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By David Holland

Once upon a time, not too very long ago, there lived a little boy in Baltimore, Maryland. He was not much different from many other little boys. He had a mother, a father, a plot of grass somewhere to play on, and a precocious mind filled with fantasy. Other playmates would dream of being a fireman while they hosed down a flaming box of matches, or hope that some day they might be a doctor while administering candy pills to an ailing friend. But our little boy's wants were simple. He just wanted to be a star.

Other children would whizz their bicycles around the Indianapolis 500 of their drive-ways or produce culinary delights in Jiffy lightbulb ovens while he sat in the local theater watching endless hours of film. Errol Flynn swashbuckling across a veranda, Vivian Leigh looking to tomorrow, Godzilla devouring another victim, were his then untouchable world. They were the celluloid reality that he could mimic in front of secret mirrors, that he could daydream about while others did not know dreams, and that he could tuck into bed with other prayers and teddy-bears.

Today, while others are firemen and doctors, he is just that star he envisioned in his dreams. He is Divine, an actor whose influence extends beyond the stage and cameras. Divine, for our purposes here, is an art form no different from the canvasses of Warhol and Oldenburg, the earth sculptures of Christo, or the writings of Burroughs. He is a creator in, and ostensibly a product of, our culture.

Divine began his career with another Baltimore boy, John Waters, who in some respects had the same dreams. Waters is the creator of such films as *Multiple Maniacs*, *Mondo Trasho*, *Female Trouble*, and most notably, *Pink Flamingos*. John and Divine were first brought together in a tri-screen film effort entitled *Roman Candles*. It was the beginning of the image and the fantasy that the public would know to be Divine. That image was fully realized by the public in the film *Pink Flamingos*.

In *Flamingos*, a 1972 John Waters production, Divine portrays the "filthiest woman alive," Babs Johnson. Babs resides

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in a neo-classic silver-lined trailer with some loosely-related characters: Crackers, a chicken-loving nymphomaniac; Cotton, an emotionally-barren voyeur; and Edie, Bab's cribbed, egg-eating mother. Babs Johnson, while riding in her early sixties white Cadillac Coupe-de-Ville and defecating on manicured lawns, sets out to wage war against her pretenders, Raymond and Connie Marble.

Raymond and Connie, fun-loving citizens, opting for the coveted title of the filthiest people alive, maintain a baby-ring. The money from the ring, which supplies bastard children for lesbian couples, provides front money for elementary-school heroin pushers and porno shops. The contest reaches a climax when the Marbles are brought before a kangaroo-court presided over by Babs, Crackers, and Cotton. Reporters from major tabloids are in attendance as Divine, as Babs Johnson, convicts Connie Marble of "asshole-ism." Raising her pistol to carry out the sentence she declares, "Filth is my politics, filth is my life."

The audience squirms in its seats during the last frames of *Pink Flamingos* as Divine proves that she is truly the "filthiest person alive" by feasting on the best laid sidewalk efforts of a leashed-pooch.

The film, four years since its premiere, still plays to packed houses in most major cities. And judging from the screams and howls emanating from the midnight shows, the audience is decidedly gay. But the spectators know that it is the leading underground film since Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* and, by attaining such status, it will be shown during the Great American Comedy Series at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

This very fact brings to mind elementary logic. If the film *Pink Flamingos* is to be shown at the Museum of Modern Art, which is the showcase of the best examples of contemporary art and expression; and if Divine is the primary vehicle in the film; then it follows: Divine is an example of contemporary art and expression. Premise A and B are true.

No connoisseur of modern, pop, or conceptual art can honestly deny that Divine is part of, or the embodiment of, the entire art movement developed in the sixties and overflowing into the seventies. No wonder then that he is a close friend of Andy Warhol and the star of cult-master John Waters. No wonder, too, that his presence is sought after to grace important parties and important openings. And no wonder that he has been cast in off-off Broadway's current smash hit, *Women Behind Bars*.

Women Behind Bars is the brain-child of writer Tom Eyan, who is currently writing scripts for Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman. He has been nudging New York, London, and Paris audiences with his productions since 1964 and has been the recipient of some of the art's most prestigious fellowships.

Divine, having arrived in New York to stage a revue, auditioned for the play. Eyan and Director Ron Link, immediately cast him to play Pauline, the unrelenting Matron of the Women's House of Detention, which is the setting for this "stage-film."

Divine, as Pauline, pounds onto the stage following a Bette Davis-like absence, letting the incarcerated know that "the fuckin' party's over!" From there we are both assaulted and delighted by every stereotypical female "wrong-doer" imaginable. Cheri, a full-bosomed girl of questionable lineage and mores; Jo-Jo, a no-nonsense black dyke; Guadalupe, a cha-cha Puerto Rican; and Mary-Eleanor, the "innocent raped by the system" are some of the House's inmates who are ruled by Pauline.



