

MOVIES

# Drag queens go mainstream in 'To Wong Foo'

TICKETS PLEASE



JOHN MONAGHAN

"To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar." The title alone should tell you that we're not in Kansas anymore. Or maybe we are. The story finds three drag queens lost in middle America on the way west from New York City. And with Wesley Snipes and Patrick Swayze as two of these "career girls," the movie almost succeeds in making cross-dressing mainstream. The road trip begins when Noxzema Jackson and Vida Boheme tie for first place in a Big Apple

drag queen contest. The prize: two round trips to Hollywood for the national finals. Instead of flying the friendly skies, they sell their tickets, buy an old junker and hook up with a third party, a Latino named Chi Chi Rodriguez (John Leguizamo). On a lonely road one night they're stopped by a backwoods sheriff (Chris Penn) who gets a rude awakening when he tries to feel up Vida's dress. Ridiculed by fellow officers for getting beat up by a girl, he swears revenge. Meanwhile, stranded with car trouble in downtown Snyderville (population about 20), the girls decide to make the best of the long weekend. Noxzema concludes that Hollywood, after all, is where you make it. Of course we've been on this

road before. Just last year in the cult hit "Frisicilla, Queen of the Desert." That trio of queens headed across the Australian outback in a pink-painted bus instead of a 1967 Cadillac convertible. And where "Frisicilla's" catty dialogue and Abba jokes made it seem as if the movie was actually made by drag queens, "Wong Foo's" obviously risky concept has more than a few Hollywood safeguards. The movie is directed by Beeban Kidron, whose previous films were the equally eccentric "Antonia and Jane" and "Used People." She has the right sense of fun when she shows the local yokel fooled by the masquerade and awed by their rare encounter with

big city life. This particular weekend happens to be the strawberry festival, where the sole event is a mid-afternoon meeting in the town square to eat pies. The girls decide to live it up, raid the attic of the local boutique for authentic '60s fashion, and change the theme to "Red and Wild." Snipes and Swayze have a genuinely good time in their offbeat roles. While Snipes is about as convincing in a dress as Flip Wilson's Geraldine, Swayze, awash in chiffon, makes us believe more than once that he is what he appears. You may forget them both, however, when newcomer John Leguizamo is on screen. Noxzema and Vida make it their mission to turn this "little Latino boy in a

dress" into a full-fledged drag queen, but it's Leguizamo who could give the two seasoned actors a few style tips. His Chi-Chi, a definite Oscar contender, is both funny and poignant to the point where we really want things to work out with the shy local boy who begins to court him. At the same time you're laughing at his outrageousness. And there are some hilarious moments in "Wong Foo." At least a couple belong to Penn's sheriff, whose list of "Places to Find Homos" sends him to dance studios, flower shops, and antique stores. The rest of the supporting cast includes some familiar faces, including Robin Williams early on

as a fast-talking fan and Blythe Danner as one of the formerly repressed townspeople. Julie Newmar ("Catwoman" to TV's "Batman") also appears, not surprising since her autographed photo stolen from a restaurant inspires the girls on their trek. A hard sell movie if there ever was one, "Wong Foo" is inoffensive fun and mainstream enough to bring out movie-goers who wouldn't be caught dead at "Wigstock" or even "Frisicilla." To leave a message for John Monaghan, dial 953-2047, mailbox number 1866, on a touch-tone phone, fax him a note at 591-7270, or write him in care of Entertainment, Observer & Eccentric News-papers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48160.

## COMING ATTRACTIONS

OPENING FRIDAY, SEPT. 15

**"COUNTRY LIFE"**  
Take that! Both funny and moving about life at the turn of the century Australian sheep farm that's thrown into chaos with the return

of a long-lost son-in-law and his new English wife. Based on Cheryl "Uncle Yarn" it stars Sam Neill, Greta Scacchi, John Hargreaves and Kerry Fox.  
**"BRAVEHEART"**  
Re-release of drama about a 13th

Century Scottish patriot who leads his country to rise against the King of England.  
**"AHGUS"**  
Awkward teenage boy who desperately wants to be normal, tries to make sense of his complicated life. Stars Charlie Talbert, Kathy Bates, Rita Moreno. Rated PG-13.

