

CAN A BOY BE TOO ATTRACTIVE?

Michael Ferguson

Joe Dallesandro has never understood all the excitement. On a makeshift stage at a club in Chicago in 1998, where *Flesh* had just been screened, he took questions from the attendees, one of whom wondered why the actor thinks the films continue to interest audiences.

“I never understood why someone would sit through them once, let alone come back for more.” The crowd laughed, perhaps in part because they appreciated his honesty, or maybe it was refreshing to see an actor uneasy with his work, even mystified by it, rather than the egocentric or self-effacing replies typical at festivals, conventions, and tributes. I couldn’t disagree with him more, and he knows it. I discover nuances in the Warhol and Morrissey films each time I see them.

Joe doesn’t fully appreciate his enormous potency as an image, either. That probably has a lot to do with personal overkill and a contempt that derives from familiarity, but it also stems from an understandable lack of objectivity. To Joe, the films “were what they were.” And now they’re over and done with.

His cult status as an iconic figure of the so-called underground film, even as the first nude male film star, is deserved and reason enough to pay homage, but how comfortable can it be for this man to know that his unclad form is the key to his adulation, to say nothing of a now middle-aged man forced to confront his naked youth time and time again?

His avant-garde display as male sex symbol, offered up for objectification in a fashion historically reserved for women in the cinema, has left him disconnected from a sense of real accomplishment.

This isn’t to say that his beauty doesn’t merit attention or is without reason for celebration. We weren’t accustomed to looking at our handsome leading men casually naked on screen and the effect was powerful; seen variously as liberation and exploitation by women, pander and provocation by straight men, acknowledgment and wish-fulfillment by gay men. In the United States, where prudishness and guilt intensifies the erotic power of the nude, no matter how perfunctory its exhibition, Joe Dallesandro was a revelation.

He has often said that when he was asked to strip down to his underwear and wrestle Ondine in *The Loves of Ondine*, his first Warhol and Morrissey film, he agreed to do so without thinking much of it. He had by 18, and surely long before, learned that he held certain attractions to both men and women and that he might be asked to put them to use. Morrissey saw a good-looking kid who had wandered in off the streets to watch a film in progress, and simply wanted to see how he would work in front of the camera, but young Joe had no inkling that this was anything other than amateur moviemaking let alone the beginning of an international film career. He scoffed when asked to sign a release.

Perhaps the situation didn’t seem far removed from the men who had asked him to model nude while he was a teenage runaway, not long after living in foster homes, getting into fights at school, engaging in petty crimes, then stealing cars, or serving time at a juvenile detention camp where he gave himself his famous tattoo. The nude photos he did for various photographers (the Athletic Model Guild’s Bob Mizer, among them) illustrate a streetwise awareness of his powers of attraction, a kid taking advantage of a situation while in turn being taken advantage of. On their own, these photos fail to stand out from those of thousands of other young men who submitted to this treatment to make a little money and cover their next meal or pay the rent. Joe would be lost among a sea of such images if it hadn’t been that he eventually made a name for himself. These early physique

studies are highly collectible to his fans, but remain historical artifacts without suggestion of potential. They're a photographic record of his youthful body, something which even he has come to appreciate, if pressed to do so, and a unique tie in his serendipitous connection to queer culture, yet his participation was purely practical.

Pretty boys can certainly inspire, but they can also be replaced. You have to possess more than good looks to attain the longevity of a Dallesandro. What we discovered in the films he made for Andy Warhol, and most importantly, for Paul Morrissey, was a natural actor with extraordinary and unanticipated resources, a charismatic screen presence, a beguiling manner, and a countenance that transmitted his every thought. His flesh in advertisements for *Flesh* (1968)—which carried the tag line “Can A Boy Be Too Attractive?”—might have been the lure, but it was the boy himself who captivated us, a sometimes sweet, even shy, often temperamental young man forcing himself to hustle through another day's life in the big city.

Morrissey placed an enormous burden on his neophyte star. Joe is not only in every scene of *Flesh*, but the camera is nearly transfixed by his visage, often lingering on his face while others speak. It's an astonishing pledge of confidence to risk your film on an audience's willingness to follow essentially one actor, on sustaining interest while watching his expressions and reading into other characters through his reactions.

If there was a hitch to Joe's doing the role and handling all of the attention and fame—and eventual worship—to come, it was in having the character he played in *Flesh*, and then the impotent druggie he essayed in *Trash*, so closely melded in the viewer's mind with his off-screen self. The intrinsic identification was key to the remarkable following the films developed and the equally remarkable emotional response they engendered. With the low budgets and improvisational nature of these movies, an array of curious personalities parading before the camera often calling each other by their real first names, as well as the Warhol brand and the growing mythology of his Factory, the line between what was acting and what was real had been blurred to the point of obliteration. Audiences could hardly be blamed for thinking that the Joe they saw up there on screen was the Joe they might meet on the street corner.

Asked whether he was aware of what he meant—as image, as icon—to audiences at the time, if he was at all clued in to their perception, Joe says, “I was quite aware of what I meant to an audience. Yeah, I knew that I was people's fantasy. But it didn't affect me. It didn't make me feel like I was beautiful. I just felt great because people liked me...and I needed that love. I went through a childhood in which I was missing a lot of that love.”

This is the essence of the man, a kid from the streets truly thankful for the career that came to him out of nowhere and provided a wealth of opportunities, but also conflicted by that other Joe, the projected image. Morrissey's films employed Joe as sex object to censure a manifest corruption of values in America, with its sex and drug obsessions. In many ways, though, Joe transcended that critical view while embodying it, eliciting compassion and demonstrating how audiences tend to take away from a film or an actor what it is they need.

