



JOHN WATERS INTERVIEW
FRAGMENTS OF PARADISE
LIFE STORIES

John Waters, Filmmaker
15 August, 2020
Interviewed by Katie Davison
Total Running Time: 40 minutes and 55 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

John Waters
Filmmaker

00:00:05:00

KATIE DAVISON:

John Waters, take one. Okay. Who are you?

00:00:10:00

JOHN WATERS:

I am John Waters speaking to you from the Parkway Theater in Baltimore,
Maryland.

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KATIE DAVISON:

And who was Jonas Mekas?

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JOHN WATERS:

Jonas Mekas, to me, was my savior when I was in high school and Luther Ville, Maryland. Somehow I knew about the Village Voice, and I got it. And I used to read Jonas, this column, movie journal. And he told me what underground movies were. I never heard of such a thing. I didn't know what they were. And that's how I learned about Wormhole and Kenneth Anger and the Koch brothers and all those kind of movies. So I became kind of obsessed by them. And I used to sneak away on New York and tell my parents I was going to a fraternity weekend, which I don't know why they believe me. No fraternity ever asked me to be in it, but I would print up phony permission slips and they would sign them. And then I'd go on the Greyhound bus and go to New York and see the underground movies that Jonas wrote about. So that's how I got my film education. I loved Film Culture Magazine, which came out a little bit later, and I got that. And that gave me a great education, too. And what I loved about Jonas was not only was he for underground movies, he was kind of against the foreign art movies that were the big hits in the theaters. He was beyond that thing. They weren't real cinema either, which was really radical. And Jonas used to show movies where you got arrested if you went to see them, the audience was taken away. Talk about edgy. Can you imagine going to the movies today and seeing Flaming Creatures and being taken away in a paddy wagon? That's what I call real moviegoing.

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KATIE DAVISON:

We're wondering, how did you get your hands on The Village Voice? Was it in Baltimore?



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JOHN WATERS:

There was a bookstore downtown called Shermans that used to have the first gay porn, like Tom of Finland stuff, and it had the Village Voice and even the department store near where I lived got variety. I used to get that there, but the Village Voice, I'm sure that I got maybe 1 or 2 copies in the beginning downtown and then had a subscription to it. They came to my parents house, you know, my Dreamland Studios was my bedroom and my parents house in Louisville. So, I definitely had a subscription, probably the Village Voice from 1964 to the day it died. I was in high school 61 to 64. So during that period I did read it. Yes. And then maybe I made up for some things that I learned later, you know, because they he would continue to show Scorpio Rising and Jack Smith and all those kind of movies were continuously showing over the years. So, and the early Warhol stopped and everything. So he was my leader, really. He, he was a lifeline outside of Baltimore. I would have never heard of these movies, and I would have never made hag in a Black Color Jacket, which was my first movie, an eight millimeter black and white, not super eight eight. I didn't know how to make a movie. You can tell. I thought it was very dogma 95. I thought, there's just you shot everything in order in the camera and there was no editing. And that was what my first movie was, which isn't that dogma 95, the Lars von Trier thing? So, but Jonas was even before dogma 95 or anything, and, and he would come out really for the Warhol films no one else did at the time. Really. I mean, the ones like Sleep and Empire and all that and way later in life, Jonas gave me that original flier for Empire, but was a Xerox flier when it first came out, the movie, and, so. And he was involved. He shot that. Right. So he he was involved right from the beginning. Where now, Jonas makers underground movies could have never happened in between.



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KATIE DAVISON:

Amy Taupin said that he because he was championing these films, that's what made them possible, particularly for Warhol. Like that's why he got to keep making those films. Did you see it that way?

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JOHN WATERS:

Yeah. I think that no one would have reviewed those movies or ever heard of those movies except Jonas. And not only did he give them great reviews, he said they were better than Fellini and Antonioni and all the auteurs that were being very praised by The New York Times and all the all the reviewers that made the movies ahead. So Jonas certainly could make an underground hit. He was the only one that could buy. And and if he didn't like you, you were it was you were through even in the underground. And, you know, the underground eventually turned into midnight, turned into independent movies. Hollywood is influenced today because of Johnny's makers. Everything he did changed everything changed the movie business, how it worked. He had pop up theaters. He really did that first.

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KATIE DAVISON:

So do you have like, could you define what the underground was?

