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BOOKS

To create is divine

The mother of all drag queens writes a book

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN



Pink Flamingos put Divine on the countercultural map

Can one honestly hope to get the real lowdown from a biography written by the subject's mother?

This is the most obvious question you'll ask yourself making your way through the pages of *My Son Divine* (Alyson Publications, 2001; \$19.95 softcover), a hybrid of memoir and scrapbook devoted to the life and times of the infamous 300-pound-plus drag queen. His story is related through the reminiscences of his mother, Frances Milstead, who shares authorship with filmmakers Kevin Heffernan and Steve Yeager.

Born Oct. 18, 1945, Harris Glenn Milstead grew up to become the one and only Divine, star of stage and many of director John Waters' cinematic attacks on good taste (*Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*.) His mother's prose is hardly conducive to sociological analysis, but it's easy to pinpoint "little Glenny" as one of the many doted-upon, somewhat spoiled middle-class baby boom children of Depression-era parents who were determined to give their children the things they never had.

Glenn sang in the church choir (Southern Baptist), acted in school plays and generally hogged the spotlight. In addition to having a tendency toward chubbiness, he was also effeminate, which caused disruptions in school—especially in the later grades—following a pattern that will ring sadly true to many gay men who have faced childhood harassment.

Milstead paints a picture of herself as a protective mother but a victim of her times. In anecdotes equally disturbing and funny, she recalls the separate occasions on which both her mother and the family doctor expressed barely veiled concern about the likelihood that her son was gay. Milstead's naiveté initially comes across bemusing and old-fashioned but less so when we learn that,



Even as a kid, he was a little campy

aside from dressing as Elizabeth Taylor for a teen-age Halloween party (and doing a fabulous job of it, as the accompanying photo indicates), Glenn felt obligated to hide the less-ordinary aspects of himself from his family.

Even after they knew about his films, for instance, he forbade them to see the scandalous early ones.

The book's center is Divine's reconciliation with his family in 1981 after a self-imposed nine-year exile that arose from a financial dispute. Milstead discovered her child's celebrity when she befriended a gay co-worker who lent her an issue of *Life* featuring an article on Waters.

She chose her strange, newly discovered son over no son at all, and the family was amicably reunited until Divine's untimely death in 1988, shortly after the release of his most popular Waters film, *Hairspray*. (Milstead writes ecstatically of attending the premiere.)

The author leaves the ins and outs of her son's missing years to anecdotes from his entourage, fellow showbiz professionals and fans. This makes for an interesting, often contradictory picture but also emphasizes the main reason Milstead's own text as biography is dispiriting: Although she's an understanding, tolerant woman, the sections directly pertaining to Divine's relationship with his family are devoid of any of the messy ambivalence that obviously characterized the actor's feelings toward his origins, if not the other way around.

Milstead is clearly making an effort to do right by her son, but the way she tells his story doesn't do justice to the spirit of subversion and sexual other-

ness that Divine so proudly embodied. Instead, this book is best seen as a window into how an exceedingly "normal" person copes with—and eventually incorporates into her sensibility—such a foreign, convention-defying family member. It's a glimpse into an unworldly straight woman's experience of the concepts of cross-dressing and homosexuality.

That might not exactly delight the Divine fan eager for a warts-and-all glimpse into the queen's family life, but Heffernan and Yeager

have more than compensated by putting the book together with a rather cool, oversize-paperback, coffee-table-style design. It also contains more than 100 photos, including many from Milstead's personal albums never before seen by the public.

The images are worth all of the book's words—and then some—and are often more revealing than the text. In fact, the unlikely juxtaposition of the rose-colored rambling and the scrapbook jumble of snapshots and publicity stills from all stages of the icon's life cumulatively lends

a mawkishly poignant legitimacy, transforming *My Son Divine* into a camp artifact that Waters and even Divine himself would be tickled to have on their shelves. **J**

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Portland writer and filmmaker.



That's Divine's mom on the left, but who's that normal-looking chap on her arm?



A Divine picture is worth a thousand words