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# John Waters runs deep

A legend of Australian stage and screen, John Waters has been melting hearts for more than 40 years, most recently in his tribute to John Lennon.

**DNA:** You've revived *Looking Through A Glass Onion*, your tribute show to John Lennon. What is it about Lennon that you find engaging?

**John Waters:** I was a teenager at the time The Beatles first emerged and here was a group of guys that were a few years older than me and like big brothers. Their voices were political and were saying to young people, "you don't have to conform to all these things that are supposed to be normal, you can be a bit different". So it was a kind of call-to-arms for young people to change the world. It was more

than the music, it was about social change.

**Have you had feedback on the show from any of Lennon's family or friends?**

Yeah, one of John's closest friends, Victor Spinetti, who he really admired and happens to be a gay English actor and was in three Beatles movies. He came to see the show in the West End and said some lovely things about how I caught the essence of John Lennon without being a dead ringer or sounding like him. It was very kind.

**Your first big role was in the '70s ABC colonial drama, *Rush*. What are your**

**memories of that show?**

It was a big surprise to me to have a drama like that become such a hit. It was the first time the ABC had a drama that out-rated the commercial stations and I was amazed at the reaction. I look at it now and realise it was well-written and well-made. There was something about my low-key delivery that struck a chord with people, but it was only because I didn't know much about acting and was feeling my way through. I didn't want to stick my neck out too much.

**What did you think of the *D-Generation's***

### **Olden Days overdub comedy version?**

Oh, that was very funny. I met Mick Molloy and Tony Martin at the Como Hotel one night and had a laugh about what they'd done with the old *Rush* episodes. I said, "I should come onto the D-Gen with you guys," and so they started their show with me behind the scenes actually saying the words while they were miming to my voice. It was a good gag.

### **How often do people confuse you with the filmmaker John Waters of Hairspray fame?**

It tends to happen in print. I was once contacted by an American art dealer who said he knew I was very interested in the 1920s Deco movement of American art and would I be interested in buying some? And I thought, "Who is this? And why is he contacting me?" Then when [John Waters] was playing in Melbourne last year people were asking me what it was that I was going to be doing.

### **Have you met him?**

No, I haven't but I'd like to as I think he's an amazingly creative person.

### **There is an Aussie Facebook page called Our John Waters Is Better Than The Other One.**

[Laughing] Well, that's pretty good. I like that. **You must have had many gay friends over the years – any particularly close gay mates?**

Taylor and I liked the idea of him being a gay man who was around a lot of rough and tough boys and liked it. I chose clothes that were a size too tight and wore some rather slightly kinky-looking black leather gloves. It wasn't an out-there gay performance, but if anyone ever picked up on it and said, "I loved that gay man you played in *Breaker Morant*!" I would say, "You picked it!" It's definitely a unique role for straight actors. I've missed a couple of opportunities through other people getting the roles, but I think we all play whatever role is offered to us. There is no greater example of any actor being right for a role, in that regard, than in *Brokeback Mountain* – Heath Ledger was sensational. I thought it was a beautiful film, a pure and simple love story with *Romeo And Juliet* overtones. Hopefully it was a revelation to a lot of straight men that it may involve sex but it was really about love.

### **Of the many roles you've played is there a particular favourite?**

I'd go back to Sergeant McKellar in *Rush*. It was a creation of my own. I had a lot of freedom to flesh him out. I was very fond of that character. I also love the character of Darcy Proudman in *Offspring*. He's one of those men who's a very nice guy but kind of lazy because he takes

I did get one or two propositions but I don't think it was to do with the earring.

### **Back in the '70s or '80s, did you ever pose for the Cleo centrefold?**

No, damn it, and I was disappointed.

Interestingly, there's a TV series being made about the days of *Cleo* and Asher Keddie from *Offspring* is playing Ita Buttrose. I did get my kit off for various productions. Australian TV in the '70s was pretty out-there and simulated sex scenes were just a matter of getting your kit off and going for it. In the movie *Summerfield* I do a fairly full-on simulated sex scene. Australian movies and television of that era were groundbreaking. We were typically Australian and didn't have any taboos.

