



THE
NATIONAL THEATRE
FOUNDATION

hairspray

STUDY GUIDE





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THE NATIONAL THEATRE FOUNDATION

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INTRODUCING

hairspray

“YOU CAN’T STOP THE BEAT”

So goes one of *Hairspray*’s signature numbers, and it’s an appropriate sentiment considering the hit musical based on John Waters’ cult classic film has been unstoppable since it debuted on Broadway in 2002. The story of Tracy Turnblad, a loveable plus-size girl who dreams of dancing on the hottest show in Baltimore, has struck a chord with audiences looking for a message of inclusivity and empowerment. In this guide, you’ll get to know that story a little better, take a trip through its many iterations across stage and screen, and examine some of the political issues the musical confronts. Start by reading the **Summary** to grasp the story and get a preview of some

of the show’s key lyrics. Then, take a look at **Anatomy of a Song: “Timeless to Me”** for a dive into one of the show’s most heartwarming numbers. Follow it up with **To the Screen, to the Stage: The Many Iterations of *Hairspray***, a tour through *Hairspray*’s long and multi-faceted history, starting with the original 1988 film and continuing into the 2016 live TV production. Finally, consider the complex politics at play in **Navigating Difference in *Hairspray***. You can learn more about this touring production by visiting its website at <https://hairspraytour.com>.



“You Can’t Stop The Beat”—The Company of *Hairspray*. Photo by Jeremy Daniel

SUMMARY

Act One of *Hairspray* opens with “**Good Morning Baltimore,**” an ode to the city our hero Tracy Turnblad calls home. The year is 1962, and Tracy, a plus-size girl with big dreams, is certain something good is coming her way. Following this upbeat prologue, Tracy and her best friend Penny tune in to *The Corny Collins Show*, their favorite teen dance program.

Host Corny Collins sings “**The Nicest Kids in Town,**” introducing the fine, upstanding—and very White—team of dancers known as the Council. The girls swoon over Link, the teen heartthrob. Meanwhile, Tracy’s mother Edna, a local laundress, looks on disapprovingly as she works on an order for Penny’s uptight mother Prudy.

Over at the studio, producer Velma confronts Corny over the “Detroit sound”—a.k.a. Black music—he has been playing and pushes Link aside to make room for her daughter Amber, Link’s girlfriend and the presumptive star of the show. Later, with the help of Ultra Clutch Hairspray chairman Harriman F. Spritzer, Corny announces a major showcase at the new Baltimore Eventorium, during which they’ll crown Ms. Teenage Hairspray, an award Amber very much has her eyes on. There’s other big news in store: one of the girls is taking a (9-month) hiatus, meaning there’s an opening for someone to join the Council.

Tracy is ecstatic and immediately starts making plans to audition, but Edna is quick to tamp down her enthusiasm. Edna begs her husband Wilbur to explain that nobody wants heavyset women like them on TV except to be made fun of. Wilbur only encourages Tracy to chase after her dreams, just like he chased after his dream to open a chain of joke shops. Meanwhile, Prudy chastises Penny for listening to “race music” while Velma criticizes Amber for dancing badly. As the three sets of mothers and daughters fight, the number “**I’m a Big Girl Now**” kicks off. With the help of backup singers, the girls explain that they’re growing up now and don’t want to be coddled anymore.

Tracy eventually shows up at the audition. As she is getting ready to perform, Link accidentally bumps into her on his way out. This triggers “**I Can Hear the Bells,**” in which Tracy sings of her love for Link. The other girls, meanwhile, insult her ruthlessly. Tracy pleads her case to Velma but the producer is unmoved; she sings “**Miss Baltimore Crabs,**” describing the lengths *she* went to in order to win her beauty queen title. Meanwhile, the girls pepper Tracy with questions, all leading up to the big one: “would you swim in an integrated pool?” Tracy gives an enthusiastic yes, and is quickly dismissed alongside Little Inez, a young Black girl who had arrived to audition, too.

Back at school, Tracy is sent to detention for “disrupting” class with her massive hairdo. While in detention, she meets Seaweed, Glibert, Lorraine, Thad, Duane, and Stooie, a crew of Black kids. Seaweed turns on some



Good Morning Baltimore

“Good morning Baltimore!
Every day’s like an open door,
Every night is a fantasy,
Every sound’s like a symphony!”

