
Photograph **Jonathan Hanson**

John Waters wants a ride

You're driving along and you see a guy hitching. Turns out, it's the director of *Hairspray!*

David Farley joins the cult filmmaker on to hear why he decided to hitchhike across America, and joins him on a trip to Divine's grave

Thumbs up!: John Waters hitches a ride to 'Disgraceland' – what he calls his burial plot





DISGRACELAND

John Waters is standing on a residential street a block from his Baltimore home holding a hand-made cardboard sign with the word “Disgraceland” scrawled across it in black ink. With hand outstretched and his thumb in the air, wearing a black suit jacket and a purple tie to match his purple-tinged slip-on sneakers, he keeps his eyes locked on the road, looking for oncoming cars. Waters has a few monikers: the Pope of Trash and the King of Bad Taste. He should have a new one: the Patron Saint of Hitchhiking.

“This is where I walked out of the house one morning and began the journey,” says the filmmaker. “I had this idea to hitchhike from here to my apartment in San Francisco and it wasn’t until this point, standing here, that I thought: ‘What the hell are you doing?’”

The result of what the hell he was doing is *Carsick*, an account of his journey, written by the man who made such outlandish films as *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*. It’s a book in three sections: the first two are fictionalised adventures of his trip, “The Best That Could Happen” and “The Worst That Could Happen”.

“In many ways the fiction parts of the book are just like my movies,” says the 68-year-old. He’s right: there are scenes with plenty of sexual activity (best) and scenes of horrific car accidents (worst), picking up his favourite porn star (best, naturally) and riding with a vegan extremist (worst). There’s even a chapter where Waters writes his own death, a hilarious tale of a maniac who intends to murder every living cult filmmaker.

And then there’s the third section – a non-fiction account of his actual trip, “The Real Thing”. In this people drive past Waters, at first under the impression he is a homeless John Waters lookalike – only to circle back and find that it really is the director of *Hairspray*. “Are you really John Waters?” was the common icebreaker – although a couple of times people wondered if he was the actor Steve Buscemi.

And this is sort of what has just happened to us now. A black Honda Civic slows to a crawl, the passenger window unwinds and a man in his mid-30s leans over and yells: “Are you really hitchhiking?” Ten seconds later Waters and I are in the car. I’m scrunched in the back with a child seat and the filmmaker is directing the driver, Grant, where to go.

Hitchhiking is nothing new to Waters. He regularly hitchhiked home from school when he was a teenager in Baltimore. And then in Provincetown, on Cape Code, where he still maintains a home, he regularly thumbed it to a beach 10 miles away because he couldn’t get a parking permit there. He’d often go on “hitchhiking dates” where he’d take a friend with him. On one such occasion, a driver asked: “Are you John Waters?” John nodded and then, pointing to the backseat, said: “And that’s Patty Hearst.”

Waters and I were not heading to a beach. Instead, we were going to Prospect Hill cemetery, where his longtime friend and early star of his films, Divine, is buried. Divine, aka Harris Glenn Milstead, a larger-than-life drag queen, died from a heart attack at the age of 42 in 1988, just a week after the premiere of Waters’s film *Hairspray*. Prospect Hill is also where Waters himself has a plot, as does his friend (and actor in many of his films) Mink Stole. “We call it Disgraceland,” he tells Grant and me in the car. Hence the handwritten cardboard sign. (He had a second sign with “London” scrawled across it.)

Waters chats to Grant, inquiring about his life. In just a few minutes we learn that he moved here from Las Vegas. We learn of his love life. He tells us about his various career changes. He now runs a food-truck business. “See,” Waters interjects, looking back at me. “These are the people that pick up hitchhikers. It’s a special breed of person. More adventurous and curious. You’ve reinvented yourself numerous times and there’s something to that.”

“Well,” Grant says, “to be honest, I wouldn’t have picked you up if you weren’t John Waters.”

