

**Hairspray**  
Directed by John Waters  
**Five Corners**  
Directed by Tony Bill

By Pat Aufderheide

**N**OW THAT, AS *NEWSWEEK* TELLS us, "the '80s are over," the '60s are being given a nostalgia-bath as well as the occasional critical wringing out. Two current films locate themselves on the edge of the full-blown '60s. Both are made by veterans of the era, fascinated by the texture of white urban working-class life, but very different in their takes on the recent past.

John Waters' *Hairspray*, its narrative anchored to early rock'n'roll, is another of the director's exuberant flaunting of American kitsch-as-culture, with a surprisingly direct anti-racist theme pushing the plot. *Hairspray* looks cheerfully forward to an era in which fashion and politics are tightly interwoven.

John Waters trafficks in glorious tackiness. His films (*Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, *Polyester*) seem hellbent on a mission to shock the lower middle class out of it prudish inferiority complex. *Hairspray* is a Miss Manners lesson on the difference between good bad taste and bad bad taste. Waters' most mild-mannered film to date, it's also the most expensive, although at under \$3 million it's still a low-low budget production by Hollywood standards. More sweetly wacky than bizarre, *Hairspray* is about how racism is not just silly but in bad bad taste. **Divine and Corny:** *Hairspray* featured, in his last role, the divine Divine, who died on March 7. A female impersonator made nationally famous by Waters, Divine became the incarnation of good bad taste. This time he played Edna, the mother of a mini-Divine, Tracy (Ricki Lake).

Tracy's just an average teenager, with a mom who takes in ironing and a dad who runs a practical-joke store. She dreams of getting on *The Corny Collins Show*, a local *American Bandstand* look-alike program. Tracy is immensely fat and her clothes are cut to drape a refrigerator, but she has poise and good humor, and becomes the star of the afternoon show.

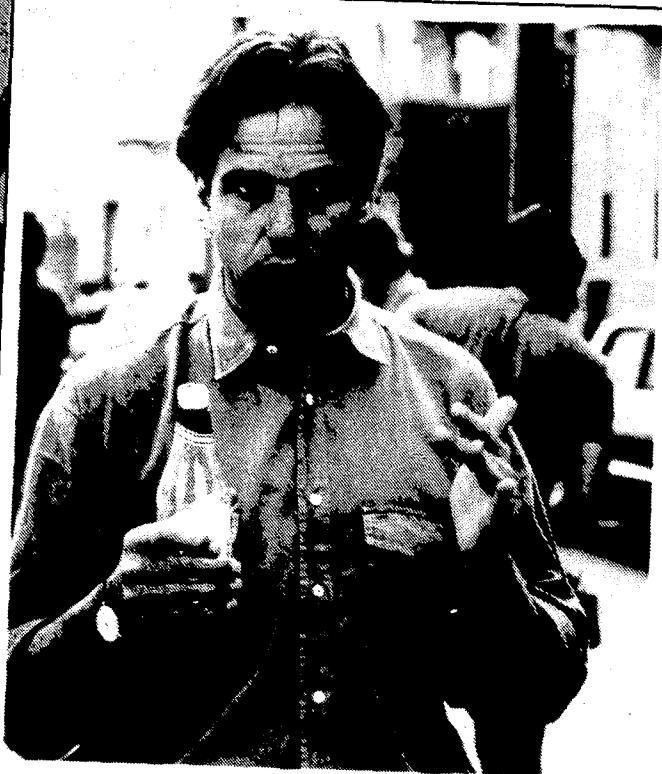
She displaces the snooty Amber Von Tussle (Colleen Fitzpatrick), whose dad and mom (Debbie Harry and Sonny Bono, lending an appropriately tacky celebrity gloss to the production) are grooming her for a commercial future. Amber's mom and dad, who own an amusement park, are fierce segregationists, and as sponsors of *The Corny Collins Show* they aren't eager to see blacks dancing to "Negro music" on TV.

