

Taylor Mead

1924–2013

MARC SIEGEL

"ASK ME SOME MORE QUESTIONS." Long a great fan of underground legend Taylor Mead, I finally got a chance to meet the actor, poet, filmmaker, and amiable longtime fixture of New York's Lower East Side in November 2008. I attended one of his Monday evening readings at the Bowery Poetry Club, and we hung out at the bar afterward, during the queer bingo event hosted by New York drag personalities Linda Simpson and Murray Hill. Not long before, in Berlin, I had screened Mead's predominantly single-frame 16-mm film of his travels in France, Italy, and Greece, *European Diaries* (1966), in a film series investigating transatlantic connections among underground film scenes from the mid-1960s to the mid-'70s, so I was particularly curious about his period abroad from 1964 to 1967.¹ Although Mead's work in the '60s American underground has been relatively well documented, his European period has received very little attention. On that November evening, he was happy not to be asked about Andy Warhol, with whom Mead is, for better or worse, inextricably associated; he therefore encouraged my probing. "You're asking interesting questions. Ask me more." And indeed I did. Unfortunately, over the course of those few hours at the bar and another couple of hours

we spent together soon thereafter at Mead's hangout, the French bistro Lucien, I garnered few details about his European travels and interactions abroad with artists and filmmakers. However, as if to nurture my nosiness about the lesser-known aspects of his illustrious career, Mead suggested I track down an 8-mm film he made with Robert Wade Chatterton while living in Venice, California, in 1961, *Passion in a Seaside Slum*. "I'd love to see how contemporary gay audiences would react to it," he remarked.

If I begin these reflections on Taylor Mead, who died at the age of eighty-eight on May 8, 2013, with brief mention of two underexplored periods in the artist's life—his years in the late Beat scene in Venice and his European period of self-imposed exile from New York in the mid-'60s—it is to suggest that we have yet to account for the breadth, diversity, and wide-ranging importance of more than five decades of work by the disarmingly affable man considered the first superstar of underground film and the "doyen of underground performance."²

"Meditation is for / people with happy / childhoods," Mead writes in *Son of Andy Warhol: Excerpts from the Anonymous Diary of a New York Youth*, vol. 4 (1986), one of five volumes of poetry, witticisms, apho-

risms, and notes that he published between 1961 and 2005.³ Mead likely didn't meditate, as attested to by the many accounts of an unhappy childhood marked by frequent suicide attempts in the upper-class surroundings of Grosse Pointe, Michigan. After frustrating years at boarding school, he committed himself to a life of constant vagabondage, hitchhiking across the US many times over and ending up in numerous jails for minor offenses. "I have been in great jails and terrible jails," he writes in "Autobiography (after a poem by Ferlinghetti)." He studied acting briefly in the '40s at the Pasadena Playhouse, and in the '50s with Herbert Berghof in New York. He first began reading poetry in

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1959 at the Epitome, the Bleeker Street café started by Larry Poons and others and frequented by such diverse figures as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Bob Dylan, Tiny Tim, and future Fluxus artists Al Hansen and Dick Higgins.⁴ Mead's self-described "scatological and defiant poems" gained him a degree of notoriety and infused early-'60s poetry scenes on both coasts with a sharp humor and radical sexual libertarianism.⁵ Through his poetry readings in San Francisco, Mead met the filmmaker who escorted him on his way to underground-film superstardom: Ron Rice.

Indeed, it was Mead's second appearance on-screen, as a charming contemporary imp wandering through the streets of San Francisco in Rice's Beat picaresque *The Flower Thief* (1960), that guaranteed his ubiquity

Ron Rice, *The Flower Thief*, 1960, 16 mm, black-and-white, sound, 70 minutes, Flower Thief (Taylor Mead).



Ron Rice, *The Queen of Sheba Meets Atom Man*, 1963/1982, 16 mm, black-and-white, sound, 110 minutes, Atom Man (Taylor Mead).





Wynne Chamberlain, *Brand X*, 1970. 35 mm, color, sound, 87 minutes. Taylor Mead.



