Defying Faggotry:

Exploring Intersections of Queerness, Drag and Musical Theatre

by

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Abstract

Queer performers have engaged musical theatre and nightlife as relatively safe spaces to work and explore artistic creation for generations. “Show queens” straddle the thin line between drag performance and musical theatre symbiotically. In this thesis, I will explore the convergence of queerness, drag and musical theatre as an auto/ethnographic site, one I have personally endeavored to embody with my drag character, Ms. Golden Delicious, and which also allows me to engage with the work of a selection of drag performers, in their own words, to discover their impact. I will also explore the link between queerness and the Broadway musical, a site where coded queerness is also employed. Tracking the creation and frequent re-imagination of *Hairspray*— the John Waters film turned Broadway Musical with an iconic, but not explicitly queer, drag character— I will also argue that musical theatre drag performers use the above strategies and labor practices to reckon with “faggotry,” the necessary paradox of needing to perform one’s queer identity for straight audiences in commercial pursuits.

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Defying Faggotry

Maybe it's because we are in New York City, maybe it's the cultural ubiquity of *Wicked*. It likely has a lot to do with personal delusion— but Gloria Swansong and I know that the only true finale for drag brunch is our rendition of "Defying Gravity." I am always Glinda (I'm the blonde, duh) and my partner in crime is a nonbinary, vintage-age Elphaba. We lip-sync with every ounce of conviction in our bodies as we take each opportunity to make a blue joke despite the squeaky-clean Original Broadway Cast Recording blasting from an admittedly too-loud speaker system, climbing over the patrons of the Mexican Fusion restaurant in Astoria where we are the Queens of Sunday brunch. The staff knows their choreography, dodging our flailing bodies and delivering us props right as we need them. The push broom is essential; Migue, the restaurant's hostess, hands it to me as Gloria lip-syncs "Glinda, come with me, think of what we could do, together." As the song reaches its first climax, we lip-sync "…just you and I defying gravity, with you and I defying gravity, they'll never bring us down" while aggressively stroking the broom handle— a good drag queen never ignores a phallus. Gloria, as Elphaba, lip-syncs to me, "are you coming?" and I use the brief pause in the OBCR to say, aloud, "Well, this is really embarrassing, I've had a lot to drink, and…" The joke probably lands about 30% of the time, and it is more for Gloria and me than it is for the audience, but there is not enough time to dwell. Gloria leaves me to sprint down the aisle between rows of tables, jumps onto the bar and into yet another climax. I toss her the broom and my attention as she commands the gaze of everyone in the restaurant, closing the song. We then grab our microphones one last time and lead the room in a toast, "If no one has told you today that they love you, we love you" says Gloria, and I chime in, "speak for yourself." Thus concludes the formal performance of brunch, but we linger to chat and take pictures (reluctantly, because our makeup is never in pristine condition). Similar

performances of “Defying Gravity” happen around the world at drag shows, and they are cathartic. The intersection of queerness, musical theatre, and drag can create a magic atmosphere of acceptance and excitement. It feels like an in-person manifestation of my queer childhood experience of listening to and finding comfort in Original Cast Recordings.

My research exploring the intersection of drag and musical theatre took several turns. As I explored the canon of musicals with drag roles and the historical archive of drag performers with a clear connection to that canon, I started to see the effect nightlife and commercial theatre have on each other as a conversation. Especially in cultural centers like New York City, drag queens are performing in the same neighborhoods as major musicals. They are in the audience, and sometimes they appear onstage (in and out of drag). These two distinctly queer art forms grew alongside each other through varied levels of queer oppression, and served as safe spaces for queers and creatives to create performances. Those queens bold enough to work in both spaces, to cross the thin line between musical theatre and drag, embody a unique kind of knowledge about the politics and performance of of gender. Drag is reaching new, incredibly broad mainstream appeal in the twenty-first century and many graduates of collegiate theatre programs go on to pursue drag professionally, finding yet another creative mode to exploit their talents and skills in queer spaces, especially in booming nightlife drag scenes. By exploring a selection of drag performers who straddle the line between nightlife performance and commercial musical theatre, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of this unique point of entry into cultural and knowledge production. As essential to my research as the canon and archive is the writing of queer theorists like Jack Halberstam, David Román, and Kareem Khubchandani, and theatre/drag historians like George Chauncey, Bruce Kirle, and John M. Clum, all of whom provide context and language that is essential to my exploration of this topic.

My understanding and use of "coded queerness" is informed by Cameron Crookston's use of the term to explore its significance in the musical comedy work of drag performers Jinkx Monsoon and Major Scales. Crookston remarks on the significance of coding in modern drag performances as a byproduct of the camp sensibility, and a historiographic tool used in queer performance spaces, it "originated as a form of covert communication and community building… [and] additionally functions as a way for queers to connect with their own histories."[1] Queer performances knowingly and unknowingly incorporate coded jokes and references, which add interpretive value when de-coded. Not every queer coded reference is placed intentionally, and they are only as valuable as interpreters can make them.

Defining *Faggotry*: Performing Queerness for Straight Audiences

The title of this thesis, *Defying Faggotry*, refers to a phenomenon I have found fascinating in my time as a professional drag performer: the feeling that in order to make money, it is necessary to perform my queerness for the entertainment of straight people. My research did not reveal much about the way this phenomenon made the drag queens of yesteryear feel, but several notions suggested that it is an ever-present dynamic. "Slumming" is a term used for a similar dynamic practiced during the drag boom of the early twentieth century. Affluent straight people would go "slumming" at the clubs of the Harlem Renaissance, or at nightlife venues in other areas like Times Square and the East Village, an evening of enjoying watching the "lowbrow" entertainments of queer performers, a particularly racialized practice of class performance wherein the privileged few took pleasure in seeing the poor (and, often, of color) dance for their

[1] Cameron Crookston, "It Feels Like Yesterday: Drag, Nostalgia, and Queer Affective History in The Vaudevillians," *Journal of Homosexuality*, (March 16, 2021): 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2021.1892403.

dinner.[2] In *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (2009), Shane Vogel does not read this dynamic as victimizing the Black, queer performers of the Harlem Renaissance and the Pansy Craze; he sees it as a "central institution of American nightlife" which allowed queers of color to push back against the harmful narratives leveraged against them.[3] Today, I see "faggotry" as the performer's side of this practice, as I have observed it among contemporary queers participating in the post-*Drag Race* commercial drag boom— the act by the performer of doing their queerness for the straight gaze in order to further sustain their creative capital.

"Faggotry," of course, is derived from a violent slur with a sordid history that elicits mixed emotions in and out of the queer community. However, I seek to reappropriate and disidentify with the term by using it in this context, as an example of queer resilience and the queenly propensity for edgy and absurd word play.

Queening Queer Ethnographies

In his ethnographic inquiry into desi nightlife, *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* (2020), Kareem Khubchandani describes the kinship building that happens between the audience and drag performer, noting that by confronting the audience with "performances of racialized and classed femininity" and invite audiences to, "recall [their] own attachments to those embodiments."[4] He also cites Muñoz and Delgado's *Everynight Life* (1997)[5] to account for the

[2] Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife*, 1885-1940 (University of Chicago Press, 2008).
[3] Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009): 46.
[4] Kareem Khubchandani, *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* (University of Michigan Press, 2020): xiii.
[5] Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz, eds., *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*, Latin America Otherwise, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1997).

way drag practices affect the offstage lives of their practitioners and fans. To highlight the importance of the collaborative nature of the drag performance space, Khubchandani also borrows the term "communal performance labor" from Marlon M. Bailey's study of the Detroit ballroom scene.[6] It is as if by participating in the ritual of drag, everyone in the space is directed towards the "ideality"[7] that queerness represents. Thereby, the practice of performing queerness is not fraught in the identity politics of individualism. Khubchandani describes this unspoken exchange beautifully:

