



Mitchell, John Cameron (b. 1963)

by Greg Varner

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John Cameron Mitchell.
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While he had already achieved recognition as an actor, the multiple talents of performer, writer, and filmmaker John Cameron Mitchell came to wide public notice in 2001 with the release of his prize-winning film, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Based on his successful 1998 musical of the same name, *Hedwig* presents Mitchell in the title role as an "internationally ignored song stylist" who has an "angry inch" of vestigial male anatomy as the result of a botched sex change operation. With songs by Stephen Trask, the musical showcases smart rock tunes written in a range of styles, from pop ballads to punk anthems.

One of Trask's songs, "The Origin of Love," was written after Mitchell asked him to adapt the fable spun by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* to explain what we now call sexual orientation. According to this fable, human beings were originally bundled in pairs of various genders, then split down the middle by an angry god. Since that time, Aristophanes posited, men and women have searched, with varying degrees of success, for their other halves. In this charming way, Aristophanes accounts for the existence of gay men, lesbians, and heterosexuals. Mitchell (and Trask) use the fable as a means of commenting on Hedwig's existential dilemma.

Hedwig is a creature divided. As a boy in East Germany, she was named Hansel. After falling in love with an American soldier, Hansel is persuaded to undergo a sex change operation so that he will be able to marry and leave the country. The operation is botched; as Hedwig later sings, "My guardian angel fell asleep on the watch. Now all I've got is a Barbie doll crotch--I've got an angry inch." She tells her story with a liberal sprinkling of humor: "When I woke up from the operation, I was bleeding down there--from a gash between my legs. It's my first day as a woman, [and] already it's that time of the month."

Through music, comedy, and the pathos of her unusual but compelling story, Hedwig challenges prevailing gay norms, which are sometimes codified into rigid orthodoxies, and makes the deeply moral point that even society's outsiders are deserving of love. Stephen Trask's supercharged music and incendiary lyrics for "Freaks" deliver the show's musical manifesto: "We are freaks! We fuck who we please and do what we choose. We're not bad. We're not diseased or confused."

As the drag creation of an openly gay actor and as a transsexual character, Hedwig is the revolutionary embodiment of Mitchell's desire to increase popular acceptance of difference. His utter believability in the role left many observers surprised to learn that Mitchell had never done drag prior to assuming the persona of Hedwig.

After meeting Stephen Trask on a plane in 1997 and inviting him to create songs for the character of Hedwig, Mitchell first appeared in the character at a drag punk club in New York City. Combining Trask's songs with his stand-up monologue, Mitchell used these early appearances as Hedwig to develop the character.

Incorporating Trask's songs, Mitchell eventually had enough material for a full-length show, which was

presented off-Broadway in 1998 and became a surprise hit. Hailed as one of the best rock musicals ever produced, it ran for three years at the Jane Street Theater. Various actors, Michael Cerveris and Ally Sheedy among them, have succeeded Mitchell in the stage role in productions all over the country.

When producer Christine Vachon saw the show, she was captivated by it. Her company, Killer Films, produced the movie version. The film won the Best Director Award (for Mitchell) and the Audience Favorite Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 2001.

Mitchell was born on April 21, 1963 in El Paso, Texas, the son of an army officer and a Scottish-born housewife. An "army brat," he lived in various places around the world; his father, by then a general, was United States military commander in West Berlin from 1984 to 1988. (The character of Hedwig is based, in part, on an East German woman who babysat for the children of military personnel, including Mitchell's brother, and also worked as a part-time prostitute.)

Although he grew up full of self-loathing because of his sexuality, Mitchell came out to his parents at age 20. They have been largely supportive of him and are proud of his success.

Mitchell studied theater at Northwestern University in the 1980s. Leaving college before graduating, he understudied the role of Huckleberry Finn in the musical *Big River* (1985), then went to California and won bit parts in various television shows. Back in New York, he appeared in the original cast of John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* in 1990. The following year, he was in the Broadway cast of the musical *The Secret Garden*. In 1992, he earned positive reviews and an Obie Award for his performance as the young Ned Weeks in Larry Kramer's *The Destiny of Me*. At Lincoln Center in 1994, he was in the original cast of Michael John LaChiusa's stunning musical, *Hello Again*, in which he played two gay male characters.

In addition, Mitchell appeared on television sitcoms and did voice-overs and commercials to earn money to finance his pet project, which finally materialized as *Hedwig and the Angry Itch*.

His faith in that project vindicated by the success of both the stage musical and the film, Mitchell hopes in the future to concentrate on filmmaking. He is currently developing a project under the title *Shortbus*, about the search for love and sex in New York City, for which he plans to film actual sex scenes.

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Greg Varner was arts editor of the *Washington Blade* from October, 1997 until September, 2001. He earned an undergraduate degree in writing at Oberlin College, and a master's degree at University of Virginia. He lives in Washington, D.C.