

# A Discussion Guide on Hairspray! The Musical

Based on the New Line Cinema film, written and directed by John Waters  
Book by Thomas Meehan and Mark O'Donnell | Music and Lyrics by Marc Shaiman

## hairspray

• THE BROADWAY MUSICAL •

**Meridian Theatres  
@ Centrepointe**

**May 25-29, 2022**

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## ABOUT SUZART PRODUCTIONS:

*Suzart Productions is a Canadian not for profit community musical theatre company based in Ottawa, Ontario. Specializing in affordable entertainment for the whole family, Suzart provides opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to experience the world of theatre in all its aspects.*

## INTRODUCTION:

*Hairspray! The Musical*, is a vibrant musical set in 1960s Baltimore, Maryland. Inspired by the real [Buddy Deane Show](#), *Hairspray!* presents the fictional *Corny Collins Show*, a teenage dance show that forms the backdrop for an exploration of important topics like personal identity, discrimination based on race and body size, racial segregation (and eventual integration), activism and allyship, as well as social change. Released as a [film](#) in 1988, premiering on [Broadway](#) in 2002, and then as [movie musical](#) in 2007, *Hairspray!* remains as relevant today as when it first debuted.

The overall message of the musical is one of inclusion, positivity, and hope. A better day is on the horizon; a day when Black and white teenagers, can dance together on *Corny Collins Show* rather than being segregated. Using comedy to explore important topics such as race and the fight for inclusion, *Hairspray!* provides many valuable lessons about youth activism, the importance of believing in yourself, and pursuing your dreams even when faced with what appears to be insurmountable challenges.

As the Suzart Production's production of *Hairspray! The Musical*, uses a youth cast to tell this complicated story, this discussion guide was created to support parents, teachers, and youth as they navigate and discuss the topics explored in the musical.

## SYNOPSIS:

*Hairspray!* opens in June 1962, as teenager Tracy Turnblad wakes up ready for another day. As a teenager her day revolves around attending school and watching her favourite show, the teenage dance the *Corny Collins Show*. Like many teenage girls her age, Tracy is infatuated with Link Larkin, a star from the *Corny Collins Show*. In the early scenes we get exposed to the racism that was commonplace in the 1960s (as well as still being an issue in 2022) as Prudy Pingleton (Penny's mother), expresses her disapproval that the teenagers are dancing to "**coloured music.**" Tracy's mother jokingly dismisses Purdy's racism when she replies, "it ain't coloured. The TV's black and white." Another example is found when the show producer, Velma Von Tussle tells Corny, the host, that he

should not include “that [Detroit sound](#)” (during the 1950s and 1960s, the majority of Black musical acts were signed to Motown Records, based in Detroit) and that his job was to “steer the kids in the white direction.”

When Corny announces that there will be an opening to replace one of the female dancers on the show, Tracy expresses a desire to audition. However, rather than being supportive Edna (Tracy's mom) discourages her fearing that Tracy will be rejected because of her body size. Tracy though, embraces body positivity and does not believe that she is overweight or too big to be on television. Tracy also believes in love and daydreams about getting married to the teenage star Link Larkin. But when Tracy arrives at the audition, she is immediately humiliated by as jokes are made about her weight and appearance.

The portrayal of Black characters is at times filled with negative stereotypes. Black students are portrayed as regularly being in detention because they are less interested in learning and would prefer to be dancing and having fun. There is also the sexualization of Black bodies for example, when asked about the name of his dance, Seaweed replies to Tracy, “Oh this? I call this one ‘Peyton Place After Midnight’ I use it to attract the opposite sex.”

Using the dance moves she learned from Seaweed, Tracy is successful at the audition and becomes one of the “Nicest Kids in Town”. Despite her new popularity, Tracy remains committed to her believe in harmony and inclusion. When asked what her first official act would be if she was president, she replies, “Well, I’d make everyday Negro Day.” Her answer shocks the producers of the Corny Collins show, “Mrs. Von Tussle, Negro Day every day? That chubby Communist girl and kissing on the mouth with possibly parted lips... I assure you, controversy is not what Ultra Clutch wishes to promote.” In a later scene, we are once again reminded that Tracy desires a world where everyone is welcomed. She wonders why Black and white teenagers cannot dance together on the Corny Collins Show and decides to lead a protest racial segregation. Link rejects the idea, fearing it will hurt his chance to be on national TV. He leaves a heartbroken Tracy to go back to Amber and his life of comfort. This is an important lesson in activism and the personal costs of standing up for an issue you believe in especially if your friends do not share that same believe.