Joe wasn't required to say anything to his audience in order to speak to them, of course, but his reputation for not saying much in his Morrissey or Warhol movies is contradicted by the films themselves. I think that this perception, one which I shared for quite some time, is skewed by how otherwise “normal” Joe's characters appear when surrounded by flamboyant, larger-than-life, and very talkative characters. By comparison, he seems subdued and silent. Where others are verbose and vociferous, Joe Dallesandro is economical and quietly efficient.

Sometimes one has to be a close listener to catch the verbal gems, such as his strange remark in

Flesh right after the blow job that “Mother used to watch and she didn’t mind.” The throwaway comment suggests an entire subplot, or at the very least a dysfunctional family history that could explain why the character is doing what he’s doing.

In *Lonesome Cowboys* (1969), when Taylor Mead hesitates after prefacing “When you’re gay, when you want to be gay...,” Joe interrupts with, “Well are you or aren’t you?” He does so with a smile in his voice, cutting to the quick, stating the obvious without a trace of prejudice, as if such things didn’t matter to him as much as he was confused that Mead didn’t seem to know. His contributions are without meditation, instinctual and happily full of subtext.

In *Heat*, Sally Todd remarks how much Joe has grown up and he answers, “Kind of.” It’s the perfect reply from a character who’ll reveal himself to be an overgrown child, a narcissist. Replay the later scene where he talks to Sally in the living room of her mansion and marvel at his ease, so unaffected in his delivery, with beautiful, subtle shifts in expression, conveying cynicism and melancholy.

In Europe, Joe embraced offers to appear in urban gang movies (chilling in the best of them, *Fango bollente*), exploitation, even literary costume drama (*Un Cuore semplice*), anything that would change his image or widen his horizons, all the while weaving in and out of “art” pictures: as a mute player in a fairy tale battle of the sexes for Louis Malle (*Black Moon*), as a gay garbage truck driver in love with Jane Birkin’s behind for Serge Gainsbourg (*Je t’aime moi non plus*), as a married man doomed by sex in Paris for Walerian Borowczyk (*La Marge*), as a mystery boyfriend who may or may not be trustworthy for Jacques Rivette (*Merry-Go-Round*), and in a cameo as a self-centered American actor for Catherine Breillat (*Tapage nocturne*).

His return to America in the early 1980s was professionally complicated because his industry didn’t really know who he was or associated him solely as the underground sex symbol and not as a legitimate actor. Further skewing his perception of the value of his work, he wasn’t aware of the degree to which critics in the United States credited his performances in the Morrissey films. Those films were not afforded the attention and respect they had in Germany.

Sir Laurence Olivier expressed admiration when Joe visited his dressing room in London in the early 1970s. “He’s in the middle of finishing a performance,” remembers Joe, “and he’s obviously not looking for anything from me. He’s not making a date. But he’s seen the work and appreciated them for what they were and was complimenting them. I had to take the comment graciously. I told myself not to let it go to my head when people like Laurence Olivier or Dustin Hoffman or Norman Mailer would say nice things about me. It was just that they appreciated my work.”

Unstudied in his technique, and always first to say he is only capable of playing a role one way, he was (and is) an actor looking to a good director to bring out the best in him. He often takes roles on the basis of the filmmaker’s belief in his potential. He’d ask the director, “Can you see me doing this?” He understands that all actors have their method, but what matters is the result.

It’s not at all surprising that his fondness for actors arises from respect of a bygone era. If his roster of heavies and gangsters in American films (for directors such as Coppola and Edwards) and on television (notably *Wiseguy*) share mannerisms and attitudes, they are culled from a love of old movies, of Cagney and E.G. Robinson. Little tough guys.

Joe often says that all he really had to do for the films that made him famous was show up. In a profound sense, he’s absolutely right. There’s a purity to that statement that’s undeniable, and charming as all hell, too, but they wouldn’t have worked had he only been a body.

Joe became the most popular male Superstar of the underground cinema because of innate qualities, much the same way that Gable was the most popular male film star of Hollywood in the 1930s. Both resonated and wrestled with cultural concepts of masculinity. Joe fulfilled a desire in audiences, satisfied a longing, and fostered an empathy. For a generation of gay men, he was a vital

sex symbol, perhaps even an affirming, liberating one. Straight or gay, male or female, though, you couldn't watch Joe in the late 1960s or 1970s and not confront your perspective on sexuality and attraction.

The off-screen projection of Joe as an available to all-comers partner is one that has plagued him for years. He is, in many ways, a moral man to whom family and relationships are held in high esteem. He gets upset when asked questions about who he's slept with and how often. This reduction of his persona to the purely sexual is deeply insulting and an affront to his personal values. He understands, sometimes with great difficulty, that people find him attractive, but no license is given to exploit that attraction or assume that he's hypersexual or willing to be had for a price. It isn't that he finds sex absurd, as Paul Morrissey seems to, or that he's obsessed and repulsed by it simultaneously, as Andy seems to have been. What it is, for Joe, is private.

Joe Dallesandro is indeed a private man; never a partygoer or seeker of the limelight. He's happy to act when the right project comes along, but he's just as inclined not to seek those opportunities out on his own. He's a homebody, caring for his cat and watching his cartoons, indulging his affection for fantasy and science fiction.

The Berlin International Film Festival's appreciation and the honor of a special Teddy Award are a formal acknowledgement of his achievements as underground film star, gay icon, and actor. The first two remain curious and ambivalent labels to him; the last, a justifiable and in some respect overdue appellation we may have to convince him he deserves.