“When I did my cross-country hitchhiking,” Waters responds, “most people didn’t know who I was and they picked me up.” That’s partially true. Waters’s adventure went viral while he was still on the trip thanks to the live tweeting of a Brooklyn-based indie rock band called Here We Go Magic. “Just picked up John Waters hitchhiking in the middle of Ohio. No joke. Waters in the car,” went their first tweet, starting a media frenzy about the director’s unlikely journey.

“Aargh!” Waters suddenly exclaims. He points to a stone neo-Gothic church. “There’s where it all began,” he says. “When I was eight, I refused at that church to pledge that I would not watch certain films that were condemned

by the church. That’s when my mom first got an inkling there may be something wrong with me.” He laughs. “That was the church that caused the rage that inspired *Pink Flamingos*.”

And, in turn, *Pink Flamingos* caused further rage. Released in 1972, the boundary-breaking movie was called “one of the most vile, stupid, and repulsive films ever made,” by *Variety* magazine, a charge, I suspect, Waters doesn’t mind at all. *Pink Flamingos* launched Waters as the reigning monarch of midnight movies in the US, and the emperor of underground cinema. And while his films slowly became better in terms of production value – such as *Serial Mom*, *Pecker* and *Cecil B Demented* – he never stopped playing with moral ambiguity, or questioning the “family values” conservative politicians liked to boast about. Waters’s work insists that there’s an America out there few people dare speak of. He was, and still is, this America.

This is why his excursion is so appealing and refreshing. It would be like finding celebrity psychologist and TV presenter Dr Phil or a newsreader from Fox News hanging out in Brooklyn watching an indie band. You’d do a double take and wonder if your drink was laced with something. During Waters’s hitchhiking adventure he came into contact with an America he has largely eschewed for most of his lifetime. If you live in a big city in a cosmopolitan environment of the east or west coasts,

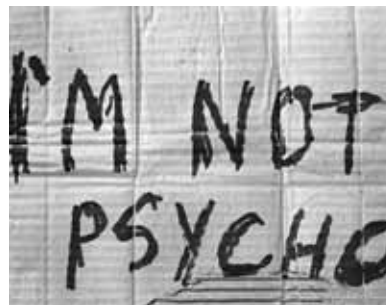
it’s easy to avoid corporate-chain-store-laden America. You can almost forget it exists.

In Waters’s case, he drank Coca-Cola for the first time in two decades. He ate at McDonald’s and Applebee’s. He slept at low-brow chain motels. “Days Inn,” he confesses, “was the best hotel chain I stayed at. Holiday Inns were terrible.” But the best parts were with the people he met along the way. “I always believed in the goodness of people,” says Waters. “I hate it when people say ‘middle America’. It’s

synonymous with ‘close-minded’. I didn’t find that at all on my trip.”

These days Waters is far more than a filmmaker: he’s an artist, a television presenter, an author (*Carsick* is his ninth book including screenplays and photograph collections), as well as a performer (he’ll be bringing a one-man show of his hitchhiking trip to the UK next month). He says he has no plans for another film, not because of lack of desire, but because the indie scene requires so much more funding these days. “Besides that,” >

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he added, "I'm booked for the next year." Waters is a famous control freak, scheduling even the most mundane aspects of his life in appointments. He even schedules hangovers and when he'll allow himself to eat sweets two or three months in advance. This is one of the reasons he did the cross-country hitchhike. "I wanted something I couldn't control," he said. "Something I couldn't plan."

At first Waters, with trademark pencil-thin moustache and a waifish frame often clad in *Comme des Garçons*, seems like one of the most unlikely people on the planet to undertake such an endeavour. But hitchhiking seems to have become more subversive than putting a drag queen as the lead in your movies. "People just don't do hitchhike any more," says Waters. "In Provincetown a few years ago, a couple picked me up and their young child kept saying: 'Who is this man?' He had no idea what hitchhiking even was!"

"I think it's dangerous to stay home," he adds, "never going out and seeing the world and meeting new and interesting people. Now that's dangerous."

We pull up to the cemetery. "Want to come with us?" Waters asks Grant. He shrugs and gets out of the car.

