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Adam Shankman: Hairspray

19 Jul 2007

Nearly 20 years after John Waters shocked his admirers by going PG with nostalgic satire *Hairspray*, Adam Shankman has re-invented the cult classic for a whole new generation.

Starring newcomer Nikki Blonsky as Tracy Turnblad, John Travolta as her over-sized mother Edna and Michelle Pfeiffer as Velma Von Tussle, *Hairspray* is a timeless attack on bigotry with coiffures as its weapons.

Shankman started his career in musical theatre before turning his attention to Hollywood. He's choreographed the nimble footsteps of **Channing Tatum** in *Step Up*, **Ewan McGregor** in *A Life Less Ordinary* and **Mark Wahlberg** in *Boogie Nights* and his first outing as a director starred Jennifer Lopez in straight comedy *The Wedding Planner*.

Rachael Scott met him while he was in London on the publicity bandwagon and learns why directing *Hairspray* is a dream come true for the openly gay choreographer turned director and just how much John Travolta loved his huge backside.

I really enjoyed your film. So how did remaking *Hairspray* come about?

I was a huge fan of the original, which came out in 1988. That was actually the year I met the composer Marc Shaiman and the lyricist Scott Wittman [of the Broadway show]. I was a student at Juilliard and a waiter at Tex-Mex. Marc was on Broadway playing piano and Scott was directing shows in nightclubs. It was a crazy time.

Many years later I had just started directing films and Marc had been asked to write the music for *Hairspray*. I really wanted to be involved, but I had stopped working in theatre. It was so painful. But I was around when they were writing the songs and I knew it was going to be great.

Once again years later they decided to make a movie of it, so I came in with guns a-blazing, jumped through fiery hoops for the job and they ended up hiring the director and choreographer of the original Broadway show.

I was crushed. Then I got a call saying they couldn't do it because of a scheduling conflict from one of the producers Neil Meron. He asked me if I wanted to talk about doing *Hairspray*. I thought, 'Oh God. I can't go through this again and not get it. I'll die a horrible slow death. My heart will break'. I told him I couldn't jump through the hoops again. I'd done it once and it hurt too bad. I would only consider it if it was probably mine.

I have a unique qualification for the movie because I'm one of the few choreographer-directors in Hollywood. I knew the material inside and out. I've always felt like Tracy to some extent.

"It's odd watching John Travolta and Christopher Walken sing and dance a love story, you know."

Did the show adaptation influence the new film?

Because I had a good relationship with the composer and lyricist I didn't want to just shoot the show. I think a Broadway show is a Broadway show for a reason. In its translation you have to blow it out into the world. I had definite opinions about how it should be done. So they picked me and then all hell broke loose.

How did John Waters feel about his baby being reinvented?

Well his baby had already been reinvented as a musical. When I got the job I got John Waters email and I sent him a text saying, 'Dear Mr Waters. My name is Adam Shankman. I thought I should introduce myself because I'm going to be directing the new *Hairspray* movie.' He sent me a text back straight away saying let's meet for lunch tomorrow.

John lives in Baltimore and I was there producing a movie called *Step Up*. I was terrified of course, because he is the creator of all things *Hairspray*, but he was like, 'Oh it's so fabulous to meet you. You're going to love doing this.' We got on great and I had his blessing straight away.

He said, 'Don't do what I did. Mine got stinky reviews and made no money.' He told me to do it my own way because the story is only told well when it's done through a unique perspective.

Your version is very faithful to the original though.

It's because John made such strong fabulous characters. Thematically what it's about is so relevant and you don't go away from those elements. John shot his version as a kind of arch remembrance of a pure time that he lived through, his idolatry of those kids on TV and how he was going to take them down basically. So really it was through his eyes.

I shot the movie through Tracy's eyes, which is the big difference. So my version, though arch and a little more anarchistic than the play, and harkening back to what John would do here, still had the sunshine of Tracy's vision of Baltimore. I mean, you can't sing 'Good Morning Baltimore' and be as arch as John, although I got to do other things. I got to make Prudy [Pinkleton, Penny's mother] a religious fanatic, things like the pregnant



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women drinking Martinis and smoking. There's still stuff that is witty and Watersy if you know what I mean. Tracy sings on top of the garbage truck like Barbra Streisand sings on top of the tugboat. I got to do those things in my own way.

"[John Travolta] wanted that ass. 'Bigger ass, bigger ass, bigger ass.' He loved that ass."

Tracy is a wonderfully optimistic character.

She is and that's something that we need right now. We live in such a dark pessimistic world. This musical seems to affect people, it's funny and I hope it does well. It's odd watching John Travolta and Christopher Walken sing and dance a love story, you know.

How did you manage to get John Travolta to act in his first musical for 30 years?

Once a dancer, always a dancer. If Shirley MacLaine has taught us nothing else it's that! Being a dancer is a very once bitten kind of thing. Knowing that I knew if the right project came around of course he'd want to put his dancing shoes on. I just don't think he realised they were going to be heels.



Was it difficult to get him to play a woman?

No. He had no fear about putting on a dress. He just wanted to know why and what was going to be special about it. I was like, 'You have to ask?!' I told him the role is traditionally played by a man, that's what John [Waters] set out to do and you don't go away from that tradition. Tracy's a newcomer and Edna's a guy.

When you're trying to make a big flashy musical and you're going for big names, who's the biggest male star of our generation for musicals? It's John in *Grease*, *Saturday Night Fever* and dare I say *Stayin' Alive*.

I think people were a little stunned because even in his musicals he's had a very macho image, but he's is a goofball and he loved the idea of playing Edna once he knew I wasn't going to be making fun of her. He had a lot of respect for this dame. He wanted to do something unique with her because he was the star of the biggest musical of all time.

The hippopotamus-sized bottom made her quite unique.

He wanted that ass. 'Bigger ass, bigger ass, bigger ass.' He loved that ass.

There's a lyric in there which I took everything from, 'I haven't left this house since 1951' and it's 1962. Edna's been shut in that house since she was a size 10. That's heartbreaking. So when we started there with her he really dug the whole thing and I think he based a lot of it on his mom.

"Gay? I breathe pink air! I walk pink footsteps! Everybody from John Waters to me to the two producers to the composer and lyricist are all gay."

How has he managed to cope with the news that gay activists are going to boycott the film because Scientology is homophobic?

There's one editor of the Washington Blade who's called for a boycott for the most wrong reasons. First of all John has nothing but the utmost respect and love for the gays in his life.

Scientology doesn't actively go out to convert people from what I am told, although the word Scientology never came onto my set. I've done some investigation because I wanted to understand what the guy from the Blade was talking about. This guy isn't even a gay leader, he's a guy from a gay rag in Washington and was screaming to get 15 minutes of fame.

The truth of the matter is that the biggest converters historically have been the Catholics. It's not like we're going out there boycotting Catholic directors' movies, do you know what I mean? It's a ridiculous claim and we're all ignoring it.

We, like you say you're gay aren't you.

Gay? I breathe pink air! I walk pink footsteps! Everybody from John Waters to me to the two producers to the composer and lyricist are all gay. It's not like he was saying we can do this, but I hope you guys can revert!

We had the best time and I never felt any disapproval coming from Mr. Travolta when I was asking him to kick that leg higher or put another inch on those heels. It was a silly claim.

Read our review of [Hairspray](#).

***Hairspray* opens in the UK on 20 July 2007**

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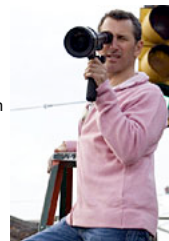
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