



Wood, Ed (1924?-1978)

by Gary Morris

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Ed Wood in a promotional photograph for his breakthrough film, *Glen or Glenda* (1953).

During his lifetime, 1950s transvestite director Edward D. Wood, Jr., also known as Ed Wood, worked diligently--if sometimes despairingly--at the margins of Hollywood, making bizarre low-budget films that went almost entirely unnoticed.

He died in 1978 a penniless alcoholic, but posthumously became the center of one of cinema's most enduring cults. Opposing camps celebrated and reviled him using the same epithet: "the world's worst director."

Born in Poughkeepsie, New York, on October 10, 1924 (some sources give 1922), Wood served in the United States Marine Corps from 1942 to 1946. According to legend, he stormed the beaches of Tarawa wearing women's underwear beneath his uniform.

After the service, he moved to Hollywood, where he made his first film, the no-budget western, *Crossroads of Laredo* (1948). Five years later, collaborating with producer George Weiss, he directed his breakthrough film, *Glen or Glenda*, also known as *I Changed My Sex*, which would start his fitful career and his reputation as a hack of prodigious proportions.

This "torn-from-the-pages-of-life" story, based on the then-scandalous sex change of Christine Jorgensen became a fractured but compelling exercise in autobiography, as Wood himself played the lead roles of Glen and his cross-dressing alter ego Glenda.

A cult favorite with little critical following, Wood has nonetheless been defended by some critics, including Danny Peary, as among the most interesting directors of the post-World War II film scene.

With its narrative ruptures, genre melding, split-screen effects, sudden insertions of stock footage and pornographic tableaux, and consistently surprising imagery, *Glen or Glenda* bolsters the case for Wood as an early postmodernist constantly at war with his own narrative.

In addition to being a transvestite, Wood was also an alcoholic, a writer of pornographic novels, and a habitu  of Hollywood's seedier bars and demimondes. *Glen or Glenda*, masquerading as a plea for tolerance, is in fact a tour of the director's fevered psychic landscape, complete with cut-rate cheesecake and bondage imagery and a view of deviance at once empathetic and lurid.

Notwithstanding his cross-dressing, Wood was in some ways the quintessential "American"--ex-soldier, buoyant, creative, charismatic, and resourceful--but he attracted an entourage that included some of Hollywood's most unusual personalities.

Among Wood's collaborators were such artists and misfits as horror hostess Vampira, psychic Criswell, the hyperdramatic Dudley Manlove, has-been Bela Lugosi, Swedish wrestler Tor Johnson, and drag queen Bunny Breckenridge.

Wood's willingness to accept, embrace, and display these eccentrics alongside himself made them both his friends and, for works such as *Bride of the Monster* (1956) and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1958), a seedier version of the kind of stock company that major directors such as John Ford and Orson Welles cultivated.

Plan 9 is formally less extreme than *Glen or Glenda*, but is perhaps the classic Wood film, the apotheosis of 1950s exploitation camp. Its amusing crudities include startling continuity gaps, hubcaps doubling for spaceships, tombstones made of paper, and actors clearly reading their lines from cue cards in front of them.

In a legendary conceit, Wood replaced Bela Lugosi, who died mid-production, with a blond chiropractor and drinking buddy, who holds his cape over his face to prevent the audience from verifying the obvious.

Wood, and *Plan 9* specifically, was memorialized in Tim Burton's feature *Ed Wood* (1994). Burton takes the Wood cult's view that *Plan 9*, like all of the director's oeuvre, is unmistakably naïve art, purveyed to an unsuspecting culture by an endearing misfit whose sheer tenacity would inspire many future independent filmmakers.

Wood's unapologetic transvestism--it fueled novels with titles such as *Death of a Transvestite* (1967) and caused considerable grief in his personal life--was radical for its time; and his films wittily portend, consciously or not, the trash-camp of later masters such as John Waters and the Kuchar brothers.

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Gary Morris is the editor and publisher of *Bright Lights Film Journal*, now online as brightlightsfilm.com. Author of *Roger Corman*, he writes on film regularly for the *Bay Area Reporter* and the *San Francisco Weekly*. He serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtq.com.