

# The new and unimproved Hairspray

Hiram Lee  
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In 1988, the often controversial American filmmaker John Waters wrote and directed his most popular and successful film, *Hairspray*. The movie marked a major change in the director's work. Prior to *Hairspray*, in the 1960s and 1970s, Waters made a number of radical and disturbing low-budget movies. These films, usually rated X, featured Waters's trademark intentional bad taste and "trashiness." Among the best of these early films were *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Female Trouble* (1974). These were stories featuring profoundly disoriented characters attempting to out-do each other in self-destructive pursuits for notoriety—people racing to the bottom.

After taking a break from filmmaking in the early 1980s to teach in Maryland prisons, Waters returned to directing with *Hairspray*, *Cry-Baby* (1990) and *Serial Mom* (1994). These movies were tame in comparison to his earlier work and not nearly as challenging. While they were in many ways entertaining and likeable movies, they made up something of a down period in Waters's career. Thankfully, the director would return to form, more or less, beginning in the late 1990s with films like *Pecker* (1998), *Cecil B. DeMented* (2000), and most recently, *A Dirty Shame* (2004).

*Hairspray*, for better or worse, remains Waters's most popular film, a cult classic. In 2002, it was turned into a Tony Award-winning Broadway musical. Inevitably, a new film would have to follow. It has, and is directed by Adam Shankman.

Set in 1962 in Baltimore, Maryland, *Hairspray* (2007) tells the story of Tracy Turnblad (Nikki Blonsky), a high school student obsessed with *The Corny Collins Show*, a popular local dance program for teenagers similar to *American Bandstand*. *The Corny Collins Show*, sponsored by Ultra Clutch hairspray, is segregated and black dancers may only appear on "Negro Day" which comes once a month and is hosted by local record shop owner Motormouth Maybelle (Queen Latifah).

Each day after school, Tracy and her friend Penny Pingleton (Amanda Bynes) race home to catch the show on television, copying the dance steps they see and hoping that they too might appear on the show some day.

Tracy's mother Edna (John Travolta) takes in laundry to make a living, her dream of running her own coin laundry never having come true. She dislikes her daughter's music and discourages her from dancing and watching the popular show. Travolta, saddled with distracting make-up and an impossibly

severe Baltimore accent, plays Edna as a shut-in with major insecurities about her weight.

His Edna is surprisingly timid throughout much of the film. She has to be coaxed by her daughter to leave the house and act as her manager when Tracy is offered a spokesperson deal with a clothing store called Mr. Pinky's Hefty Hideaway. This is a major change from the Edna of the original film—played by drag queen and frequent John Waters collaborator Divine—who was more than eager to act as her daughter's manager and go out without any prompting. Travolta has put a lot of effort into his performance, but somehow it does not feel as genuine as Divine's creation.

When Tracy and Penny hear about auditions for a new dancer on *Corny Collins*, they cut classes and go to try out. Because she is overweight, Tracy is met with hostility by one of the show's stars, Amber Von Tussle (Brittany Snow), the pageant-queen daughter of station manager Velma Von Tussle (Michelle Pfeiffer). Already facing slim chances, Tracy ultimately fails her audition when she is asked if she would swim in an integrated pool and answers yes.

When she returns late to school in defeat, Tracy is sent to detention. Here she meets Seaweed (Elijah Kelley), the son of Motormouth Maybelle and a talented dancer. The two quickly become friends and when Tracy introduces Seaweed to Penny, he and Penny fall in love at first sight. This will come as a shock to Penny's very religious and racist mother, who by the end of the film will tie her daughter up in her bedroom with a jump rope, forcing her to listen to a recording of the Lord's Prayer over and over again.

Using new dance steps she learns from Seaweed, Tracy catches the eye of *Corny Collins Show* star Link Larkin (Zac Efron) at a dance and is soon invited to join the cast. When asked on air what she'd like to accomplish, she says she'd like to make every day Negro Day, prompting the sponsor of the show to call her "the chubby communist girl." Soon, Tracy and Amber Von Tussle will become bitter rivals in the show's annual Miss Teenage Hairspray pageant.

When Tracy and Penny go with Seaweed to a party held at his mother's record shop, Motormouth Maybelle reveals to them that Negro Day will be cancelled. Outraged, Tracy suggests a protest march. Judging from the way this scene plays out, one gets the impression this had never occurred to Maybelle before. This is simply unbelievable, and it is not clear why this should

be the case considering the protest in the original film was in fact Maybelle's idea.

