



This whimsical, candy-colored, sixties-tinged musical—based on a film by the notoriously weird John Waters and starring Harvey Fierstein in drag—won over the critics and the crowds in Seattle. Now it's set to open on Broadway. Could this be the next *Producers*? By Susan Dominus

Hairspray It On

It's two days before the Broadway musical *Hairspray* is scheduled to begin previews in Seattle, and the lead producer, Margo Lion, has just decided she hates her own show.

It took Lion, an aristocratic, dark-haired beauty in her fifties, three years of pitching, persuading, and hondling to create a musical-theater version of John Waters's sweetly kitschy film about the integration of a Dick Clark-style TV dance show in early-sixties Baltimore. She signed on Marc Shaiman (the perverse genius behind the *South Park* movie soundtrack) and his partner, Scott Wittman, to write a cheerfully subversive score, the celebrity architect David Rockwell to create off-kilter sets in Necco Wafer hues, and costume designer William Ivey Long to finesse all those metallic satins, Pucci prints, and towers of teased hair. Lion recruited a cast of young, eager talents and one Broadway icon, luring Harvey Fierstein back into drag to play a housewife whose heart is matched in size only by her waistline.

So for most of the drizzly May week, Lion has been happily anticipating the initial run-through, when the cast will perform in full costume with sets and orchestra for the first time. She's spent days wandering in and out of the theater, hugging the creatives hello, beaming at the dancers as they jumped and shimmied their way through choreographer Jerry

OH, BEEHIVE: The cast of *Hairspray*, with the original film's director John Waters at center. From left, Kerry Butler, Corey Reynolds, Marissa Jaret Winokur, Harvey Fierstein, Laura Bell Bundy, and Matthew Morrison.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANDREW ECCLES

Mitchell's period-perfect numbers. By the end of the week, the show will open to the Seattle public, and seven weeks after that, on July 18, start previews at the Neil Simon Theater in New York.

But around halfway through the first act, Lion begins to get a sinking feeling. Her laughs, initially enthusiastic, start to sound a bit half-hearted, and then cease altogether. Marissa Jaret Winokur, the actress playing the part of Tracy Turnblad, the show's stout and stouthearted heroine, is sick with some bronchial bug, and her replacement is missing the bright-aqua paisley polyester dress she should be wearing when she emerges triumphant from a cotton-candy-pink boutique in the third scene. The

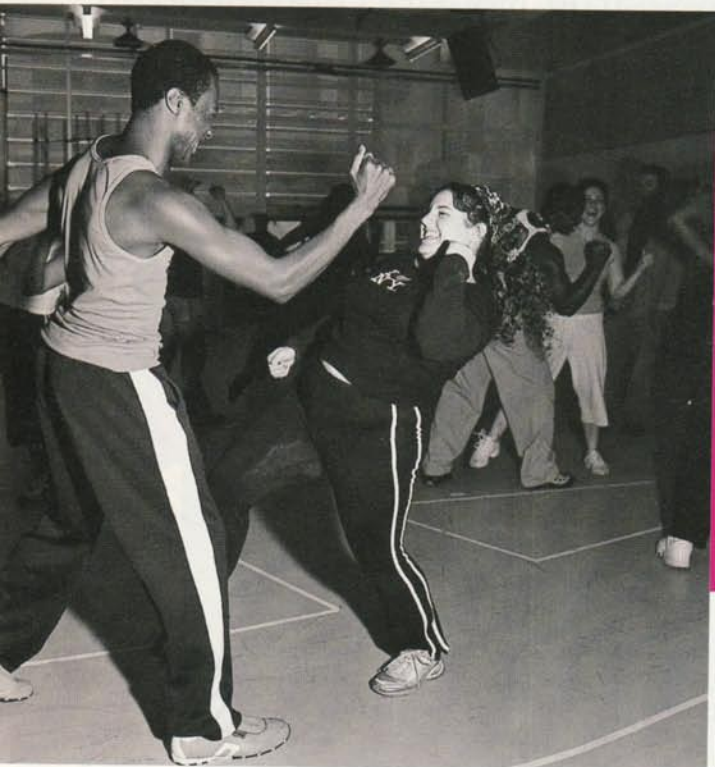
strap on her purse breaks and the entire contents of the bag fall right in. The next day, she says dryly: "And all my friends think producing theater is really glamorous."