Tracy's heart is in the right place, but because she does not fully appreciate how police interactions with Black communities are usually more tense and adversarial than the interactions with white communities, the demonstration that Tracy leads eventually turns into a riot due to the force used by the police against the demonstrators. Tracy and all the women are arrested and taken to women's house of detention. Eventually, the women are released either because of being friends with the Governor (as was the case for Velma and

Amber) or because their bail was posted by Tracy's dad. Unfortunately, Tracy is not so lucky, and is moved to solitary confinement rather than being released.

Challenging social norms continues as we see progressions in the relationships between Tracy and Link, and Seaweed and Penny. Link eventually realizes that he is attracted to Tracy despite her body size deviating from the beauty standards of the time and her views on racial integration. He uses a blowtorch improvised with a lighter and can of hairspray, to break Tracy out of jail. After he rescues Penny, Seaweed and Penny perform a musical number about interracial love, something that was very controversial in the 1960s (even illegal in some parts of the United States during the time that *Hairspray!* is based on).

In the final Act of *Hairspray!*, Tracy with the help of the other characters is successful in getting the Corny Collins Show to integrate. We see everyone dancing together in harmony as Tracy shouts "You Can't Stop the Beat", a song that speaks to changing social times and the promise of a more inclusive society.

“...CAUSE YOU CAN'T STOP  
THE MOTION OF THE OCEAN  
OR THE RAIN FROM ABOVE  
YOU CAN TRY TO STOP THE PARADISE  
WE'RE DREAMING OF  
BUT YOU CANNOT STOP THE RHYTHM  
OF TWO HEARTS IN LOVE TO STAY  
YOU CAN'T STOP THE BEAT!”

## TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

*Hairspray!* encourages self-expression, acceptance, and freedom, beyond its early 1960s context, to highlight ongoing issues such as body-image, racism, discrimination, and the value of working together to achieve significant social change. In the following section, quotes from script related to these topics as well as suggested discussion questions are provided to support conversations about topics explored in the musical.

### TOPIC 1: APPEARANCE AND BODY IMAGE

The main character, Tracy Turnblad, navigates a society that often judges her because of her body size and shape. Yet, Tracy remains confident in the face of

rejection. Tracy's mom, Edna also struggles with her appearance but unlike Tracy, she does not seem to fully accept or embrace who she is.

## **QUOTES**

*"GOOD MORNING BALTIMORE/ EVERY DAY'S LIKE AN OPEN DOOR / EVERY NIGHT IS A FANTASY / EVERY SOUND'S LIKE A SYMPHONY/ GOOD MORNING BALTIMORE AND SOME DAY WHEN I TAKE TO THE FLOOR /THE WORLD'S GONNA WAKE UP AND SEE BALTIMORE AND ME."*

*"I KNOW THERE'S A PLACE WHERE I BELONG, I SEE ALL THE PARTY LIGHTS SHINING AHEAD SO SOMEONE INVITE ME BEFORE I DROP DEAD."*

*"WELL, ISN'T SHE A LOVELY SLIM GIRL."*

*"GIRLS LIKE TRACY... PEOPLE LIKE US... YOU KNOW WHAT I'M SAYING. THEY DON'T PUT PEOPLE LIKE US ON TELEVISION - EXCEPT TO BE LAUGHED AT."*

*"OH MY GOD / HOW TIMES HAVE CHANGED /THIS GIRL'S EITHER BLIND/ OR COMPLETELY DERANGED/ AH, BUT TIME SEEMED TO HALT WHEN I WAS "MISS BALTIMORE CRABS."*

*"FIRST IMPRESSIONS CAN BE TOUGH AND WHEN I SAW YOU, I KNEW IT IF YOUR SIZE WEREN'T ENOUGH YOUR LAST ANSWER JUST BLEW IT!"*

*"AND SO, MY DEAR, SO SHORT AND STOUT YOU'LL NEVER BE "IN" SO WE'RE KICKING YOU OUT!"*

*"I'M SORRY, TRACY. BUT NO ONE SAID ANYTHING ABOUT ME APPEARING ON TELEVISION. I'M SORRY BUT I SIMPLY CAN NOT APPEAR ON TELEVISION AT MY PRESENT WEIGHT."*

*"YOU CAN'T STOP MY HAPPINESS [...] 'CAUSE I LIKE THE WAY I AM AND YOU JUST CAN'T STOP MY KNIFE AND FORK WHEN I SEE A CHRISTMAS HAM SO IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE WAY I LOOK WELL, I JUST DON'T GIVE A DAMN!"*

## **Discussion Questions**

1. In the song, "Good Morning Baltimore." Tracy sings with an abundance of self-confidence, "Oh, oh, oh look at my hair/ What 'do can compare with mine today... 'Cause when I start to dance I'm a movie star." Do you tell yourself positive affirmations each morning? Why and how has it helped you feel more confident and prouder in who you are?