> By facing her, tipping her, whistling for her, we come into relation with her, become gendered subjects of her address, ritualized witnesses of her song and dance, fellow travelers through time, space, and feeling. For those of us who traffic in her aesthetics, she affirms our right to be there, to reinvent gender, to exaggerate dance, to commit fully to the emotions and breaths of a song. We continue to cruise while she performs, but her splits and lip-quivers fight for our attention, ask us to praise and honor her transfemininity in spaces where naturalized masculinities— jocks, bros, and bears—carry so much cultural capital.[8]

Like Khubchandani, my research is informed by an auto-ethnographic approach. In exploring the background and motivations of historical drag figures and roles, I hope to employ embodied knowledge from my experience as a musical theatre and drag performer. This pursuit is not one of objectivity or authenticity, rather an exploration of the self in relation to the past, allowing me to use that lens to look towards futurity. Queerness makes this possible; the "ideality" helps

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[6] Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*, Triangulations: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theatre/Drama/Performance (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
[7] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (New York: NYU Press, 2009): 1.
[8] Kareem Khubchandani, *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* (University of Michigan Press, 2020): 18.

inform our choices in the present without ignoring lessons from the past, and a reminds us that "the moment of storytelling itself is an epistemological and embodied experience of the self as same, the self as other, and the intersubjectivity between teller and listener."[9]

In section one I will look to a selection of performers who repeatedly cross the line between nightlife and musical theatre performances, striving to use their own words when possible to consider the meaning behind their choice to work between both worlds. Paris Todd of the Jewel Box Revue also served as a male dancer in several national tours and regional and summerstock productions. Nicholas Dante AKA Ronnie Morales, the Pulitzer Prize winning co-author of *A Chorus Line,* is immortalized in the epic monologue his character Paul recites. Lypsinka, AKA John Epperson's iconic and meteoric rise to fame exemplifies the pinnacle of what can be done by a studied performer with a knack for marketing themself. Alexandra Billings' one-woman musical tells the story of a transgender woman learning who she wants to be, through the power of her early drag persona Shanté. Section two is an exploration of Edna Turnblad, the drag role in the film and musical *Hairspray*. Looking to the portrayals of four performers— Divine, Harvey Fierstein, John Travolta and Andrew Levitt AKA Nina West— I will explore the queerness of the role, the impact of the performer on the portrayal and why experienced drag performers bring unique qualifications to the role.

In my early years as an amateur, I only performed at one-night-only newbie contests and low-level "guest star" tip-spots. These audiences were almost exclusively made up of queer, cis-gender men. However, once I started finding success, it was clear that the real money was in "faggotry": like performing for big corporate pride parties (always organized by the few queer

[9] E. Patrick Johnson, "Put a Little Honey in my Sweet Tea: Oral History as Quare Performance," in *Imagining Queer Methods,* Amin Ghaziani and Matt Brim, eds. (New York: NYU Press, 2019): 46.

employees, and enjoyed by their straight coworkers), in comedy clubs and cabaret theaters, and most lucratively at drag brunch. Drag brunches usually have a few queer patrons in the audience, but most often the demographic skews straight. They are fabulous audiences, and they tip well, but in-jokes or coded queer readings in performances often go over their heads. Sometimes they were *Drag Race* fans, but it usually felt like there is an aspect of "slumming" in that environment. My argument in "Defying Faggotry" is that performers who exploit their ability to move between modes of performance (specifically nightlife performance and musical theatre) are doing so, in part, to counter the ontological creative paradox of needing to perform queerness for straight audiences. By performing musical theatre numbers in drag, splitting labor between the two commercial sites, or simply by using the techniques and tools across expressive modes, theatre queens manage to balance the commercial need for the audience with their creative need to perform self-actualization.

Part 1: What's a Good Job, Anyway? Drag Labor between Musical Theatre and Nightlife

The connection between queer sensibility and musical theatre has been well established as a point of entry for ethnographic and critical study, and drag is often regarded as an important site of such scholarship. Particularly useful to my project is John M. Clum's *Something for the Boys: Musical Theatre and Gay Culture*, an autobiographical performance study in which Clum explores show queening from the inside looking out. This framework is helpful as I look to a lineage into which I hope to fall: the show queens, those who work to jump rope in the middle ground between the industries of musical theatre and performing drag on nightlife stages.[10] It is

[10] Two of the most well-known examples of such performers in the current New York City scene are J Harrison Ghee, AKA Crystal Demure, a former lead of Broadway's *Kinky Boots* who recently starred in drag as Velma Kelly in the MUNY's *Chicago*, and Terren Wooten, AKA Kizha Carr, a top queen in NYC nightlife and former ensemble member in Broadway's *The Book of Mormon*.

clear in both critical discourse on drag and my personal experience that performers who do labor in both spaces, or who train in one and pursue the other, do not see any value in viewing the artistic work of one as different from the other, usually because the gig-labor aspect of performing professions rewards the kind of range and skill it takes to do both. In *Unfinished Show Business*, Bruce Kirle directly engages Clum's work, critiquing its exuberance and willingness to make bold claims but valuing Clum's perspective and building on his provocations on the relationship between stage divas and homosexuals, and the use of double entendre in Cole Porter-era musicals to code queer themes.[11]

Clum's framework in *Something for the Boys* is rooted in storytelling; he uses the "gift of gab" and queer proclivity for dramatization to his advantage as he shares opinions alongside hard facts. What makes his book performative is his goal of representing his enthusiasm for his identity as show queen as a reaction to the new-millennium vision of the ideal gay man who lives outside of the stereotypes placed on his community. In retrospect, his outlook reads a bit pessimistic, a "theatre is dead" kind of mentality that gay men have left behind the art form for more palatable, masculine entertainments. However, paired with his recent chapter "A Little More Mascara" (2020), one can see that queerness and the American musical did not separate, rather the lines blurred further as queer life became more visible (and, once again, more profitable) in media and the academy, and drag's ability to break down the gender binary made that possible.[12]

Queer theory and nonbinary studies are essential to my work of considering the labor of

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[11] Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process*, Theater in the Americas (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 195.
[12] John M. Clum, "'A Little More Mascara': Drag and the American Musical from La Cage Aux Folles to Kinky Boots," in *The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical*, ed. Jessica Sternfeld and Elizabeth L. Wollman (New York ; London: Routledge, 2019).

drag queens. In the context of queer feminisms, Clum's title is a misnomer: in the 20 years since it was published, there has been a major shift in the conversation around defining drag, clarifying that drag queens are not all men and their work is hardly only resonant "for the boys."[13] This progress is quick, and Rupp and Taylor's 2003 feminist consideration of drag's gender commentary is the basis for the definition of drag I find useful: "people who create their own authentic genders."[14] I reserve the right to label any queer aesthetic performance of gender as drag: from the Pansy Craze to *Drag Race.*

In this section, I will work to re-center drag performers in the conversation about their labor between musical theatre and nightlife/drag spaces. Whereas Clum, Kirle, and others looked to the audience to understand the impact coded work had on those who perceived it as queer, I hope to shift the spotlight back to the stage and understand what it means for queer performers to engage in the self-actualization process of drag. I see Clum's exuberant and entertaining book as permission to use my embodied knowledge as a show queen to read the onstage and offstage performances of genderqueer performers who employ drag as a medium to express their true selves and engage in activism and advocacy. My aim is also to avoid a chronological retelling, demonstrating queer time's non-linear structure by framing the intersecting sites of musical theatre and drag performance as in a constant conversation that happens both within and between generational boundaries.

Paris Todd and the Jewel Box Revue

A number of drag performers from the 1920s, 30s, and 40s are noted as having moved

[13] Clum briefly acknowledges that his title is is vague and reductive, but is able to skirt the issue because of the autobiographical nature of his book.
[14] Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, 1st edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 103.

between musical theatre gigs and residencies at gay nightclubs in pansy shows. Particularly famous are the major success of Julian Eltinge on Broadway,[15] the queens in Mae West's famous and divisive "gay plays" whom she culled from real-life drag balls,[16] and gender bending Pansy Craze star G/Jene Malin.[17] This movement between labor and creative modes seems to be largely motivated by a need for more work combined with an expressive and personal impulse to dress in drag. The archive becomes much more robust surrounding the lives of these artists in the 40s and gets more expansive with each passing decade. Especially later into the golden age of musicals, these artists would work as chorus boys in Broadway shows, and in drag in productions like the Jewel Box Revue or other cabaret-type remnants of the pansy craze.

