

Vapors

USA | 1965 | 32 minutes

Credits

Director	Andy Milligan
Screenplay	Hope Stansbury
Photography	Andy Milligan

Cast

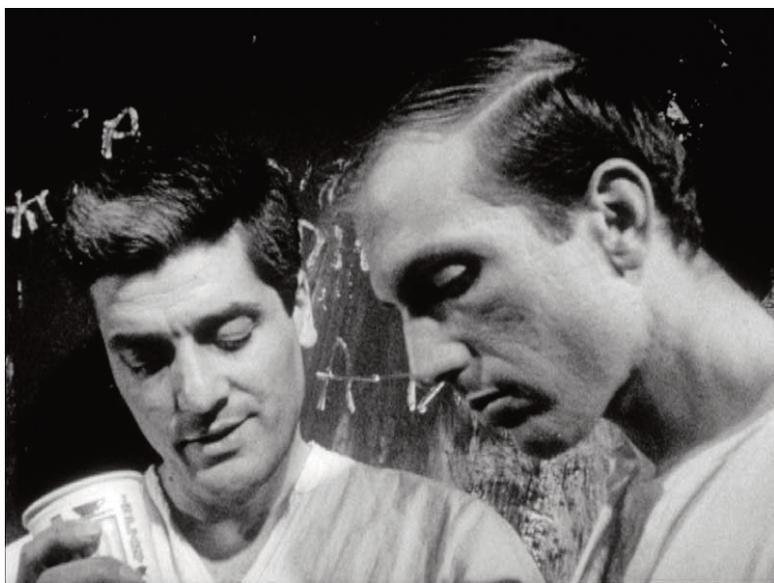
Mr. Jaffee	Robert Dahdah
Thomas	Gerald Jacuzzi
Miss Parrish	Hal Sherwood
Mavis	Hal Borske

In Brief

An under-acknowledged figure in the history of US underground cinema, Andy Milligan moved from staging plays to making ultra-low budget films. Unfortunately for Milligan his position within the off-off-Broadway circuit meant that his contributions went largely unnoticed at the time. Recently, however, Milligan's work has undergone something of a re-evaluation, including some notable releases from the BFI. The bathhouse-set *Vapors* is a case in point, now being recognised as a key pre-Stonewall example of a specifically gay cinema.

Among its many pleasures, the sixties opened the floodgates for cinematic sleaze. Subjects hitherto found only in the brains of maladjusted sixteen-year-old boys, psychotic janitors, and quietly demented businessmen could be projected onto America's grindhouse screens with only occasional fear of legal reprisal. The genres — exploitation, sexploitation, nudies, roughies — even spawned a few superstar directors, with recognition coming sometimes early (Russ Meyer) and sometimes later (Herschel Gordon Lewis, Doris Wishman). For a few sleazier souls, acceptance, not to mention fame, remains elusive, even among many aficionados of trashy movies. The late gay auteur Andy Milligan, who wore every possible hat on his no-budget films, is a prime example.

Milligan was raised in a dysfunctional household — but I repeat myself — that thrived on abuse, physical, sexual, and psychological. Born in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1929, he escaped the clutches of a military father and an unhinged alcoholic mother to try his luck first at acting, then puppeteering. He worked in early live TV and eventually moved to New York, where his skill as a dressmaker won him acclaim. Milligan's interest in theater grew in the hothouse of the Big Apple, and by 1960 he was associated with the pioneering *Caffe Cino*, a pre-La Mama experimental theatre group-cum-commune made up of evil queens, fag hags, hustlers, and hangers-on. Milligan's theatrical efforts were outré even by Cino's loose standards. His biographer Jimmy McDonough, in *The Ghastly One: The Sex-Gore Netherworld of Filmmaker Andy Milligan* (A Capella, 2001) describes in brilliant detail how his threadbare productions of works like Lord Dunsany's *The Glittering Gates* or Genet's *The Maids* became too-real exercises in sadomasochism, with Milligan demanding that actual violence be substituted for the fantasy kind called for in the script. This approach, not surprisingly, terrified the actors (who nevertheless typically kept coming back for more) and repelled some audiences (ditto), but pushed rough realism in off- and off-off-Broadway plays to levels unseen outside private dungeons and heartland meth labs at night.



During this period, Milligan also exhibited a brand of vitriolic camp in his incarnation as a coutourier. He opened a dress shop called the Ad Lib where, according to McDonough, "Minette, an ageless, sparrowlike drag queen, worked as 'stitch bitch' while Milligan threw fat women out of the store and argued with everyone else. 'Andy never wanted to sell his clothes,' said employee Jo Ann Proccocino. 'He'd get upset if they wanted to buy them. He used to jump up and down. 'Dammit! That bitch bought my dress!'"

Milligan spent a lot of time trawling for anonymous sex and exercising his serious sadistic impulses in scenarios documented in creepy detail by McDonough (the participants weren't always willing). When the Caffé Cino scene imploded from drugs and violence, he continued working in low-budget theatricals, often writing, producing, directing, and dressing these threadbare plays. By 1965, he made his first film, the featurette *Vapors*. Set in New York's St. Mark's bathhouse, *Vapors* offers a fascinating pre-Stonewall glimpse at the gay bathhouse sex scene. Shot in black-and-white with Milligan's typical jittery camerawork, the film is an



encounter between two men, one gay and one possibly straight or a closet case. A Greek chorus of catty queens wander in and out of the scenes, sometimes dishing, sometimes explaining the ropes to new arrivals. There's a creepy, real-time air to the proceedings reminiscent of Warhol's early work. A cock in close-up got Vapors censored, but the film played at legendary New York queer cinemas like The Adonis.

One of the stars of Vapors, Gerry Jacuzzi, became part of Milligan's stock company, a group of amateurish but tenacious actors who stayed with the director for many of his 29 films despite frequent abuses mental and physical. Less hardy talents often fled mid-production. Jacuzzi plays the queeny Duke of Norwich in Torture Dungeon (1970), and recalls that the actor who played Ivan the horny gay hunchback vanished after a scene in which he was "pummeled, whipped, and painted" — apparently a little too realistically. Torture Dungeon is a cut-rate tale of Shakespearean intrigue shot "on the beaches of Staten Island" doubling for medieval England. McDonough's biography amusingly recounts the problems with this production, which ranged from talentless townspeople corralled into acting ("dese, dem, and dose" being the typical "medieval" patois they could manage) to an actress trying to crush Milligan with her horse after one too many takes. Campsters will appreciate the film's polysexuality —

the Duke says "I'm not a homosexual, I'm not a heterosexual, I'm not asexual. I'm trisexual. . . I'll try anything ... for pleasure!" This includes humping the ill-fated hunchback on the Duke's wedding night. Gore fans will admire Torture Dungeon's pitchforks to the chest and close-up beheadings, while few could fail to applaud Hal Borske's portrayal of a retarded prince who mindlessly picks his nose.

Milligan's work — which includes such titles as Fleshpot on 42nd St., Bloodthirsty Butchers; Guru, the Mad Monk; and The Rats Are Coming! The Werewolves Are Here! — has been written off in most quarters as both too unpleasant and too incompetent to merit attention. But Milligan, who died of AIDS in 1991, has an undeniable style, a dark energy partly derived from his trademark nervous handheld camera and partly from an approach to narrative that's practically entropic. His nihilistic worldview is bracing in its unadorned cruelty, ragged acting, and persistent, troubling air of sheer strangeness. This is personal cinema from the brackish backwaters of pre-Disneyfied Times Square, rendering a grim, trashy world far from the safety and solace of the multiplex.

Gary Morris (<http://brightlightsfilm.com>)

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