The Nicest Kids in Town

“Ev’ry afternoon
When the clock strikes four,
A crazy bunch of kids
Crash through that door.
They throw off their coats
And leave the squares behind
And then they shake it,
Shake it, shake it,
Like they’re losing their mind.
You’ll never see them frown
‘Cause they’re
The nicest kids in town!”

I’m a Big Girl Now

“Once upon a time
When I was just a kid,
You never let me do
Just what the older kids did.
But lose that laundry list
Of what you won’t allow,
‘Cause Mama,
I’m a big girl now.”

I Can Hear the Bells

“I can hear the bells,
My head is spinning,
I can hear the bells,
Something’s beginning.
Everybody says
That a girl who looks like me
Can’t win his love
Well, just wait and see!”

Miss Baltimore Crabs

“Oh my God,
How times have changed,
This girl’s either blind
Or completely deranged.
Ah, but time seemed to halt
When I was Miss Baltimore Crabs.”

The Nicest Kids in Town

“Who cares about sleep
When you can snooze in school?
They’ll never get to college
But they sure look cool.
Don’t need a cap and a gown
‘Cause they’re the
Nicest kids in town!”

It Takes Two

“They say it’s a man’s world,
Well, that cannot be denied,
But what good’s a man’s world
Without a woman by your side?
And so I will wait
Until that moment you decide...”

Velma’s Revenge

“She’s a blemish, a blackhead
That must be expelled,
There’s a standard of beauty
That must be upheld.”

Welcome to the 60’s

“Hey Mama hey Mama, look around,
Ev’rybody’s groovin’ to a brand-new sound.
Hey Mama hey Mama, follow me,
I know something’s in you that you wanna set
free.
So let go, go, go of the past now,
Say hello to the love in your heart.
Yes, I know that the world’s spinning fast now,
You gotta get yourself a brand-new start!”

Run and Tell That

“Now I won’t ask you
To be color blind
‘Cause if you pick the fruit
Then girl, you’re sure to find:
The blacker the berry,
The sweeter the juice,
I could say it ain’t so
But darlin’, what’s the use?”

tunes and starts dancing his blues away; Tracy joins him and impresses the rest of the crew. She recognizes Seaweed from his time dancing for “Negro Day” on *The Corny Collins Show* and eagerly brings the prospect of them dancing together on an integrated version of the show; unfortunately, the Black kids are not optimistic about their chances.” Also, capitalize and italicize “The” in “*The Corny Collins Show*.” Later, they head to the high school gym, where Corny Collins is there as a guest. As the students start dancing the Madison, Seaweed urges Tracy to dance with her own kind. Meanwhile, Corny catches Tracy doing a great job of the Madison. Tracy starts doing the “Peyton Place After Midnight,” a dance she learned from Seaweed. Corny and Link are immediately impressed.

That afternoon, *The Corny Collins Show* comes back on with a reprise of “**The Nicest Kids in Town**” and a new addition to the lineup: Tracy! Penny, Edna, and Wilbur cheer on from home as Tracy takes to the stage. After the number, Corny pulls her up front for an interview. Tracy tells him she dreams big—say, of being the first woman president, or of being a Rockette—and that she wishes every day was Negro Day. This shocks Velma and Mr. Spritzer, but Corny says he “reads her like tomorrow’s headlines.” He then asks if she would like Link to sing her a song. As Amber protests, Link breaks into the romantic ballad “**It Takes Two**”. Unable to help herself, Tracy finishes the song with a kiss. Offstage, Velma and Spritzer confront Corny, urging him to get rid of “that chubby Communist girl.” Corny counters by saying the show should keep up with the times. When Velma tries to intimidate him, he threatens to go to another network. This prompts “**Velma’s Revenge**,” in which Velma promises to punish everyone who threatens her bigoted beauty standards.

Tracy returns home and finds Edna fielding calls from all over town. One of the calls comes from Mr. Pinky, of Mr. Pinky’s Hefty Hideaway, a plus-size women’s boutique. He wants to make Tracy his spokeswoman, but Tracy refuses to do anything without the help of her agent, a.k.a. her mother. With that, Tracy grabs Edna and heads out on the town, kicking off “**Welcome to the 60’s**,” a song about welcoming this new age with confidence and style. During the song, Edna cuts a deal with Mr. Pinky. The Dynamites, a group of Black backup singers, join mother and daughter in bringing the number to a fabulous crescendo.