Tracy's black friends teach her dances and turn her on to hot



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**HAIRSPRAY**

Directors John Waters and Tony Bill.



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**FIVE CORNERS** 45%

## *Hairspray* and *Five Corners*: the sticky issue of '60s nostalgia

rock'n'roll and R&B (with the help of R&B artist Ruth Brown, who plays Motormouth Maybell). Soon Tracy is into demonstrations and lands in jail. In the perfect fairy tale ending, Tracy, freed by her trusty black friends, ends up wearing a queen-for-a-day type crown as Miss Auto Show 1963.

**Cultural tuna melt:** Waters has previously demonstrated his fascination with the overlap between appearance and reality, between fame and self-esteem, between fashion statements and social statements in the kitschy postwar culture that he calls home in Baltimore. *Hairspray*, which features some truly amazing early '60s hairdos, reiterates that point.

As you can see from Tracy's meteoric career, the fact that image and substance have come together in a cultural tuna melt creates new possibilities for the erstwhile dowdy, ugly and discriminated-against. In this movie blacks have the best music, the best dancing, the hippest clothes and, of course, the best choice in friends—cheerful good old girl Tracy.

Of course in real life it wasn't all that easy. Waters based the story on the local Baltimore TV program *The Buddy Dane Show*, highly popular until it was finally desegregated, when it went off the air in 1964. But then, Waters knows that in real life blacks don't dance their way to integration, and that vicious segregationists aren't laughed out of harm's way, any more than fat lower-class girls become the girlfriends of the most popular boys in school. In fact, everybody knows that—and that's what makes the goofy good humor of *Hairspray* so funny. It thumbs its nose at

exclusivism of all kinds, and invites you to conspire to do the same.

**Changing times:** *Five Corners* makes macabre populism out of the same era, in a different neighborhood. While Tracy is learning to iron her hair (beatnik influence) instead of ratting it, the kids in *Five Corners* are variously sniffing glue, getting jobs and dreaming of civil rights. Tracy's mom says, as if she's just thought of it, "The times they are a-changing. Something is blowing in the wind." The kids in *Five Corners* listen, without ironic distance, to the song.

The movie was directed and produced by Tony Bill, who for 25 years has been an improbable Hollywood success story. Beginning his movie career as an actor in the '60s, he produced *Steelyard Blues* (1973), *The Sting* (1975), *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Going in Style* (1979). His directorial debut, *My Bodyguard* (1980), was a growing-up movie that didn't genuflect before the teen audience. As his record shows, Tony Bill stubbornly works within conventions that usually recycle truisms and manages to get at a nut of authenticity. It may not be earthshaking, but it makes the difference between sitcom-and-TV-special populism and popular art.

for *Moonstruck*, it was another one for the record. *Moonstruck*, that goofy valentine to neighborhood life, to love on the wrong corner, and to America's romance with the concept of ethnicity, was actually Shanley's second screenplay. The first, *Five Corners*, released shortly after *Moonstruck*, has much in common with the hottest box office hit in the U.S. today, including its New York neighborhood location. It also has some critical differences.

**Character and caricature:** Shanley, son of a meat packer and telephone operator, grew up in the East Bronx before going to college and the Marines, and he clearly draws from his own youth in both films. In both there's shameless corn and real affection. There's the self-confidence that lets the writer caricature a character, knowing that self-dramatization is part of daily life among people who think of themselves as ordinary.

But *Moonstruck* is executed at several more removes from Shanley's own story than *Five Corners*, which sometimes falls into the special pit reserved for brilliant young writers and their own growing-up stories. *Five Corners* is Shanley's adolescence worked over heavily by literary devices that sometimes threaten to club it to

murderous red arrow—that project beyond the edge of viewer tolerance. Of all the gimmicks littering the movie, these two perhaps best capture the fatal mix of sentimental and grotesque that can sandbag *Five Corners*. Too bad, because much in the film is genuinely moving.

