

CINCINNATI

by Scott Cain

Interview with Austin Miller *Hairspray* Tour by Ed Feldman

Also see Scott Cain's review of [Hairspray](#)



It's really apples and oranges, I said to a friend. Comparison is typical, I guess, especially if you have seen a Broadway company and are now taking a peek at the touring cast. What my friend and I were speaking of specifically was the character of Link in *Hairspray*, the hunky guy who falls in love with the chunky woman. Austin Miller approaches the part a bit differently than his Broadway counterpart (Matthew Morrison). Austin brings to Link a bit of vulnerability and youthful exuberance that is well-received by the audience. The touring company certainly exemplifies how synergistic efforts produce a quality theatrical experience. There are times, however, when some actor catches your attention and you realize how he/she helps raise the bar in terms of the quality of a production. Austin Miller does just that.

A performer since childhood, Austin faced uncertainty head-on by turning his back to expectations that he follow a more traditional career path. Instead, he dropped out of college to accept a part in a show playing in Las Vegas. Within six weeks, he was one of the principals. Austin possesses versatility as an actor, singer and dancer that has led to success in various entertainment mediums including TV, movies and theater. He has showcased his talents in national tours of *Smokey Joe's Café* (Michael), *Grease* (Kenickie) and *Victor/Victoria* as well as the soon-to-be movie release of *Puerta Vallarta Squeeze*. He may be best known as Hawk on NBC's "Days of Our Lives."

I spoke with Austin in his hotel room while *Hairspray* was playing in

Rochester, New York.

Ed Feldman: Your phone number has an LA area code - are you California born and bred?

AM: No. I don't think anyone is from LA (laughing). I was raised in South Texas.

EF: I don't hear that drawl. Is your family still there?

AM: If I have a few drinks or talk to my mom, the accent comes out (laughing). My family is still there. In fact, I just bought a house down there. I love to go home and visit. Texas is the place!

EF: Let me ask you about your email address, which in part reads "gimmesugar" - that cracked me up.

AM: Oh, there is a little story that goes along with it. My attorney told me to incorporate. So, I'm thinking to myself, "what am I going to call this incorporation?" I don't want it to be cheesy. I bought a cat, which sort of resembles and acts like a dog. I don't like cats but do love dogs. However, I am not allowed a dog where I live. I found this breed of cats, which are huge, around 30 pounds. I got one, which I named JR (after Larry Hagman). He does all kinds of tricks. One of the tricks is where I pick him up by the backside and say "gimmesugar" and he licks my nose. Later one day I was pondering over a martini and thought "gimmesugar incorporated" is perfect.

EF: Were you born to be an actor?

AM: I never had any aspirations to be anything else. I started dancing when I was a little kid. My mom is a musical director, which was certainly an influence. I grew up in a very, very staunchly conservative Catholic family where acting wasn't looked at as a career option. You don't drop out of school like I did and run off to Las Vegas to do a show. They've adjusted remarkably well though.

EF: Did you go to college?

AM: I went to Baylor University, which is the bastion of Baptistdom. I was there on a scholarship and was basically living for my fraternity life. I figured I was



not learning anything so I decided if I got a gig for the upcoming summer where I could realistically support myself, I'd leave.

I took a job at the Stardust Hotel in Las Vegas in a show that was called *Enter the Night*. It's the show that *Showgirls* was based on. In six weeks I moved up to a principal role. It was an excellent place to start and get my feet wet.

EF: How have you changed as an actor since then?

AM: Well, mostly I learned how to act (laughing). You are taught as a kid to be more of a showman than an actor. You go out there and tap dance and sing, but they don't really care, at least in my experience, if you can act. I had to refine my skills. I had to realize that I was not perfect and was not ready. I had to open my mind to criticism without taking it personally.

EF: I would guess you characterize yourself as an actor, singer and dancer. How about putting those in order.

AM: Oh mercy! I love to dance. Boy, this is a hard question. I would like to consider myself an actor first because I think you need to be a connected actor to make the other two things more enjoyable, not only for yourself but for the audience. I should say my goal is to always be an actor who sings or an actor who dances.

