

**Always cast in a supporting role in the films of John Waters – most notably as the incredible Egg Lady in *Pink Flamingos* – Edie Massey**



**tended to be overshadowed by the attention-grabbing, larger-than-life diva Divine. Yet Edie's characters were integral to the artistic success of those films. Here, for the first time, her contribution is acknowledged**

# Edie Massey

text BRAD BRANSON

BACK IN 1982, the Whisky A Go-Go club on L.A.'s Sunset Strip was coming to its end as the place to see the best groups. Immortalised in Oliver Stone's movie *The Doors*, it had been a venue for everyone from The Supremes and Janis Joplin in the Sixties to Blondie and the Sex Pistols in the Seventies. Those were the days when you would check out a couple of bands a week, eagerly searching the weekend listings to see who was coming to town.

One Sunday I noticed a bizarre name playing

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at the Whisky – Edith Massey & The Incredible Eggs. Now I had only recently been initiated as a fan of John Waters, having seen *Female Trouble* in which – quite apart from Divine – there was this crazy old woman playing the role of Aunt Ida, strapped hideously into a leather SM outfit that laced up the side. I was hooked forever on John Waters' films and this woman, Edie Massey, was my new screen heroine.

I sprang into action and immediately tele-

phoned the ticket office. "Is it really Edith Massey from *Pink Flamingos*?" I asked, laughing at the thought.

"Yeah, she's got this punk group together and they're touring the States."

This I had to see.

When I arrived at the Whisky, there was already a line snaking its way around the corner. The crowd resembled a *Rocky Horror Picture Show* queue, with a few deadbeat John Waters fans thrown in. (Don't ask me how you

can spot a Waters fan – you just can.) I doubt if anyone who was there that night could remember if there was an opening act – the buzz in the air was so great in anticipation of what we were going to experience.

A throng of hardcore worshippers was clustered in deep discussion when, all of a sudden, the curtain went up. Here was this 60-year-old woman in a punk outfit – a 'Death' T-shirt underneath a safety-pinned leather jacket and

with a big plastic spider on her face. We were speechless, aghast, awestruck...

She sang songs like *Night In Jail* and *Queen Of Punk*, occasionally shouting things at the rowdy audience – "Go gargle with some razor-blades", "Eat some brown rice, you hippy" or "Go suck an egg" which, appropriately for her, was a popular American expression at the time.

I had come, like many that night, as a spectator, to see what the hell this lady was all about. I had also just started to take photographs. I was 19 and working in a health food shop, doing portraits of friends and performance artists in my spare time – anyone who looked or did anything fascinating. Edith Massey had both in spades.

She billed herself as 'The Queen of Punk' – a concept both brilliant and ludicrous at the same time and an act which, I later found out, she had been working since 1978. (Edith's drummer was Gina Shock, soon to leave to join an all-girl band – still a weird idea in itself – called The Go-Gos.)

I pushed my way backstage to get a closer look. It was as if Edie was some sort of sideshow freak. With teeth out of a Brothers Grimm fairytale, her appearance didn't help matters much but Edie in person was just like

**IDOLS**



Left to right: Edie with the author, an early booth photo, as the Egg Lady in *Pink Flamingos*, birthday party hostess, Edie looking too, too glamorous



Edie on screen – daffy, self-involved and reeking not unpleasantly of Baltimore trash. Somehow I ended up not only meeting her but having a chat. I think everyone else was afraid of her. Edith and I exchanged addresses, and we kept in touch after she got back to Baltimore.

Through these letters, I started to form a picture of Edie's life story. She was born Edith Yetti Ida Dornfeld in New York on 28 May

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1918. Her parents died when she was just three or four and she ended up, with her three brothers and sisters, in a Jewish Orphanage until she was 15. After being accepted into a foster family, she ran away at 16 because, even though they told her “you’ll be just like one of the family”, she ended up like Cinderella the housekeeper instead. The family had two daughters, and Edie used to iron their dresses so they could go out on dates.

In his twenty-minute biopic *A Love Letter To Edie*, Baltimore film-maker Robert Maier attempted to tell Edie's story in a nutshell. One scene shows Edie down on her knees, being

abused by her stepsisters as she's scrubbing the floor. Angered, she dumps a bucket of dirty water on the pair and runs off. And that's just what she did – straight to Hollywood.

She later married a soldier named Robert Leroy Russell Massey, whom she met in San Francisco. The marriage soon fell apart but Edie found herself a new boyfriend and began travelling across the country. They ended up in Tishimonga, Oklahoma, where they took over

a small gasoline station and turned it into a bar. For nearly five years, Edie lived her dream.

When the relationship ended, they sold the bar and Edie became a madam in a ‘sporting house’ run by the Mob in Quincy, Illinois.

“Money used to fall in my lap,” she once told me, “but I could never save any. The guys I had would quit their jobs and I’d end up taking care of them. One man drank. I was always a good sport. I used to be very, very sweet – so sweet that it was pitiful. When I left home everything was glitter to me. Every man was Prince Charming. No more. I learned my lesson.”

She eventually ended up in Baltimore, where

she met John Waters in 1968. As Mr Waters recalls, “After seeing her in the bar, charming every type from drunken sailor to nodding junkie, I knew she would make a great actress.”

One of my favourite Edith stories is about this time of her life. “I was working in Pete's Bar,” she told me, her voice like Truman Capote in a clothes-wringer. “John would come in and he was always so nice to me. Some of the men would be so cruel. One day this fat drunkard called me over – ‘Hey, fatty, come over here – I want a drink.’ I was so hurt, I says, ‘All right, what do you want, you wrinkly motherfucker?!’” The delivery was so matter-of-fact it was brilliant.