2. What could other people say to you that would make you feel appreciated and beautiful/handsome?
3. Tracy's mother, Edna, does not want her to try out for The Corny Collins Show because she fears that Tracy will not be accepted because of her size. In what ways have you, friends or family members been discouraged from doing something due to worries that you might not fit in?
4. Do you think the body image issues explored in *Hairspray!* are still relevant today? If yes, why is that? And if no, why?
5. When you look at television or social media, do you see people who look like you? How important is it see images that are representative of diverse groups of people? How do you or your friends feel when there is a lack of representation?
6. Have you or someone close ever felt excluded from a group because of your body size or body type? How did that make you feel? What did you do?
7. For some people, including those who are racialized, queer and/or have disabilities, they often face additional discrimination based not only on their body size but also their other identity factors. How can people who face discrimination due to one identity factor help those who face multiple types of discrimination?
8. What can be done to foster more inclusive environments where people of all body sizes and shapes feel welcomed?
9. How would you make someone aware that they might experience discrimination because of their body size? Could you this in a way that does not make them feel overly discouraged from pursuing their dreams?

## **TOPIC 2: EMBRACING YOUR INDIVIDUALITY AND RESPECTING THE DIVERISTY OF OTHERS**

*Hairspray's* core message is one of embracing diversity and not letting others undermine your sense of self-worth. Throughout the play, we see Tracy, Seaweed, and others embody the idea that you don't have to conform to anyone else's standard of what is "normal" or "attractive."

### **QUOTES**

"I CAN'T SEE/WHY PEOPLE LOOK AT ME AND ONLY SEE/THE COLOR OF MY FACE/ AND THEN THERE'S THOSE THAT TRY TO HELP/ GOD KNOWS BUT ALWAYS HAVE TO PUT ME IN MY PLACE"

"IMAGINE BEING INVITED PLACES BY COLORED PEOPLE. I FEEL SO HIP."

"I KNOW THERE'S A PLACE WHERE I BELONG, I SEE ALL THE PARTY LIGHTS SHINING AHEAD SO SOMEONE INVITE ME BEFORE I DROP DEAD."

"HEY MAMA, HEY MAMA, FOLLOW ME I KNOW SOMETHING'S IN YOU THAT YOU WANNA SET FREE. SO LET GO, GO, GO OF THE PAST NOW SAY HELLO TO THE LOVE IN YOUR HEART YES, I KNOW THAT THE WORLD'S SPINNING FAST NOW YOU GOTTA GET YOURSELF A BRAND-NEW START."

"I'M TIRED OF COV'RIN' UP ALL MY PRIDE I'VE GOT A NEW WAY OF MOVIN' AND I GOT MY OWN VOICE."

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Tracy's sense of self-worth is undeniable. She embraces her individuality and shows compassion for the Black teenagers who have been excluded from being regular dancers on the Corny Collins Show. Similarly, Ms. Motormouth embraces herself and is proud of who she is. How do Tracy and Ms. Motormouth stay positive and show self-love and compassion for others throughout the play?
2. Are there other people who have a positive sense of self-love that you admire? What about them do you admire?
3. How do you embrace your own individuality? How do you encourage others to embrace theirs?
4. Some days it might feel easier than others remain positive. What are some ways to re-affirm your sense of self-worth when others try to make you feel excluded?
5. How would you feel if you had to hide part of your identity?
6. How do you think the Black characters in *Hairspray!* felt, knowing that because of their skin colour they were not accepted the same way their white teenagers were on the Corny Collins Show?
7. In the play, Black teenagers are allowed to dance on the Corny Collins Show but only on "Negro Day", the once-a-month event when the show welcomes Black teenagers. Though they are allowed on the show, they are not allowed to dance alongside the white teenagers? Do you think the Black teenagers feel welcomed and included or might they have a different emotion?
8. How would you feel if every day except once a month, you were excluded from participating in activities with your friends simply because of the colour of your skin, the religion you practice or your body size/body type? How would you react? Would accept things the way they are? Would push for change?

### **TOPIC 3: ANTI-BLACK RACISM AND SOLIDARITY**

Anti-Black racism is defined as the prejudice, attitudes, beliefs, stereotyping, and discrimination that is directed at people of African descent and is rooted in their unique history and experience of enslavement and its legacy. Anti-Black racism is an issue in the United States as well as in Canada. More importantly, the racism that is evident in 1960s segregated Baltimore is still present in 2022. Anti-Black racism is evident in the social, economic, and political marginalization of Black Canadians and Black Americans. It leads to unequal opportunities, higher unemployment, significant poverty rates and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system.

In the musical, anti-Black racism is shown by the interactions of the police with the Black community during the protests; in segregation on the Corny Collins Show, as well as in comments made about “coloured music”.