Waters knows exactly where Divine's grave is. On his tombstone is faded graffiti, the most prominent being a Satanic pentagram. "Someone wrote 'Satan' on his tombstone once," says Waters, "but Pat Moran [Waters's longtime casting agent] said: 'Oh, they just meant to write satin.'"

It's not the first time Waters has told this story to an interviewer, but he laughs every time. "Let's go and find my plot," he says, with more excitement than anyone should have for their future grave.

We wander about 50ft away to a shady, slightly inclined spot of the cemetery. Waters has trouble finding his own piece of land. Little biscuit-sized stones with initials on them are embedded in the ground. There is one with "JW" engraved on it, but he's not convinced this is it. Then he thinks it is. Then he's not sure. Then he says it probably is.

We stand there for a second in silence, only to be interrupted by Grant. "Guys, um, I have to go. I have things to do." We say goodbye and continue standing there. We'll figure out another way home, even if we have to thumb it again.

"I got an email from someone recently who said he is an avid hitchhiker and now, thanks to being on national radio programmes talking about the book, he has been getting picked up by drivers a lot more. So it's nice to do something for the hitchhikers," he says.

We turn away from the burial plot and make our way to the nearest busy street. ■



'The van takes off and everybody starts smoking joints' Stories from John Waters's hitch across America

I stand there. It's quiet for once. Actually cold. I put on my wool scarf for the first time. The sun's coming up causes a big glare and, when the first one or two vehicles exit the lot, I see the drivers have to squint and lower their visors to see at all. Not even sure they can actually see me hitchhiking, so I move back into the shade closer inside the rest area. I realise this is the kind of rest area where late at night it would be scary. No security. No services. Except maybe blow jobs inside.

Here in the day it feels safe, though. Couples stop to walk their dogs. Even the few truck drivers pulling out throw up their hands to signal they would pick me up if they could. I stand there feeling both foolish and brave. Silence except for the birds. I'm alive, I think, and so many of my friends are not. I may be nuts to be doing this, but I'm kind of proud of myself. I am having an adventure. I like my life.

Even if I have to stand here for the rest of it.

But I don't. The next ride is yet another nice guy. Nondescript vehicle. He's 66 years old, just like me, but hetero, I'm sure. A Republican, he tells me, who is happy Obama came out for gay marriage because "before, when he said he was 'evolving on the issue', that was bullshit." He's also a Vietnam vet with a Kentucky-type accent, and I never once feel uncomfortable with him.

Here is yet another straight guy who can't stop praising his wife, bragging proudly how she loves to read and how smart she is. I tell him what I do for a living and he shows no real surprise, just says how happy his daughter would be to hear he picked me up, because she loved *Hairspray*. He starts telling me about his career – providing feed for farm animals and how the business has come a long way on healthy nutrition for cattle and pigs. I learn that baby pigs love M&M's as a treat, and if you feed one >

in a litter that snack, the baby pig will follow you around every time you appear. Chickens, however, are a whole different story. “They’re the worst – all their feed’s laced with growth hormones. That’s why eight-year-old girls get their period now,” he explains, “from eating these chickens that are more science projects than animals.” Now there is a sobering thought. I eat chicken. I hope I don’t get man tits!

He takes me deep into Indiana and I feel so safe and happy. After about two hours I realise he’s going to be turning off Route 70W, so I ask him if he knows a good rest area similar to the one he picked me up at this morning. We start scouting and immediately see a sign for one coming up soon. I know he is actually driving farther west than this, but who knows what the entrance ramp will be like when he has to merge south on to his new route. I ask him if he’ll pull off now to inspect hitchhiking spots.

This rest stop looks good. A pretty park. Enough cars stop. Even a few truckers mixed in, presumably taking naps. Bingo! I’ll take it. I give him my thanks for the lift card and he chuckles and bids me farewell. I’m on a roll. Next!