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JOHN WATERS:



Well, I think I made a movie called Cecil B Demented versus a B demented films that I'm he says technique is nothing more than failed style. And I believe in that. If you come from a movie and say the first thing you say is, boy, that cinematography was really good. I think that means it's a bad movie because you can't think of saying, Wow, that was so great. It changed me forever, you know? So Jonas praised. Technique that was sometimes the opposite of good. The lack of technique or having no money made no difference. He was the opposite of Hollywood in a way that special effects and everything, all that kind of thing that makes a big Hollywood movie today would be the worst thing you could ever do for Jonas. But mistakes were good. Shooting on the run was good. He never asked permission. Are you kidding? He defied censorship constantly over and over and over. But those movies were art. So? So he won in court eventually. He won. Every one of his opinions is right. And today, I'm still amazed when I see the anthology Film Archive Showing and MJ Wheeler movies and Gregory Markopolos, all these filmmakers that were really hard to like, even man, much less now. And people are there watching them. That's only because of Jonas, because he never gave up on his brand. And his brand was movies that were defiantly uncommercial but incredibly original, and they ended up influencing every Hollywood director in the long run.

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KATIE DAVISON:

I think that today, because everybody has a phone that is a movie camera in their pocket, it's hard to understand for like today's generation, how revolutionary it was to just pick up a camera and shoot.

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JOHN WATERS:

It's the same today when every young kid makes his first movie with his friends, with his phone. When we did it, you did it with your friends, but you had to get those giant 16 millimeter cameras that had the giant things on the top, and yet they weighed a ton. They were anything but easy to work, and there was no easy way to edit them in any way. And you had to get everything developed at them at the film lab. And it was expensive. And and so it was much harder to make a movie that the no one had access to the equipment where today everybody can make a movie. And but that's so good and bad because now everybody does make a movie, and that's also a bad thing. There's too many. So you give up watching them. You know, people say to me, now when you watch my movie, I say no because it'll sit there with 50 other ones, and then it's like homework and they'll call me up mad. Did you see it yet? And then if you didn't see it, what do you say? It's embarrassing. So to me, I always say, I'll pay to see your movie once you get it in the theater. Now, I can't even say that anymore.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Did he crack that door open? Like, did he make people believe that they could do it themselves?

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JOHN WATERS:

Completely. He made me believe I could do it myself. How else? My grandmother gave me an eight millimeter movie camera, and I didn't know



how to make a movie. No one showed me how. I didn't think I had the instruction book, so I just did it. But that movie did get shown once in a beatnik coffee house in Baltimore, and we passed the hat. And, and then it was shown for the second time at Lincoln Center at the retrospective I had a few years ago. So, it only played twice, but it was pretty pretty. It lasted that long. And even even, he taught me in a way, Jonas Mekas taught how to sell a movie, too, in a way, because he he picked extreme movies that were sensational in a way and, and cause trouble and, outrage. People certainly outraged the mainstream art critics at the time who said, well, this is enough. Any art that makes people finally said, well, I finally draw the line here. That's the art that lasts. That's what abstract expressionist, that's what pop art, and that's what minimalism did. So it's every art that defies the people that were last in power and say, this is ridiculous. That ends up being the next great thing. And Jonas never said they were ridiculous, but he most definitely said they were not only the next best thing, they were the only thing. And he was a fanatic about that. He was a true fanatic for underground movies. He would review projectionists. When he would see a theater, he would write up. This theater had a bad projectionist, which is hilarious. You know that the the projectionist got a bad review for one time. Missing the changeover mark or something.

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KATIE DAVISON:

I wonder about, you know, the postwar generation. They were coming out of this moment in which, like the mainstream, almost had lost all legitimacy. Mainstream gives us genocide. Do you feel like that's why that generation was pushing against norms?