In the summer of 1998, Lion caught *Hairspray* on TV for no other reason than she was home saddled with a bad flu, possibly precipitated by a bad funk: Her beloved *Triumph of Love*, a musical fairy tale based on a Marivaux play that she'd developed and single-handedly produced, had folded six months earlier. "I was really in mourning," she admits. Watching \$3 million of investors' money and those

merchandise, with Shoshanna Lonstein among the designers creating a whole new line of narrow-waisted, full-skirted dresses for the store's forthcoming *Hairspray* shop. Even the potentially vicious gossips on theater-obsessive Websites like *Talkinbroadway.com* have had nothing but nice things to say about the cast and score. "I haven't seen buzz this good since *The Producers*," says Jonathan Frank, a writer for the site. As the noise about the show grew louder, even those outside the theater community started

to take note. "People in the architect world don't show a lot of visible enthusiasm for theater," says Rockwell. "They just quietly call and start asking for tickets."

A story about a fat girl who wins a spot on a dance show, then goes on to integrate it (winning the affections of the local heartthrob along the way), *Hairspray*



segues seem muddy, the lighting is off on the eighteen-and-a-half-foot-tall multi-level dance platform, and the one-liners fall flat, or at least seem to in the mostly empty theater—though there is that one guy, some young actress's husband, who keeps laughing maniacally at every joke in the show's book.

Insulted by Velma Von Tussle, a rich white racist, a young black character asks, "Are all white people like that?" "No," responds Tracy's father, "just most."

At that, Lion slinks down in her chair. "Ew," she says. "I hate that."

Lion knows that the first run-through is often a show's darkest moment. And she can almost laugh, during the break just before the second act, when she runs to the bathroom and disaster seems to follow her even there. As she leans over to flush the toilet,

develop a high level of anxiety about the next project she painstakingly develops and brings to the stage. And back in the theater, as the jubilant chord sounds in the final all-out dance number, Lion jumps up in misery and beelines backstage, where she's required to assure everyone that the show's going to be great.

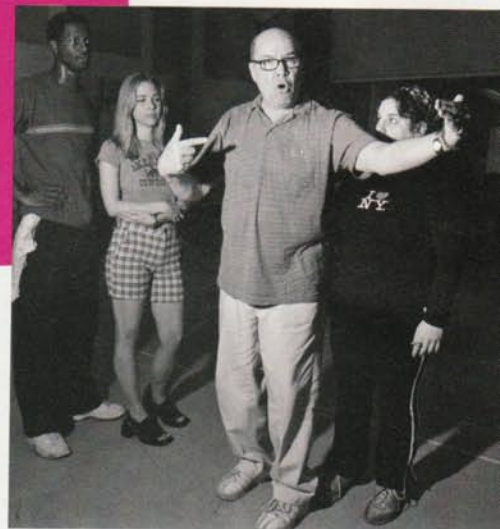
GIVEN THE HARD, COLD FACT THAT MORE musicals fail on Broadway than succeed, any producer could be forgiven the occasional immoderate mood swing in the weeks leading up to a show's debut. As a production, *Hairspray* had long been enjoying the kind of aerosol high that can make a show's team giddy but nervous, with rave reports at its readings and investors clamoring to sign on. Bloomingdale's committed to filling its windows with *Hairspray*-themed



HAIR TODAY: This page, from left: Winokur rehearses a dance with an ensemble member; producer Margo Lion; director Jack O'Brien gives notes to Reynolds, Butler, and Winokur. Opposite: Fierstein takes a break from rehearsal.

\$100,000 she'd borrowed trickle away into nothingness, a person, as they say, could develop a cold.

She could also de-



may not sound like a conventional Broadway hit. Then again, until *The Producers*, neither did a show about a gonif and his sidekick profiting off a comedy about the Third Reich. Waters-inspired weirdness notwithstanding, *Hairspray's* humor is more upbeat than *The Producers*—if *The Producers* both satirizes and celebrates cynicism, *Hairspray* does the same thing for early-sixties sincerity. (There is some creative overlap: Tom Meehan co-wrote the books of both shows.) You could call what the show does shtick, or you could call it good clean fun, with a wink. Just don't call it camp.