I stand there for a while. Drivers leaving in cars politely nod or make hand signals that they aren’t going far. I try to remain positive. I see a Hispanic woman with a bunch of kids in the park, taking a break from driving. She keeps looking at me, and I think, wonderful, she’s going to give me a ride! But when she walks over to me at the beginning of the exit ramp, I see she is holding out something in her hand for me. “Please take this,” she says with an accent, and I am stunned to see what I think is a \$10 bill. “No, really, thank you so much,” I plead. “I don’t need it. I’m writing a book.” Yeah, sure, I can see her thinking, here’s a homeless person off his meds.

“Please, sir, take this!” she again orders with a militant kindness that breaks my heart. I realise she is not going to return to her family until I accept. Giving up, I take the bill and realise it’s a \$20, not a 10. I am amazed how generous she is. And how privileged and lucky I am. I feel guilty. Not worthy. Suppose I were homeless and off my meds? Hearing voices. Demons. No cash or credit cards. I vow to myself as she walks back to her kids that I will pass along her \$20 bill like a good-luck talisman to the next needy traveller.

I’m still trying to compute the generous act in my mind. You cheapskate, I berate myself, why don’t you go over there and give her \$500? But I don’t even have time to consider this

because her gesture has already brought me incredible luck.

A trucker who had been parked by the side of the rest stop the whole time I was there pulls out and hollers from inside the cab, “Come on, I’ll take you!” I’ve never felt gayer as I climb up those three steps on the passenger side of the 80,000lb Kenworth and jump inside. Eureka! A trucker has actually picked me up hitchhiking!

“The book needed this!” I explain right away to the handsome 50-year-old driver, who seems to take it all in stride despite, I could tell, having never heard of me when I introduced myself. I blurt out how grateful I am, how I make movies and how “I promise I won’t print your or the truck company’s name because I know you aren’t allowed to pick up hitchhikers.” He agrees with that, telling me that while his company doesn’t demand two drivers, they do have a chip in the truck to always tell them where he is, and his schedule is highly regulated – he’s only allowed to drive a total of 70 hours a week and never more than 12 in one day.

It’s so modern up here in the front seat of a truck! High-tech. Computers. So massive a vehicle. So high up. So much more glamorous than a limo or a town car. This is fun! He’s even a good driver, yet I’m almost afraid to look over

at him for fear he’ll think I’m cruising, but then I realise not everybody thinks like a queer man. He’s just a good guy.

Yet I can’t help thinking, isn’t this trucker what every gay “bear” is trying to emulate? Tough but gentle? Sporting a belly but somehow still in shape? Unjudgmental but courageous? Smart but also down-to-earth? A supposed “real” man? I ask him about trucker horror stories, and this gets him going – how he once was in an accident when his whole truck flipped over and there were no air bags and

he had to climb out the passenger window to safety. Or how he saw a collision recently where a school bus hit a truck but somehow the kids were all right. I could listen forever.

He has no patience for whiners. Sure, he hates the ever-present traffic near cities in Ohio and Texas the worst, but he never listens to “filthy” CB radios anymore.

“Filthy?” I ask, perking up over a word so near and dear to my livelihood. “You know,” he explains, “complaining, bitching about the rules of trucking. I can’t stand hearing that stuff.” He has only good things to say about life on the road, especially Petro truck

stops. “They’ve got everything,” he enthusiastically tells me, “lounges, you can watch TV, good food.”

“In other words, the Tiffany’s of truck stops?” I ask, prodding him to possibly be their spokesperson in a TV commercial. “You bet,” he agrees with a grin.

And yep, here’s yet one more heterosexual man who loves his wife. I’m telling you, it’s a trend! Women I know who are always complaining they can never meet a good straight man – maybe you’re living in the wrong part of the country. Maybe you need to hitchhike. Route 70 West could be the path to a great marriage. Go ahead, stick out your thumb for romance.

OK, trucker heaven can’t last forever. He’s going to be turning south to go home soon, so once again I flip back to full unease about where I can be dropped off. I explain my “good rest area” karma and we start looking. Pretty soon one pops up and he pulls off the interstate. I give him my pre-autographed hitchhiking card and wonder if he’ll tell his family about me. Probably. But it will be no big deal. He’s got a nice life – why should he give a rat’s ass about anybody’s celebrity?