Back at school, the students show up to gym for a round of scatter dodgeball. There, Amber and the rest of the Council girls make fun of Tracy and start spreading vicious rumors about her. As Link tries to stop them, Seaweed spots Penny and introduces himself; Penny is immediately smitten. Once the dodgeball game is under way, Amber snatches a ball and knocks Tracy out with one hit. Link abandons the Council and rushes to revive Tracy.

Seaweed then invites Tracy, Penny, and Link down to his family’s record store on North Avenue, the sort of place White kids like them typically never go. On their way over, Seaweed sings “**Run and Tell That**,” a testament



PHOTOS: page 4—“**Good Morning, Baltimore**”—**Niki Metcalf** as “**Tracy Turnblad**”

page 5—**Welcome to the 60’s**—(from L) **Niki Metcalf** as “**Tracy Turnblad**,” **Andrew Levitt** (aka **Nina West**) as “**Edna Turnblad**” and company

Photos by Jeremy Daniel

to Black beauty and self-assuredness. At the record store, they meet up with Seaweed and Little Inez's mother Motormouth Maybelle, a local DJ. She welcomes them in, speaking in a series of clever, jazzy rhymes. Just as she's getting to know everyone, Amber barges in and is horrified to find Link dancing with Black people. While she tries to get him to leave with her, Velma comes in and is doubly horrified. They are quickly followed by Edna and Wilbur, who just came back from getting chicken and waffles. Velma insults Edna and very nearly gets into a fight before storming off. Amber leaves, but not before trying, unsuccessfully, to get Link to join her.

With the villains gone, the group hatches a plan to integrate *The Corry Collins Show* during the upcoming Mother Daughter Day by having Motormouth and Little Inez show up together. If the producers resist, they plan to walk out as a group, Black and White together. Though Link is sympathetic to the cause, he is too worried about his career to take this risk; he departs, leaving Tracy heartbroken and disappointed. Edna has her own misgivings about appearing on TV at her weight, but Motormouth quickly steps in with **"Big, Blonde, and Beautiful,"** a brassy tribute to fat women everywhere.

As Motormouth sings, the rest of the group joins her in marching to the TV station. Velma and the rest of the White mothers and daughters affiliated with the Council panic. They call the cops, who rush in and load the protesters into the paddy wagon.

Act Two starts with Tracy, Edna, Motormouth, Little Inez, Penny, Velma, and Amber in the house of detention. They sing **"Big Dollhouse,"** complaining about the conditions and crying out for an opportunity to escape. Thankfully for her and Amber, Velma has an in with the governor, who calls to set them free. Later, Wilbur arrives having mortgaged his store, the Har-Dee-Har Hut, so he can pay bail for everyone else. Unfortunately, just as they are leaving, the guard announces Tracy has been put into solitary confinement by order of the governor. As the rest file out, Tracy sings a sad **reprise of "Good Morning Baltimore,"** wishing that Link would come to her aid.

At the Har-Dee-Hard Hut, Edna and Wilbur commiserate. Mr. Pinky has already pulled Tracy's sponsorship, forcing Edna to return all her clothes. Fortunately, Wilbur has a plan to get Tracy out with the help of an exploding can of hairspray. Edna laments the fact that while her daughter is a revolutionary and her husband a genius, she herself has nothing to show for all her work. Wilbur comes to her defense in the duet **"You're Timeless to Me."** Together they sing to their enduring love, which survives despite how much they (and the world) are changing.

Later that night, Link breaks into the prison to see Tracy. He reveals that Amber and Velma were only using him to make Amber popular, so he broke up with her and is eager to be with Tracy instead. Even though they can't be together because of the bars, they sing **"Without Love,"** remarking how sad life would be if they were alone. Meanwhile, Prudy is tying Penny to the bed



Big, Blonde, and Beautiful

"Bring on that pecan pie,
Pour some sugar on it,
Sugar don't be shy.
Scoop me up a mess
Of that chocolate swirl.
Don't be stingy,
I'm a growing girl!"