Danny Brown and Doc Brenner started the Jewel Box Revue in Miami, FL in 1939 because as gay men they were fed up with the straight-run vaudeville venues and drag clubs, which they saw as taking advantage of queer talent without much regard for the dignity of the queer performers whose labor made them money. Within a few years, the Revue was touring North America and would continue for over 30 years. It is also regarded as the first racially integrated female impersonation revue, and famously featured Stonewall icon Stormé DeLaverie as its only female member, host, and emcee. Their productions emulated vaudeville and Follies style staging and costuming, a nostalgic aesthetic with a queer twist.

The opportunity to hear about the experiences of Jewel Box Revue performers in their own words is limited. However, in February 2017, drag performer Paris Todd wrote to historian

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[15] James F. Wilson, "The Somewhat Different Diva: Impersonation, Ambivalence and the Musical Comedy Performances of Julian Eltinge," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 2018): 9–23.
[16] Ariel Nereson, "Queens 'Campin'' Onstage: Performing Queerness in Mae West's 'Gay Plays,'" *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 4 (2012): 513–32.
[17] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 314.

JD Doyle, recounting her time working at the JBR, with a bit of information about her experience working in "legit" theatre as well. In her letter, Paris Todd reveals several important points about the experiences of the JBR performers that provide a deeper understanding of their feelings about drag and the show. Todd recounts her experience working with the JBR in between "legit" gigs (out of drag): "I stayed with The Jewel Box on and off for 9 years. I would go off to do summer stock, a road show tour, or ballet, or so-called "legit theatre", but whenever I had free time on my hands and I felt like it, Doc and Danny always made room to feature me."[18] Paris seems forever grateful for the opportunity to work with the JBR between other jobs. She goes on to explain why few photos of her appear in JBR programs— for fear that being "found out" would affect future job opportunities: "I asked Doc and Danny not to use many photos of me because I was afraid at the time that it would hurt my 'legit' career. So in many ways, I did the JBR 'on the down low.' Today I am very proud of my participation in JBR. It was wonderful entertainment that had great performers who were often overlooked for their craft."[19]

While Paris remained incognito in the programs, many performers were featured in glamorous headshots and production stills, valuable archival documentations of the aesthetics the JBR queens employed. Many of the remaining programs feature this note from Doc and Danny about the nature of the JBR show:

> 'It's an old mannish custom,' explains Danny Brown to people who think guys getting done up in gal's clothes is something new and unique. And because it's a far cry from Juliet to Hopalong Cassidy, it's hard for most of us to realize that the immortal

[18] Paris Todd, "A Few Adventures with The Jewel Box Revue," February 2017, letter to Queer Music Heritage, https://www.queermusicheritage.com/f-todd-paris.html.
[19] Paris Todd, "A Few Adventures with The Jewel Box Revue," n.p.

> Shakespeare created his greatest feminine role, Juliet, knowing it would be portrayed— not by a woman— but by a young man. For in the days of the Elizabethan theatre, all feminine roles were played by young men, and this custom prevailed until after the Revolution. As a matter of fact, when the boys of the Jewel Box Revue are asked how it feels to be wearing long hair for their stage appearance, they recall how loss of masculinity has always been synonymous with loss of hair. Remember Samson? And Hercules? And Billy the Kid and Buffalo Bill, the Wild West heroes, weren't they almost as vainly proud of their long flowing bobs? Female impersonation, men making ladies look to their laurels in the matter of fashion finery, and such, has long been with us, and Danny and Doc in their Jewel Box Revue have maintained the art in its true and original sense.[20]

The focus on dressing in drag as an inherent and natural desire for the masculine man in the tone of the program notes is mirrored in the inclusion of a "Mr." in front of the feminine stage names most performers adopted, though the prefixes disappear in the late 60's when crossdressing laws became less of a concern. The program notes balance a desire to maintain the masculinity of their performers out-of-drag with what Danny and Doc saw as the noble cause of proliferating the art of female impersonation. The note seems to work towards a goal of informing the audience that the performers onstage are not freaks to be gawked at, but men who choose to express themselves artistically. It does not account for those in the cast who may not identify with their assigned male gender, and all but erases the male impersonators the show almost always featured (like Stormé DeLaverie), further proving Halberstam's argument that female

[20] JD Doyle, "Jewel Box Revue," ca.1960s, Queer Music Heritage, accessed October 8, 2021, https://queermusicheritage.com/fem-jewl.html.

masculinity is systemically undervalued in drag performance.[21]

In a way, Doc and Danny have attempted to defy faggotry for their performers with their program note, getting ahead of the idea that "slumming" is a part of their brand. While the sentiments of their take on the history of drag performance ignore the reality of transgender identities, their attempt at explaining the ethos of their show does represent a careful and assertive attitude; there is kinship between the performers and their employers.

Ronnie Morales AKA Nicholas Dante

Another opportunity to hear about the lives of the Jewel Box Revue's cast of drag performers comes directly from the Broadway canon: Paul's monologue in *A Chorus Line*. Nicholas Dante, the Pulitzer Prize winning co-author of *A Chorus Line*, performed with the Jewel Box Revue under the pseudonym Ronnie Morales. Nicholas spent his early career in the 60s at the Jewel Box Revue as Ronnie, before taking to Broadway as a male dancer, performing in the ensembles of a handful of Broadway musicals. His *Playbill* biography for *A Chorus Line* acknowledges his identity as a "New York City born Puerto Rican"[22] and mentions his Broadway and television successes, but not his work as Ronnie Morales. However, Nicholas, and his story about becoming Ronnie that became Paul's monologue, became a climactic turning point in *A Chorus Line* remembered by many as one of the more important moments in the musical.

Paul is mild-mannered, polite and timid. "I don't know why, but I loved the musicals,"[23]

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[21] Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 1st edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1998).
[22] Nicholas Dante biography, Playbill for *A Chorus Line*, July 1975, https://www.playbill.com/playbillpagegallery/inside-playbill?asset=00000150-ac7d-d16d-a550-ec7f27fb0000&type=InsidePlaybill&slide=2.
[23] James Kirkwood and Nicholas Dante, *A Chorus Line* (New York: Applause, 1995). 102.

he says, before recounting his experiences being molested at a movie theatre when he was a boy. He doesn't dwell on his trauma, rather choosing to remember his fascination with song and dance in his early years at a time when he already, though young, understood he was gay. "I always knew I was gay, but that didn't bother me. What bothered me was that I didn't know how to be a boy."[24] This sentiment emulates the work of scholars like Clum and D.A. Miller,[25] who strived to explain the cross-generational pull the musical theatre form has on young queer people. Paul recounts a typical story of high school bullying affecting his ability to succeed in school. When he describes auditioning for the Jewel Box Revue as a sixteen-year-old drop-out, he apologizes constantly, reminding his audience that it "was a lifetime ago,"[26] his story tinged with some lingering shame from his experience dressing in drag professionally. The crux of the story is when his parents come to the theatre early, mid-show, and find their son (who they believe to be playing a male role) in drag. When he recounts facing his parents, the interaction is short and clipped, but their reaction is not violent or even disparaging. "All they said to me was please write, make sure you eat and take care of yourself. And just before my parents left, my father turned to the producer and said: 'Take care of my son. . . That was the first time he ever called me that."[27] Paul breaks down and is comforted by Zach as the action moves past his story.

I recall an evolution in my reading of Paul's monologue. As a closeted teen, I remember focusing on Paul's shame, the anecdote about his assault coloring the rest of the speech. However, now I do not see Paul, or Nicholas, or Ronnie as broken, rather as symbols of

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[24] Kirkwood and Dante, *A Chorus Line*, 102
[25] John M. Clum, "'A Little More Mascara': Drag and the Broadway Musical from La Cage Aux Folles to Kinky Boots," in *The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical* (Routledge, 2019); D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998).
[26] Kirkwood and Dante, *A Chorus Line*, 102.
[27] Kirkwood and Dante, *A Chorus Line,* 103.

perseverance. His parents' (however tepid) acceptance that his work led him to drag resonates with my personal experience, and the knowledge that Dante went on to be a lauded author further affirms his choice to do what was necessary for his career and creative expression.