Marcel Duchamp, Ultra Violet, and Taylor Mead at the opening of John Vaccaro's production of *Conquest of the Universe*, Bouwerie Lane Theatre, New York, November 1967. Photo: Sally Chamberlain/Chamberlain Family Collection.

in accounts of the American underground. (Mead's first role—filmed in 1959—was as a deaf-mute drug pusher in Raymond Phelan's exploitation flick *Too Young, Too Immoral* [1962]). Rice's movie, shot on outdated 16-mm film stock that lent the black-and-white images a wistful look, was both a document of the last remnants of San Francisco's North Beach Beat scene and a lyrical portrayal of Mead's joyful embodiment of flexibility and spontaneity. Mead collaborated with Rice on one other film, the unfinished epic *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (1963), in which the star's improvisational skills, his sense of ridiculous and devious play, and his magnetic and moving screen presence more than sustain the nearly two-hour production. His knack for spontaneous physical comedy and his astounding athleticism have understandably led critics to compare Mead's screen performances with those of the great silent-film comedians Charlie Chaplin, Harry Langdon, and Stan Laurel.

Mead often reminded interviewers and audiences that he was "B.A.—Before Andy." Having already starred in at least half a dozen films, Mead was in fact a recognizable underground-film personality before he made that celebrated cross-country car trip with Warhol, Wynn Chamberlain, and Gerard Malanga in the fall of 1963 to attend the artist's epochal opening at the Ferus Gallery. In LA, Warhol and Mead collaborated on *Tarzan and Jane Regained*... *Sort Of* (1963), in which Mead embodies the "Lord of the Jungle" as a puny pansy. Taking into account Mead's contributions to some fifteen Warhol films alone—for instance, his remarkably expressive as performance in *Taylor Mead's Ass* (1964); his fey Western nurse in *Lonesome Cowboys*

(1967–68); and his uproarious solicitation of a surfer's golden shower in *San Diego Surf* (1968/1996)—we would do well to situate his screen persona in the cinematic tradition of the sissy. Mead's sissy self-awareness in the pursuit of mischief—film critic Parker Tyler creatively described Mead's style as "definitely faggot"—is certainly one reason his performances feel so liberatory. In a 1964 review of *Tarzan and Jane*, critic James Stoller beautifully captures the essence—one might even argue, the ethics—of Mead's performance style when he writes that "the evocations of joy, wonder, and sheer playfulness Taylor Mead provides... are so convincing and remarkably moving it scarcely matters that he is also mocking nearly everything he does; it is enough that he begins by doing it."⁸

Mead's association with Warhol tends to overshadow most of the actor's other remarkable screen appearances (numbering roughly 130 in total), from his '60s films with Vernon Zimmerman, Robert Downey Sr., and Chamberlain to his '70s and '80s video work with Michel Auder and Anton Perich to his '90s vignettes alongside Bill Rice in Gary Goldberg's brilliant Beckettian short films. Jim Jarmusch, of course, benefited from the poetry of the Mead/Rice pairing in *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003).

In 1964, shortly after his Obie Award-winning stage performance in Frank O'Hara's *The General Returns from One Place to Another*, which appeared on a double bill at the small East Village Writers Stage Theatre with LeRoi Jones's *The Baptism* (in which Mead played "The Homosexual"), the underground star unexpectedly took off for Europe. He was apparently angry that neither playwright wanted to capitalize on the production's

success by moving it to a more prominent, off-Broadway theater, and exasperated over Warhol's sluggishness in finishing *Tarzan and Jane*. In Europe, Mead took on the unlikely role of cultural ambassador for American underground film (sort of), presenting films to audiences in Paris and Rome and collaborating with or inspiring younger filmmakers and artists, including French filmmaker Jean-Pierre Bouyoukou, Fluxus artist Jean-Jacques Lebel, and German avant-garde filmmakers W+B Hein. While in Europe, Mead also completed and screened the second entry in his series of "Home Movies" (1964–68), film diaries that in their single-frame technique offer a visual parallel to the aphoristic style of his written poetry.

Mention of Mead's mid-'60s European encounters returns us to my 2008 conversations with the artist. I did in fact track down Chatterton's *Passion in a Seaside Slum* (with the help of archivist Andrew Lampert at Anthology Film Archives in New York) and—thanks to a grant from the National Film Preservation Foundation to Los Angeles Filmforum—this early 8-mm contribution to queer underground film has been preserved and made available in new 16-mm prints. We can now see a youthful Mead in yet another moving and hilarious performance as he tries to seduce a rough-trade type by donning various implausible drag disguises.

In *On Amphetamine and in Europe* (1968), Mead made the following, characteristically self-mocking declaration: "I prefer to be just a simple infamously famous. That he was, and—it goes without saying—a whole lot more too. □"

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