Big Dollhouse

"I gotta get out,
I gotta get out,
I gotta get out,
How'd I get in this slammer,
This cooler,
This big dollhouse!"

reprise of Good Morning Baltimore

"And get ready Baltimore,
There's a bright, brand-new day in store.
Let me out so this dream's unfurled,
I'll eat some breakfast,
Then change the world!
And I promise, Baltimore,
Once I cha-cha right out of that door,
The world's gonna wake up and see
Link's in love with me!"

You're Timeless to Me

"Styles keep a changin'
The world's re-arrangin'
But Edna, you're timeless to me.
Hemlines are shorter,
A beer costs a quarter,
But time cannot take what comes

Without Love

"Once I was a selfish fool
Who never understood.
I never looked inside myself
Though on the outside, I looked good!
Then we met and you made me
The man I am today.
Tracy, I'm in love with you
No matter what you weigh!

I Know Where I've Been

"There's a cry in the distance.
It's a voice that comes from deep within.
There's a cry asking why,
I pray the answer's up ahead,
Cause I know where I've been."

Hairspray

"What give a girl
Power and punch?
Is it charm, is it poise?
No, it's hairspray!
What gets a gal
Asked out to lunch?
Is it brains, is it dough?
No, it's hairspray!"

Cooties

"They came from way far out
In outer space
She's hard to miss
And so they landed on her face!"

You Can't Stop the Beat

"You can't stop an avalanche
As it races down the hill.
You can try to stop the season's, girl,
But 'cha know you never will.
And you can try to stop my dancin' feet
But I just cannot stand still!"

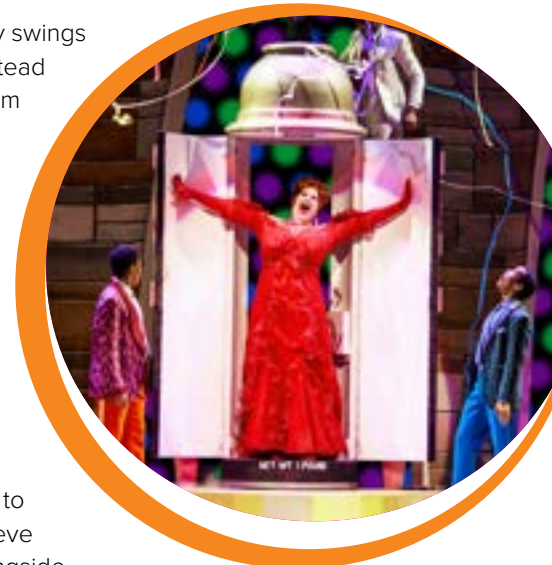
"Cause the world keeps spinning
Round and round
And my heart's keeping time
To the speed of sound
I was lost 'till I heard the drums
And I found my way."

in her bedroom as punishment. When the phone rings, Prudy leaves, and Seaweed appears in the window to set Penny free. They join in "Without Love," their romance growing with each lyric. Tracy laments that if only she had a can of hairspray and a zippo lighter, she could set herself free. Thankfully, Link has both, and Tracy uses them to burn a hole in the bars and escape.

Together, the kids rush back to Motormouth's house, where Motormouth, Lorraine, Duane, and Gilbert are watching news of the jailbreak on TV. Penny and Seaweed arrive together, and Motormouth gives them her blessing—albeit with a warning that, as an interracial couple, they are set to face a lot of challenges. Later, Tracy and Link arrive to rally everyone for another push. Unfortunately, the TV station will have guards this time, and some folks understandably want to sit this one out. Motormouth is determined, though, and she sings "**I Know Where I've Been,**" a pledge to keep moving forward to justice.

Back at the Eventorium, Corny Collins kicks off with a rendition of "**Hairspray,**" an ode to the value of a good can of Ultra Clutch. As the number finishes, Wilbur, wearing a hat and fake nose, wheels a giant hairspray can onstage. Velma sicks security on him; thankfully for Wilbur, the guards who respond are really Seaweed and the three Motormouth Boys in disguise. As the TV cameras come back on, Amber sings "**Cooties**" along with the Council Members, sealing the deal as Miss Teenage Hairspray. With the number done, Spritzer arrives to bestow the crown on Amber. Just as she is about to claim it, Tracy comes dancing down the aisle with Link, Penny, Seaweed, and Little Inez in tow. They start the showstopper "**You Can't Stop the Beat,**" taking over the stage and pulling all the Council Members in to join them. The "guards" throw off their uniforms and run off with Velma while Amber clings defiantly to her throne.