"*Hairspray's* not camp—camp is two older gentleman talking about Rita Hay-

worth as they hang their Tiffany lamps," pronounces Waters at his West Village apartment (and not a Tiffany lamp in sight). "Camp—that's just a socially acceptable way of saying it's old-school faggy." A man who made his name with puke jokes and dog-shit stunts, Waters once said the only theater he liked was a good trial, preferably for murder. Now, as a paid consultant for a family-friendly musical, he's like a proud grandparent who can enjoy the family resemblance but skip the sleepless nights and parental headaches: "Camp is something that's so bad it's good. But I think *Hairspray's* so good, it's great."

Even in these mellowed days, Waters says he hates anything that's too feel-good, though he volunteers that the musical, like the movie, has a strong fat-liberation theme. "Fat people always say hi to me on the street," he says. Don't regular-size people, and skinny ones, also say hello? Waters practically bats his eyes. "Yeah, but fat people do it with a certain tenderness."

THE AFTERNOON OF THE FIRST RUN-THROUGH, Marc Shaiman peers into the orchestra he's seeing assembled for the first time. "What's the matter?" he asks the musical director cheerily. "You couldn't find any brothers in Seattle?"

Jack O'Brien, the director of, among other hits, *The Full Monty*, sits halfway back in the theater, his eye trained on the stage, taking notes. Later, O'Brien will de-

walked in to find Nathan Lane, Sarah Jessica Parker, and Matthew Broderick. "Scott has a formula for a great party," says Clarke Thorell, who plays Corny Collins, the Dick Clark figure. "Four cases of champagne and two cases of vodka. I think he has some kind of a deal with Veuve."

Shaiman, five feet seven, has a boyish way of bouncing as he walks, and his dress tends toward the disheveled (with the exception of the blue fox coat, white suit, and blue fedora he wore to the Oscars one year). He keeps his eye on the orchestra during rehearsals, occasionally bursting out with a "Bam!" or "Baaaam bam!" as he gets carried away emphasizing the beats of the songs. A longtime arranger for Bette Midler, he's also responsible for perhaps the world's funniest, and crudest, big musical spoof: the soundtrack to *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*.

Wittman is a tall drink of water in Paul Smith and Fred Segal, with striking green eyes that peer out from behind Oliver Peoples sunglasses. His one-liners are delivered in dulcet tones; when he directed Patti LuPone in a one-woman show, *Variety* called it "sublime." As a kid, Wittman worked as an apprentice in summer stock in Nyack, brushing shoulders with Betty Grable and Van Johnson, and his knowledge of Broadway is uselessly arcane. Asked about his favorite shows, Wittman pauses. "Well, the thing is, I like really bad musicals," he finally says. "Like *Golden Rainbow*? It starred Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme. They just broke

Dolls. "We dropped acid and wrote it in one weekend," says Wittman of the show, now a Disney movie being co-produced by their former usher, *American Beauty's* co-producer Dan Jinks. In another early collaboration, a female friend played both halves of Siamese twins; one kills the other and spends the remainder of the show carrying her head in a hatbox.

"All our friends said, 'You guys are so slick, you're going to be doing Broadway,'" says Shaiman, who until now was writing well-paying scores for movies like *Patch Adams*, *Beaches*, and *When Harry Met Sally*. "Twenty-three years later, we got here."

THE ONLY CAST MEMBER WHO REGULARLY wanders back to schmooze with O'Brien is Harvey Fierstein, who looks



"Hairspray's not camp. Camp is just a socially acceptable way of saying it's old-school faggy," says John Waters. "Camp is something so bad, it's good. Hairspray is so good, it's great."

liver those notes to the cast in his daily near-spontaneous, oratorically dramatic, inspiring, and hilarious monologue; but for the most part, O'Brien—an elegant man in his fifties—does not fraternize with the cast, most of whom are so young that when they wax nostalgic for classic Broadway, they're thinking *Rent*. The producers sit behind O'Brien or off to the side, and David Rockwell sits even farther back.

