew one on himself. I've always been a fan of his.

I feel you about missing the old Bieber, though.

I'm glad he's doing well, but I liked him when he was bad. I liked him when he was nude and drag racing—when he was going 60 miles an hour. I thought those cars wouldn't stall 60 miles an hour. Then he threw a paint balloon at someone's house—that's hardly rampant. And so once he went to a whorehouse—who hasn't? So I'm still a big fan of his—I think he's a true pop star. If you look at that early footage of him playing Aretha Franklin in the kitchen on pots and pans, and doing those fully choreographed shows in Las Vegas as a 16-year-old kid, it's amazing. He's a real star.

Do you ever look at social media?

I'm not on Facebook, because I'm not interested in what you had for lunch. But also I work from six in the morning to 10 at night, so I don't have time to look.

What about Instagram or Twitter?

No, I don't look at them. Twitter, give away all my jokes? What would I put in my book? I work for a living—what would I have left?

There are a lot of accounts that say they're you. Have you seen any?

I've seen some, and they sound like me. It's really scary—I see them and I'm like, That is what I'd say. I don't look because it'll just make me crazy. I did cooperate with Dreamland—I've known them forever, and they've been there from the beginning and they're very lovely. But I'm not against the other ones. I see hilarious stuff online, like for Easter with Divine, that people will send me, but by 10:00 at night, I'm tired. I don't have time to look through it all. And I don't have time to read the comments, the snark. You know, the first thing that I ever had published was in Life magazine; I was, like, 16, and I wrote a letter to the editor sticking up for Andy Warhol, which they printed with my address. But snark, you don't have to put your address. So it means nothing, because you're hiding, and you're a coward. You're just mad because other people are famous. But mostly, snark is nice about me. I read it once in a while, but it's self-defeating.

I have to ask you about the Met Gala—another reason why your name's been popping up so much recently.

I wasn't invited. I've never been invited. The only time I thought maybe was the year they did Comme des Garçons, because Rei Kawakubo asked me to accept her lifetime achievement award at the CFDA. It's fine, I don't care—I'm all for it, and everybody had a great time, but I'm not sorry I wasn't there. I wouldn't have worn those outfits, anyway; if someone told me I had to, I couldn't do it. I don't wear Halloween costumes. I can't.

Well, you are known to dress—

This [points at his suit] is not what you had to do there. This was beyond that. I do love the Met—they own a couple of my pieces, and I'm never more

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amazed when I see a piece of mine hanging in the Met. It really is incredibly important to me. But I get all the Google Alerts, so I did see I was mentioned so much in all Met Gala stuff, but it was really Van Smith that should have been. He did all the costumes and makeup for all my movies. He was the one, really—not me.

Do you think people lived up to the theme in the end?

I think that everybody really tried, and everybody got into the spirit of it. True camp was so bad it was good and they didn't know it. But nobody goes to the Met Ball and doesn't know what they're doing—there's no innocence about it. And no one says the word "camp" anymore. Even 90-year-old queens don't say that. Even if we're sitting under a Tiffany lampshade. Maybe even at the last meeting of the Rita Hayworth fan club. People don't know what it is. To me, camp was a secret word that gay people used and Susan Sontag exposed it in a great, great way. But then it was done. Once the secret was out, it was over. I mean, what is camp today? Is there a movie out now that's so bad it's great? Maybe not, because everybody is in on it. It's not accidental.

What about in fashion today—is there anything you think is camp?

Maybe when they had Baltimore Fashion Week, which was pitiful. All the models smiled and waved—the two things you're never allowed to do, and they were waving at their parents. [Laughs.] That was camp.

Last thing: What's the last thing you do before you go to bed?

Turn my phone off, turn my computer off, and set the alarm. I turn the phone off because I don't want it to make those noises, and I think that if you don't ever turn your phone off, it'll explode. Give it a rest. When I'd go away in the summer, I used to cover the art so it didn't have to inspire—so that it had a vacation from light, from trying to astonish, from trying to do anything. Just put black over and the art goes, [sighs].