A handful of photos of Ronnie Morales exist, but her name does not appear in any of the surviving JBR programs at Queer Music Heritage, perhaps for the same reasons Paris Todd mentioned above. In photos, Ronnie is a bit coy, but stunningly femme and clearly confident. A particular set of glamour shots on *Queer Music Heritage*[28] features her in a dark wig with light face makeup, black eyebrows, and winged eyeliner in a princess's crown. There is no shame in these portraits, she embodies confidence and beauty. The photos exemplify clearly the contrast between Nicholas (read through Paul), and Ronnie; the drag persona is a tool through which shame and self-doubt are defied.

Lypsinka AKA John Epperson

Lypsinka may be the ultimate "show business" queen. Her high regard for old-Hollywood, experience out of drag as a pianist for the New York City Ballet, groundbreaking work in fashion, and her popularity Off-Broadway in the early-90s positions her uniquely as a multi-hyphenate queen. She hustled hard and reaped the rewards for quite some time, and is regarded as an inspiration for many queens to this day. While John Epperson, the man behind Lypsinka, admits that the character was not created out of a desire to forward any political agenda (a fact noted as frustrating by her more underground critics), her radical visibility in 90s mainstream entertainment has had cross-generational impact both for her fans and on the media's portrayal of drag entertainers.

[28] Sal Angelica, *Untitled*, "More 'Jewel Box Revue' Courtesy of Sal Angelica", *Queer Music Heritage*, https://www.queermusicheritage.com/fem-cl82f2.html

Critical discourse surrounding Lypsinka's productions and popularity by her contemporaries largely focused on the difference between commercial and underground drag. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the queer community (still reckoning with the worst of the AIDS crisis) seemed split into these two factions: performers who used drag to front a radical political agenda, and those who dressed up their queer bodies as an artistic expression of mainstream femininity. Often, queens of color fell into the former category, while white drag queens populated the more nostalgic, latter faction. Drag scholar and activist Vaginal Creme Davis, a Black contemporary of Lypsinka, interviewed by Jeffrey Hilbert in 1995, says of Lypsinka's oevre: "It's easier to digest Lypsinka's kind of performance … It's safer, and people aren't challenged. But when people see an African American in this feminized role, they realize that there's a whole spectrum of being out there and that the black experience or the queer experience is not just limited to one aspect."[29] In the same article, drag queen and journalist/photographer Les/Linda Simpson, notes "The queens are better at PR than they were before… It goes hand in hand with gay people building more confidence, being louder, and being more out there."[30] Lypsinka's visibility is a product of her gumption, a confidence bolstered by her privileged position as palatable (white, female passing).

Lypsinka's palatable, passing drag[31] was considered superficial and nostalgic by those who preferred a more "underground" approach. Hilbert sees Lypsinka as the antithesis to political drag in 1995. David Román, too, critiqued Lypsinka's politics, arguing that the

[29] Jeffrey Hilbert, "The Politics of Drag" in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Duke University Press, 1995), 466.
[30] Hilbert, *The Politics of Drag*, 467.
[31] The qualities of what makes a "passable" queen remain hard to nail down, and the current "fishy" aesthetic, as it has been called, manifests quite differently today from the aesthetic style Lypsinka employed.

nostalgia she uses as the crux of her worldview commodifies camp, problematizing Lypsinka's *I Could Go On Lip-syncing* (the show that solidified her theatrical legacy) as pandering to the privileged few (older, white gay men) who can look back to "the 'simplicity' of gay life before AIDS."[32] Román's argument hinges on the fact that the younger generation, specifically citing his students at the time, does not resonate with many of Lypsinka's chosen icons like Dolores Gray or Tallulah Bankhead. However, for following generations (such as the one I find myself in), Lypsinka's references serve as an encyclopedia of past icons to discover. We use the internet to google her quotes to find out where they came from, why they are significant. I learned about the very existence of Dolores Gray, the musical *Applause,* and Joan Crawford not from reading formal histories, but from the significance Lypsinka gave to them— she curates and communicates the canon of important cultural figures as *she* sees them, unintentionally giving a glimpse of the icons pre-AIDS New York gays held dear. Without Lypsinka's radical visibility in commercial spaces, I would have one fewer way of connecting with the queer elders whose stories I should have heard first-hand, if they lived to tell their own stories.

Escapism *is* an important pillar of Lypsinka's creative project, but not in a sugar-coated, overly optimistic way. She wants her audience to escape with her to a different time but leaves much of the interpretive work to them. She is not intentionally making points about identity but is willing to let the audience take what they need from her work. While she does not shy away from calling herself a drag queen, her style and presentation harkens back to the early days of commercial drag, where female impersonation was the name of the game. Lypsinka rarely speaks: John speaks for her. This plays to her advantage; lip-syncing helps her "pass," and while

[32] David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*, Unnatural Acts (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998): 99.

that does not seem to be the point, it makes her palatable. In the 90s, live-singing was the more popular performance mode for nightclub queens: think RuPaul, Lady Bunny, Varla Jean Merman et al. Lypsinka speaks in movie quotes; they are often the first part of her long, thoughtful interview answers. Interviewed for the podcast "Entertainmentx," Epperson cites the films of Vincente Minnelli as a significant influence, "the best movies are about identity: look at Vincente Minnelli's movies, they are often about identity…"[33] He mentions *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever,* a film about a woman struggling as she lives with multiple personalities. Though she never directly calls out Minnelli's sexuality[34], nor asserts that his identity films are queer coded, identity politics are of great importance to Epperson's life, despite not being explicitly addressed in his work as Lypsinka.

In 1993, at the pinnacle of her stardom, Lypsinka returned to Boybar, an East Village spot like the Pyramid (which Hilbert regards as the central point of the period's politically charged drag revival) where she got her start. The performance is preserved on YouTube, one of the few archival Lypsinka videos on the site not meticulously curated by John Epperson.[35] Her song choice for the evening one of her signature pastiche performances, set around "But Alive," the song from the 1970 musical *Applause* set in a gay bar. It is ultra-meta: Lypsinka embodies Lauren Bacall's vocals, in a role created for the film *All About Eve* starring Bette Davis. The

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[33] John Epperson, interview with Clayton Howe "John Epperson AKA Lypsinka Part 1 on 'Identity, Fear and Desire,'" *Entertainmentx,* Podcast audio. March 8, 2020, https://open.spotify.com/episode/5r7gCrZUVkNQEIdTjZ3JMU?si=tSTNhePkSQO8uEqwhtbsjw .

[34] Emanuel Levy's biography of Vincente Minnelli goes into detail about his life and status as a semicloseted homosexual.
Emanuel Levy, *Vincente Minnelli: Hollywood's Dark Dreamer*, First Edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009).

[35] Rodger Mikhaiel, *LYPSINKA AT "BOYBAR" IN NYC 1993*, Youtube Video, 9:47, April 18, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jwBImEgilQ&t=1s.

number then moves to Lypsinka's signature telephone schtick, wherein she is interrupted by a phone ringing, she picks it up, lip-syncs to a melodramatic film quote, hangs up and repeats the process. This goes on for nearly seven minutes, and many of the clips feature Faye Dunaway's iconically camp portrayal of Bette Davis's famed rival Joan Crawford. Crawford is a particular object of Lypsinka's fascination; her 2005 Off-Broadway lip-sync play "The Passion of the Crawford" was inspired by the film star's famously camp antics. The connection between Davis and Crawford, mediated by Lypsinka through Lauren Bacall, may have been more obvious to Lypsinka's contemporaries than it is to later generations, but it is the kind of coded innuendo that has dominated drag performance since long before the 90's. Kirle notes the pervasiveness of in-jokes and coded queer themes as "intrinsic" to the queer performances of previous generations, "… musical theatre stars of this era [1930's to 1960's], through their playfulness and antic appropriation of a multiplicity of identities in their performances, helped allay gay anxiety about America's attitude toward gender and role playing. Central to this playfulness about gender was double entendre…"[36]

In reinventing the form of lip-syncing drag performance, Lypsinka positions the practice of coding queer references and sentiments into the text of the drag queen so expertly that her style is practically synonymous with contemporary drag performance. While certainly many performers sing live or otherwise avoid lip-syncing, the "drag mix" is a major player in most drag events.[37] Queens race to perform new songs and memes first, crafting entire performances out of the absurd pivots and fake outs that Lypsinka pioneered. Audience readings of these

[36] Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process*, Theater in the Americas (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 165.
[37] Notable contemporary masters of the drag mix (all of whom have theatrical backgrounds) include Bob the Drag Queen, Kiki Ballchange, Didi Cumswell and the previously mentioned Kizha Carr.

performances can vary, and it often becomes interactive, the audience suggesting new references and jokes, delighted to see their favorite performers in solidarity with their interests or values.