Thanks to their efforts, the vote tally swings overwhelmingly in Tracy's favor. Instead of accepting the title, Tracy lays claim to Link as her prize and declares *The Corny Collins Show* officially integrated. With the viewership soaring, Spritzer announces that Tracy has been pardoned by the governor and given a full scholarship to Essex Community College. Meanwhile, Velma, who is mistakenly credited for her success with the show, is put in charge of Ultra Glow, beauty products for women of color (much to her dismay). Prudy bursts in to retrieve Penny, only to find her dancing alongside her beau. Prudy accepts that this is what Penny wants and embraces her daughter. Link and Tracy, meanwhile, finally get to share their kiss on live TV. For the coup de grace, Wilbur busts the giant hairspray can open to reveal Edna in her best finery. With that, they pick "**You Can't Stop the Beat**" up again. In the midst of it all, Motormouth throws off her guard's uniform and joins the song, helping bring the show to a grand and glorious crescendo.



PHOTOS : Page 6—"Big, Blonde and Beautiful"—
Sandie Lee as "Motormouth Maybelle."
Page 7—"Finale"—featuring Andrew Levitt (aka Nina West)
as "Edna Turnblad" and company

Photos by Jeremy Daniel

ANATOMY OF A SONG: YOU'RE TIMELESS TO ME

Every good musical needs several standout numbers, and *Hairspray* has plenty to go around. In this section, you'll get to know one of the show's greatest hits: "You're Timeless to Me." The song is a duet sung by Edna and Wilbur, Tracy's parents, after their daughter is looked in solitary confinement. As they plot what to do next, Edna confesses that she feels useless in this fight. Thankfully, Wilbur steps in to lift her spirits and remind her of the fact that, though the world is changing all the time, their love is eternal. Consult the lyrics and annotations below for a closer look at this touching tune.



"You're Timeless To Me"—(from L) Christopher Swan as "Wilbur Turnblad" and Andrew Levitt as "Edna Turnblad" in *Hairspray*. Photo by Jeremy Daniel

WILBUR

Styles keep a changin',
The world's re-arrangin',
But Edna, you're timeless to me.
Hemlines are shorter,
A beer costs a quarter,
But time cannot take what comes free.
You're like a stinky old cheese, babe,
Just getting' riper with age.
You're like a fatal disease, babe,
And there's no cure
So let this fever rage.

This is one of several instances where the lyrics play on the double meanings of words like "ripe." Ripe can mean especially smelly or ready to be enjoyed. In this sense, Edna is like "a stinky old cheese" in that she is only getting more enjoyable as she gets older.

Thanks to inflation, the dollar amount for common goods like beer has grown exponentially for decades. For reference, the average cost of a six-pack of beer has increased by more than 500% since 1962, the year the show takes place in!

This is a reference to the Cuban revolution, which began in 1953 and ended in 1958 with the establishment of a Marxist government led by Fidel Castro. Castro's government became a significant player in the Cold War and maintained a confrontational relationship with the United States.

Some folks can't stand it,
Say time is a bandit,
But I take the opposite view.
'Cause when I need a lift,
Time brings a gift:
Another day with you!

A twist or a waltz,
It's all the same schmaltz
With just a change in the scenery.
You'll never be old hat
That's that!
You're timeless to me.

EDNA

Oh, Wilbur!
Fads keep a-fadin',
And Castro's invading,
But Wilbur, you're timeless to me.

Hairdos are higher—
Mine feels like barbed wire—
But you say I'm chic as can be!

You're like a rare vintage ripple
A vintage they'll never forget.
So pour me a teeny weenie triple
And we can toast the fact we ain't dead yet!

Geritol is a vitamin supplement. The implication here is that the two of them are getting older—but also, that they want to stay healthy for each other.

I can't stop eating
Your hairline's receding
And soon there'll be nothing at all
So, you'll wear a wig
While I roast a pig

Hey! Pass that Geritol

Glenn Miller had brass
That Chubby Checker's a Gas
But they all pass eventually

You'll never be passé,

Hip hooray!