EF: How would you define success in terms of being an actor?

AM: (long pause) ... I'd say if you are doing a live show where you have to do so many performances and you can feel it 25% of the time, then you are a success. I know that is a small margin. If you feel it 100% of the time, you are fooling yourself. In fact, Jack O'Brien (director of *Hairspray*) echoed the same sentiments. He said the exact same thing.

EF: You know, many times the audience can't really tell the difference.

AM: That's right, they can't but you sure can. It is so different.

EF: What was the *Hairspray* audition experience like?

AM: Oh Boy. It was long. It was day after day after day. I was driving from LA to Texas for Christmas. I was on the interstate and my agent called. He asked for a fax number where he could send material regarding an audition for the character Link in *Hairspray*. I was like "Hair what?" Nobody in LA knows anything about theater. OK, that is not completely true, but the LA theater scene isn't big and I wasn't keeping up with what was going on in NY and the powerhouse that *Hairspray* was. I just didn't know.

I remember thinking I didn't really want to do a musical. I had just finished a picture at the time called *Puerta Vallarta Squeeze* and had been doing "Days of Our Lives." I was feeling more stable in the whole camera industry. He faxed me pages and pages of dialogue and songs. I read it and bought the CD. I put it in and heard a friend of mine (Corey Reynolds as Seaweed) sing. We're old buddies but sort of grew apart. I was so happy for him. I read about other people in the show because I didn't know who was in it. I realized Marissa (Jaret Winokur, the original Broadway Tracy) and I have some mutual friends. Well, I listened to the lyrics of the songs. Scott Wittman and Marc Shaiman (lyricists) are so damn brilliant. I was excited to do the audition for nothing else than to sing some of the songs.

I went for the audition in LA and there were tons of people there. It was packed. I sang and talked for a while and was asked to come in the next day. I ended up going back, if I'm not mistaken, for nine days in a row. I didn't know this until recently but Joey McIntyre and other celebrities were also auditioning. My last audition was on a Friday and on Monday the call and offered. By then, of course, I was going to do it.

EF: Have you seen the Broadway cast perform?

AM: Oh, yeah. We would slip in and take a look while we were rehearsing in New York.

EF: So you've seen Matthew Morrison play the role of Link. How did you make the part your own?

AM: Well, we are two different guys with different strengths and aesthetics. I was never trying to be Matthew as Link. I was always trying to be Austin as Link, which is the only way to approach it. Watching him do the show was fantastic because there were times I didn't know what I was doing because we hadn't hit that part in the rehearsal process. So, as far as hitting the marks and that sort of thing, he helped me flush it out. He was there the first day and very supportive. He's a nice guy.

EF: You two definitely approach the character differently. You give Link more of an edge, a more youthful energy.



AM: I think I make him a little more vulnerable. When you are playing opposite Carly Jibson (Tracy on tour), she's like a machine. She's fantastic. A lot of my thought in the show is how she is a mirror for me. I see my potential and the kind of person I actually am because she sees it first. Carly and I have chemistry that is



hard to replicate.

EF: I hear the final dress rehearsal was in front of the Broadway cast. I can't even imagine what that was like. I heard they cracked up with the difficult costume changes.

AM: We had some new stuff. When something new came up, they would stand up and scream and yell. We also had some of the cast of *Chicago* and *The Producers* there. It was definitely a Broadway event to see the first national of *Hairspray*. I was terrified. Jack O'Brien said, "if you can do this in front of this house of dogs, you can do it in front of anybody." I think he was right. It was scary.

EF: How would you describe Link?

AM: Link is a very insecure teenage guy. The world is his oyster and he doesn't know that. That is why it is so important for him to fall in love with this girl. He's a little narcissistic perhaps. Jack O'Brien described Link as someone who doesn't have any support at home, probably in some way trying to supplement his siblings financially. He sees this whole "Corny Collins Show" that he is a part of as the only thing he has. He's hoping some record deal will come along that will get him out of Baltimore.