Shaiman, on the other hand, spends most of his time in the front row, as does his co-lyricist, Scott Wittman, who's also his partner of 23 years—the two of them are the favorites of the cast, the big brothers who ply them with expensive alcohol and impress them with their snazzy friends and never give them tough-love speeches about the responsibility of a star. At a party Shaiman and Wittman hosted at their apartment in New York, cast members

character whenever they felt like it and went into their lounge act."

It was the music Wittman and Shaiman wrote for *Hairspray* that got the show moving early on—in a matter of days, they'd tossed off three highly singable songs with bounce, an early-sixties beat, and just enough Waters-style grit to make it a match. ("The rats in the street / All dance around my feet / Tracy, they tell me, it's uuuup to yooooo . . .") All three songs are still in the show. "They won't tell me how long it took them to write them," says Lion.

"Right, because she pays by the minute," Shaiman says.

This is their first major collaboration, but they've been working together on small shows since they met (Wittman was looking for a pianist at a West Village bar where he worked; Shaiman got the job). One of their first joint projects was a musical called *Living*

surprisingly civilian in an untucked T-shirt and sneakers for most of rehearsal. A three-time Tony winner—two for his tour de force *Torch Song Trilogy* and one for the book of *La Cage aux Folles*—Fierstein is a grown-up like O'Brien, with as many Broadway bona fides as anyone in the theater. Although he works steadily, most recently with a small part in the Robin Williams film *Death to Smoochy*, he hasn't performed onstage since *Safe Sex*, a follow-up to *Torch Song Trilogy* that lasted only a week on Broadway.

Initially apprehensive about returning to theater, Fierstein seems relaxed and happy, and eager to please; anytime he's onstage, he's prepared to deliver a laugh for O'Brien, whether he's in character or not. "Are you comfortable in there?" O'Brien asks Fierstein one day as he emerges from a piece of scenery that encloses him in a tight space.

"Oh, sure," Fierstein calls out in that famous voice—the croak of a mobster on his deathbed, all smoke and gravel and crushed glass. "Just give me a little glory hole and it'll feel like home."

The Fierstein wit is fast, and frequently foul, and almost always at his own expense. During notes one day, O'Brien mentions that an oversize hair-spray can they've all been waiting for will be arriving the next day. "Oh, yeah, I love that big can!" says a cast member. "Why, *thank you*, Rashad," murmurs Fierstein.

Fierstein infuses that distinct combination—bawdy but gracious—into his portrayal of Edna (played in the film by drag legend Divine), a character for whom he

rolled onto the stage a particular set, a jail cell with a toilet in it. There was Winokur, butt planted on the toilet, open magazine in front of her, pants and underwear at her feet. "You can't half-ass it," says Winokur, her black hair held back in a checked kerchief. "Either you do it, or you don't." She does her stage mother proud.

IF *THE PRODUCERS* OCCASIONALLY FELT DATED—how fresh can you make an endless succession of gay jokes?—*Hairspray*'s humor would better be described as unabashedly nostalgic. A typical rehearsal finds Fierstein practicing a scene with a whoopee cushion. The appropriate sound effect rings out impressively. "You break it,

Brooks on the book of *The Producers*). "It's a mystic science," says Meehan, sitting a few rows back from O'Brien along with his co-writer, Mark O'Donnell; the two are rarely seen apart all week. "We know it's about rhythm. It's primitive that way." And there are a few precious guidelines. "Whenever Nathan Lane was delivering a funny line on *The Producers*, he'd tell the rest of the cast, 'Okay, when I deliver this line, nobody move.' He wasn't being difficult. He just knew that if the eye was distracted by any movement onstage, the punch wouldn't be there."

