

Film Close-Up: John Travolta

by Joey_Berlin

In the days of "Saturday Night Fever" and "Grease," John Travolta's dancing was the epitome of cool. Then after Quentin Tarantino threw Travolta a life preserver by casting him in "Pulp Fiction" and giving him his first big dance number since "Staying Alive," his on-screen boogies evolved into their own minievents.

JOHN TRAVOLTA - John Travolta stars as Edna Turnblad in a remake of the musical 'Hairspray.' CNS Photo courtesy of David James. It was a selling point of the "Get Shorty" sequel "Be Cool" that Travolta and Uma Thurman, his dance partner from Tarantino's movie, reunited on the dance floor. And Travolta gets to dance once again in the new musical "Hairspray."

The 53-year-old superstar is a riot in drag, playing the 300-pound mother of Tracy Turnblad, a girl in 1962 Baltimore who dreams of dancing on the "Corny Collins Show." She gets her shot at local stardom in "Hairspray," which was first a marginally successful movie from director John Waters before it became a big, brassy Broadway musical that won a bunch of Tony awards.

Travolta, who is on yet another hot streak after a few years of back-to-back disappointments, recently co-starred in the blockbuster comedy "Wild Hogs." He will reunite with that film's director for another comedy next year, "Old Dogs," co-starring with his wife, Kelly Preston, and Robin Williams.

Q: Is it important that audiences view your character in "Hairspray" as a real woman and not just as a man in drag?

A: Yeah, the idea was that it had to be woman. And that meant that I had big breasts, a big butt and a little waist - the full prosthetic. You had to visually believe that I was a woman. If I could do that, then I could do the acting part. I can move and dance and round out a movement to be more feminine than masculine. With the help of the visual, I could add my dance movements and those other layers.

Q: Did playing this part alter your ideas about women?

A: I don't know how they do it. Of course, this is in 1962 and back in those days there were more accoutrements, more bras, especially for the overweight. I do remember my mother wearing stockings, a girdle, bra and high heels. And that was enough to exhaust her. I wondered why it all exhausted her and now, cut to 40 years later, I know exactly why she was exhausted. I tried it and it'll take your breath away, dealing with all that.

Q: So was your performance inspired by your mother?

A: You know, I have a library of great memories from growing up with a lot of great women. But I also have memories of women from theater and film. I like watching women, and as an actor I try to observe as much as I can. But I never thought I'd ever have to use it. So you watch your mother, her friends, and ladies onstage and screen, and you build up a knowledge of behavior. It was mixture of things.

Q: You have not danced on-screen in a long time. After so many years, was it any different this time?

A: It was exhausting because I had on a fat suit. But on the other hand, it was exhilarating because it got me in shape again and I lost some weight. It was fun. I wanted to do a musical for the last 30 years. I was offered "A Chorus Line," "Phantom" and "Chicago," but I just couldn't see it. The producers of "Hairspray" gave me a year and two months to think about it. They convinced me that all departments were A-plus. Musicals are like Westerns and other genres. There's no guarantee, so you need to have all your ducks lined up.

Q: Why do you think they wanted to cast you?

A: I don't know. After 30 years of being a leading man, and a macho leading man at that, I wondered, "Why me?" What was it about my performances in "Face Off" and "Broken Arrow" that made them think I'd look good as a 300-pound woman? I'm dead serious. But they thought I could pull it off.

Q: You also danced with Christopher Walken, who plays your husband. Was it hard to re-educate your brain about being led on a dance floor?

A: It was a trick to undo that. There was a distinct rethinking. But I fell into it pretty easily because, years ago, I wanted to be a dance instructor and you had to practice both sides in order to learn how to teach. So I just fell back to that.

Q: Most people do not realize the depth of your theater experience. Would you ever return to the stage?

A: Honestly, I did stage from the time I was 12 until I was 26 years old. I know it's sacrilegious to say, but I did my years onstage. It's a lot of work. Movies are hard, but then they're over. If you commit to a year's run for a Broadway show, man, you'd rather be digging ditches by the time it's over.

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