

There and Back Again

Joey Arias returns to Portland for QDoc BY RYAN J. PRADO

To become a living legend generally connotes a life spent on the edge. The label speaks of pioneering new thought, approaching or surpassing previously insurmountable achievements and making some noise, figuratively—or literally—speaking while doing so. But above all, it means you've had to survive. To be a living legend is a coveted and rare sort of treat. At only 50 years old, it's safe to say Joey Arias fits that bill.

Arias established himself as an enormous part of the new wave, East Village art scene in the late 1970s and early '80s—running in the same circles as Andy Warhol, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. With a journey that took him from fashionista department store salesman to the stages of Club 57 to *Saturday Night Live* backing David Bowie with close friend Klaus Nomi, Arias has blazed a singular path for the advancement of sonic, cabaret-style performance art. For a sample, the 2009 documentary *Arias with a Twist: The Docufantasy* follows Arias and world-renowned puppeteer Basil Twist's wildly successful show run of the same name. The documentary kicks off the 2011 QDoc Film Festival Thursday, June 2 at the Clinton Street Theater.

Arias will be on hand to introduce the film and to answer questions before heading off to perform at Mother's Bistro for a couple of numbers with Pink Martini's Thomas Lauderdale—just another day for a pop-art pioneer. Luckily, we were able to snag a quick phone interview with the legend himself in anticipation of his arrival.

Just Out: You're a couple years removed from when "Arias with a Twist" was first performed. Does promoting the "docufantasy" bring back fond memories?

Joey Arias: You know, whenever I see the film, it puts me [back] there. We're doing the show again in New York in the fall for a month. It's kind of a present back to New York. It's called "Arias with a Twist Deluxe."

I don't like looking back usually—that's not my thing. It's all history, and it's great if you want to be able to look at it that way. I like going to the future. I know there's a body of



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—JOEY ARIAS

work now on me. I personally don't go back and look at it. So when I see the film, it mirrors, of course, certain things in my life ... it changes every time I see it. I have copies of it at home, and I don't choose to watch it a lot.

JO: I'd read that when you first started performing, and the first couple times you dressed in drag, you weren't a huge fan of it...

JA: I wasn't a big fan of drag—period—in the beginning. When I did get into drag, it was

a party that Andy Warhol and a bunch of artists were going to and you had to go in drag. I was like, "Oh no! This is not what I want to do!" So I went in drag and people were like, "Oh my God, you should always dress in girl's clothes!" [My outfit] was kind of based on a Russ Meyer super-vixen kind of apparel. Then I hooked up with Manfred Thierry Mugler and he was very excited. He said, "You've got to be in drag. It's too perfect for you. You can't be wearing men's clothes." So I just embraced it. It became part of my life; it's part of my attire. Instead of wearing guy's clothes, I'm wearing [adopting sultry voice] *beautiful women's clothes*. Now I have become the goddess.

JO: What would you say was the turning point in your work, where you said, "I'm going to live my creativity, live my art"?

JA: Well, when I did *Saturday Night Live* with David Bowie, and with Klaus—that was one point. There was another point when I went solo—probably 1988. I was all alone in London or Spain at a big show and the owners told me, "James Brown was here two weeks ago.

You have to be better than him." I'm like, "I'm not gonna compete with James Brown!" I had this devil kind of character look, did this whole show and the crowd went bananas. I remember right before I walked out on stage, I said to myself, "All right, if this flops, I'm gonna walk away from all of it." I'd have just gone back into fashion. But it turned out to be something spectacular, and that was it.

JO: I would imagine, in some respects, with Portland being a smaller city, the scene out here might be comparable to the way it was when you started in New York.

JA: Yeah. Portland is definitely insane. I've gone to some clubs there that were over the top—things you can't even do in New York. X-rated—just *really* nasty. I went to a bar one time there and there were about four guys standing there at the bar. They saw me and all of a sudden they all pulled their pants down. They were like, "This is for you!" I was like, "What?" They were like, "We heard you like big cocks, so we're here to show you Portland has big cocks!" Oh my God! So I wound up sampling some of the culinary of Portland! [laughing]

JO: Well that takes care of my "where do you like to go or what do you like to see when you come to Portland?" question. I'll let you go enjoy the rest of your day.

JA: Ha! I'm looking forward to coming there and seeing everybody! I hope you pull your crotch out, too.

JO: We'll see!

JA: That's the new handshake, I think!

JO: The Portland handshake...

JA: That kind of blew my mind.

Joey Arias appears Thurs., June 2 at the Clinton Street Theater (2522 SE Clinton St.) at 7 p.m. Sneakin' Out performs prior to screening. After the film, Arias will be joined by Pink Martini's Thomas Lauderdale at Mother's Bistro (212 SW Stark) at 9:30 p.m. for a special opening night party featuring complimentary hors d'oeuvres and beverages. Visit queerdocfest.org for more information.

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