It takes place in 1964, on the eve of upheaval in the lives of its characters and the nation. In the bleak working-class world of the East Bronx, an oddball high-school couple—Linda (Jodie Foster) and her sometime boyfriend James (Todd Graff)—are flanked by forces of light and darkness.

Light comes in the shape of Harry (Tim Robbins), the stalwart son of a policeman who was killed in the line of duty. Harry wants to go off with SNCC organizers to get on the civil rights frontlines in the South. Darkness is Heinz (John Turturro) the psychotic who once tried to rape Linda and has just come back to town, crazier than ever. The character reminds you of some of the flakier Elmore Leonard villains. But if he's derivative as written, Turturro fills him with a horrifying presence. Turturro played the sidekick in *The Sicilian* and has already won a handful of awards for his Broadway work; his performance here guarantees the film a place, if no other, in future Turturro retrospectives.

**Neighborhood portraits:** Least effective are the plot-driven action scenes. The film's best moments put what is usually the backdrop—the idiosyncratic lives of working people—in the foreground. Two glue-sniffing girls, basically sweet kids, get into some precarious sexual escapades in an elevator shaft. Harry's mom has a running dialogue with him on the subject of his dog, a discussion that encodes a host of other concerns. Linda, who works in her father's pet shop, has developed a bad attitude about tropical fish.

Honest curiosity—not always sympathy but fascination—lies behind Shanley's character sketching, brought out by Tony Bill's direction. ("I ask new writers to sink or swim with me, and in return I sink or swim with them," he says. He may not have counted on both happening in the same movie.) The incidents add up to portraits not just of individual people but of a way of life. "The neighborhood is the central character in the story," says Shanley, and he's right.

The denizens of John Waters' Baltimore wouldn't recognize the dwellers of Shanley's and Bill's East Bronx. But would any of them recognize their own neighborhoods 25 years later? Looking at these movies, you realize how long ago, measured in increments of cynicism, the early '60s were. And you wonder what the movies that recall the '80s will look like.

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**John Waters' *Hairspray* is a Miss Manners lesson on the difference between good bad taste and bad bad taste.**

Bill has a reputation for launching new talent, especially scriptwriters such as David Ward and Martin Brest. When John Patrick Shanley won the Oscar nomination

death—somewhat like the psychotic who bashes the penguins he finds so cute in *Five Corners*.

Yes, penguins. They're one of several plot devices—another is a



# Makeba returns to U.S. and goes back to basics

By J. Poet

**P**EOPLE IN THE UNITED STATES have a 'Tarzan movie' view of Africa," says Miriam Makeba. "That's because in the movies all you see are jungles and animals, or occasionally the pictures from South Africa of people being beaten by the police. You don't realize that we live normal lives there, just as Americans and Europeans do. We watch television and listen to the radio and go to dances and fall in love." Makeba (pronounced Ma-Kay-Bah), the first international pop star to come out of South Africa, is taping a segment of the program *Studio A* for Oakland's KTVU. While the bright studio lights glare, she does her best to correct the misperceptions that most Americans still have about Africa.

"I was in Texas last week, talking to people in a book store. When I told them about my life at home this big man in a cowboy hat said [switches to a Texas accent and doubles her volume], 'Ya mean ta tell me y'all got TVs in Af-ree-ca?'" Makeba laughed and shook her head. "America is a very media-oriented society, and if people don't see you on TV or hear you on the radio, you don't exist."

Makeba may not exist in the U.S. due to past "political problems" with her record company here, but she maintains a busy worldwide touring schedule, regularly headlining in Europe, Asia and Africa. "It's almost funny when I come to the U.S., because people ask me why I don't sing anymore. I tell them I sing all around the world, but if you don't—or rather, *can't*—sing in the U.S. then you haven't really made it."

Thanks to her high profile on Paul Simon's *Graceland* tour, Makeba's ready to make another impression on the U.S. market. Her latest album, *Sangoma* (Warner Bros.), is doing well, as is her recently published biography, *Makeba: My Story* (New American Library) and plans are underway for an American tour.