Alexandra Billings

In the early 1990's , around the same time Lypsinka was walking the runway for Thierry Mugler[38] and starring in flashy Off-Broadway lip-sync plays, Alexandra Billings was laying the groundwork for a career that would change altogether the way transgender people are represented onstage and onscreen. According to her biography, "Billings has been acting since 1968 and has performed across the United States in hundreds of plays and musicals… Most every stage role is considered to be a first for a transgender actress."[39] Billings currently appears on Broadway in *Wicked*, as the antagonist-adjacent Madame Morrible, making her the first transgender woman to play that role. Her resume is diverse and expansive from Steppenwolf to Broadway in plays and musicals both dramatic and comedic. However, most compelling to this study of gender-transgressing theatre practitioners is her autobiographical one-woman show, *Before I Disappear*. In that play, which premiered at the Bailiwick Repertory in 1996, Billings embodies characters from her life: her pre-transition self, her wife and childhood sweetheart, her mother, a talk-show host who outs her as transgender on television and more. Billings recounts traumas alongside her triumphant journey into self-actualization and onstage success in Chicago, not by recounting her stories first-hand but by donning the supporting characters from her journey. This choice allows her to shift the focus away from the specifics of what it means to be in transition, or addicted to drugs, or diagnosed as HIV-positive, humanizing her experiences to

[38] TheLypsinka1, "Lypsinka slays on the catwalk for Thierry Mugler, LA, April 1992," Youtube Video, 5:22, April 28, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXBT2rw3B-0.
[39] "Alexandra Billings Bio", no date, accessed October 12, 2021, http://www.alexandrabillings.com/billings/alexandra_billings_bio.pdf.

her audience who, at the time, was more likely to relate to the supporting characters than the play's leading lady. The show is performed without costumes or set, relying only on Billings's performing gift to tell her story. It balances the comedic and the dramatic and features original musical numbers that showcase Billings's powerful vocals.

Billings uses Shanté, the drag persona she created early in her career while she was performing at the renowned Chicago female-impersonation venue the Baton Lounge, as a tool for finding her true self. Donning drag and performing an exaggerated femininity, before she self-actualized as a transgender woman, allowed her to experiment the desire to transgress gender norms. In a 1999 article about her career in *The Advocate*, Billings recounts being cast as a "transvestite" in *Time to Burn* at Steppenwolf. While she originally took the role, she eventually realized she would be unable to pass as *male* in a shower scene, which helped her come to an important conclusion about the politics of accepting that kind of role: "I said, `I'm not built like a boy. In fact, if you call this character a transvestite, politically, I can't do that because you're sending the wrong message to people.' I wanted to do the scene, so they changed the role to a transsexual."[40] Billings' activist message as an HIV-positive woman is also clear in that article, "All my friends are dead, and I'm not even 40 years old. Had [the Reagans] not ignored [the epidemic], we'd be ten years ahead of where we are now."

Billings distanced herself from the world of drag when it stopped being useful and stopped feeling authentic in her daily life. In a 2011 YouTube interview she describes transition as a universal human phenomenon, "you transition out of your twenties, you transition into a marriage, you transition into a new job, and when you do that you get larger and you shed

[40] Laurie Schenden, "ALWAYS A WOMAN TO ME," *The Advocate,* (Regent Media, May 25, 1999).

things— things that you used to *be*, you used to think, you used to hold true and dear and all of that goes away and you become who you were meant to be."[41] She goes on to describe her thoughts on why transgender and drag performers do not often sing live, she feels that when "illusion" becomes the primary concern of the performer, a lower voice or huskier tone can serve as a "tell," breaking the illusion. However, she makes it clear that in her ethos, illusion is not the goal, authenticity is, which allows her unique voice to serve the higher purpose of her performing goals. Billings's ability to thrive across mediums and do so while being radically visible as a transgender woman is a major testament to queer resilience. She transcends any need to code her queerness, though she is not afraid to see the humor her identity can inspire. In a world where identity politics can divide more than they unite, she reclaims her narrative by living her ideal future.

Paris Todd, Ronnie Morales, Lypsinka and Alexandra Billings exemplify the varied ways musical theatre and drag can intersect for queer performing artists from a range of backgrounds. By crossing the thin boundary between the two forms, they can keep drag and musical theatre in conversation through the techniques and aesthetics they employ, as well as in creative roles as writers and producers of their own work. In each of these examples, there is an element of coding the queer experience, and the ever-present necessity of performing for majorly straight audiences that comes along with mainstream entertainment.

Part 2: A Tale of Four Ednas: Drag and Queerness in *Hairspray* from 1988-2021

"I've always said Hairspray is the most devious movie I ever made because it snuck in. It plays in schools and drag queens get the part. I say even racists love Hairspray." John Waters[42]

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[41] CityPagesMN, "Alexandra Billings on Being a Transgender Performer", YouTube video, 2:22, June 16, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCYukDb5dd4.
[42] Jason Keil, "Q&A With John Waters: How Hairspray Secretly Corrupted a Generation,"

The original film *Hairspray* (1988) was created by queer provocateur John Waters as a vehicle for his drag queen muse Divine. The two worked together for decades before *Hairspray*, creating a wild and subversive lexicon of films that aimed to shock and disgust— leaning in to a post-Stonewall era of visibility not by making their characters explicitly queer models of perfection, but by making them disgusting. Divine's work with Waters was widely known for its use of the grotesque to shock and subvert traditional entertainment values; before *Hairspray* and her untimely death, Divine was known best for her performance in *Pink Flamingos* (1972), wherein she literally eats dog shit and orates about the value of murder and cannibalism. In *Hairspray* Divine created the role of Edna Turnblad, the mother of the protagonist Tracy. Edna is one of the elder-generation characters in the film, a group that serves as a foil to their daughters' obsession with modernity, progress, and mainstream entertainment. Edna frequently voices her lived experience as a plus-sized woman to justify her view that the entertainment industry will not accept her daughter. Divine's Edna is a stripped back, almost anti-drag portrayal, with light makeup and flat hair; the character Edna is not a drag queen, she is a real (albeit over-the-top) working-class mother.

In 2002, the musical adaptation of *Hairspray* with a book by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan and music and lyrics by Marc Shaiman and Scott Whittman premiered on Broadway. The musicalized version of the original film is bright, bubbly, and optimistic, the twenty-first century answer to the camp sensibility. Harvey Fierstein, already a notable playwright and performer for his successful Broadway drag shows *Torch Song Trilogy* (1982) and *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983), took on the role of Edna Turnblad. It was a slight departure from his previous

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Phoenix New Times, accessed October 11, 2021, https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/arts/john-waters-hairspray-crybaby-this-filthy-world-celebrity-theater-phoenix-11316301.

work, as he played a drag queen in and out of drag in *Torch Song*, and wrote *La Cage Aux Folles* about a man who dresses in drag as his career, but lives everyday life as his assigned male gender. *Hairspray* was a major commercial success, winning eight Tony awards (one for Fierstein's acting), and running for over 2,500 performances on Broadway. The musical made *Hairspray* a household name, adding a 2007 film re-make (of the musical version) starring John Travolta as Edna, and in 2016 a live television performance of the musical, which saw Fierstein back in his iconic Edna drag.