OPENING FRIDAY, SEPT. 29  
**"DEVIL IN A BLUE DRESS"**  
Mystery drama about a man who finds himself being drawn into a web of murder, blackmail, brutal cops and city politics when he takes on the job of trying to find a mysterious woman. Based on novel by Walter Mosley, stars Denzel Washington, Tom Sizemore, Jennifer Beals and Don Cheadle.  
**"THE STARS FALL ON HENRIETTA"**  
Bittersweet comic drama set in the Texas dustbowl of the 1930s about an eccentric oil wildcatter and a down on his luck farmer and how determination and the belief

in dreams transform their lives. Stars Robert Duvall, Aidan Quinn, Frances Fisher and Brian Dennehy.  
OPENING FRIDAY, OCT. 6  
**"ASSASSINS"**  
Veteran assassin joins forces with the woman he was assigned to kill when he becomes the target of a young ambitious hit man who wants to supplant him as the best in the field. Stars Sylvester Stallone and Antonio Banderas.  
**"TO DIE FOR"**  
Hip and chilling portrait of America as seen through the eyes of a woman whose warped view of reality and naive ambition to become a

TV personality land her in very cold water. Stars Nicole Kidman, Joaquin Phoenix and Matt Dillon.  
**"EMPIRE RECORDS"**  
Music can be a funny business when you spend the day with a group of young people working in record store. Stars Anthony LaPaglia, Liv Ullmann.  
**"FOUR ROOMS"**  
It's New Year's Eve in a Los Angeles hotel and the bellman's first day on the job as he deals with some curious guests in four separate rooms. Stars Tim Roth, Bruce Willis, Jennifer Beals, Madonna, Marisa Tomei, Quentin Tarantino.

**"BEST CRIME MOVIE OF THE 90'S!"**

**"THE FRESHEST, FUNNIEST AND SCARIEST THRILLER OF THE SUMMER!"**  
—Peter Travers, ROLLING STONE

**"IT'S THE SUMMER'S BEST THRILLER BAR NONE!"**  
—THE NEW YORK TIMES

**"I HAD A GREAT TIME! A REAL THRILLER!"**  
—JOE SIZEM, GOOD AFTERNOON AMERICA

**"A WHOPPER OF AN ENDING."**  
—JAMES BRADY, THE NEW YORK TIMES

**THE USUAL SUSPECTS**  
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NO PASSES OR COUPONS ACCEPTED

Who is Keyser Soze? Find out at <http://www.polygram.com/polygram/usf>

Get out your pens and paper — enter our reader write-in movie contests. Send or fax entries to: Keely Wygonik, Entertainment Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48160. To fax entries call, (313) 591-7279. Winners will be notified by phone.

## Win tickets to two sneak previews

Write and tell us about a relative who had a positive influence on your life (no names please), and share a funny story about that relative from the past to win two tickets to see "Unstrung Heroes" at the AMC Maple III Theatre in Bloomfield Hills 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 19. We will award tickets to the first 50 entries. Keep entries to 100 words or less.

Deadline to enter is Tuesday, Sept. 12. "Unstrung Heroes," opening at metro Detroit movie theaters on Friday, Sept. 22, is based on the memoirs of Franz Lidz. Soccer players, coaches, and parents — write and tell us why your team needs a pick-me-up

movie treat to win tickets to a 7 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 27 screening of "The Big Green" at the AMC Old Orchard Theatre in Farmington Hills. Two teams — first place and second place — will receive tickets for their team to the sneak preview of the film. The first prize team will also win additional prizes. Deadline to enter is Monday, Sept. 18.

**GIVE BLOOD, PLEASE.**

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AMC EASTLAND 9  
AMC LAUREL PARK  
AMC SOUTHWEST CITY  
AMC WUNDERLAND  
SHOWCASE 11:15 AM  
SHOWCASE 12:00 PM  
STAR GRATIOT AT 13 MILE  
STAR LINCOLN PARK STAR ROCHESTER HILLS STAR TAYLOR  
STAR WEST RIVER  
NO PASSES OR COUPONS ACCEPTED

FOUR SCORE AND SEVEN BEERS AGO.

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**SENIOR TRIP**  
THEY SAW IT THEY SAID THEY PASSED OUT

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STAR GRATIOT AT 13 MILE  
SHOWCASE 11:15 AM  
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