You're timeless to me.

You're like a broken down chevy,
All you need is a fresh coat of paint



A set of 1950s vintage "ripple" glasses.

"Vintage ripple" refers to vintage glassware that ripples from top to bottom or side to side. When Edna says "pour me a teeny weenie triple," she means a triple shot(!) of liquor to go in that vintage glass. Liquor, like some cheeses, tends to get better with age.

Glenn Miller was the head of the Glenn Miller Orchestra, a swing dance band with a strong brass section. Chubby Checker is a rock and roll legend who popularized a number of major dances in his heyday, including the Twist. Also, note that Edna calls Chubby Checker "a gas," as in a good time, and then says Wilbur will never be "passé," as in out of style: could it double as a reference to "passing gas?"



Harvey Fierstein as Edna and Dick Latessa as Wilbur in the original Broadway production of *Hairspray*. Photo by Sara Krulwich for *The New York Times*

WILBUR

And Edna, you got me goin' hot and heavy,
You're fat and old, but baby, boring you ain't!

WILBUR & EDNA

Some folks don't get it
But we never fret it

'Cause we know that time is our friend.

Yeah, it's plain to see
That you're stuck with me
Until the bitter end.

And we got a kid
Who's blowin' the lid
Off the Turnblad family tree!

EDNA

You'll always hit the spot
Big shot!
You're timeless to me.

WILBUR

You'll always be du jour
Mon amour
You're timeless to me.

EDNA

You'll always be first string.

WILBUR

Ring-a-ding-ding!

WILBUR & EDNA

You're timeless to me.

EDNA

You're timeless to me.

WILBUR

You're timeless to me.

WILBUR & EDNA

You're timeless to me!

This song speaks to a common fear of losing things—health, loved ones, a sense of purpose—as time goes on, but points out that for Edna and Wilbur, time only brings out a greater love and admiration for each other.

The French term "du jour" translates literally to "of the day." It is often used to indicate what is most popular or desirable at that moment. "Mon amour," of course, means "my love."



Christopher Walken as Wilbur and John Travolta as Edna in the 2007 film version of *Hairspray*.

TO THE SCREEN, TO THE STAGE: THE MANY ITERATIONS OF HAIRSPRAY

In 2002, *Hairspray* debuted on Broadway and went on to become a bona fide hit. By that point, it had already walked a familiar path from the screen to the stage—and it would soon make a much rarer trip back in the same direction.



John Waters, pictured here in 2008, wrote and directed the original *Hairspray* (1988). The Baltimore native is notable for creating unique, provocative films that use camp and “bad taste” to challenge the status quo.

Photo by Donald MacLellan for Getty Images

The original film *Hairspray* (1988) was the brainchild of John Waters, an independent filmmaker from Baltimore who has since become something of a cult figure thanks to his distinctive persona and flair for campy, provocative material. Waters’ original idea for the film came after he wrote an article for *Baltimore Magazine* on *The Buddy Dean Show*, a local teen dance and variety show akin to *American Bandstand*. Waters had been an avid fan of the show growing up and considered it the ideal centerpiece for the film that eventually became *Hairspray*. He cast his high

school friend Divine, a noted drag queen who had already appeared in several of his movies, as Edna Turnblad, setting the trend for other adaptations to follow. Ricki Lake, then a complete unknown, won the role of Tracy Turnblad following an open call audition. Waters was at

first dismayed to learn that the film had earned a PG rating—his previous work tended to be much more adult!—but decided that doing something wholesome couldn’t be all bad. While not a major financial success, the film earned positive reviews and elevated Waters’ status, enabling him to take on more high-profile projects.

Hairspray quickly developed something of a cult following and eventually caught the eye of independent theatrical producer Margo Lion. Lion approached Waters, who was skeptical having watched previous efforts to adapt it for the stage and TV fail. After receiving Waters’ blessing, Lion set about putting together the right team. Her first recruit was composer



Divine, left, and Ricki Lake as Edna and Tracy Turnblad. This still comes from the original film (1988).