It is because of the cultural significance and widespread fame of *Hairspray* that I take it on to discover the ways its gender politics can inform a contemporary conception of drag in the commercial theatre. By considering the writing and performance of the various versions of Edna Turnblad onstage and onscreen, I hope to understand the range in the ways queer sensibility, however intangible, justifies the cross-gender casting of the role. My argument is that by casting an openly queer actor as Edna, the purpose of the gender-play reads stronger, and that the opposite choice (in the case of Travolta's portrayal in the 2007 film) privileges a mis-reading of the original queer-coded intent of Waters and Divine's critique of late-80's feminisms. Perhaps mis-readings of Edna's coded queerness confuse the conversation around the cross-dressing roles. A lack of explicit discourse around queerness and drag in such roles has encouraged further musical adaptations of non-queer drag films like *Tootsie* or *Mrs. Doubtfire*, to loud and passionately negative reception from parts of the queer community[43], and even more recently, mainstream critics.[44] By exploring four major portrayals of Edna Turnblad, along with the

[43] Christian Lewis, "The Gender Problem 'Tootsie' Can't Dress Up," *American Theatre*, May 7, 2019, https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/05/07/the-gender-problem-tootsie-cant-dress-up/.
[44] Maya Phillips, "A Scottish Nanny Caught in a Time Warp.," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2021, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A685491799/AONE?u=sunybuff_main&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=610834e0.

creative choices, text and reception of the character in each iteration, I hope to track the back-and-forth discussion between executions of cross-dressing for the role, which I find to be a microcosm of a canon-wide confusion about the role drag plays in musical theatre.

The creation and reimagination of Edna Turnblad reveals both the advantages and pitfalls of using drag to stage coded queerness. From the original film to the creation of the stage musical, there was consistency in the ethos and aesthetic of the character: Edna was an effective vehicle to feature queer performers in a canonically non-queer role. However, the 2007 film's all-white, all-cis production team made a fatal error in the casting of John Travolta in the role. Travolta's prosthetics-heavy vision of Edna runs antithetical to the character John Waters created, erasing the queerness from the text and confusing the intersectional intent of the story, making Edna's size, class and masculinity a punchline. Most recently, *RuPauls Drag Race* contestant and Columbus, Ohio drag mother Nina West was announced as Edna in the 2021 re-launch of a *Hairspray* national tour. Andrew Levitt (the artist behind Nina West) provides fascinating insight into the task of taking on Edna as a trained theatre professional and nightlife drag fixture.

Edna Turnblad is not a drag queen, but she is written to be played by one. The text of *Hairspray* does not make Mrs. Turnblad's gender subversion a plot point and there are no references to her being physically different other than by her size, a feature her daughter Tracy shares. The role could feasibly be played by a woman, so why did Waters choose that role for Divine? John Waters discusses leveraging shock in the interest of progressive ideals: "We tried to shock you to pay attention to something different, but tried to make you laugh at the same time."[45] Waters and Divine had a long working relationship and as-long friendship, suggesting the answer to my question may be simple and utilitarian: Divine played Edna because it was the

[45] Jason Keil, "Q&A With John Waters," n.pag.

most appropriate role. John Waters and Divine crafted Edna as a coded queer character, which is evidenced by her intersectional positions on gender, class, race, and body size in the film.

An overarching theme in Waters' story hinges on the daughters in the show reflecting the attitudes of their mothers. Tracy is a feminist because of the sensibility she was raised around. Edna's daughter is an activist: the plot of *Hairspray* hinges on the negative consequences Tracy must face as a result of her identity as a fat woman and her outspoken belief in racial integration. Edna's reluctance to allow Tracy to audition for The Corny Collins Show in Act 1 is based on her lived experience, an act of protection from a world Mrs. Turnblad knows is all too cruel to women like them. However, by positioning Edna as an "other" from the top, and casting a well-known drag figure in the role, the authors make it explicitly clear that there is something queer about the Turnblads. Both of Tracy's parents are entrepreneurs who settled for small versions of their big dreams, and while they are written as a straight couple, both parents tend to buck "traditional" gender roles: the mother spends her day doing hard physical labor on her feet, cleaning and ironing clothes while the father pursues a less conservative and more creative practice in his joke shop.

In her article "Racializing White Drag" Reagan Rhyne argues that many white drag queens (including Divine) leverage camp as an aesthetic that can forward progressive notions of class, and thereby race. To Rhyne, the queer project of Divine has less to do with subverting gender, rather, "Class…becomes the very excess that characterizes Divine's drag; working class femininity, instead of codes of masculinity, is the marker of incongruity."[46] Her reading of *Hairspray* asserts that the solidarity between the Turnblads and Motormouth's community of

[46] Ragan Rhyne, "Racializing White Drag," *Journal of Homosexuality* 46, no. 3–4 (April 20, 2004): 189, https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v46n03_11.

Black Baltimoreans raises the stakes of the class struggle they each experience, and that Divine's Edna "disrupts codes of femininity as much as, if not more than, her performance of gender and further lays bare the 'work' of embodiment of all of these categories."[47] Because Waters and Divine are masters of camp, the original iteration of *Hairspray* is a rich site for studying queer performances of class, race, and other themes. The forthcoming iterations of the story leave true camp behind for a more mainstream approach, while maintaining most of the dramatic efficacy of Waters' original screenplay.

The book of the 2002 Broadway Musical *Hairspray* is also clear about the Turnblads' maternal lineage of progressive thinking; in Act 2 Edna reminds Tracy as they are booked by the police at a pro-integration protest, "remember, your grandma was a Suffragette!"[48] Fierstein's stage Edna is faithful to the character Divine created, especially apparent in her first set of scenes, where the costume design is practically a head-to-toe recreation of the iconic pin-curl and house-dress look Divine sported in the 1988 film. The tone of the musical and the cadence of its jokes result in a more sugary, palatable Baltimore than the one Waters depicts, but the stage adaptation is thematically quite faithful to the film. One line in the script briefly flirts with the idea that Edna is more masculine than she should be: a one-sided phone-call in which she responds to the person on the other line, "No, I'm not her father,"[49] a self-referential nod to Harvey Fierstein's iconic grizzly voice which is not present in the John Waters screenplay. As noted by Ryan Donovan, the script of *Hairspray* (2002) has a tendency for this kind of subtle hypocrisy, especially when it comes to fatness and race: "While *Hairspray* works hard to be in

[47] Rhyne, "Racializing White Drag," 190.
[48] Marc Shaiman et al., *Hairspray* (New York; Milwaukee: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books; Hal Leonard Corp., 2002): 71.
[49] Marc Shaiman et al., *Hairspray, 3*1.

on the jokes, it also subtly subverts the identities it means to celebrate by laughing not only with but sometimes at its characters."[50]

There is another touch of the early twenty-first century musical's proclivity for spectacle and glitz in the way Edna transforms in the number "Welcome to the 60s"— once she's been made over, her hair is perfectly primped and her dress is made of sequin fabric and lined with feathers, whereas in the original, Edna's costume becomes more modern but no less tacky after she starts trying to fit in. Fierstein looks conventionally *fierce* in a way that Divine never did: this is a post-RuPaul *Supermodel of the World* drag.[51] This polished aesthetic goes further in John Travolta's portrayal of Edna in the musical film *Hairspray* (2007), wherein he confuses the character's queerness because of a mis-reading of the coded queer history Divine and John Waters baked into the role. In casting and providing creative control to a famously masculine, publicly heterosexual movie-star, the film does not explicitly work any better or worse, dramatically, though critical discourse surrounding the use of drag, fat suits, and racialized performances illuminate the importance of queerness to *Hairspray's* relevance and effectiveness.

