

Hedwig and the Angry Inch: Not Your Average Transvestite Musical

By Sarah Dooley and Robin Lyon

Hedwig and the Angry Inch, written by, starring, and directed by John Cameron Mitchell with music by Stephen Trask, is a stunningly original musical, recently adapted for the screen from the Off-Broadway hit, in which the music is the story rather than a strange and frightening interruption. The Hedwig we are introduced to is a lounge singer touring with her band, the Angry Inch, in a vengeful, musical, and personal pursuit of the former partner and soul mate, Tommy Gnosis, who has betrayed her to become a rock icon. The songs form a story telling us about her past, problems, and philosophies; they build a person through a montage of vibrant isolated images.

The story follows a boy named Hansel from his childhood in East Berlin through his attempt to escape the country by getting a sex change operation and marrying an American G.I. The operation goes wrong, and Hansel (now Hedwig) is left with the titular “angry inch,” abandoned in a Kansas trailer park with nothing but a fabulous collection of blonde wigs to fall back on. The opening song, “Tear Me Down”, begins, “Don’t you know me Kansas City, I’m the new Berlin wall,” and continues in a spoken interlude, “Hedwig is like that wall, standing before you in a divide between east and west, slavery and freedom, man and woman, top and bottom.” Berlin, itself suffering from a split personality, is the city that created her. It is the city which made Hansel willing to “leave behind a small part of oneself” in order to run to away to America, only to watch the wall torn down on the day her husband leaves her. The young boy being

exposed to the excitement of American radio, the teenager in love and willing to undergo a sex change operation to get away from Berlin, becomes the odd neighbor in a trailer park in Kansas: a woman who has gone through many hardships, but is confidently pursuing music, “influencing” the men in the town, and both changing the world of and falling in love with then Tommy Speck, a small-town teenage “Jesus Freak”. Who then leaves her alone, forcing her once more to reconsider who she really is.

Hedwig is the story of its protagonist’s struggle with identity, torn in terms of sexuality and self. The failed operation leaves her literally between genders, and the ways she changes herself to be with the America GI, and then to be a “normal” member of their Kansas trailer park, continue to skew her identity. In one song, “The Origin of Love”, the band presents Plato’s idea that humans were originally half-man half-woman, man and man, or woman and woman, and were then split apart by angry and fearful gods (thus explaining hetero and homosexuality, and in this instance, telling how humans were separated from their other halves). It is her search for this cosmic other half, signified by a half face tattooed on her hip, that forms the largest part of Hedwig’s struggle. Her past losses force her to face her identity and examine whether there really is a cosmic other half somewhere and, if so, whether she can be whole without hers.

The music throughout the film blends perfectly with the story. Many of its songs: “Origin of Love”, “Midnight Radio”, “Wicked Little Town”, “Sugar Daddy”, can stand alone as great rock ballads, while others: “Tear Me Down”, “Angry Inch”, serve more as aids to the plot, although still delivering great rock and roll. “Wig In A Box” is a hilarious and catchy anthem to wigs, makeup and the daily toil of a working “woman” in the Midwest. Tommy Gnosis offers a new version of “Wicked Little Town”, which

poignantly ties together Hedwig's struggle and offers a new explanation, presented at the film's incredibly powerful climax.

Hedwig's life is told in random, witty flashbacks; the band is on stage performing, or Hedwig is telling the audience a story, and suddenly she's speaking from inside an oven or sunbathing nude in rubble next to the Berlin wall. In her stories Hedwig delivers a dry but hilarious lounge humor, but one always with a bittersweet tinge to it, when we know what's behind it. There are also animations throughout the film that illustrate Hedwig's belief in and search for cosmic love. The cartoon people are primitive and unilinear; they swim and vibrate like spermatozoa, and somehow in their rich plainness capture the most instinctual emotions of the complex human characters. These elements, which could have been incoherent interruptions if handled poorly, are instead blended seamlessly together to form an incredibly satisfying experience. Their sensitive expansion of characters and unpretentious introduction of ideas lift the film above simple camp fun and make it into something real, thought provoking and genuinely touching.