DIVINE



"I'd love to do Shakespeare," he sighs. "Sure I'd like to re-create some of the immortal roles done before."
 "But, yeah, film is my favorite."

What comes across more clearly in actions than words is his softness and sincerity. Backstage, sipping a paper cup filled with tea and surrounded with the accolades afforded a star, he exhaustedly leaves behind the public Divine. Platinum wigs are draped on styrofoam heads, glittering costumes hide in the closet, and what remains is a person looking much like some displaced Buddha.

Somehow one gets the feeling that the stripping is not accidental, that the dresses tucked away are done so for a reason. During the interview, one of the supporting cast came in with a swatch of sequined fabric and draped over the shell that is Divine and crooned at its "loveliness." He nods with placating distance. His actions say: "I am tired of it. There is something beyond this contrived fantasy."

More obvious than the fact that he has created an outrageous character, is the fact that we have locked him into delivering the character. Our high-pitched screams are only for an image that someone has obligingly designed for us. We demand its constancy. We demand its unflinching appearance. Consider this: there is a metamorphosis beyond the butterfly.

Leaving the theater and heading out into the night world of Manhattan with a tape and a yet undeveloped roll of film, the opening lines of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* reel through my mind.

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed | by madness, starving hysterical naked,

dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix."

And as I board the F-train for the Upper East Side of the City, a man once again dons a carefully styled wig, squirms into a Matron's uniform, checks the make-up, and prepares to deliver another awaited performance. The madness is the demanded image, the angry fix is the heavenly connection out of a too-tight dress.



Photography: Deborah Irmas

Pauline, affectionately nicknamed Paul, wields her power at the prison with more force and sadism than Kesey's Nurse Ratchet. Divine's bunned hairdo is the same as Louise Fletcher's Academy Award-winning character, but the verbal whips are much less subtle. One scene, in which Pauline explains her evening's plans, would make the Marquis de Sade grimace in embarrassment. Divine (Pauline) arrives on stage squeezed into a red-sequined dress two sizes too small to explain what will happen between her date and her at the drive-in. Obviously, according to her, there will be more action in the coupe than on the screen. No detail is left sacred.

Is there any doubt, as the audience hoots and whistles, that *Women Behind Bars* is Divine? No, there isn't. But it is his virtuoso performance, not as a cult-figure but as an actor, that will carry the play to the West Coast for both a stage production and film adaptation early next year.

The move from New York to California (which is Divine's home) will, I suspect, also carry with it Divine's famous tongue-twitching and body-caressing undulations that are his signature. But I doubt that it will carry to the awaiting-audiences the very real person that is beneath all the pancake and dyed.

In an interview with GCN the opportunity came to photograph and record the man who has created one of the most outstanding art figures of our time, if not the most original. Interviews, at best, should reveal something of the interviewee, but sitting with Divine, stripped of everything the public knows, revealed a softness and sensitivity that quoted words cannot capture.

Most recent interviews have centered on Divine, the image, the fantasy, the cult-hero. What must be looked at now is the person struggling, creatively, to emerge from the cocoon that has carried him to stardom. Consider the Shirley Temples and John Waynes that have never been allowed, by their audience, to become human. They will remain curly-topped or bronco-busting images long after their deaths. Similarly Divine may remain the titillating, outrageous character he has created and presented. This severe example of type-casting can be not only creatively stifling but repulsive.

Divine on Drag:

"Oh, I have to clear that issue with everyone. I am a man playing women's roles."

Think of Elizabethan drama or Japanese Kabuki.

"This dressing is a 'drag'; the best part of it is getting out of the costume.

"I see myself primarily as an actor. This is the image I create. I'm not a female-impersonator, they duplicate famous women stars, you know, Channing, Streisand. I'm creating an original."

On theater and film:

"Almost anyone can do film. Real acting is on the stage. What I had to ask myself was, 'Can I sustain a performance night after night, can I do it?' It's not easy, but now I know that it can be done.

"The theater has helped legitimize me. I want to do more. I want to do legitimate theater. There is some fool inside me that just wants to come out on the stage."

On privacy:

"I don't go out much. I'm just too tired after work. I can't just go out. Too many people know who I am. Oh, sometimes the notice is great, that's part of what it's all about, but sometimes I would like to go out and be left alone. So I just stay at home."

On his career:

"I really like film. I'm scheduled to do a sci-fi film." He grins. "I think film is the best medium, it's my favorite."

