

# Brattle Theatre Film Notes: John Waters' **HAIRSPRAY**

USA, 1988. PG. 92 min. Cast: Ricki Lake, Divine, Jerry Stiller, Colleen Fitzpatrick, Sonny Bono, Deborah Harry, Mink Stole, Rick Ocasek, Pia Zadora; Music: Rachel Sweet; Cinematographer: David Insley; Producer: Rachel Talalay; Director: John Waters

From the twisted individual who brought you such infamous, sordid, unprecedented celebrations of trash culture as *Pink Flamingoes*, *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living*, a family-friendly, PG-rated romp about an overweight teenager seeking to integrate an early '60s after-school television dance show? In 1988, it seemed unlikely that John Waters, who hadn't made a film since the Odorama-enhanced *Polyester* seven years before would return with something so lighthearted and tame—at least in comparison to his dog doo-doo eating days of yore. Although *Hairspray* launched a more accessible phase of Waters' career, expanding his audience well beyond the midnight movie circuit, it's arguably his most enduring film as well as his most popular.

Set in Baltimore (where else?), *Hairspray* recreates and slightly satirizes a long-lost era when The Council was king. No, not the student government, but a cotillion of popular, attractive, well-coiffed boys and girls who held court every afternoon on The Corny Collins Show, a local version of *American Bandstand* (itself inspired by an actual Baltimore program of the time, *The Buddy Deane Show*). Tracy Turnblad (Ricki Lake in her first film role) is a "pleasantly plump" gal who longs to find a place on The Council. Physically, she doesn't fit their svelte standards, but she can out-mashed-potato any of them. Eventually, she gets in and becomes the show's breakout star, much to the consternation of Amber Von Tussle (Colleen Fitzpatrick, later known as pop singer Vitamin C), a snotty rich girl determined to be crowned Miss Auto Show. As Tracy and Amber vie for the title and fight over heartthrob Link Larkin (Michael St. Gerard), spunky Tracy becomes an unlikely activist, pushing to integrate the segregated television show with the help of her naive but adoring friend Penny Pingleton (Leslie Ann Powers), Penny's African-

American boyfriend Seaweed (Clayton Prince), and his radio-DJ mother "Motormouth" Maybelle (blues singer Ruth Brown).

Originally, Waters wrote Tracy's role for Divine, the indisputable star of his stock players. However, the studio wasn't crazy about a middle-aged drag queen playing a teenaged girl, so Waters re-cast Divine as Tracy's zaftig mother Edna (a role originally written for transsexual Christine Jorgensen!). The film also features Divine in a dual role appearing out of drag as racist TV station owner Arvin Hodgepile. Although a few familiar Waters faces pop up (including Mink Stole as Collins' assistant Tammy and Waters himself in a cameo as a dubious psychiatrist), *Hairspray* features an incredibly quirky extended cast. Only Waters (or possibly Fellini) could've brought together such an eccentric



assortment of celebrities as Jerry Stiller (as Tracy's joke shop owning father), Pia Zadora and The Cars' lead singer Ric Ocasek (as beatniks) and the head-scratching duo of Sonny Bono and Deborah Harry (as Amber's scheming parents).

Although working from a decidedly less risqué palette, Waters infuses the film with a distinct sensibility that both celebrates and transcends mere camp. From Rachel Sweet's giddy theme song playing over the opening credits as various Council members groom themselves with copious amounts of Aqua Net to an incarcerated Tracy being forced to (gasp!) iron her hair in an all-girl reformatory, Waters gently pokes fun at the very particular principles of a youth culture that would radically change within a few

years. He also fills the soundtrack with obscure dance-craze novelties of the era like "The Madison Time", "The Roach" and "The Bug", all of them equally silly and sublime. However, instead of indulging the how-low-can-you-go shock tactics that practically defined his earlier films, Waters outwardly invites his audience to root without shame for Tracy, a heroine that's still an unconventional underdog, but far more palatable and relatable than Babs Johnson or Dawn Davenport. Still, fans of those earlier bad taste epics might enjoy *Hairspray*'s Dolby-enhanced zit popping scene or an amusement park fracas that begins with one character vomiting and ends with what can be most accurately described as a "slapstick race riot."

An unlikely hit (it initially grossed three times its budget), *Hairspray*'s success was bitter-sweet, as 42-year-old Divine sadly died from a heart attack ten days after the film's national release. Over the next decade, Waters would continue pursuing the not-quite-mainstream without his muse. Although zany, subversive comedies like *Serial Mom* and *Pecker* couldn't have come from anyone else, they left one pondering what Divine could've added to them. Nonetheless, Waters comfortably embraced his iconic status post-*Hairspray*, regularly hosting the Independent Spirit Awards and even appearing more or less as himself on *The Simpsons*.

In an unexpected turn of events, the film was successfully adapted into a Broadway musical by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan in 2002. With a score by Marc Shaiman and Harvey Fierstein memorably stepping into Divine's orthopedic shoes as Edna Turnblad, the show was a smash hit, making over \$76 million in its initial run and sweeping the 2003 Tony Awards, winning eight statues (out of thirteen nominations). In 2004, *Hairspray* came full circle as New Line announced it would be adapting the musical version back into a new film.

- Chris Kriofske