

HEDWIG & THE ANGRY INCH

SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

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Surprising almost no one, John Cameron Mitchell's ebullient transgender rock opera "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" makes a seamless transition from rock club to stage to screen, descending on Park City with enough positive advance word to qualify it the rare sure bet of Sundance 2001. It didn't hurt that its golden-boy writer-director-star was given full reign over his creation, but in cosmic collaboration with composer Stephen Trask, whose infectious song cycle bridges the gap between glam and grunge, this electrifying production transports the off-Broadway sensation to soaring new cinematic heights. Whether or not Hedwig mania spreads to the hinterlands and ignites a new sensitivity for the plight of the transgendered -- or any underdog, for that matter -- depends on Fine Line's shrewd marketing of this wholly unique rock and roll musical monologue. But the film's deft ability to touch just about any audience with its resonant plea for self-acceptance is triumphant enough.

Framed as a series of live performances by a misfit rock group in strip-mall seafood restaurants across America, lead singer and "internationally ignored song stylist" Hedwig Schmidt recounts her amazing life story in flashback, through songs, monologues, animation, devastating asides and enough costume changes to quash the Cold War. After fleeing his austere East German boyhood in 1961 with a G.I. lover, Hedwig discovers heartbreak and deception in America after a botched sex change operation leaves her with an "angry inch" -- she's female-identified with vestiges of male equipment. Left with nothing but her vast wig collection and childhood dreams of rock and roll stardom, Hedwig forms a band, The Angry Inch, out of her Kansas trailer which grows to include her second husband Yitzhak (Miriam Shor), a back-up singer with gender dysphoria of his own. Hedwig thinks she's found her elusive other half after she falls in love with teenage Jesus freak Tommy, whom she rechristens Tommy Gnosis -- a Ziggy Stardust-like rock messiah who steals Hedwig's songs and embarks on a sold-out cross-country arena tour. Hedwig retaliates by launching an Angry Inch tour in Tommy's shadow, thinking she can steal back some of the limelight she helped create. What she learns on the road is that it's not the size of the venue that counts, it's the energy you bring to the performance that makes it so cathartic.

Part of Hedwig's appeal off-Broadway, aside from its unconventional storytelling methods, was the way in which the show broke the fourth wall by fusing monologue and performance with Hedwig's abrupt leaps into the audience -- she put her life in the audience's lap, often literally -- so that it had no choice but to feel touched by the character's incredible journey of self-discovery. Of course the dilemma in translating

Hedwig to the big screen is that the fourth wall can't be broken like it could in the productions live rock-show backdrop But that doesn't stop the irrepressible Hedwig from leaping off the screen in other, more inventive ways, inciting audience sing-alongs during one number and employing animated drawings by Emily Hubley (Faith's daughter) in another to better articulate the roots of this feverish original character's desperate search for fulfillment.

A glorified drag show at heart (it was spawned in a rock club before it played off-Broadway) Hedwig never forgets its marginalized roots. It's still a bare-bones production that celebrates making do with what you have and giving your all even when your audience is a handful of strip-mall geriatrics and misfit youths. The wig and costume budget seems to have been inflated tenfold for the movie version -- Arianne Phillips' Filth Mart chic (she's dressed Madonna and Courtney Love) and Mike Potter's Farrah-era flips help imbue the production with its outrageous glam rock-rooted style. In many ways, Hedwig rights all the wrongs of "Velvet Goldmine," advancing that muddled film's ambisexual re-make/re-model aesthetic while avoiding the pitfalls of Todd Haynes' academic rigor.

The intricacy of Mitchell's wildly original story line, which equates the construction of the Berlin Wall with the onset of Hedwig's gender dysphoria and its downfall with her own personal awakening, never grows pretentious or heavy handed, thanks to Trask's Grammy-winning songs that advance the plot with a vengeance, all the while standing apart as terrific compositions in their own right. Indeed, the fusion of Mitchell's monologues with Trask's music is what finally lends this unforgettable story its universal resonance. It's easy to see why tourists from Dubuque kept returning in droves to see Hedwig off-Broadway and embrace their inner tranny hooker: A classic collaboration that delves to the heart of transgendered longing -- where one's sense of wholeness is only ever half there -- "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" provides equal-opportunity inspiration for anyone who ever got stuck with the short end of the stick.

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