**New world records:** Like many kids all over the world, Makeba's first love was the record player. "When I was young, I never bought records," she says, "because my brother Joseph played saxophone and he had a record player and all the records I wanted."

Makeba started singing with friends in a part-time jazz combo, and came to the attention of Harry Belafonte in the late '50s. She had a small part as a nightclub singer in a low-budget, anti-apartheid film called *Come Back, Africa*, and her performance electrified everyone who saw it. Belafonte pulled some strings and brought Makeba to the

U.S. by way of London.

"There was a major culture shock," she recalls. "I had to stay in London a few weeks while the South African government decided what to do with me. When I got hungry I'd go out to eat, but the restaurant I went to had white people eating in it, and back home that meant black people had to stay out, so I cooked quite a few meals on the hot plate in my room."

Makeba eventually got her visa and took the U.S. by storm. She cut a string of commercially successful albums, both as a solo artist and as

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a featured member of Harry Belafonte's international folk music review. In the '60s, Makeba also spoke regularly at the United Nations denouncing the South African regime. She was the only artist invited to perform at the first meeting of the Organization of African Unity and sang at the independence celebrations of Kenya and Tanzania. Still, there was no political or economic fall-out 'til she married Stokely Carmichael in 1968. Carmichael, a leader of the Black Power movement at the time, was criticizing the apartheid that existed in the U.S. and the powers that be took exception to his words. After Makeba's marriage things got nasty.

"Suddenly the concert bookings vanished," Makeba said. "The record company told me that they weren't going to honor my recording contract. It was one thing to speak out against racism abroad, but when it came closer to home people wouldn't listen." Makeba shrugged.

**Thanks to her high profile on Paul Simon's *Graceland* tour, Miriam Makeba is poised to make another impression on the U.S. market.**

"I'd already been in exile for 10 years, and the world is free, even if the countries in it aren't, so I packed my bags and left."

**Back to Africa:** As a result of her work with the anti-apartheid movement at the U.N., Makeba had met many of the leaders of post-colonial Africa. In 1969 she accepted an invitation from President Sékou Touré of Guinea to relocate there. Makeba has made her home in Guinea ever since, although she frequently visits friends and relations in this country. During a visit in 1986 the *Graceland* connection was made.

"I was visiting Washington, D.C., in December of '86 for a dinner with the Black Congressional Caucus," Makeba said. "After dinner I got a call from Hugh [Masekela, another South African musician in exile, and Makeba's third husband] and he arranged for me to meet Paul Simon. The tour was still an idea at the time, but we talked and two months later I was in Rotterdam with the *Graceland* tour. From there we went to Zimbabwe, and eventually we went all around the world. I'm grateful to Paul Simon because he's allowed me to bring my music back to my friends in this country."

"After the U.S. tour, Paul introduced me to Russ Titelman, and he asked if I'd record for Warner's." Considering the fact that Warner's dropped Makeba in the '60s, that turn of events must have been satisfyingly ironic. Makeba smirked. "Yesss," she said, drawing the syllable out.

**Xhosa tradition:** Makeba's new album, *Sangoma*, is a strongly traditional work. "That was Titelman's idea," she said. I would never have dreamed about doing a traditional album, but Russ was interested in the vocal tradition of my people, the Xhosa. Since Warner's had good luck with Ladysmith Black Mambazo, he decided to take a chance with my style of traditional music.

"I know many people were expecting something in the Township Style, like Paul Simon's album, but there's more to South Africa than Township music. South Africa has many styles, kwela, jazz, mbaqanga, pop, marabi, even the blues. I could do albums for 10 years and never repeat a style."

"The title, *Sangoma*, is a word that means healer, although the white men translated it as 'witch doctor.' Before the whites came to our country we had herbal doctors or traditional healers who could cure us when we were sick. We weren't waiting for Western medicine to make us healthy, you know. My mother was *isangoma*, a healer, so the album is named in her honor."

As the interview was drawing to a close, several long-time Makeba fans crowded into the room. One man had a copy of Makeba's first American album for her to autograph. Makeba signed it, but she seemed embarrassed. After he left the room I asked how she felt when she listened to her older work.