I SCOPE OUT the rest area. Very similar to the last one. Except I see some kind of staff servicing the vending machines inside. Uh-oh. Oh well, I’ve had no trouble so far, why would I now? I buy non-Evian water and then go outside and take up my usual place at the beginning of the exit ramp from the rest area. It’s still a beautiful day. I see many drivers come and go, some taking a walk on the parklike grounds, stretching their backs and just being glad to be out of their vehicle for a moment. I notice a couple who look kind of like druggies walking their huge dog. I hold up my sign to the girl, but she shrugs as if she can’t – she’s not driving and it’s beyond her control.

Then one of the staff of the rest area walks out of the building and heads toward me. “You can’t hitchhike,” she says flatly. “The cops told me it was OK, and I’ve been hitchhiking in rest areas all across this state with no problem,” I lie, almost with an attitude. I notice this lady has few teeth – maybe the staff is work-release from prison, I think, instantly dentally profiling her. Suddenly her whole face changes in surprise. “Are you John Waters?!” she shouts with sudden friendliness. “Yes,” I say, completely shocked that she recognises me. “OK, you can stay,” she says with a complete law-and-order turnaround. I know I should be mad she was shitty when she didn’t know who I am and now practically kisses my ass when she does, but when you’re hitchhiking your usual value system collapses.

I see her go over and start talking to the druggie couple, who are piling into a van. That nosy little busybody, I think, as I keep my thumb out for rides. The van pulls out of the parking space and the back door slides >

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open. I see a packed interior – almost like a hoarder’s. The two druggie types sit on a mattress on the floor with the giant dog. There’s even some kind of bird in a cage. “We’ll take you to Kansas City if you don’t mind sitting up here,” offers a white guy, about 40 years old, in the front passenger seat, who seems to be running the show. He points to a space between himself and his wife, the driver. Not a seat at all, just the centre console, but who cares. I climb in and balance between Ritchie and Aiyana, as they introduce themselves. Kansas City? That’s far! I am beyond thrilled.

But should I be worried? The van takes off and everybody starts smoking joints. Ritchie tells me that the toothless rest-stop worker had said to them, “Can you get John Waters out of here?” I could tell she had mentioned something about who I was, but I could also feel they hadn’t heard of me. I look in the back and marvel at all the personal belongings packed inside the van.

Shirley and Jasper, as they shyly announce their names, introduce Billyburr, the dog. They remind me of Karen and John, the famous “Needle Park”

junkie couple *Life* magazine profiled in 1965 that so obsessed me at the time. Jasper, also about 40, is handsome in an ex-con way, and Shirley’s a little younger, pretty, but you can tell she’s been through the wringer. I wonder if they are meth-heads.

Ritchie explains they are on their way to the fracking boom in North Dakota to build temporary housing for the work. All my liberal friends are against it, but I’m open-minded. Besides, Ritchie isn’t a fracker himself; his speciality is building temporary housing in sud-

denly overpopulated areas. Most recently he has been in northern Pennsylvania and, I gather, is fleeing some sort of illegal-alien-trafficking problem he casually mentions. Ritchie says: “I love Mexican workers” because “they show up and do a better job than the legal ones I can find in this country.” Like every man who has picked me up hitchhiking so far, he hates freeloaders.

I instantly like Ritchie. He’s a renegade. A pot-head wheeler-dealer who, I could tell, also loves to drink. A pirate. A grifter when he has to be and maybe a bit of a fugitive. Ritchie lost his house to the bank in the last recession. He’s broken but not down and still looking for his pot of gold. ■

This is an edited extract from Carsick: John Waters Hitchhikes Across America, published on 16 October by Corsair at £16.99. To order a copy for £13.59, go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846.

Carsick: This Filthy World Volume Two Live Comedy Monologue is at London’s South Bank Centre (11 November), Manchester Academy (12 November) and Glasgow O2 Academy (14 November)

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