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JOHN WATERS:

And then I think the generation, the movie business was pushing against censorship, because underground movies meant to some people dirty and that they were and the sex part of it. There were two kinds of underground movies. There was the Warhol, Kenneth Anger couture, the ones I liked, really, that always had nudity and gay people and drugs and everything. And then there was the real arty, kind of like Stan Brakhage and Thriller. I didn't like them so much then. I liked them now and realized that Jonas was completely right about that school, too. But at the time, they were dueling underground movies, kind of. And Jonas embraced growth, I think, and would bring them together and an uneasy truce, I am not for sure. But Kenneth Anger hung around with the damn Brakhage. Maybe they did, I don't know. Because the generation was a little ahead of me, really, even ten years ahead. Kind of in a way, because I was in high school when underground movies really came out. But, I didn't go to see them all really at when he would. And then the filmmakers cooperative when it was called that distributed monitor trash. So that was the first real distributor I ever got. And, and they would pay a dollar a minute and that's what you got. And it was in the catalog. They didn't push anything. You could just rent it. But Mondo Trash, it was 90 minutes a long, 90 minutes long. So I got \$90 every one time somebody rented it. And I guess we split it. I can't remember the deal, but they had a print that was the first distributor I ever had. Certainly was Jonas. And. And Leslie Trumbull, I think that's who worked there for many, many years that I dealt with. If I'm getting the name right, I think it was. And they were a



godsend to me. Yeah. I'd pay back my father for \$2,500 at Mondo Trash, of course, because of the filmmaker's collaborator.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Can you tell us that story? How did that happen?

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JOHN WATERS:

Well, the thing was, the filmmakers cooperative would distribute anybody. You could deposit their film there that you'd. It wasn't some honor because they didn't say no to anybody, I don't think. And the beginning. But then they had another part of it that was the commercial part of it. They would try to get theater bookings, and I was in that part so that I think maybe was a little harder to get in. Was that called the was the filmmakers cooperative in the filmmakers maybe distribution? I forget, but, they actually did theaters and got some theater bookings for me. So, I just followed them and everything. I got variety when I was a teenager, too, so I knew about the business and I got film culture. I got all that stuff. So I knew where a movie could show, really, and I would send out fliers that I would design and posters and go up there and show them to me. But New York was the last place my movies caught on. Actually, they played in LA and San Francisco and Baltimore in Provincetown Way before New York. I mean, Mondo Trash or even Mondo Trash or Multiple Maniacs didn't really play in New York till after Pink Flamingos became my hand at the Elgin. But Jonas did take the film and distributed them all over the country. Mondo Thrasher did play, and at the Underground Cinema 12 and different Circuits that there was actually a few circuits or underground



movies at the time, and Underground Cinema traveler's Mike Gatz, and that was run by the, this one theater chain, Arts Cinema Guild, I believe, that had porno theaters kind of in the day. But, once a week on Saturday night, they had art movies and midnight movies and underground movies, and that was a great thing to get picked up on because it was like ten cities and you got a dollar a minute. And I really helped pay my father back from that one. And I just saw my guest for the first time in 40, 50 years. It was really that long ago. Recently, he came to one of my, spoken word shows and we caught up afterwards. It was really great to see him because he also was a big help in those days. And, and you remember the people that took that really took a chance on you in the, in the very beginning. And, and that's what Jonas did. And he was odd because Jonas also made movies like *The Brig* and hung around with the Living Theater, but then he would also hang around with the Warhol crowd. You know, it was a completely opposite scene, very arty European intellectuals and speed freaks. And he seemed to get along with all of them.

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KATIE DAVISON:

I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about what that culture was like in the in the 50s and 60s, during that time when Jonas was really beginning to build?

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JOHN WATERS:

Well, the 50s was, I don't know, I was I wanted to be a beatnik in the 50s, but I was in a, you know, in junior high, I really couldn't it was hard to be one. I



wore sandals that laced up and looked like a fool. But, I, but when the 60s happened, that's when underground movies were really thought of as, as a thing of the 60s, which was defying Hollywood, doing it a completely different way and having nudity, having sex, having drugs, having all the things that the 60s were completely but but turning your nose up a technique and billion dollar budgets and everything. It was, a real pride. I have no money, so the cheaper you could make a movie for was more glamorous an underground movie? Certainly.

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KATIE DAVISON:

So was there like a transgressive element, like a rep rebellion?