After writing the book for eighties blockbuster *Annie*, Meehan went on to pen a spectacular flop, *Annie II*, a production that clearly haunts him still. "We all

"It's a miraculous thing to make 1,900 people laugh at exactly the same moment," says director Jack O'Brien. "It's like trying to get everyone to have the same thought at the same time."

says he has tremendous empathy. He understands her fears of the unknown, her insecurities about her looks, her tough slog as a wife and mother. "Edna's a very hard-working woman," says Fierstein. "Her husband's a little bit of a goof, her daughter's a dreamer, and she seems to run it all and keep it together. But at the same time, she hasn't been given a lot of happiness, and what happens is that all of the strengths that she's given to her daughter then come back and are given to her, so then she discovers the world at large." Fierstein worked carefully with his makeup designer, Randy Mercer, to create a look that was clearly female but not glamorous—Edna's a housewife, after all, not a cabaret act.

And then there was the body suit. "I got a new body suit today," Fierstein explains one afternoon in between scenes. "Because the old fat suit, we decided the tits were too big, so we took the tits down a bit, but now the tits-to-belly ratio is off, and we're worried the belly's too big." The biggest difference, he says, is that "this one has a crack." And he's happy about that? "My bowels are," he says sincerely.

Winokur says that Fierstein, who plays her mother, has actually taken on the role offstage as well, fussing over her health, making sure that she's eaten. Winokur, a curly-haired girl from Westchester, is sort of a cross between Betty Boop and Rosie O'Donnell. In character, she's adorably wide-eyed as Tracy; but offstage, she's as quick-witted and potty-mouthed as anyone in the production, and this is not a crowd short on either talent. During one technical run, the crew, checking some tracking,

you buy it!" crows his character's husband, the owner of a joke shop called the Har De Har.

"With a serious play, you're trying to open it up to more honesty, but you don't feel the responsibility of getting a group response," says O'Brien. "I mean, it's a miraculous thing to make 1,900 people laugh at exactly the same moment—it's like trying to get everyone to have the same thought at the same time. So we work on the delivery and work on the delivery until you get the laugh. And then once it works in a hit production, something goes into the consciousness, so that even if amateurs do it, it gets a laugh. And you think, *But we worked our butt off to get that laugh!* It's not fair."

In one sight gag, Fierstein talks into a phone receiver with its cord pulled taut all the way offstage; when he says good-bye, he merely lets go in mid-air, and the phone springs all the way back, disappearing off stage left. It's amusing on Tuesday; by Wednesday morning, they've added the sound effect of breaking glass a beat after he lets go, and the gag gets better. On Wednesday afternoon, Jack suggests that Harvey watch the phone disappear, as if admiring his aim. "That'll nail the laugh." And somehow, it does.

Co-writer Tom Meehan has been crafting comedy for years, and has the battle-weary look of someone who's spent decades up against a foe who keeps changing the rules (either that, or he's still wrung out from his collaboration with the famously difficult Mel



thought it was *better* than the first *Annie*. It wasn't until we performed it in front of an audience for the first time that we saw it wasn't going to work." He grimaces. "Within five minutes, we knew."

The Seattle audience that showed up for the first preview would be the definitive end to all internal debates about whether a line has chops ("If they don't laugh in Seattle, they won't laugh anywhere," says Meehan). Someone asks O'Brien if he's excited about the first preview, the debut performance before the all-knowing audience. "Bloody fucking audience," he says. "I hate them. *I hate them.*"

O'Brien, of course, has devoted his life to delighting audiences. It's just that at the mo-

ment, tension is starting to build as various producers, in town for the preview, start gathering like dark clouds in the corners of the theater. The cast members, meanwhile, are having the time of their lives. They're practically all in their early twenties, uniformly gorgeous, and so high-energy that they nearly miss their beats because they're jumping so high. Since arriving in Seattle, they've been crashing at dormlike apart-

