

John Waters tackles Cincinnati

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(Photo: Provided)
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Filmmaker and cult icon John Waters – at 68, still wiry, whip-smart and unflinchingly frank – entertained an audience at Memorial Hall Saturday night with funny and sometimes-tender stories of his youth, his friends and the places he loves, like Baltimore and Provincetown, Mass.

In total, he was on stage for about 90 minutes, taking questions from the audience at the end.

After the performance, Waters stayed to take pictures and sign copies of his new book, "Carsick: John Waters Hitchhikes Across America."

Waters' one-man show "This Filthy World" as part of the FotoFocus festival of lens-based art.

If he were producing the opening night of FotoFocus, Waters said, invitations would be sent with postage due, and the red carpet would be filled with Vivian Maier lookalikes who would jump out to scare people, and paparazzi would be shooting under the tables. (Maier is the nanny whose vast portfolio of street photography was discovered posthumously. An exhibition of her work, curated by FotoFocus artistic director Kevin Moore, is at 1400 Elm St. through Nov. 1.)

In truth, the performance wasn't as filthy or profane as many of the films for which Waters became famous beginning in the early '70s – films such as "Pink Flamingos," "Female Trouble" and "Polyester." He became mainstream with 1988's "Hairspray," an entertaining but pointed commentary on social injustice in the '60s. It made a star out of Ricki Lake, became a Broadway musical and was remade in 2007 with John Travolta and Zac Efron.

"The only perverted really thing I ever did was 'Hairspray,'" Waters said. "It's in every high school."

In response to a question from an audience member, Waters said: "There are still great filmmakers out there who astound me." He had just seen and liked David Lynch's "Gone Girl."

"I still go see lots of movies," he said.

On the topic of gay marriage: "I'm a single man who doesn't want to get married. I'm the new pariah in the gay community."

But more seriously, he said, "You know how hard it is to find someone to love, gay or straight. Why would it threaten anyone?"

It wasn't Waters' first appearance in Cincinnati. One of his more recent visits included a performance when the national touring version of "Hairspray" came to Broadway in Cincinnati in 2003.

On Friday, Jeff L. Rosenheim, curator in charge of the Department of Photographs at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, delivered the FotoFocus keynote address on the topic of photography and the Civil War.

Rosenheim described the collision of war and the then-20-year-old technology of photography as a "watershed moment in American culture" with profound implications.

"It allowed us to see something many of us could not imagine," Rosenheim said.

Some of the first portraits Americans would ever see of themselves were taken during the war.

"By the end of the war ... everyone," he said.

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