### **There was a scene in Eliza Fraser where you had to warm a gentleman's bed.**

Yes, that was for the character played by Trevor Howard. He was terribly embarrassed about that scene because, again, he was another close friend of my dad's. But it never went any further than me taking my clothes off and getting into bed.

### **So, if you were gay, who would you go for?**

Gee, I've always wanted to emulate the fairly masculine actors like Humphrey Bogart, Robert De Niro or Al Pacino – the Latin types. If I was gay I think I'd have a Latin lover.

### **Which gay diva do you admire?**

I have a soft spot for Kylie. We did a fundraising concert for the Fitzroy Football Club and Kylie and I did *I Got You Babe* – the UB40 version. It was about a year after that when her career took off. She's a sweetheart and a friend. I really dig Kylie.

### **Have there been any absolute career pinnacle moments for you?**

In the early 1980s, when I'd done a lot of work in film and television, I took to the stage with Jacki Weaver in *They're Playing Our Song*. It's a Marvin Hamlisch musical and a Neil Simon play rolled into one and it was a huge hit. It was really on the strength of Jac and myself being the leading man and lady of the day and I suppose you can't get much higher than that. That show was sold out for two years on the strength of our names. It was a terrific feeling.

### **Jocks, boxers or freeballing?**

I wear the snug-fitted boxer. They're the most comfortable and probably the best looking, too, if you ever want to parade around in your underwear.

### **Back in the days of Rush, did you ever wear long johns?**

I did! During winter shoots, but in the summer it was too hot. But if there was a scene of me getting out of uniform and taking off those jodhpurs or cavalry-type trousers, I'd have to wear the long johns because people did back then. They're great in the winter. Not so good in the summer!

For more on Looking Through A Glass Onion go to [johnwaters.com.au](http://johnwaters.com.au)

## **“Australian TV in the 1970s was pretty out there and simulated sex scenes were just a matter of getting your kit off and going for it.”**

Yes, I have lots. Back in the days when it was harder to be out, it was easier to be out in my business. It's easier to be who you are in the entertainment industry and that has always been a good thing about it. If you live and grow up in the entertainment industry you have a much better overview of life than people who lead a more straight existence.

### **As a straight man, do you understand the whole camp culture thing?**

I don't think a straight man can really fully understand it, but all I know is that the parties are great, the humour is great and the camaraderie is great. Something I learned early about my gay friends is that they're men. We like the same things and can talk about things like football. We are all just guys, so it's not a big deal.

### **What's the campest thing you own?**

Probably my electric blue jacket from Antons. It's not really a dinner jacket – more shiny and glittery. It's really cool and I use it on stage and wear it to functions as well.

### **You've played so many roles, from Dracula to Judas to Lennon. Have you ever played gay?**

Funnily enough, by choice, when the choice was optional and it was rather subtle. The character I play in *Breaker Morant* is an Anglo-Irish intelligence officer named Captain

the easy option of putting a positive spin on anything. He's non-confrontational and relies on his charm. It's an interesting look at a certain type of man.

### **Is it true that your very first role was in the 1958 Titanic movie, A Night To Remember?**

That's right. I wouldn't exactly call it a role... My godfather was a British matinee idol called Kenneth More and was the star of that movie. My father, being an actor, had known Ken since they were both young actors in the '30s. When I was about 11 years old, I went to the set of *A Night To Remember* at Pinewood Studios. Ken said, "Put the boy in some clothes, put some water over him and make him one of the children on the boats." So I was there as an extra. I've looked at the footage and I can't see myself but I'm there somewhere.

### **Over the years you've been labelled a sex symbol. Has that been a good or bad thing?**

There's nothing bad about it. Some people say I'm a serious actor. I am, but if people fancy me, that's great. It's a bonus!

### **Including gay men.**

Yes. I don't know if it still exists but when I was 19 I had my right ear pierced and someone told me recently that it was a code for being gay. Is that true?

**Well, I've never quite understood that myself.**