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'Ali Baba is coming!'

by Jim Hoberman

Jack Smith's **"FLAMING CREATURES"** (1963) has publicly surfaced again at both the Film Forum and the Anthology Film Archives after seven and a half years in legal limbo. Despite its suppression and despite the fact that Smith has remained underground, his aesthetic progeny are everywhere apparent—most recently the Cockettes of San Francisco and Jackie Curtis's "Vain Victory," more generally in the work of Warhol, Morrissey and the Factory Superstars, the Playhouse of the Ridiculous (and its progeny), Ronald Tavel (who in a recent Voice interview compared Smith to Ezra Pound), the several artists who have been doing one-madman theatre pieces in SoHo this season, and in phenomena like the current Carmen Miranda revival (though characteristically Smith remained true to Maria Montez's more subtle and Arabian embodiment).

The initial impact of "Flaming Creatures" upon New York artists and writers was great. Smith was compared in print to Milton, Dante, Hieronymus Bosch, Wagner, and Josef von Sternberg. Prints were confiscated by the state, Jonas Mekas and others arrested at a screening. It was the first shocking manifestation of an aesthetic vision subsequently marketed as Camp, and later made palatable as Nostalgia. "Flaming Creatures" 45 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 child-like joy. The marriage of Heaven and Hell presented with playful depravity. Gregory Markopolous was only slightly exaggerating when he commented that "Flaming Creatures" early audiences were astounded when their secret Hollywood fantasies burst upon the screen.

Photographically, "Flaming Creatures" is as visually sensual and as exquisitely mannered as "Shanghai Express" or "The Devil Is a Woman." The film transcends artiness (not that Sternberg doesn't also) with the intoxicated energy and mortal clowning that characterize the fragrant, faded kodachrome rolls of a New Year's Eve costume ball in 1952. Despite painstaking care apparent in each composition and set-

up, "Flaming Creatures" is put together with willful home-movie casual crudeness—a triumph of sensibility over craft. The flaming creatures are Smith's perfect film stars—actors so bad that they can't play anything other than their inspired selves (or any role other than their own)—who rather than vanish into their part, project their personality. "A bad actor is rich, unique, idiosyncratic, revaling of himself. . . ." Warhol's conception of Superstars comes directly out of this—Mario Montez makes a stunning debut in "Flaming Creatures."

Whereas a foreign classic like "Breathless" (1959) uses American pop cultural clichés with sophisticated old-world romantic ennui (Camus-the-Shamus), "Flaming Creatures," Flieschner, Smith and Jacobs's "Blonde Cobra" (1959-62), and the 8mm films of the Bronx Mozarts, George and Mike Kuchar, are insane regurgitations of 10 to 20 years' prolonged over-exposure to radio and the movies. Jacobs called his early unfinished work "Star Spangled to Death." (What "Breathless" has in common with "Flaming Creatures" or "Blonde Cobra" or "Hold Me While I'm Naked," aside from a common Rossellini heritage, is that they are all representative of the ontological drive toward the nature of film and/or the movies by the fourth, by my reckoning, generation of film-makers and in this respect they are all romantic, as opposed to the more formal work of Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, and others.) Though it is to some extent a meditation on Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley forms, "Flaming Creatures" is too obsessive to share the ironic condescension toward the mass culture of democracy that characterizes the capitalist realism of second-rate pop artists like Roy Lichtenstein or the more clever creations of Madison Avenue.

Smith, like a four-dimensional Kurt Schwitters, takes for material things at hand—the refuse and relics of his civilization—and presents them as phenomena without overt comment, though in new contexts. (This is virtually an anthropological metaphor for the job of the artist as bricolauer, old rag and bone man with a movie-camera.) Using Tin Pan Alley, old National Geographic, thrift-shop, and socially-rejected human trash, Smith celebrates the commonplace with a vengeance. (Also its dialectic—the "exotic" (again anthropological)—though the "exotic" of his concern is obviously twice-removed from nature being always the childish and simple-minded Hollywood version.)

All last year Smith put on weekly plays at midnight in his loft, half of which was devoted to a massive assemblage that included empty bottles of pagan punch and old tin cans, a toilet, a crutch, half a mannequin, a large heart-shaped candy box, a few commercial signs (Free All Day, U. S. Gypsum) and a rubber dinosaur, strewn with Christmas tinsel and bathed by colored theatre lights from above. Despite the heap's seeming chaos it became increasingly structured during the course of the three or four hour performance (even more so on subsequent viewings), much of which was Smith making minor adjustments or vacuuming while wrapped in a shawl. At a well-attended performance of "Gas-

tacular" (there were 15 or 20 people sitting in a rickety grandstand, including a Serbo-Croatian professor moved to declare that this was two years ahead of what they were doing in Europe), a Japanese destruction artist spontaneously somersaulted into the assemblage. Smith, keeping his temper with some difficulty, spent the next hour painfully restoring his trash to its former state.

Jack Smith is exemplary for his use of music as a thing in itself and not as commentary or for background, though he often creates intersections between image or action and sound (or art and life) which are totally left-field and weirdly hilarious. (One play was briefly recessed at about 3 a. m. while the audience shared a joint. Stoned, I perceived Smith go to his coffin-enclosed phonograph and play Merle Haggard singing, "We don't smoke marijuana in Musgoee. . .")

Other films by Smith, "Normal Love" (1964) and "No President" (1969) are unavailable—if they still exist. He now of necessity works in Super-8 and also with slides. This work has grown more

detached, less desperate, and more assured since "Flaming Creatures" or his appearance in "Blonde Cobra." "Spiritual Oasis of Lucky Landlord Slide Show" and the "Travelogue of Atlantis Slide Show" (both last spring) were completely cinematic in their use of image, sound, and time. Smith combined a series of slides—elaborately posed creatures, New York City landscapes (Coney Island, Eighth Avenue, an Italian street fair)—with records from his collection of exotic Hollywood scores, hacienda and hula-hula music, sentimental popular songs—improvising occasional montages on his carousel projector. "Flaming Creatures" is the brilliant overture to a body of work which has continued to grow despite (or rather because of) its lack of recognition.