The look and feel of the 2007 musical film *Hairspray* clearly evokes a more palatable or mainstream aesthetic than the Waters film. In 2012, Suzanne Woodward, a scholar of transgender representation in film, tracked the differences in the gender politics of John Travolta's Edna Turnblad with Divine's original portrayal.[52] Her critique is not an

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[50] Ryan Donovan, "'Must Be Heavyset': Casting Women, Fat Stigma, and Broadway Bodies," *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2019): 5, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/539.

[51] *Supermodel of the World,* RuPaul's 1993 debut album, marked a turning point in the mainstream success of drag performers and is an especially significant rebranding of RuPaul from underground club-kid to mainstream Diva.

[52] Suzanne Woodward, "Taming Transgression: Gender-Bending in Hairspray (John Waters, 1988) and Its Remake," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 10, no. 2 (September 1, 2012): 115–26, https://doi.org/10.1386/ncin.10.2-3.115_1.

admonishment of Travolta's portrayal or Adam Shankman's directorial vision, in fact arguing that the realness of this film's Edna might make the gender transgression in the film more "palatable" to mainstream audiences.[53] Woodward also asserts that the move from underground film to Hollywood blockbuster made this change a necessity, and that the camp sensibility of Divine's gender subversion is all but lost in the politics of Shankman's *Hairspray*:

> In the remake of Hairspray, family values still centre the film and there is a particular focus on racial tolerance and the rejection of the western beauty myth, but the camp gender disruption that characterizes the original is overshadowed rather than foregrounded. In part, this is a result of the film's lessened 'awareness of incongruity' that Babuscio identifies as a defining feature of camp as a political strategy, and in part it can be attributed to the Broadway musical that stands between Shankman's and Waters' versions. However, the most obvious source of the diminished campness of the film is the appearance of John Travolta in Divine's original role as Edna Turnblad, epitomizing the 'family-friendly drag queen' to which Waters objects.[54]

Woodward's primary interest is the impact of filmmaking on the perception of Edna, failing to acknowledge the reverence Fierstein's Edna seems to have for the original, even going so far as to say the musical "stands between" the Waters and Shankman films, that the 2007 film fails to deliver on the self-aware sensibility of camp because the Broadway Musical is a mainstream project.[55] She also avoids engaging in specificity about the nature of what makes *Hairspray* queer: it is the point of view of the artists at work, not the plot. *Hairspray* the Broadway musical was written by white gay men who were new to Broadway and known for underground

[53] Woodward, "Taming Transgression," 124.
[54] Woodward, "Taming Transgression," 121.
[55] Woodward, "Taming Transgression," 121.

sensibilities: composer Marc Shaiman and lyricist Scott Whittman built their careers by staging big, queer camp productions on the Lower East Side in the 70s and later work in television and cabaret, respectively. Co-book writer and gay humorist Mark O'Donnell was called "an eccentric guy" by John Waters himself.[56] Rob Marshall, a perennial Broadway dancer, choreographer, director at the time (also gay,) directed the musical. Waters was reportedly thrilled with the musicalization of his film[57], no doubt in part because the adaptors understood his sensibility.

Though Shankman, who directed the 2007 film, is a gay man, his background is more deeply engrained in the mainstream than the previous handlers of *Hairspray*, having grown up in an entertainment business family in Los Angeles. Before *Hairspray*, Shankman was well known as an out-and-proud director and choreographer in film, television, and music videos. In a 2003 *The Advocate* article, Shankman says of his experience, "I never felt like I was shut out of anything by straight people."[58] Such a statement seems to run antithetical to the ethos of John Waters, who famously wrote the words "The world of the heterosexual is a sick and boring life."[59] This difference in ethos and willingness to assimilate color Shankman's his adaptation. Perhaps an idealistic view of Hollywood as a progressive paradise is to blame for the casting and creative control given to John Travolta in Shankman's film.

Two things are clear in the archive of press surrounding Travolta's Turnblad: that he was

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[56] Denise Grady, "Mark O'Donnell, 'Hairspray' Writer, Dies at 58," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/08/theater/mark-odonnell-hairspray-writer-dies-at-58.html.
[57] Susan King, "John Waters Talks about 'Hairspray,' His Biggest — and Most Unexpected — Hit," *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 2018, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-hairspray-john-waters-20180712-story.html.
[58] Dave White, "Master of the House: The Wedding Planner's Adam Shankman Lucked into His First Movie Job. Now He's Directing Steve Martin and Queen Latifah in Bringing Down the House. (Film)," *The Advocate*, March 4, 2003, 56–58.
[59] John Waters, *Female Trouble*, October 4, 1974, (Baltimore, MD: Dreamland).

reluctant to take the role because he saw drag as gimmicky and "theatrical," and that his goal for Edna was to escape into the character so completely that the audience would forget they were watching a very famous man play Tracy's mother. Travolta, by most accounts, failed his goal of escaping into Edna (perhaps through no fault of his own, and rather a byproduct of his status as a famously masculine sex-symbol). Criticism of the film focused primarily on the transformative physical process of *making* John Travolta into Edna, rather than his choices as an actor, as Woodward notes:

> John Travolta, on the other hand, is noticeably still John Travolta (albeit in a dress with elaborate prosthetics), far more attractive (and plastic) than Divine's version of Edna … In contrast to Divine's performance in the original film, Travolta appears more as an unintentional parody than an anti-normative camp rebel.[60]

The "unintentional parody" Woodward references results from a failure to engage in a *queer* practice of drag— Travolta is parodying femininity rather than the structures than define femininity. The painstaking (and expensive) efforts by the crew to make Edna a "real woman" resulted in a character who, from the beginning, conforms to the commonplace ideal of a 1950's housewife, whereas Divine's Edna either actively goes against or reluctantly fails to conform to such standards throughout the original film. Masking Travolta's masculinity in turn masks his character's queerness. This, more than any other portrayal, falls more firmly into the category of "gimmickry." By *avoiding* the queerness of the character, Travolta *masks* the queerness of the character, which at first seems like an attempt to avoid appropriation, but ultimately comes across as an uninformed misreading of the text. When queer people "defy faggotry," they do not

[60] Suzanne Woodward, "Taming Transgression: Gender-Bending in Hairspray (John Waters, 1988) and Its Remake," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 10, no. 2 (September 1, 2012): 122, https://doi.org/10.1386/ncin.10.2-3.115_1.

do so for protection from judgment, rather they are finding ways to reconcile performing their queerness for straight audiences. Travolta here does the opposite: he shirks queerness for his own benefit, as a shield he holds up against the queer community who know him as famously heterosexual. However, when a queer performer (like Divine, Fierstein, or West) uses Edna as a tool to express a coded version of their queer point of view, they connect on a deeper level with *all* audiences.

In a behind-the-scenes feature on Travolta's transformation, Shankman and Travolta became distracted from Edna's original status as a transgressively masculine, working-class woman by the pursuit of Hollywood magic. Shankman recalls: "It was months and months and months in the creation of the look for Edna. Tony, the makeup effects guy, had to create an Edna that not only could walk around in the streets and really look like a woman, but also had to create different suits that could accommodate different physical needs for the character, because this character needed to dance a lot."[61] Travolta also states, "I decided that she was a hot tamale in her day, and she was very voluptuous,"[62] which again seems to contradict the original text of the musical, where Edna works to protect her fat daughter from the prejudice she experienced as a fat woman. It is important to note that *Hairspray* the musical is as much a project of glitz and nostalgia as it is a social justice commentary and works more to make the audience feel good than reckon with issues of racism, fat phobia and queerness. However, perhaps because of Waters' expert coding of the queer narratives in his original film, a much more explicitly progressive piece, the text of the musical has a rich body of queer subtext within the larger themes about racism and fat phobia. While it is difficult to track each of the numerous

[61] Alterian, Inc., "AlterianMFX: Travolta Into Turnblad", YouTube video, 6:43, January 11, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZ572AUpocw.
[62] Alterian, Inc., "Travolta into Turnblad," 2011.

independent licensed productions of *Hairspray* that take place over the world, the recent casting of the 2021 Broadway National Tour production encouragingly lends the role again to an experienced drag performer.