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JOHN WATERS:

Completely. It was rebellion, yes. It was not only rebelling against Hollywood, it was rebelling against foreign art movies, too, that were they were the things that most all left wing, intellectual people movie buffs liked. But Jonas defied them to think, oh, this is all shit, too. You know, the only things that are good are flicker or horror movies that throw you into seizures, or that you have to watch the Empire State Building for eight hours. But he was right. Those movies were really radical. They were beyond anything anybody ever did. And including he recognized Warhol films, which I think are as great or even greater than his artwork. Because he speed it up, people doing nothing on speed and make it slower in real life. That's really the opposite of what a movie is. He made a movie not move which. Talk about radical and still radical. If you watch Scorpio Rising or if you watch the Car Brothers or you



watch some of the Warhol, you will see that that has been absorbed by our culture. But it's still beautiful. It's still original. It's still of its time. You can immediately recognize it as the work of one particular artist. So I think we're getting less and less of that kind of movies today. I think a lot of young people want to see Hollywood movies that cost \$100 million in a mall and stadium seating. They like that. So I think that's radical, I think. And I never say, oh, we had more fun than they did. I think that just makes you old. But young people today are watching movies in a completely different way, which I'm sure that Jonas probably would have been for completely the most radical way for anybody to watch a movie at home or on your phone. He wouldn't have been against that. He was. He embraced the new technology, but he was not. A stickler on on being things looking beautiful or perfectly formed or everything. No, he was an elitist. In the opposite way almost that an elitist that if it costs nothing and looked bad and made people crazy, that was high.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Do you remember the first time you met him?

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JOHN WATERS:

Oh, I used to see him in all the events because I would go to the filmmakers cooperative, or when they'd have Warhol, or they and I go to the Bridge Theater and the Gate Theater, and a lot of the ones that he was around, and I would see him there and everything, and I was always impressed, you know, I don't know that I ever met him until way later when I gave that award at the new school. Maybe that might have been the first time we actually ever met,



because even I would write him in the early days trying to get him to look at my movies and everything he answered and stuff, but I think it was usually through lazy or other people at the filmmakers cooperative. He already had an empire.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Was he about radical inclusivity? You know, like like I'm thinking about Flaming Creatures.

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JOHN WATERS:

Yes. And it's the oddest thing because it certainly didn't seem gay to me, you know, and I'm not sure. But he hung around and gay culture that much either or anything. But he did embrace a lot of gay filmmakers. But those same gay filmmakers wouldn't have gotten along with other gay people either. He knew he like people like I do that can't even fit in their own minorities.

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KATIE DAVISON:

What was censorship like at that time?

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JOHN WATERS:

Oh, it was terrible. Well, it felt at first you could see women's brass, then their ass, then men's ass, then their dick, then barking. That took 30 years for those gates to fall. And Jones was there for each one of them. And and they got away



with it because of foreign films, because it was already. But the underground films scared the censors because they had never even seen that before. That scared him. To them, they didn't know if it was art or pornography. It was too raw for them. They didn't. They didn't know how to respond to that. And that's why they were even better, because they they disarmed the censors. They didn't know what to do. Truffaut and Antonioni and Fellini and I loved all those movies too. But at the same time, these were more radical. These were more, cause more trouble. And, you know, and he did this in a movie, you know, he did. He did movies that always had censorship problems. And, and for some reason, then they always arrested the projectionist as if the projectionist chose a movie to show. But but they did Jonas's when he would show Flaming Creatures, it didn't get arrested and raided and stuff. How exciting.

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KATIE DAVISON:

I heard the Jeannette film was an influence on you.

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JOHN WATERS:

Oh, everything Jeannette was a huge influence on me. Of course, I read all Chinese books and Catholic high school and they figured, oh, letting the film just read, he'll shut up and let him read. So I'm there sitting, reading Our Lady of the Flowers and Stuff and and the Thief Journal and, and Catholic High School. And they didn't know what the books were and they thought, oh, it's good he's reading. Little did they know what I was reading. So all those movies influence me. My God, they made me want to make movies. Yeah.



They formed. What I end up doing was making exploitation films for art theaters, which certainly was putting together underground movies, foreign movies and, and, and, and underground movies, I think altogether. And, so yes, it was a huge part of my taste today is even influenced by weird other movies like *The World's Greatest Sinner* and *Different than I even showed*. I showed *kitten with a whip* at the anthology. It was a fundraiser. You know, they embraced exploitation to you later. I mean, you look through the Anthology Film Archive every month when I get the calendar, it's just amazing what they show the and they're obscure. Believe me, there's some, I think. What is that one? I even I never heard of that one. But but people go, you know, and if it wasn't for Jones and if it wasn't for that theater, that whole genre would have been forgotten and undiscovered. But today, young people are in there seeing those movies. And I think that's because of the brand that Jonas had.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Did you or do you consider yourself part of the underground?

