



Divine (Harris Glenn Milstead) (1945-1988)

by David Aldstadt

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

A versatile character actor, nightclub singer, and international cult star who generally performed his stage show and movie roles in drag, Divine first became famous through his appearances in John Waters' films of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Born Harris Glenn Milstead on October 19, 1945 in Towson, Maryland, the future actor grew up in Baltimore suburbs. His parents, Bernard and Diana Francis Milstead, were generous and indulgent, perhaps because Harris was picked on at school for being plump and effeminate. At the age of 12, the family moved to Lutherville, another Baltimore suburb. The family lived just six houses from a boy Harris's age named John Waters.

Waters, who became a neighborhood friend in Baltimore, was responsible both for creating Milstead's stage name, supposedly a religious reference, and for crafting a host of outrageous roles for him.

Two scenes in particular from Waters' films contributed to Divine's cult status. In *Pink Flamingos* (1972), Divine eats real dog feces so that her character can prove she is "the filthiest person alive." In *Female Trouble* (1975), the Divine character Dawn Davenport gets sexually attacked by dirty-old-man Earl, also played by Divine (with help from a body double for certain shots).

Other films in which Divine appears include *Polyester* (1981) and *Hairspray* (1988), directed by Waters; *Lust in the Dust* (1984), directed by Paul Bartel; and *Trouble in Mind* (1985), directed by Alan Rudolph.

After beginning in films, Divine gained celebrity in the mid 1970s by performing campy stage plays and disco acts in San Francisco. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Divine made films and performed in clubs around the world. He became famous in Australia, England, the Netherlands, and Israel, as well as in the United States.

Although Divine often had difficulty releasing records in the United States, his hits such as "Walk Like a Man" and "I'm So Beautiful," both released in 1985, became popular both at home and abroad. During the 1980s, Divine was also a frequent guest on talk shows and cable television programs, and often appeared at celebrity events. But a life constantly on the road began to take its toll on the performer.

Professionally, Divine yearned both for greater Hollywood stardom and for recognition of his talent, both in and out of drag, as a character actor. In his personal life, Divine faced worry over his romantic involvements, increasing weight, and financial difficulties.

In 1988, when Waters cast him in *Hairspray*, as a leading lady in addition to a cameo as a male character, Divine's personal and professional situations began to improve. With the film's success came publicity and offers for more interesting roles, as well as the possibility of the stardom Divine desired. However, in a sad twist of fate, Milstead, because of an enlarged heart, died in his sleep on March 7, 1988, soon after the film's opening.

Divine's appeal to audiences springs not only from his innate talent and likeability, but also from his willingness to do absolutely anything, no matter how bizarre or subversive, in his quest for fame.

As a film actor, Divine constructed serious characterizations even in roles that called for him to perform outlandish actions. On stage and in personal appearances, he exhibited the same measure of control and professionalism. He created a stage persona marked by raunchy humor and sarcastic exchanges with audience members; but he could also moderate this persona by projecting a more subdued appearance and calm, avuncular demeanor.

Today, with recent video releases and television airings of his films, Divine's wild looks, expressive gestures, strong delivery, and undeniable talent continue to attract new fans.

Bibliography

Bernard, Jay. *Not Simply Divine*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.

Waters, John. *Shock Value*. New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1981.

About the Author

David Aldstadt is a doctoral candidate in French cinema, modern French literature, and French culture at Ohio State University. His dissertation examines cinematic collaboration, authorship, and star personae in films by Marcel Carné with Arletty and by Jean Cocteau with Jean Marais.