

## **Hairspray: A Christian Reading**

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*Hairspray* began life as a 1988 feature film written and directed by John Waters. Its stage adaptation premiered at Seattle's 5th Avenue Theatre in 2002 before opening on Broadway at the Neil Simon Theatre on August 15, 2002. The production ran for 2,642 performances and won eight of its thirteen nominations at the 2003 Tony Awards, including Best Musical and Best Original Score. When it closed on January 4, 2009, it ranked as Broadway's twenty-first longest-running show. The 2007 film adaptation of the musical set a record for the highest opening weekend ever for a movie musical, grossing \$27.5 million, until it was surpassed by *Mamma Mia!* in 2008. Across all of its incarnations, *Hairspray* has remained faithful to the central theme that runs throughout Waters's work: the celebration of the outsider.

*Hairspray* is a campy, vibrant musical populated by characters with alliterative names, colorful costumes, and irresistibly catchy songs. Beneath its exuberant surface, however, lies a surprisingly weighty message. Behind the dance party and laughter, *Hairspray* explores who gets seen, who gets valued, and what it takes to change a culture.

Set in 1962 Baltimore, Maryland, *Hairspray* follows teenage Tracy Turnblad's dream of dancing on The Corny Collins Show, a local television dance program modeled after the real-life Buddy Deane Show. When Tracy earns a spot on the program, she becomes an overnight celebrity. Her newfound popularity soon becomes a platform for social change as she champions the show's integration.

The setting is not incidental. Waters chose Baltimore because it was where he grew up; it was his world. But 1962 is no neutral backdrop. It represents a world not so long ago in which segregation was not merely practiced but normalized—even televised. The story takes place in a nation on the cusp of change, just before the major legislative breakthroughs of the Civil Rights Movement. The play's central conflict—the integration of The Corny Collins Show—revolves around racial segregation in 1962 Baltimore, where it was acceptable to dance to music by black people but impermissible to dance with black people.

The Corny Collins Show hosts “Negro Day” on the last Tuesday of each month. It is the one day when black teenagers are permitted to appear on an otherwise segregated television dance program. “Negro Day” offers the appearance of inclusion while preserving the social distance imposed by segregation. It is not true integration but managed separation—diversity without dignity, participation without equality.

Tracy Turnblad is a distinctive protagonist. The script describes her as “a high-spirited, irrepressible, chubby teen girl; she loves to dance and is eager for her life to kick in.” Tracy herself experiences exclusion—not because of her race, but because of her weight. When her equally plump mother projects her own insecurities onto her daughter, Tracy responds with optimism: “People who are different ... Their time is coming!”

Tracy demonstrates that a person's worth is not determined by cultural ideals of beauty, and in doing so she has become an icon. Writing in *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat* (2020), Aubrey Gordon argues that *Hairspray* is unusual in its refusal to make Tracy's body a problem to be solved:

“So many portrayals of fat people make our bodies into morality tales, warnings of assumed gluttony or

imagined sloth. Our bodies are consistently depicted as *before*s, forever yearning to become *after*s. But *Hairspray* bucks that trend. Tracy Turnblad's character development doesn't hinge on weight loss, remorse for 'letting herself go,' or guilt of her size. She is not a tool to stroke audiences' disgust, condescension, pity or rage. She does not stand for anything, is not a symbol of capitalism run amok, or self-loathing, not a representation of bloated wealth or lazy poverty. Tracy simply stands for herself" (Gordon, 126).

Making Tracy the lead is itself an argument for inclusion. Access is not restricted by physical characteristics, nor is belonging reserved for those who conform to cultural expectations. In *Hairspray*, one need not become the same in order to be included.

*Hairspray*'s message is reminiscent of the birth of the church at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-41). Pentecost is the moment when the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples, empowering them to proclaim the gospel to all nations and inaugurating the church's global mission. Remarkably with pilgrims from all over the known world, "each one of them was hearing them [the disciples] speak in his own language" (Acts 2:6 NASB).

God's methodology at this critical moment is striking. If the goal were uniformity, Pentecost would have been the perfect moment to establish it. Yet God does not erase cultural or linguistic distinctions. Had God's goal been assimilation, God could have made everyone speak a single language and removed the differences that separated them. Instead, at Pentecost, God proclaimed one truth through many tongues, not erasing difference but honoring it. The miracle is not sameness but understanding. The result is not uniformity but unity. That distinction matters. Unity says, "You belong." Uniformity says, "You must become something else first."

*Hairspray* echoes something deeply theological. Its solution is not assimilation into a single culture but shared space with retained identity. Unity of truth. Diversity of expression. That vision maps beautifully onto Pentecost. It is about opening the floor rather than narrowing it. Like Pentecost, the goal is not one voice but many voices held together in a common purpose. *Hairspray* resonates with Christian theatre because it tells a kingdom-shaped story: a world in which the excluded are welcomed, joy becomes a form of resistance, and ordinary people risk everything to reflect a more just reality.

At its heart, *Hairspray* is not a story about making everyone the same. It is a story about making space. Tracy Turnblad does not fight for a world in which everyone dances the same way or looks the same way. She fights for a world in which more people are allowed onto the dance floor. The goal is not conformity but participation.

The question *Hairspray* leaves us with is not whether we enjoy the music, but whether we are willing to step onto the floor ourselves—to join a rhythm larger than our own voice, to make room for those kept at the margins, to move toward those unlike us, and to participate in a movement that, like the beat itself, cannot ultimately be stopped. By the time the final number declares, "You Can't Stop the Beat," it is more than a musical refrain. It is a statement about the direction of the world itself. Something has been set in motion that cannot easily be undone.

Pentecost makes a similar claim. The Book of Acts concludes with Paul in Rome, "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered" (Acts 28:31 NASB). The gospel that began at Pentecost continues its advance to the very end of the book. In that sense, "You Can't Stop the Beat" is more than a finale. It is a theological claim. God has set something in motion that no barrier, prejudice, prison, or empire can ultimately stop.