



Shaiman, Marc (b. 1959), and Scott Wittman (b. 1955)

by Linda Rapp

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Composer Marc Shaiman and lyricist and director Scott Wittman, partners in life and collaborators in theater, film, and television projects, have a long list of credits in the entertainment industry. Their work on the musical version of John Waters' *Hairspray* earned Tony and Grammy awards in 2003.

Both Shaiman and Wittman grew up in the vicinity of New York City, the former in Scotch Plains, New Jersey, and the latter in Nyack, New York. Both were fascinated with musical theater from an early age and dreamed of careers on Broadway.

Shaiman played piano with local community theater groups from the time that he was twelve, and Wittman apprenticed in summer stock in his hometown. Such was their love for the stage that they both cut high school classes to travel into New York for matinees.

Wittman attended Emerson College in Boston but left after two years to pursue a career as a writer and director in musical theater in New York. In the city's East Village he crossed paths with Shaiman, who had quit high school at sixteen to join the New York musical scene. Wittman was directing a show at a club in Greenwich Village when Shaiman came in and started playing the piano. Wittman promptly hired him. They subsequently fell in love and have been a couple since 1979.

The two soon began collaborating professionally, writing songs that Shaiman describes as "full of anarchy and joy." In the 1980s they produced quirky musicals at off-Broadway venues such as Club 57, including *Living Dolls*, a story about the Barbie and Ken figures, which was, in the words of Jesse Green of the *New York Times*, "a cult success downtown but ran afoul of [toy company] Mattel on the eve of its uptown transfer."

Both Shaiman and Wittman explored other professional avenues. Shaiman, a longtime fan of Bette Midler, parlayed the fortuitous circumstance of Wittman's being the neighbor of one of her back-up singers into becoming her arranger and producer for albums and concert appearances.

Shaiman also wrote for television shows including *Saturday Night Live*, on which he began working in 1975. Through that job he met Billy Crystal, with whom he worked frequently over the years in film as well as television. Since 1997 Shaiman and Wittman have contributed and directed music for the Academy Awards presentation show, often hosted by Crystal.

At the same time Wittman, who humorously calls himself "a great diva wrangler," was directing concerts. In addition to working with Midler, he has had a long association with Patti LuPone and has worked with Christine Ebersole, Raquel Welch, Dame Edna Everage (Barry Humphries), and Lypsinka among many others. He also directed Bruce Vilanch's one-man show *Almost Famous* in 2000.



Top: Marc Shaiman.
Above: Scott Wittman.
Images courtesy Marc Shaiman, Inc.

In the late 1980s Shaiman and Wittman, who now have homes in both New York and Los Angeles, went to California so that Shaiman could begin writing for films. He has over fifty credits as a music writer, arranger, and producer.

The first film on which he worked was Rob Reiner's *Misery*, released in 1990. Among others to which he contributed are *When Harry Met Sally* (1989, also directed by Reiner), Nora Ephron's *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), and Hugh Wilson's *The First Wives Club* (1996). In addition to his other work, Shaiman has appeared in around a dozen films, often as a piano player.

One of Shaiman's best-known projects is the score for Trey Parker's *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* (1999), particularly the hilarious march "Blame Canada" for which he received one of his five Academy Award nominations.

Shaiman and Wittman's greatest triumph thus far is *Hairspray*, an adaptation of the 1988 John Waters movie for the musical stage. Shaiman and Wittman wrote the music, and Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan the book for the play.

Shaiman and Wittman, both avid Waters fans, were excited to have the chance to work on *Hairspray*, the story of a chubby Baltimore high schooler who goes from being an outsider and a nobody to a heroine when her love of pop music sets her on a course that leads to the desegregation of a television dance show in 1962.

After a nationwide tour *Hairspray*, featuring Harvey Fierstein in the role played by Divine in the movie, took Broadway by storm in August 2002, quickly becoming one of the hottest tickets in the city. The show dominated the 2003 Tony Awards, winning eight, including best musical and best score.

At the end of their acceptance speeches Shaiman declared to Wittman, "I love you, and I'd like to spend the rest of my life with you." The couple then embraced and shared a long and tender kiss. News outlets around the world took note of this affecting moment.

The success of the play led to its adaptation for the big screen. With Shaiman and Wittman serving as executive producers, and Shaiman as the music producer, the movie *Hairspray*, directed by Adam Shankman and produced by Craig Zadan and Neil Meron, opened in the summer of 2007. Shaiman and Wittman wrote three new songs for the movie.

In addition to that project, Shaiman and Wittman are working on the score for a musical stage version of Stephen Spielberg's 2002 film *Catch Me If You Can*.

Shaiman also composed the music for the soundtrack of *The Bucket List*, a film directed by Rob Reiner and starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, released in January 2008.

Shaiman and Wittman have been very generous in contributing their time and talent to fundraisers for AIDS charities, participating in numerous concerts and other benefits to support research and treatment.

[Shaiman's activist spirit also came to the fore after the passage on November 4, 2008, of California's Proposition 8, which amended the state constitution to prohibit same-sex marriage. Soon after the initiative's passage, he learned that Scott Eckern, the musical director of the California Musical Theater in Sacramento, had donated money to support it. Shaiman found this troubling, since the theater had recently staged a production of *Hairspray*.

Incensed that funds generated at least in part by his work were used to bolster a cause he opposed,

Shaiman helped publicize Ekern's contribution, which led to a threatened boycott of the theater and the director's decision to resign from his position.

Although Shaiman had not asked for Eckern's resignation, he felt somewhat burdened when he learned of the director's decision.

"I did not ask for his resignation, nor would it be my place to ask for someone's resignation," Shaiman told the *New York Times*. "But I was a part of that, and that is a very heavy weight, and I don't take it lightly."

In addition, Shaiman felt guilty for having been apathetic before the election. "We stupidly allowed ourselves to be lulled into a sense of 'everything's fantastic now,'" Shaiman remarked.

In response, Shaiman decided to do something positive: he sat down at his piano in his home in Los Angeles and wrote "Prop 8--the Musical," a three-minute Internet video that became an immediate hit when it was posted on the Website funnyordie.com.

Directed by Adam Shankman and featuring Jack Black as Jesus Christ, along with appearances by John C. Reilly, Margaret Cho, Neil Patrick Harris, and others, the video is a song-and-dance diatribe that excoriates the religious right's tendency to "pick and choose" passages from the Bible.

Perhaps the most telling credit for "Prop 8--the Musical" is the one that says Shaiman conceived and wrote the skit "six weeks later than he shoulda."]

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