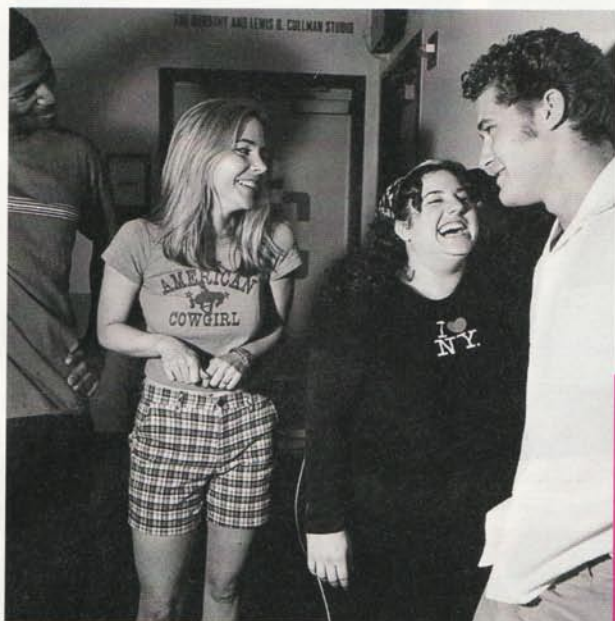
tume designer is so busy analyzing whether the pennies in the penny loafers are shiny enough that it becomes impossible to step back and capture the full effect of the dance number—or the plot.

At the same time, there's a spirit of last-gasp improvisation at the very end of the rehearsal process that jacks up the adrenaline. Two days after the first run-through, in a flurry of tweaking, half the ensemble

learn an entirely reconfigured, cheerier dance routine for the opener, and late in the afternoon the day of the preview, they rush through an entirely new bit for a post-curtain-call, minute-long frosting-on-the-cake finale.

For months, there had been tinkering with the book, some of it driven

the show, a soulful belter called "I Know Where I've Been." A tribute, Shaiman says, "to the black perspective," the song struck Lion and some of the other producers as a drag on the plot, not to mention a cliché—the obligatory eleventh-hour number when a big black woman comes out, stops the show, and tells it like it is. Under pressure, Shaiman and Wittman whipped up a cheerier replacement, the worryingly titled "Step It Up." But about three weeks into rehearsal, when they tried it out on the cast, they sensed it wasn't going over well with the African-American performers—Shaiman says it was something about the way they were smiling during what he calls the "clappin'" section of the song. "It is a little bit cotton-pickin'," someone finally told him, at which point, he says, "we put on our 800-pound-gorilla suit" and fought to make



THE BIG TEASE: This page, from left: Reynolds, Butler, Winokur, and Morrison relax between scenes; choreographer Jerry Mitchell shows a move; composer Marc Shaiman. Opposite: Fierstein makes a grand gesture to O'Brien et al.

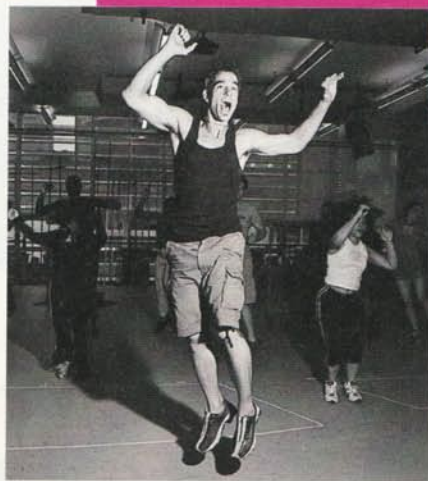
ments ten minutes from the theater. They play late-night poker, put on the occasional strip show, and throw parties with theme rooms (in one, only towel apparel allowed). Fast friendships have sprung up across the board, like the one between Fierstein and Dick Latessa, the Broadway veteran playing Edna's husband. The two of them play off each other as they kill time onstage waiting for the orchestra to cue up their soft-shoe song and dance, a number that starts out with Latessa, a spry man in his sixties, hugging Fierstein from behind as they dance. The two assume the position.

"Is it in yet?" asks Fierstein. "I couldn't tell . . ."

"No," says Dick, "but I think I found my wallet." O'Brien and Wittman and Fierstein crack up. A young cast member lounging in the front row lets out a groan. "Aw, man! That's gross. Cut it out, you guys."