When Tracy achieves her dreams of dancing on the Corny Collins Show, she becomes more aware of the injustices faced by her Black friends who are barred from the show and face racism and discrimination in their everyday lives. Using her new popularity, Tracy realizes that through solidarity and active allyship with the Black community that she might be able to change society for the better. Throughout the musical she stands up for what she believes in and inspires others to do the same.

But racism and in particular, anti-Black racism is more than just how one individual feels. It is deep rooted and often entrenched in society. It requires collective action to make change and it also requires a long and sustained commitment because the issues that Tracy fought for in 1960s are still issues that are relevant today.

#### **QUOTES**

“NICE WHITE KIDS/ WHO LIKE TO LEAD THE WAY AND ONCE A MONTH/WE HAVE OUR NEGRO DAY!”

“TEENAGERS. THEY JUST LOVE WATCHING THAT CORNY COLLINS / DELINQUENTS. IT AIN'T RIGHT DANCING TO THAT COLORED MUSIC/ DON'T BE SILLY, IT AIN'T COLORED. THE TV'S BLACK AND WHITE.”

“AND YOU, MR. COLLINS! NONE OF THAT DETROIT SOUND TODAY. YOU HAVE SOMETHING AGAINST CONNIE FRANCIS?”

"THE KIDS ARE JUST OVER THE MOON FOR RHYTHM AND BLUES, VELMA. THEY CAN'T GET ENOUGH. THEY'RE KIDS, CORNY. THAT'S WHY WE HAVE TO STEER THEM IN THE WHITE DIRECTION...I MEAN...YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN."

"NEGRO DAY IS THE BEST. I WISH EVERY DAY WAS NEGRO DAY."

"ALRIGHT, BUT REMEMBER, YOU GOTTA DANCE WITH YOUR CROWD AND I GOTTA DANCE WITH MINE."

"HOW COME WE ALWAYS HAVE TO DANCE IN THE BACK? I DON'T KNOW. THERE'S THEM AND THERE'S US. THAT'S JUST THE WAY IT IS."

"I LIKE THESE PEOPLE. BUT WHETHER OR NOT THEY'RE ON TV WON'T GET ME A RECORDING CONTRACT... TRACY, SATURDAY NIGHT IS EVERYTHING I'VE WORKED FOR. I'M NOT GONNA THROW IT AWAY."

"I CAN'T SEE/WHY PEOPLE LOOK AT ME AND ONLY SEE/THE COLOR OF MY FACE/ AND THEN THERE'S THOSE THAT TRY TO HELP/ GOD KNOWS BUT ALWAYS HAVE TO PUT ME IN MY PLACE/ NOW I WON'T ASK YOU TO BE COLOR BLIND."

### **Discussion Questions**

- 1) As Tracy becomes more aware of the racism experienced by Seaweed and the other Black characters in the musical, we see her demonstrating activism and solidarity as suggests that the community protest the segregation on the Corny Collins Show. When you observe injustices, how do you react? Have you ever led a protest at school or in your community on a topic that was important to you (e.g., LGBTQ2S+ rights, climate change)?
- 2) In the musical, differences in how police treat the Black community compared to the white community leading to a chaotic and violent clash between protesters and law enforcement. Issues of racial discrimination when Black, Indigenous and other racialized Canadians interact with police remains an issue in 2022 as it was in the 1960s. Why do you think white Canadians have different interactions with the police compared to Black Canadians, Indigenous Peoples, and other racialized groups?
- 3) How have you shown support to a community that was marginalized and/or targeted for discrimination (e.g., students with disabilities, gender diverse/non-binary students, etc.)?
- 4) Why did you want to show support? How did you feel afterwards?
- 5) Link, unlike Tracy, seems to fluctuate on his commitment to social change and helping those who are less privileged if comes at a cost to him. How do you feel about Link's comments to Tracy? Do you think activism and solidarity should only happen if it does not "cost" you something or should

you be committed to a cause no matter what because it is the right thing to do?

## CONCLUSION

We hope you have enjoyed this show as much as we do. *Hairspray!* is more than just a period piece of the 1960s. It delivers an empowering and uplifting message about embracing who you are, working with others in your community to bring about change, and not giving up on your dreams.

The concepts explored - inclusion, body positivity, and hope – are as important today as they were when the film and musical first debuted.

We hope that you use this guide, the recorded panel conversation as well as other resources available online to have important conversations about the themes in the musical. The conversations that are sparked by *Hairspray!* will continue to evolve as society changes because you can't stop the beat!

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Parents Lifeline of Eastern Ontario](#)
- [Ottawa Public Health - Youth Connections](#)
- [Ottawa Carleton District School Board - Supporting Parents and Families](#)