EF: How would you compare/contrast yourself to Link?

AM: Let's see....Austin is a little wiser, but there was a time not so long ago that Austin was in a similar place. Things happened that made me more rounded. Link has good intentions and a sweetness about him. I think I'm in sync with those qualities.

EF: Let me quote something that Bruce Vilanch wrote in his column, which appears in *The Advocate* magazine: "It's going to be a big adventure taking this inherently subversive piece of work, where a fat girl gets the gorgeous guy and a fat guy plays her mother, to audiences weaned on cats and French revolutionaries and ABBA sing-alongs."

What do you think? Will the audience get it?

AM: Well, the show takes place on so many levels that even if someone is not theater cosmopolitan, they would still enjoy it on a surface level. I mean, it is pretty, it is bright, exciting and loud. On that level, it functions very well. If you are there and enjoy it and have a good time, then that is great. There are other people, however, who might be in high school and are not identifying well with their body. Body image is portrayed positively by this great, 4'10" charismatic, overweight girl. This is a huge deal. The show also explores integration and showcases a large guy

playing a woman who loves her husband. It can be very deep depending on what you take out of it.



Austin Miller, Sandra DeNise, Terron Brooks & Carly Jibson

EF: Let me throw out a couple of projects you've been involved with and give me a line or two of something that comes to mind.

EF: *Smokey Joe's Café.*

AM: So much fun!

EF: *Victor/Victoria.*

AM: Oh boy! Not where was I supposed to be at that time of my life. It was Learning 101.

EF: "Days of Our Lives."

AM: Made some good friends.

EF: *Hairspray.*

AM: It is just a magical machine. I just try to absorb it all.

EF: I was talking to a friend of mine who is an actor and for a brief time traveled with a show. He mentioned how traveling was tough for him. I'm curious as to what your thoughts are about traveling. I've been told it can be tough enough to sustain a relationship being an actor but I'd imagine traveling further complicates things.

AM: The last couple of years have been so chaotic in my professional life. I've been all over the place. I haven't had a date in a while.

Maintaining my friendships has been as much of a thing as I'm choosing to undertake. I have a handful of very close friends and that is enough. I have an enormous family and they support me tremendously. I correspond with them. The most difficult thing is I have two sisters who are very young (two and four). I don't see them as often as I'd like. Each time I go back, they are different. It is hard; having them grow up without me is tough.

On the positive side, we are covering a lot of different, interesting places. If you go into a job knowing it could be potentially propelling you into something bigger, you are cool with it.

EF: Let me end by asking you to reveal a little known secret about yourself. Maybe something your mom would tell us.

AM: I'm a glutton. I eat like a pig.

EF: Health foods?

AM: No, no, no. I have like boxes of chocolates and bags of Twix.

EF: Would you look at yourself?!

AM: The Lord came down to me when I was a kid and said this poor little fat boy has done his time (laughing). I've had to pull my weight lifting back. I've lost about 12 pounds in the show. I'm trying to put some of the weight back on since I'm wasting away (laughing). You should have seen Carly and I eat during rehearsals. I would have finished a sandwich or two and she'd be sitting beside me eating her first bit of a half a sandwich or something. I'd just look at her longingly asking her how it was. Then I'd ask her if I could have some. I eat dinner a lot with the guy who plays Corny Collins (Troy Britton Johnson) and he calls everything I order fat man's candy.

EF Well, you are looking good with that blue t-shirt in the second act which, incidentally, looks like it is painted on you.

AM: The pants used to be that snug until I lost the weight. It is good to know that even if I'm having an off night and my song really sucked that at least I look good in the shirt (laughing).

Thoughts and Reflections:

In this crazy, come and go world of ours, it is always nice to meet quality people. Austin Miller's outer beauty is easily matched by his inner beauty. His energy, passion, and charm all ultimately enhance his already strong stage presence. It is time to get excited about Austin Miller and there is no better way to do this than to catch him in *Hairspray*.

Hairspray Photos: Paul Kolnik

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