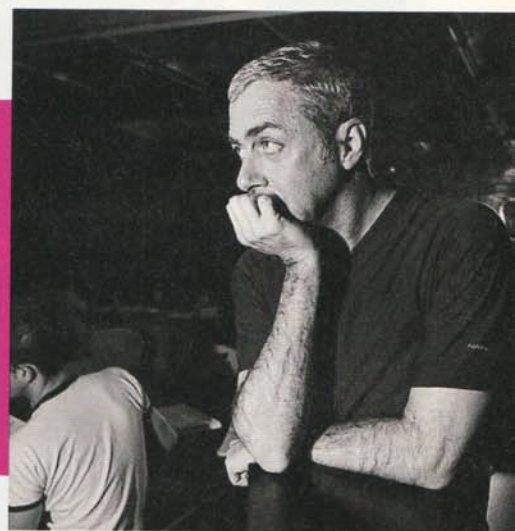
"I found my wallet!" hoots O'Brien, and he and Wittman and Fierstein keep laughing. They know how the old joke goes; they're all in on the same old routines they've known for years.

IN THE PRODUCTION OF A MUSICAL, NO DETAIL is too small to escape attention, which perhaps explains why so many disasters actually make it all the way to Broadway: Everyone from the producers to the cos-



by casual suggestions made by Waters himself, whose approval every creative craved (and eventually won). "They treat me like the pope," says Waters. "Is this right? Is this right?" Mostly he gave notes about authenticity; he pointed out that when Tracy wins a scholarship at the end, it shouldn't be to Goucher—too highfalutin for our girl—but to Essex Community College, which gets a bigger laugh in any case.

The biggest creative controversy came down to a battle between the producers and Shaiman and Wittman over a song that comes three-quarters of the way through



sure "I Know Where I've Been" at least got a try-out in Seattle. "We weren't going to make this into a minstrel show," says Shaiman, still indignant. "The cast found something very important about that song."

"Which, of course, we wrote in Laguna, while drinking martinis," adds Wittman.

THROUGHOUT REHEARSAL, THE LOBBY outside the theater has been filled with overflow that didn't fit backstage: cables, steel boxes, rubber containers, men drilling. But early in the evening before the first preview performance, a cleanup crew empties the hall, revealing a red carpet and dramatic curling staircase—entirely transformed, the space suddenly feels like it's yet another set, with nice casting touches like the fresh-faced girl at the candy counter selling five-flavor punch. As if on cue, at 7:30, the audience starts streaming in.

The opening drumbeats sound, and the curtain rises on Tracy, in bed—only the bed is vertical, a Rockwell design that's visually surprising but (continued on page 57)

perfectly lucid, and somehow funny. Tracy opens her eyes wide on the beat. "Oh, oh, oh," she sings with a touch of Brenda Lee brightness, her eyes round in wonder and curiosity, her little hands peeking out and holding the sheets up. "Woke up today, feeling the way I always do . . ." Rockwell, Lion, Shaiman, and Wittman, scattered throughout the theater, scrutinize the audience. There are a few stony-faced men. But a lot of people are already showing that sweetly childlike, spaced-out smile that suggests they've quickly gone to musical-theater land, where beds stand at 90 degrees, people burst into song instead of dragging themselves toward the shower, and a fat girl like Tracy can win the world with the height of her hair.

When "I Know Where I've Been" rolls around, Lion puts her head in her hands for most of the song, looking up apprehensively at the last note. Thunderous applause and encores ensue. She shakes her head in resignation: "I can see I'm going to lose on this one." By the end of the show, any lingering angst has been swept away, and she's beaming. As Lion applauds wildly, waiting

Winokur finishes "Good Morning, Baltimore" and a team of dancing, sixties-style teenyboppers has stormed the stage, a disembodied male voice interrupts the performance. ". . . technical difficulties . . . we'll begin again in five minutes." Only half the appropriate set has arrived onstage. Dejected, the cast streams off as the audience shifts in its seats, unsure what to make of this surprise. Shaiman jumps up: "It's just like rehearsal!" he cries out to the audience.

"I was actually happy when it happened," he says. "That kind of thing can win an audience over to your side—they feel like they're part of something. And in my Jewish way, I was like, 'Everything's gone so well . . . finally!'"

Backstage, the dance captain is giving Winokur, who is baffled and upset, a serious pep talk about her responsibility as the star to keep the energy up. Ten minutes later, she shows up onstage, gives the audience an exasperated shrug, then throws her arms back and widens her eyes and smiles, resuming the stance of her character as she was in the last moment of the song before the interruption. With the audience laughing along with her, the show segues into the next scene.

these kinds of glitches, O'Brien is nowhere near the theater. Lion, sitting with her friend Laura Ziskin (producer of *Spider-Man*), is watching with some degree of resignation. "It was one of those shows that goes on for 24 hours," she says dryly.