In Summer 2021, it was announced that Andrew Levitt, AKA Nina West would become the first *RuPaul's Drag Race* alum to take on the role of Edna Turnblad in a major national production of *Hairspray*. West— a well-known figure in drag as a national title holder (Entertainer of the Year, 2008), philanthropist, and producer of high-end drag shows— built her character in Columbus, Ohio after graduating from Denison University with a BA in Theatre in 2001.[63] Interviewed for Broadway.com about Edna Turnblad, and what it means for her to take on a such an iconic drag role, West notes the way nightlife and musical theatre influenced her early career, setting her up for the success she has found today:

> When I first started drag, I was so intimidated by the art form… it was queens in bars and nightclubs and feeling that kind of judgement from gay men… and as I've grown, as I've done drag for 22 years, I've really embraced this crazy, incredible, beautiful art form that does allow be to celebrate and accentuate my body, celebrate my personality quirks— theatre taught me that.[64]

She also comments on Edna's journey throughout the action of *Hairspray,* the way her daughter's interest in modernity helps her to come out of her shell and embrace her beauty despite a lack of confidence: "Drag reveals who you are… it doesn't conceal, it doesn't hide you.

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[63] Grant Walters, "Interview: Nina West's Big Debut on the Small Screen," *Columbus Underground* (blog), February 28, 2019, https://www.columbusunderground.com/interview-nina-wests-big-debut-on-the-small-screen-gw1/.

[64] Broadway.com, "Broadway Profiles: RuPaul's Drag Race Star Nina West on Bringing HAIRSPRAY on Tour", YouTube video, 6:46, August 31, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xksPMCVA82A.

And so we get to see Edna … in this very simple state at the beginning of the show, but by the end of the show we get to see her revealed into this gorgeous butterfly!"[65] West is able to relate to the coded queer subtext embedded into Edna's character by her predecessors, she does not see Edna's journey of self-acceptance through self-actualization as far off from her experience in drag performance, "I live in a world of confidence… [but] we see Edna at the beginning of the show really not in love with herself."[66] Here, the character impacts the performer and vice versa. This exchange happens in both details and broad thematic elements across the multiple forms the story of *Hairspray* has taken on. Divine, Fierstein, Travolta and Levitt remain in conversation through the character, though they have never sat in the same room.

Conclusion: How to Weaponize Your BFA in Musical Theatre

In a now-deleted tweet on March 6, 2021 twitter user @_AHuff caused a bit of a stir among fans of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The tweet, accompanied by images of *Drag Race* contestants Rosé and Denali, read: "Truly do not believe either of these people has an actual passion for drag— I do however believe that a few yrs ago they both resorted to slapping on wigs & weaponizing their BFAs in musical theatre as a last-ditch grab at fame."[67] Social media is full of hot-takes on reality competitions, and the *Drag Race* online discourse has a reputation for particular vitriol. While some pointed out that Denali is not a trained musical theatre performer (though Rosé does have a BFA from Wichita State University[68]), the queens being called out saw the humor in the

[65] Broadway.com, "Broadway Profiles: Nina West," 2021.
[66] Broadway.com, "Broadway Profiles: Nina West," 2021.
[67] AHuff, "Truly Do Not Believe Either of These People...," Twitter Post (deleted), March 6, 2021.
[68] Nicole Rosky, "BWW Interview: How Rosé Sashayed from Musical Theatre to RuPaul's Drag Race," BroadwayWorld.com, accessed December 2, 2021, https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/BWW-Interview-How-Ros-Sashayed-from-Musical-Theatre-to-RuPauls-Drag-Race-20210305.

tweet, and went on to release merchandise to capitalize on the moment.[69] The tweet is particularly biting, as Twitter discourse often is, but I think the author is voicing a long-held, kept quiet opinion on drag performers by others in the performing arts and gay community. The question I am left asking myself is: is it possible to create work that is truly impactful on an audience who sees me as making a desperate "last ditch attempt at fame"? Of course, this does not mean abandoning performance, but rather deeply considering my audience. Nightlife is notorious for being exclusive and elitist, which goes hand in hand with white supremacy, so how can I reach out to queer folks on the margins instead? What does it mean to make access to my work more open to those who might not be inclined to sit in a room full of drunk white gays? By looking to the past and understanding that "weaponizing" one's skills and talents in and out of drag, I am able to better reckon with the paradox of needing to perform my queerness for commercial gain.[70] Theatre Queens do this constantly, and lucratively, creating kinship spaces where they entertain friends, fans and strangers alike, using the skills they honed (either through formal training, like a BFA, or otherwise) to live— drag becomes a tool, a strategy wherein their labor is valuable creatively and commercially.

Also at play in the dynamic of drag fans who see musical theatre queens as desperate or selling-out is the increasing straight audience drag has amassed over the past decade. My

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[69] As of December 2021, you still can buy a "Rosenali Weaponizing Diploma"
"The Rosénali Weaponizing Diploma," mybestjudy merch, accessed March 28, 2021, https://mybestjudymerch.com/products/the-rosenali-weaponizing-diploma.

[70] On November 9, 2021, it was announced that Rosé will lead a reading of a new musical by composer Billy Reece, *Fowl Play*, "a new musical about two queer musical theatre writers who are commissioned to write an apology musical for a certain homophobic fried chicken corporation."
Billy McEntee, "RuPaul's Drag Race Star Rosé to Lead a New Musical Reading Directed by John Tartaglia," *Playbill.com*, November 29, 2021, http://www.playbill.com/article/rupauls-drag-race-star-rose-to-lead-a-new-musical-reading-directed-by-john-tartaglia.

research has shown that performing queerness through drag for majority-straight audiences in hardly a new phenomenon. Queens like Paris Todd or Lypsinka have been "weaponizing" their ability to work in multiple, if adjacent, mediums for decades, surviving on their art while using explicitly queer methods like coding, double entendre, innuendo and camp to entertain those who may simply be "slumming" while also managing to perform their solidarity with any members of the queer community that may be present. Other artists, like Alexandra Billings and Nicholas Dante manage to break free of the need to code their identities and provide the canon with riveting and radically honest portrayals of those on the fringes, be it a transgender woman using drag to find herself, or a latin boy from New York City who toured in drag before penning a Pulitzer-prize winning musical.

In 2017, I entered a small amateur drag competition at a now closed Upper West Side cabaret bar called The West End. I had been immersing myself in nightlife drag as much as possible, trying to determine what kind of queen I wanted Ms. Golden Delicious to be. Each week had a theme: "90's week", "Childhood", and my favorite, "Broadway." That week, my tap number "If They Could See Me Now," from *Sweet Charity* (1966), went over like a smash, and I knew that by channeling my training and passion for musical theatre, I could reach a new level of self-actualization and give the kind of performance that would win the competition. My winning finale number was a mashup of female roles from middle school, high school and community theatre musicals, before I came out of the closet: Eliza Doolittle, *My Fair Lady;* Sally Brown*, You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*; Kathy Selden, *Singin' in the Rain* and Dorothy Gale*, The Wizard of Oz*. By reclaiming these roles and living out my queer boy fantasy lip-syncing "Over the Rainbow"[71] in front of a room full of close friends and total strangers, I was able to connect:

[71] The Barbra Streisand version, from *One Voice* (1987).

with my younger self, the audience before me, the text of an iconic queer torch-song, and the new art I would go on to pursue professionally. At first, I saw drag as an opportunity to liberate myself from a world of mostly straight gatekeepers, art by and for queer folks. However, I have learned that the true magic of drag does not need to exist inside of a gay/straight binary, and that when my work is truly self-actualized, I can connect with more people than ever, regardless of their sexuality. Self-actualization is the way I Defy Faggotry. At The West End, I claimed, if for a moment, a bit of futurity, defying all pressure to perform anything other than the *me* I wanted to be. I created my own coded queer readings of those songs, without needing to change the text, simply by embodying the characters as a queer performer in drag. This was possible because of the conversation between performers and the canon, between the subjects of Part 1 of this thesis and works like *Hairspray* in Part 2. By allowing them to exist in adjacent spaces, and keeping their symbiotic relationship alive, we connect our past with the future and allow performance to exist as both entertainment, escapism and education.

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