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JOHN WATERS:

I think I started making underground movies, then I went to midnight, then independent, then Hollywood, then Hollywood underground. And I slid right back down to not making a movie. I always wanted every movie I made to be commercial. And they were weirdly, in an odd way. They got shown they played all over the world, and they're still playing and they Canal and Criterion and all that. So in a way, they were kind of commercial. I always



thought up ad campaigns. I always tried to help the distributor sell the movie. I would try to get Devine to come to personal appearances. I gave shows just so we had a way to sell the picture. I always had stills. The unit photographer, the most important person on a film crew. Because what people remember are the stills, not the movies. And, in the old days, the underground theaters, even then, you you needed those stills to to lure people in and film comment and film culture and all those magazines, those stills from from the Warhol films, in those stills from Kenneth Anger and that that intrigued people. That's what got people into the theater.

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KATIE DAVISON:

I wanted to ask you, okay, a little bit about Jonas's personality. Like, you got to know him later. What was he like?

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JOHN WATERS:

Jonas Mekas was like. Had so much energy. I had lunch with him right before he died and he said afterwards, we're going to do this. But I had to go through this hospital thing where I died in the hospital. So I thought, well, after I get through that, then we'll have another meeting. That's kind of what I didn't realize it at the time, and I don't know if he knew it or not, but it was quite not long before he died and he was talking about the library, all these things. He was so many projects he had going and I don't know how old he was, but he was definitely old. But he didn't ever see that. He didn't. He seemed like filled with energy and not ever once doubting whether he could get something done or get something made. He was an optimist, and that spread



to other people. And when you believe that you're going to get something done and never take no for an answer, you do get it done.

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KATIE DAVISON:

How did you end up helping him later in life?

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JOHN WATERS:

I don't know that I helped Jonas because I always talked about what a what an important role he played in the cinema tastes of everybody today. I mean, I gave him an award. I did a couple of benefits there and stuff, but no, Jonas helped me. I didn't help him. He was already a legend. He was like, I don't know, he he inspired underground filmmakers everywhere. I think of Richard Kern. I think a lot of people, Amos Poe, all the people that made underground movies, that became even commercial later, they learned from the movies that Jonas shown the spotlight on. We would have never known those movies without him.

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KATIE DAVISON:

What did you think of his films?

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JOHN WATERS:

Well, some of them I like. The Brig is the one I remember seeing first, and I thought that was great, you know? And some of the diary films are amazing.



Hallelujah! The hills. Is that him or his brother? That's his brother. So. I don't know that I saw all of them. I've seen a lot of them. I have all the books about them and everything. But the one I remember the most is The brig, because, that was, I guess, the first one I saw. And it was also that cinema verité, like you're right there in the theater and all that kind of thing. And it was incredibly powerful to me.

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KATIE DAVISON:

We were confounded all the time by how he seemed to be everywhere all the time. You know, everyone like somebody. I mean, how is this even possible?

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JOHN WATERS:

Just I think because people were in awe of him, because he had such taste that was so defined, yet so militant about it, that even if you didn't agree with him, you had to give him credit for being this much of a zealot, really, about underground movies. So, it was his religion. It was not his job.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Do you think that the censorship battles that he helped wage, I mean, you waged some of this too, right?

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JOHN WATERS:



I did censorship battles, but his yes, they they were important to his career. Definitely. It made him a hero. It made him, a warrior. It was a revolutionary. It was a thing that that nobody had ever seen this. And the police? Yeah, I got busted. Two for police were threatened by underground movies. For some reason, they really believe that they were, I don't know, do what? Make everybody go crazy and turn gay or. I don't know what they thought. The problem is, they did make everybody crazy and turn gay. But police were right. They were pernicious. That's why they were so good.

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KATIE DAVISON:

How do you think the underground at that time, at that particular time, like the 60s? Yeah. What was happening in India kind of going into the 70s.