The actors know they won't be held responsible for the set glitches; but it is hard to predict how the reviewers will respond to their performances, all thrown off by the need for sudden improvisations, and the anxiety about what would go wrong next.

Monday at 5 A.M., Lion and Shaiman sit down at their respective computers in their respective hotel rooms and log on. The writers have "a shiny new hit on their hands," *Variety* reports. The *Seattle Times* says the score "really makes you want to go dance in the streets." Both Lion and Shaiman practically do.

By the end of the Seattle run, the tickets are sold out in town; the audiences keep getting better-and-better-dressed as it becomes more of an event. On the strength of the reviews, the New York advance sales numbers are creeping up to \$5 million—not the \$14 million advance of *The Producers*, but a strong showing nonetheless.

Opening night, David Rockwell watches in horror as his precious sets fall prey to tech hitches: "At intermission, I helped myself to a drink." Adds composer Marc Shaiman: "I felt my internal organs shift."

for the standing ovation to start—which it does—she's leaning all the way back in her chair, as if propelled backward by the G-force of energy onstage.

THE CAST STILL HAS TWO WEEKS UNTIL REVIEWS, but if the audiences are any indication, the show is a hit. The night the Seattle Gay Men's Chorus shows up, every person in the theater stands up and applauds until Fierstein comes out a few minutes later to take another bow. "As I came onstage, everything went sort of strange," he says. "I looked at the aisles and there was no one there. Oh, I thought. *Everyone's gone*. But I'm hearing this roar. No one had left their seats. They were all standing and screaming." Fans start greeting Winokur—always a sidekick, never before a star—outside the stage door (her sister cries at the sight of it); people in Seattle restaurants approach actors they recognize for autographs. One night, Waters's old pal Roseanne turns up. As soon as Tracy appears onstage, she calls out in glee, "That's me!"

By the night the critics arrive, the show has been running smoothly for days. So it is an unexpected shock when, right after

They are back on track, until a few scenes later, when Harvey Fierstein watches a mechanical device that sticks out of the floor—it's called a dog—roll right out onstage without the set he needs on it. He freezes backstage, paralyzed as he tries to picture the scene without the ironing board and phone. Finally, a tech person rips, with great effort, the phone off the base of the board and puts it in Fierstein's hands, and the stage manager orders him onstage. He stumbles on, clearly off his game. At the sight of Fierstein performing with nothing more than a back-drop, says Shaiman, "I felt my internal organs shift." Adds Fierstein, "It was really amateur night in Dixie."

Rockwell watches in horror as his precious creations fall prey to computer glitches and tech hitches. "It was just this feeling of utter helplessness," he says, admitting: "At intermission, I helped myself to a drink." He needed it, too: In a climactic scene in Act Two, the numbers on a scoreboard are all wrong, throwing off the plot. Winokur, as planned, starts running down the aisle; but when she sees the numbers aren't right, she panics and runs right back where she'd come from. Because of the possibility of precisely

A FEW NIGHTS BEFORE THE TEAM LEAVES TO start rehearsals in New York, Lion sits down to join the sold-out audience for a performance, as she has most nights of the run. She revels in the small details that have continued to improve the production: something as insignificant as Fierstein using the word *wiener* instead of *hot dog* in one lyric, to great effect; an overture before the opening scene that builds excitement and gives the audience a chance to laugh out loud at Rockwell's set rather than just smile; shiny brooches stuck in the daffy, dizzying wigs in the final number, a touch of luxury that finishes the look. Everyone's layering onto their characters, giving the audience more to notice, more bits of candy in unexpected places. The audience, primed to love it, responds eagerly, only too happy to complete the rhythm of the jokes with the finishing punctuation of their laughs.

"Are all white people like that?" asks the young black girl after she's insulted by Mrs. Von Tussle. "No," replies Tracy's father, "just most."

Everybody laughs, and no one louder than Lion. ■