



FILM AT REDCAT PRESENTS

Mon Nov 9 | 8:30 pm

Jack H. Skirball Series

\$9 [students \$7, CalArts \$5]

The Making and Unmaking of Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* A Screening and Talk with J. Hoberman

Los Angeles revival

1963, 16mm, b/w, 45 min.

Recognized as an unprecedented visionary masterpiece, *Flaming Creatures* was also reviled, rioted over, banned as porn, and pondered by the Supreme Court. "Jack Smith described *Flaming Creatures* as 'a comedy set in a haunted movie studio.' It is that, as well as the single most important and influential underground movie ever released in America," according to J. Hoberman, film critic of *The Village Voice* for more than 30 years and an authority on the Smith performance and film oeuvre. "Smith's movie was a source of inspiration for artists as disparate as Andy Warhol, Federico Fellini and John Waters but he never completed another." Find out why. Hoberman's books include *The Dream Life: Movies, Media and the Mythology of the Sixties* and *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Cinema Between Two Worlds*.

Hoberman has authored a 2001 monograph on *Flaming Creatures* titled, *On Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures (and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc)*, as well as numerous articles on Smith, a key figure in the New York underground cinema of the 1960s and a performance art pioneer. Hoberman's talk will precede a screening of *Flaming Creatures*, and detail the film's creative making and legal unmaking on charges of obscenity.

Flaming Creatures' delirium of transgendered eroticism and trashy artifice prompted its first champion Jonas Mekas, then writing in *The Village Voice* to declare (presciently, as it turned out): "[I]t is so beautiful I feel ashamed to sit through the current Hollywood and European movies.... The film will not be shown theatrically because our social-moral-etc. guides are sick. This movie will be called pornographic, degenerate, homosexual, trite, disgusting, etc. It is all that and it is so much more than that."

Writing in the same paper in 1972, Hoberman describes the film's powerful affect and the extreme reactions it elicited:



Prints were confiscated by the state, Jonas Mekas and others arrested at a screening [at the New Bowery Theater in March 1964]. It was the first shocking manifestation of an aesthetic vision subsequently marketed as Camp, and later made palatable as Nostalgia. *Flaming Creatures*' forty-five washed out, dated minutes depict a place where a cast of tacky transvestites and other terminal types (some costumed as recognizable genre faves – a Spanish dancer, a vampire, an exotic temptress), accompanied by recordings of popular music, shrieks, and snatches of Hollywood soundtracks ("Ali Baba is coming! Ali Baba is coming!"), dance, grope, stare, posture, and wave their penises with childlike joy. The marriage of Heaven and Hell presented with playful depravity. Gregory Markopoulos was only slightly exaggerating when he commented that *Flaming Creatures*' early audiences were astounded when their secret Hollywood fantasies burst upon the screen.

Those fantasies – Hoberman calls them "queerer than queer" in a 2001 interview with Steve Erickson for *Senses of Cinema* – were apparently inspired by the 1940s costume adventure pictures made at Universal by Smith's screen idol Maria Montez, and the androgynous glamour of director Josef von Sternberg's movies. In fact, Smith shot his bacchanalia with a cast of flaming creatures who were his friends, on a rooftop set jerry-rigged above an old movie theater, using a variety of black-and-white reversal stock that he had shoplifted.

"Perhaps traumatized by *Flaming Creatures*' legal hassles, Smith was unable to complete [his next film] *Normal Love*," Hoberman suggests in his book, *Midnight Movies* (1983; co-authored with fellow critic Jonathan Rosenbaum). Mekas and filmmaker Ken Jacobs, who was the projectionist at the fateful screening where the arrests took place, "were both convicted and received suspended prison terms for exhibiting *Flaming Creatures*." (Hoberman)

Smith withdrew *Flaming Creatures* from circulation in the late-'60s. He would continuously reedit other films he made, often incorporating them into his live performance art, but would not finish another stand-alone film for conventional screening ever again. In recent years, the radical disregard of gender and sexual norms that damned *Flaming Creatures* when it debuted has gained the film recognition as a transcendent expression of queer cinema.

In person: J. Hoberman



Film Credits: *Flaming Creatures*

Director/Cinematographer/Editor: Jack Smith

Assistant Director: Marc Schleifer

Sound Design/Recording: Tony Conrad

Special Assistant: Dick Preston

Cast: Francis Francine, Sheila Bick, Joel Markman, Dolores Flores (Mario Montez), Arnold (Arnold Rockwood), Judith Malina, Marian Zazeela

Biography and Selected Filmography of Jack Smith

A luminary of New York's underground film culture of the 1960s, filmmaker Jack Smith (1932-1989) was also an actor, a pioneering performance artist, a photographer and writer whose transformative work helped to define the aesthetics of "camp" in American art and cinema. His influence has been far-reaching, having crossed into many disciplines including in the work of artists such as Andy Warhol, John Waters, Cindy Sherman and Richard Foreman.

Born in Ohio, Smith was raised in Texas and arrived in New York in the early 1950s. By the late '50s, Smith was appearing in avant-garde filmmaker Ken Jacobs' first films, most notably *Little Cobra Dance* (1957), *Blonde Cobra* (1959-1963) and *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1958-1963).

Smith made the shorts *The Buzzards of Baghdad* (1951-1956), *Scotch Tape* (1959/1962) and *Overstimulated* (1960) before embarking on the film that would become his signature work and a cinematic cause célèbre, *Flaming Creatures* (1963). Later films include *Normal Love* (c. 1964) and *No President* (c. 1968). All were made cheaply with "appropriated materials," whether discarded film stock, borrowed tunes, thrift shop costumes or society's human rejects; in Hoberman's words, "the refuse and relics of his civilization."

In the late '60s, Smith began to mix film with his experimental theater work and slideshows, reportedly devising a lightning-fast technique to edit on the spot while the film was being projected. From then till his AIDS-related death about two decades later, Smith made films that were only presented as part of his performance art.

Curated by Steve Anker

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