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JOHN WATERS:

What it changed was, is it made an art film threatening, and art films weren't threatening before. They were beautiful or pretentious or, these were threatening these scared people, these scared, even liberals. And so that's why they were so powerful. And they chose subjects that were never chosen to be in Hollywood movies subject to drug addiction, like Shirley Clarke's *The Connection*, *Portrait of Jason*. Those kind of movies covered drug addiction, homosexual things that had never been covered, really. And Andy just pointing the camera at, naked people and beautiful people and people on speed that just kept talking. This people hadn't seen this. You. I always said Warhol put finally put gay people and drugs together where they belong. And and that hadn't really been seen before. Jonas was the ultimate hipster, really.



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KATIE DAVISON:

I guess, like, just why is it important?

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JOHN WATERS:

Jonas is important because he he introduced a new genre of rebellion and film that has never ended.

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KATIE DAVISON:

In his diaries. One of the constant there is basically just starving. Like starving all the time was always starting really, until like almost two.

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JOHN WATERS:

Weeks ago, I always saw him in nice restaurants and at dinner. Maybe he starved when he didn't go out. Jonas, I don't believe, ever got rich from from being an underground film. Enthusiasts know. But he also, I don't know, he never had to get a real job, did he? I mean, I got food stamps, maybe for a really short time, and I tried to get aid to the totally disabled because in California everybody did. But they told me I was insane, but not permanently getting welfare or food stamps or aid to the totally stable. Was getting a grant from the government to be an artist. Really? And even then, some of the social workers are very happy if they tell you what they put down was.



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KATIE DAVISON:

John is working with a lot of his friends at the time when you knew him.

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JOHN WATERS:

It's kind of no Jonas to later, certainly, but when he was starting, his friends were the film maker that was the world he was in every single night. Really. He was invited everywhere, I think. I mean, he was certainly he was certainly in the theater scene, in the movie scene, the gay scene, the abstract expressionist scene, the beatnik scene, all hipsters. They all loved Jonas. He was a part of it. He was a leader.

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KATIE DAVISON:

So film culture magazine?

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JOHN WATERS:

Yes. Film culture with my. I still have many, many copies of it. Yeah, the two Warhol editions are really amazing. And. Oh, the great magazine, a great magazine. And he would not only, champion, he would do like frank talent and, you know, tache and all different kind of filmmakers that were in there, not just the underground ones. He would pick some Hollywood ones that he felt should be discovered, too. So film culture was a really great radical magazine. Really a good one. Movie Journal was the his column in the Village Voice film culture was a bound magazine that was put out, I think journalist

was the editor of it, and that was all articles about underground movies. Pretty much. There were completely different. Movie Journal was a critique. It was a film critic, basically, that wrote a column about underground movies and reviewed them where, I'd say film culture was more like maybe a magazine, like film comment only for the underground. Totally. And he even had fiction in there too, sometimes, and weird poetry and stuff.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Later in life, he said he regretted ever being critical because all you ever wanted to be was an enthusiast.

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JOHN WATERS:

Yeah, he was never critical that much about underground movies. I think he would criticize Hollywood movies and art and foreign movies, saying they weren't as good as these underground movies. I don't remember him ever giving an underground movie a bad review, actually.

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KATIE DAVISON:

What do you think cinema was to him? Like?

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JOHN WATERS:

The cinema to him was a war and, and, a radicalization and a way. It was a vocation, I think, to him, not even making them. I think even as more than a



filmmaker, it was getting him to getting the public to understand what they were and eagerly seek them out and to take big chances when they went to the movies, not go to the movies to feel good, go to the movies and feel bad and feel scared, felt threatened, feel dangerous and feel new. That's what that's what Jones was about.

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KATIE DAVISON:

When you discovered this world, did it make you feel? I mean, I don't know, like, not a lot. I mean, not alone or like there were other.

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JOHN WATERS:

It made me feel, well, I thank God this was the world I wanted to go in. It was Bohemia. I always wanted to find Bohemia. This was the bohemian film world and I was thrilled. It was something I could do. I thought, hey, I could do this. I mean, you don't need money. You know, I always loved movies. I was a puppeteer when I was young. I had a show business career when I was 12 years old. But at the same time, this was a way. I was lucky that when I was just starting out, underground movies and genres just came out because it was the perfect fit for me to to, take it and try to run with it.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Do you consider cinema an art form?