Edith would never say or do anything to shock someone intentionally, which was part of her attraction because it totally contradicted everything you expected. It was always like talking to your sweet old Aunt Edith. She could be goofy, but she was anything but stupid. “I try not to sing the blues. You can't live in the past. I've had a lot of heartaches, but they never made me hard.”

John Waters cast her as Jesus' mother in *Multiple Maniacs*, and soon fans were flocking to see her at the small thrift shop which she was running with her friend Jean. (When Edie had discovered that Jean was living in an abandoned building, she invited her to live in a small area in back of the store in exchange for



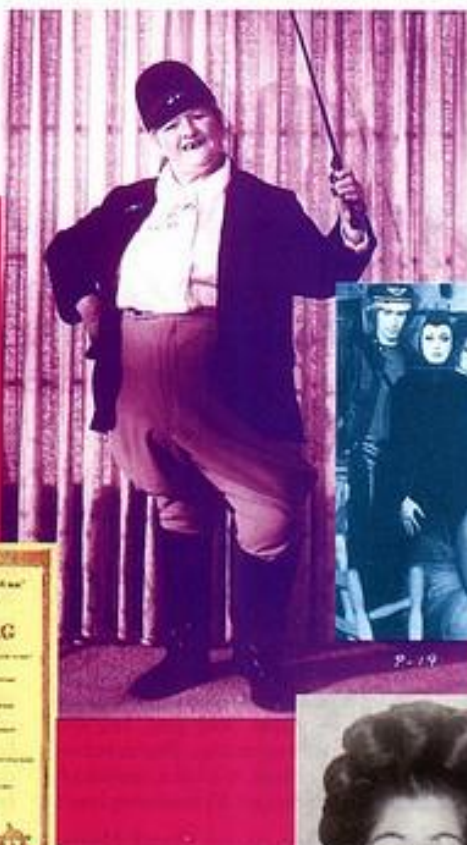
People Of The World  
R.E.L.A.!



Shady, Sadman!  
David, Friends!  
Edie, Henry!  
The Great Speed!

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Releasing: April, July, 1977

Left to right: Edie in her Shopping Bag thrift shop, invite from a lesbian party-giver, a flyer for the shop



Edie's Shopping Bag  
1717 North Broadway  
Baltimore, Maryland 21201  
Phone (410) 643-1145



Left to right: Edie as a rich bitch in Polyester, femme fatale of the booth photo, playing a vile queen in Desperate Living, and as the Alexis Carrington of the thrift shop world



helping with the shop.)

"A weird and beautiful woman of undetermined age," was how Mr Waters described Edie. "The wildest and bushiest long, grey hair and eyebrows drawn so thick it looked like industrial magic marker." Her trademark capri pants and pointy shoes completed the picture. "She was the most fashionable trendsetter in town."

Edie's next role was that of The Egg Lady in the most notorious of John Waters films, *Pink Flamingos*. She played the mother of the Marble family, who take pride in their title of 'the filthiest people alive'. Throughout the entire film, Edie resides in a playpen in a corner of the Marble mainroom. Like many of Waters' films, it was shot in the dead of winter with everyone shivering on the trailer-home set.

Edie was a real trouper, never complaining. She'd rehearse from midnight to 4am at home - "my landlady thought I was crazy, talking to the eggs" - and then sit there in the playpen during the day's filming, freezing cold with her movie-star sunglasses. She'd still be rehearsing until her scenes were ready to shoot. The arrival of the egg-delivery man was Edie's cue to gush ecstatically, "I want the brown ones, the small ones - oh, Mr Egg Man, I want all your eggs!" Cinema history was being made.

Edie always enjoyed making the movies, never allowing personal dignity to interfere with creativity. "Yeah, they were sometimes a

little gross, but they were always true to life!"

John Waters paid Edie well - or as well as he could on the shoestring budgets on which the early films were made. He would also take her on lecture tours across the country, which brought in some extra money.

"As long as I have my fans, my animals, me and the birds, I'm okay," she would say. Never tiring of her public, every fan letter was answered faithfully. When Edie had to have a cancerous growth on her nose removed, John Waters shuttled her to the hospital and paid for the operation.

A few months later, after we'd started corresponding, Edie said that she would love to come back to Los Angeles, maybe even open up a thrift shop like the one in Baltimore. Winter was approaching and she really wanted to leave for a sunnier climate. When a recording offer came through from Los Angeles, that was the deciding factor.

Edie came to LA and stayed with me for three months. I became her manager and handled the details of the record contract: a one-off deal for a cover version of the Four Seasons' classic *Big Girls Don't Cry*, backed with a home-grown ditty called *Hey Punks, Get Off the Grass!* Professional backing singers were employed, while the cover photo showed

Edie in a baby bonnet and dress, in a threatening pose. (It was also my first record cover commission.) Hard to believe maybe, but Edie's debut really sounded great and everyone was pleased.

Edie settled in Venice Beach soon after, opening a thrift shop almost identical to her Shopping Bag store in Baltimore. By this time Edie's health was deteriorating quite fast, and she was always complaining of swollen ankles due to circulation problems. She died, not long after, on 28 October 1984, mourned by the thousands of fans whom she had touched, on and off screen, through the years.

The lyrics of one of her songs pretty much sum up her fascinating life:

It wasn't very pretty  
The way you look at me  
You'd think I was a circus spectacular  
Or a mass murderer  
In a welfare society

Can't get no breakfast  
Just a Coke and pizza  
Can't get no loving 'cos  
Your finger's on the TV button

I'm running in the next Presidential race  
I don't care what Ann Landers  
Says about my face...