The march sequence in Shankman's *Hairspray* does, however, provide the film with its best musical performance, "I Know Where I've Been," sung with feeling by Queen Latifah, and it also brings about some of the film's few genuine and pointed moments of humor.

During the march, the protesters reach a police barricade. Motormouth attempts to talk to the officer in charge and is ignored. Tracy gently taps the policeman on the back of the head with a protest sign to get his attention. Pandemonium breaks loose. In spite of the relatively innocent nature of the incident, the police seize on Tracy's "assault" on the officer as a pretext for the mass arrest of the protesters. Tracy manages to escape while televised news reports gradually blow the episode out of proportion until finally claiming Tracy had brutally assaulted the officer with a crowbar leaving him in critical condition!

The march sequence also reveals the extent to which the new *Hairspray* has been cleaned up through its several stages of adaptation. In the original film, the protest—held outside a segregated theme park—erupts into violence when a racist supporter of segregation throws a cherry bomb into a crowd of people who believe it to be gunfire. In response, the police send their clubs crashing down on the heads of innocent black teenagers. Seaweed is beaten badly and for the remainder of the film wears a large bandage around his head.

While Tracy manages to escape from the riot in the new film, in the original work she was thrown in jail and a "Free Tracy" campaign was begun by Motormouth Maybelle which led to Motormouth and daughter Little Inez taking the racist governor of Maryland hostage in his own mansion and kissing him until he consented to pardon Tracy! There is a real feeling of protest in the best moments of Waters's film, which can not be found in the Shankman version.

In the new *Hairspray*, after making her escape, Tracy hides out in Penny's house until she is discovered by Penny's mother who subsequently calls the police. Both girls are able to get away with the help of Seaweed. A plot is then hatched to sneak into the *Corny Collins Show* studio the next day during the Miss Teenage Hairspray pageant and force its integration by invading the live broadcast's dance floor together. The effort will, of course, succeed and will be celebrated by one of the film's major musical pieces, "You Can't Stop The Beat", nicknamed "You Can't Stop To Breathe" by the actors due to its demanding physical work. Travolta's reserved Edna will even join in this last number invoking Tina Turner with her quick-footed dancing.

It must be said that in both the second half of Shankman's *Hairspray* and the Broadway show it's partly based on, the new creators have changed Waters's story into something more conventional.

Waters's original film, while not a musical *per se*, featured a

marvelous soundtrack of 1960s-era pop and R&B as well as a number of lively scenes featuring the popular dances of the day. Soul singer Toussaint McCall made an appearance performing his song "Nothing Takes The Place Of You." There's an extraordinary moment in Waters's film when, during McCall's performance, walking through an alley next to a dancehall, a homeless man picks up the strains of McCall singing inside and begins to sing along sorrowfully. As he makes his way, teenagers kissing in the alley stopping to listen. One gets a sense in Waters's film of the more liberating qualities of the music and the great passion its listeners had for it.

Unfortunately, this feeling is absent in much of the new film's music. The opening song is "Good Morning Baltimore," a piece that bears the influence of 1960s girl groups and the Phil Spector sound. Lyrically it does a fine job of revealing Tracy's optimism and naivety, and lines such as "The rats on the street/All dance round my feet/They seem to say/'Tracy, it's up to you'" are amusing enough. However, as the song quotes musically from "Be My Baby" by The Ronettes, including its famous drum break, it does little more than remind the viewer of what the film's slickly-produced music is lacking by comparison. Generally speaking, the musical numbers in the new *Hairspray* are too sunny too often given the subject matter.

One doesn't expect Shankman to make exactly the film that Waters did, but it seems a large number of the changes made to the work have only succeeded in pushing the film in the direction of blandness. Whatever character or unique qualities the original film had, thanks to Waters's particular brand of humor and intentional bad taste, is gone. One misses the Waters touch of the original work, with lines of wonderfully mangled English like "She better hadn't dare!" or moments like the one that comes after Tracy kisses Link in an alley when she says "Link, this is so romantic" and then kicks a rat away from her foot.

*Hairspray* is another film remade and not for the better. Such material plagues Hollywood today. There's nothing inherently wrong with a "remake"—one thinks of Howard Hawks' classic *His Girl Friday*, a remake of Lewis Milestone's *The Front Page*—but in the cultural vacuum of today's Hollywood, the remake is too often a poor and predictable watering down of past glories. *Hairspray*, in spite of its best intentions, is just such a film.



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