00:30:41:00



JOHN WATERS:

Of course. I think cinema is an art form. Yes, but if it tries too hard to be an art form, it isn't. Oh, I think art is politics. I mean, humor is politics to me. If you. That's how you win is you make the enemy laugh and then they listen to you for a second. It disarms people humor. It gets them to listen to what you have to say, and it gets them to maybe change their mind.

00:31:04:00

KATIE DAVISON:

I sometimes wonder in my mind, because of the shifts that all of you were part of at that time, did that create the space for the social progress that began?

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JOHN WATERS:

Yeah, well, social progress and things went bad. Two Aids happened. You know, a lot of good things happen and bad things happen. But it was I'm glad I lived through that time. I don't think anybody ever in this century will go through another time where people had sex with different people every single night, and that was politically correct. I don't think that will ever happen again. And maybe it shouldn't, I don't know, but I'm not. Sorry I missed that.

00:31:39:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Do you think art and politics go hand in hand?



00:31:41:00

JOHN WATERS:

Putting politics in your art to bad idea because it instantly dates it. And if you make any kind of art that's going to last, it should last for a long time. You don't want to ever put it in one specific time period. That's why I would never put a Trump joke in a movie I was making right now, because it would date it completely. So, I think you don't use you. Art is political. Everything you say in humor is political, but you can't be so obvious about it. It has to be a little more symbolic.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Do you have, like, any, a great Jonas anecdote?

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JOHN WATERS:

Well, yes. I think I got this medal from the French government for, for, furthering the arts of, France, the movies. And I had a lovely celebration at the French embassy in New York, and Jonas was a gas team was there. He said to me, I got it, too, but my honor was higher than yours, which really made me laugh. And he deserves one higher than I did.

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KATIE DAVISON:

What was it like? I mean, the Filmmakers Co-op at that time. Did you also go to the filmmaker cinema, to the filmmaker cinematheque?

00:32:42:00

JOHN WATERS:

Well, it was great. People were high. You it which was radical at the time, and it was definitely underground. It was the coolest audience everywhere, you know, and it was people that took chances. Sometimes you were there for eight hours and they were showing Empire or something, but it was fanatics. There was film fanatics, but believe me, it was definitely the best dressed, coolest, craziest, bohemian audience. Always. When you went there, people went there to. Hook up. You know, you went to see the filmmakers cooperative, not only see a movie, you got laid.

00:33:15:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Why is film preservation important?

00:33:17:00

JOHN WATERS:

Film preservation is important because people will forget them. People have to know what movies change things. There's not that many. And, they have to be remembered for what they did. And and you have to be able to see them today and imagine them in the context of the time they came out. But the good ones still work. That's the thing. The ones that still work are the ones that are the classics and underground humor and and history.

00:33:42:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Who are the big, big influences on you?

00:33:45:00

JOHN WATERS:

From the underground, to me, it was the couture brothers, Andy Warhol and Kenneth Anger would be the three that were the most important to me because they were original. They were sexy. They were funny. The cars sort of parodied soap operas, and Douglas Sirk and Kenneth Anger was, the beauty of juvenile delinquency and, and, bad boys and Warhol, drugs and homosexuality together and great girls that hung around with them.

00:34:15:00

KATIE DAVISON:

How do you describe your catalog?

00:34:17:00

JOHN WATERS:

My catalog were trash epics. Basically, they were exploitation films made for art theaters. They were sometimes they were Hollywood movies, but sometimes they were underground movies, and sometimes they were midnight movies. But they're all the same. They all have the same moral, and they all are kind of three acts. I don't think any movie should be longer than 90 minutes a comedy, unless you're moral, of course. I think mine were a genre to myself. Even if you didn't like it.

00:34:44:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Who came up with that?

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JOHN WATERS:

Me, of course. I don't know how to sell a movie.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Were you ever round the factory crowd ready?

00:34:49:00

JOHN WATERS:

Yeah, I met them later. I used to go to Max's, and I certainly. But I didn't really. I knew some of the people involved in it, but I didn't meet Andy till we made Pink Flamingos. But I saw all the movies, and I knew I'd met Brigitte and a lot of them I had met. Yes.

00:35:05:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Do you have advice for young filmmakers here? When? What? What is the advice that you give to?