Marc Shaiman, who had a steady career composing film scores. Shaiman insisted he bring his partner Scott Wittman onboard, and together the pair started crafting songs based on major lines and moments from the original film. Next, Lion recruited Thomas Meehan, who had previously written for such hits as *Annie* and *The Producers*, and comedy writer Mark O'Donnell to craft the libretto and give the show some structure. Unfortunately, she was not able to secure her original choice for director, Rob Marshall, who participated in some early development work but eventually left to direct the film version of the Broadway hit *Chicago*. Thankfully, the production came together under veteran director Jack O'Brien and choreographer Jerry Mitchell. John Waters was present throughout as an expert and adviser on all things Baltimore-related. His personalized tours had a significant influence on the production team.

musicals of the decade. The show continued to draw crowds right up until it closed in January of 2009.

Not long after the musical became a hit, New Line Cinema began planning for *another* film version, this time based on the musical. With original director O'Brien and choreographer Mitchell unavailable, the job of producers went to Craig Zadan and Neil Meron, experts in movie and TV musicals who had recently found a hit in *Chicago*. The pair brought on Adam Shankman, a professional dancer turned film director, to direct and choreograph, and Leslie Dixon, a veteran of crowd-pleasing cinema, to adapt the screenplay. As is always the case in film adaptations, some changes had to be made to fit the medium. That included fleshing out some of the scenes and changing out a few songs. Thankfully, Shaiman and Wittman were on hand to craft new tunes such as "Ladies Choice" and "New Girl in Town" in exchange for losing "Mama, I'm a Big Girl Now," "The Big Dollhouse," and "Cooties."

Of course, there were two big pairs of shoes that still had to be filled for the film to be a success. The production team reached out to John Travolta, whose long and varied career began with an iconic turn in the movie musical *Grease*, to play Edna. Despite his initial reluctance, Travolta signed on and quickly became a leading voice in the show. As for Tracy, the team turned once again to an open call, recognizing the potential of casting a relative unknown. They ended up finding their Tracy in a most unusual place:

a Cold Stone Creamery, where 17-year-old Nikki Blonsky would show off her vocal chops while at work. Blonsky won the role and quickly put her own mark on it. She and Travolta were joined by a star-studded cast featuring the likes of Queen Latifah, Christopher Walken, Zac Efron, and Amanda Bynes. The film found success at the box office and earned three Golden Globe Award nominations.

Harvey Fierstein, left, and Marissa Jaret Winokur as Edna and Tracy Turnblad singing "Welcome to the 60s" in the original Broadway production (2002). Photo by Paul Kolnik

While Rob Marshall did not helm the musical, he did direct the producers to Marissa Jaret Winokur, a young actress who had left New York after determining there were no suitable roles for a plus-size woman such as herself. Winokur was the very first person to meet with the producers about the part and remained in the role of Tracy throughout its long developmental process, even though it seemed she would not get to play it on Broadway. Things only got worse for Winokur when she contracted cancer, a fact she kept from the producers for fear that it would give them an excuse to fire her. Thankfully, Winokur's work shone through, and she kept the role for the Broadway debut. She was joined by Tony-winner Harvey Fierstein in the role of Edna Turnblad, and together they won hearts, and a pair of Tonys, for their star turns as mother and daughter. Theirs were two of the eight Tony Awards the production took home, making it one of the most successful



John Travolta, left, and Nikki Blonsky as Edna and Tracy Turnblad singing "Welcome to the 60s." This still comes from the 2007 film adaptation of the musical.

The *Hairspray* film arrived amidst a resurgence in screen musicals, which included Hollywood adaptations and live TV productions. In 2016, NBC staged a live televised performance of *Hairspray* in the same mold as their previous efforts with *The Sound of Music*, *Peter Pan*, and *The Wiz*. That version, directed by Kenny Leon and adapted for the format by returning star Harvey Fierstein, borrowed elements from both the stage musical and the movie



Maddie Baillio as Tracy, seated at center, in a promotional still from *Hairspray Live*, which was broadcast by NBC in 2016.

musical. The song “Ladies Choice,” for example, which had originally been written into the film for the character of Link, was handed over to Corny Collins. As usual, the rest of the cast was full of notable stars, including Martin Short, Jennifer Hudson, Christin Chenoweth, and Ariana Grande.

