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Broadway's 'Hedwig and the Angry Inch': How Far We've Come

By Eric Sasson

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Neil Patrick Harris in a scene from 'Hedwig & the Angry Inch'
Joan Marcus

I don't remember the last time I heard a **Broadway** audience scream so loud. From the first moment **Neil Patrick Harris** lowers onto the stage of the Belasco theater as **Hedwig** in a jumpsuit with exaggerated and curved legs cobbled together from vintage German and American camouflage fabrics, I knew this wasn't going to be your typical night at the theater.

Perhaps it was the sight of a major Hollywood player taking on a risky, if beloved iconic role. Perhaps because it's been a long time since the original 1998 off-Broadway production, which then led to the 2001 feature film, now a cult classic which has inspired thousands of rabid fans called "Hedheads": "**Hedwig and the Angry Inch**" has been long overdue for its turn on Broadway.

But maybe it was more than that. Maybe it was a way for us to celebrate the transformation of our culture, to acknowledge just how far LGBT rights have come since **John Cameron Mitchell** first started performing the characters of Hedwig and Tommy back at edgy dives like the punk-drag club Squeezebox in the early 90's. Back then, Hedwig was considered fringe, the kind of character you'd see only in certain "downtown" clubs: too gay for the straight venues, too rock and roll for the more mainstream gay bars (and interestingly enough, often "too Broadway" for the rock-and-roll bars).



When Mitchell and composer **Stephen Trask** tried to court the mainstream theaters with the show in 1998, not a single theater wanted to house “Hedwig.”

“Only a few months before our 1998 off-Broadway debut at the Jane Street Theater, there was no theater,” Trask wrote in an email to Speakeasy. “Instead there was an abandoned, derelict ballroom at a flop-house SRO hotel. Peter Askin, our director and producer, built the stage, bought some old movie theater seats, and made that theater for us because no one would have us. The Public? No. New York Theater Workshop? No. The theater on 8th Ave that had been empty for two years: they turned US down. And forget about Broadway. Theaters recoiled at the rock music that actually sounded like rock. They weren’t so fond of the drag element, much less the trans element. The combination was deadly. And frankly, we were just too queer.”

But the Jane Street Theatre did finally stage “Hedwig,” and the show began to catch on.

“It was a very, very slow build,” Trask said. “We slowly built a coalition of the sliver of theatergoers who didn’t mind the drag and the punk rock, the rockers who didn’t mind the drag and the theater, the gay audiences who didn’t mind the rock music.”

Eventually, “Hedwig” would manage a solid run of 857 performances to ever-growing acclaim. So much acclaim that Mitchell was able to produce and star in the feature film. No small feat, at a time when gay characters, let alone transgender characters, were rarely portrayed on screen.

Flash forward 15 years, and the landscape has shifted dramatically. Gay rights have gone mainstream, so much so that Neil Patrick Harris, an out gay man, has just ended his nine-year run as notorious womanizer Barney Stinson on “How I Met Your Mother.” Increasingly, transgender issues have also come to the forefront, thanks to movies such as “Dallas Buyers Club” and the Netflix series “Orange is the New Black.”

The producers have wanted to stage “Hedwig” on Broadway for many years, but waited until their dream leading man, Harris, would have the time to do the show. The result: Harris immerses himself so fully into the role of Hedwig—a part which requires him to be on stage for 100 minutes, without intermission, seven shows a week—that it’s a true testament to his dedication and stamina just how winning his performance is. His Hedwig is different from John Cameron Mitchell’s: a bit sunnier, a bit sillier, less rock and roll glam and more please-like-me showman. But the Belasco isn’t the Jane Theatre: it’s a big house, and this is a large-scale, thrilling production, with sets that amplify the drama of the songs while retaining the intimacy and pain within the lyrics.

And despite the melancholy and the emotional pain underlying the story, Hedwig still feels like a celebration: the “little show that could” finally going mainstream mirroring the gay rights movement’s similar ascent over the past decade and a half.

“That’s my favorite part of the show – the fact that it ends with a general sense of unity and catharsis,” Harris wrote in an email. “This disparate group of theatre goers, from wildly different backgrounds, who initially observe Hedwig and her tale very differently, all seem to have a communal acceptance of her by the end. There’s an emotional sense of community at the curtain call that I wasn’t expecting, and that I love.”

Trask says that since the original production of “Hedwig,” the show has picked up steam. “Rock music and hit shows that were influenced by us have found their way to the Broadway stage,” he wrote. “Suddenly, the slivers aren’t so small and our “coalition” of rockers and theater goers, young and old, gay and straight, is packing a Broadway house every night. Who knew?”

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