00:35:09:00

JOHN WATERS:

The advice I would give is if you come to me and say, how can I get a movie made? You won't get one name. You just that's the whole problem. How to figure it out. You'll figure it out or you won't do it. Everybody in the world would be a filmmaker who wouldn't want to be. You get paid, you get paid.



Tell people what to do and you get to travel. Why wouldn't every person in the world want to be a film director? So at the same time, I think I would tell them to think it's going to make money, try to make it commercial, but at the same way, have the nerve to do exactly what you want. And, somebody beside your mother and the person you're sleeping with has to like it. That's only three people. I think that's that's. I think that's youth job is to think up a new way to do sex and violence. The ultimate underground movie would be one that would get an NC 17 rating and had no sex and violence in it. That's the one line I want to say. When censorship kind of went away, censorship didn't go away. We have the Motion Picture Association of America. They're liberal censors. They're the most dangerous ones of all. Stupid. Sensors are easy to fight and you use them for publicity. They become part of your marketing campaign. Liberal ones can stop you, the MPAA, the liberal ones that say they have all the rules. But the x 17 x NC 17 is a faulty brand that they should recall. Like a car that doesn't work, because it doesn't mean that it means that people won't go see it, that advertisers won't play it. It curses the movie. It makes it financially impossible to make money. So that should be recalled. So that is censorship.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Is there an underground? Is there a real living underground in the same way that there was then?

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JOHN WATERS:



Now I'm sure there is a new underground, but it's going to be a very different thing. It's going to be shown in a different way. It's going to be I mean, there's not even midnight movies anymore. What's the big laugh? Midnight movie, Human Centipede, the last movie I can think of that should have been a midnight movie. Really? I think any movie that's going to come out today to cause trouble, sure, they will have them. Harmony Korine did it. There's plenty of Todd salons did that. Many filmmakers do it, still come out and cause trouble? The difference is don't know. Get shown an art movie theaters. You don't have to show them, you know, underground somewhere in the theaters or the distributors are looking for the next kid that comes along with his phone and makes a movie like, tarnation, those kind of movies the theaters are looking for that they weren't looking for it when their underground came out. They are now are way more open. And I guess we are in some ways and in some ways we're not. I think political correctness in a way, would have killed underground movies in a way, even though I think my movies are politically correct. But in a way, hey, I don't know today if that would affect that. You know, sometimes liberals are censors these days too.

00:38:05:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Jonas' legacy.

00:38:06:00

JOHN WATERS:

Jonas' legacy is the anthology film archive. And, because it's important, it's like the Museum of Modern Art Film Society. It continues to show all the movies that that change cinema in the underground, but also new ones. And



they discover work foreign film directors too, that maybe we've never seen. So, I think it is an underground celebration that will, have Jonas's signature on it forever.

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KATIE DAVISON:

What do you think drove him? Ultimately?

00:38:39:00

JOHN WATERS:

That's weird. What drove? Jonas to his underground movie obsession. He was a filmmaker himself, but he also realized that he was a showman in a way. He was commercial, or he made movies that were almost impossible to watch. Something that everybody was talking about and or something that everybody wanted to see. Even if they never saw it, they knew about it. They knew it was a forbidden thing. They knew it was something that was very cool. And, he made he made people go to the movies in a different way. And that changed forever, a mainstream audience. Well, today. What is that? I mean, certainly, you can have a documentary on television that millions of people see, even if it's a flop, are way more people will see that than if it played, in a movie theater. So, I don't know. I think documentaries are very popular today. I think television has made documentaries, very important to see. And I think, I think Jonas has such an interesting story. And God knows, if you use fair use for clips how that law ever became possible, I don't know, but, and anyway, I think it was once it happened, it was too late to take it back. But, God knows there's some good things you can put in there, and that'll get him going.

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KATIE DAVISON:

Looking at his life, looking at his catalog and everything, like, what can we learn from him and.

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JOHN WATERS:

What we can learn from Jonas's long, long life is never give up and go with your obsessions and never feel you can learn too much about one subject. Well. You asked, why should people that don't care about underground movies or the avant garde care about sneakers? Well, they shouldn't. They're assholes. Yeah, but people that don't care about avant garde, they don't care about. People that would blanket. They say they don't care about avant garde or movies or weird movies. I don't know who those people are. I've never met them. Who cares what they think? All right. Well, I that's a Jonas kind of answer, isn't it?

END TC: 00:40:55:00