Navigating Difference in *Hairspray*

As the Broadway opening of *Hairspray* approached, original creator John Waters wrote in *The New York Times* that the real reason he was hoping it would succeed was because “if it’s a hit, there will be high school productions, and finally the fat girl and the drag queen will get the starring parts.” The comment speaks to the career Waters has carved out for himself as a champion of outsiders and a challenger to the status quo. In addition to supporting unconventional heroes, Waters draws heavily from his life in Baltimore, a city with a long history of segregation and interracial strife. All of these elements—outsiders, subverting expectations, and overcoming segregation—are evident in each iteration of the *Hairspray* story, albeit to varying degrees.

At the center of the story, of course, is Tracy Turnblad, a fat White girl who is openly ridiculed for her size and initially excluded from *The Corny Collins Show* because she does not fit the usual (read: *thin*) profile of a member of the Council. Despite this, Tracy has all the talent, knowledge, and heart to dance on the show. As

she proves, it is the show itself that is broken, not her. Tracy also finds herself caught up in a major shift in mid-20th century American society, namely the push to integrate predominately White spaces as part of the larger civil rights movement. By bringing Black dance, and later Black people, onto *The Corny Collins Show*, Tracy participates in the kind of groundbreaking action that helped change television, not to mention American society at large. Additionally, Tracy’s family is marked by varying degrees of difference from the status quo. Her mother, Edna, is a not only a large woman herself, but is typically played by a man in drag, a move that subverts the usual expectations regarding gender and casting. Even her father, a kooky novelty shop owner, and her best friend, the peculiar daughter of a strict Christian mother, are oddballs in their own right. Penny takes a risk of her own when she starts dating Seaweed, a move that is a testament to the power of love,

but also the beginning of a challenging path that sets them apart from so many others. That Tracy brings them all together, and that each of them gets to participate in the final number of the show, points to a larger message: that everyone deserves their chance to shine.



Kerry Butler as Penny and Corey Reynolds as Seaweed in the original Broadway production of *Hairspray*. Penny and Seaweed’s relationship is a testament to the power of love—but as Seaweed’s mother warns him, there are more challenges in store for them.

While *Hairspray* has been a crowd-pleaser in all its forms, it has also come in for some criticism. The musical adaptation, for example, was criticized by some for undoing Waters’ most incisive insights into race, class, and gender in order to

make the show more appealing to a wider audience. While this is perhaps unfair to pop culture like Broadway musicals, which can project positive messages on a large scale, it does speak to how the transition from screen to stage (and back again) requires interpretive decisions that can sometimes change the original work's major qualities. For example, Waters himself said that he preferred drag queens like Divine, the original Edna, because they were “scary”—as in, they were defiantly themselves and were happy to challenge predominant expectations about gender—rather than “family friendly,” which is what the musical's version of Edna most certainly is. Rather than use drag to question gender norms, the musical fits Edna into the traditional role of mother. It is also worth recognizing that while Tracy is an outsider because she is fat, she is still given a privileged position due to being White. Even though the musical is partly about integration, it is ultimately centering Tracy's story: *she* brings dances she learned from her Black friends to the *The Corny Collins Show* (and gives them credit, to be fair) and *she* gets to be with the conventionally handsome boy at the end. Furthermore, while the integration of *The Corny Collins Show*



The Buddy Deane Show, a teen dance and variety program much like *American Bandstand*. This show inspired Waters to write *Hairspray*—and give it a happier ending.

is greeted with wide popular support in the musical, in real life, Baltimore's *Buddy Deane Show* was forced to shut down after staff members received bomb threats for their own integration efforts—not exactly the kind of happy ending we typically associate with musicals.

Nevertheless, *Hairspray* has an inspirational core that has sustained it through so many different iterations. While it is important to recognize that the politics referenced in the show go much deeper than the musical numbers allow, the overall message of inclusion still rings true. As in the show, real-life integration did require collective action and a willingness to take risks, while beauty standards and the rigid gender roles of yesteryear are being challenged even more openly now than they were when *Hairspray* debuted on Broadway. As far as *Hairspray* itself is concerned, it helps that, like all musicals, the show creates a world that is not quite like our own, one where characters can sing their true feelings and dance to the same rhythm, even when society tells them they should not. This is part of what makes it inspirational: it imagines a world that *could* be, rather than one that *actually is*.



The 2022 National Touring Company of *Hairspray* takes their opening night curtain call. Photo by Jeremy Daniel

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