"It's a funny thing," she said, "but I'll be at a dinner party and invariably someone will bring out one of my old records and put it on. I don't like it because all I can hear are the imperfections. I don't think I've ever liked one of my records."

"When you're preparing a record for release you have to listen to it over and over again, so you get resigned to it, but I'm always hearing the things that could have made it better. It's almost like a baby picture that your parents bring out to show people at a party. You know it's you, but it's still slightly embarrassing."

J. Poet is a Berkeley, Calif.-based critic and editor.

## MEDIA BEAT

By Pat Aufderheide

### Israeli Army as Movie Studio

The Israeli Army has been fighting not to suppress but to distribute a feature film that offers a disturbing view of the war in Lebanon. *Ricochets* was made under its auspices as an instructional film, and went on to become the top Israeli box office hit of 1986. It also became a buzzword at Cannes, but its distributor never made any foreign sales. The army's impatient for revenues, and has tried to get the rights back, unsuccessfully.

### Just a Joke?

A satire of TV sponsorship has turned into a marketing gold rush in Italy. An imaginary Brazilian cocoa was the vehicle for skits at the expense of advertisers on a popular variety show. But as Italians have flocked to stores looking for the cocoa, marketers have rushed to secure rights to the name—even the state network RAI, which airs the program.

### Why Redford Won't Run

When *Film Comment* asked Robert Redford (*The Candidate*) if he'd run for political office, the answer was "no." Why? The director and star explained: "So much of what we're living in, in terms of what we're told by the administration, is fantasy. It's dream talk. And it's dream talk aimed at creating the illusion that we're this perfect country, strong, courageous and bold. The country at large obviously doesn't want to hear we're not. So we support people who feed that fantasy. I don't like that. I don't want to be a part of that. And I don't think it's a negative to not want to be part of bullshit." And who better to judge what's fantasy, dream and bullshit than one of the most successful stars in the industry that puts all those items into mass production?

### The Sky Is Falling

How good is disaster coverage in broadcast and print media? According to a symposium featured in the latest *Journal of Communication*, it's a disaster area. Individual events take precedence over issues, and hazard stories leave out the crucial ingredient: risk. (How many people are at risk? What's the mortality rate? How to weigh costs and benefits?) In reportage of nuclear accidents, officials seem the major obstacle to good reporting. But in the case of Chernobyl, researcher David M. Rubin reported, Soviet reports were "late, meager but probably not untrue," while Western reports were "fast, massive and often misleading."

### No Mexicans, No Dirty Streets

The first prime-time TV show featuring Hispanic lead characters has been axed at ABC, which has muttered into its corporate beard about "creative differences." Jeffrey Bloom (producer of the projected show, *Juarez*) told trade magazine *Electronic Media* that an ABC official told him, "We don't want to see any Mexicans or dirty streets in this show." Bloom contends ABC wanted "Georgia O'Keeffe sunsets, pretty cactus and quaint adobe houses." What they got was "El Paso, which is a dusty and sort of ugly border town that is 70 percent Hispanic." Hollywood Hispanic groups have protested the cancellation.

### Oscars International

The small clique of working and retired professionals that decides the Academy Awards every year isn't noted for its expansive international spirit. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (originally created as an industry response to unionizing) even created a special category for "Foreign Language Film," more or less to pre-empt criticism of Hollywood's chauvinism. This year the Academy has peeked cautiously across national borders, with major nominations for Italian Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*, filmed in China; British John Boorman's *Hope and Glory*; and Swedish Lasse Hallstrom's *My Life as a Dog*. There is barely a hint of interest beyond the First World, of course, except for an acting nomination for Argentine Norma Aleandro in *Gaby—A True Story*. The denizens of the world's most glamorous dream factory tend to navel-gaze at award time, but the rest of the world seems to love watching them do it. Every year the Academy Awards are beamed out to an audience of around one billion worldwide; last year the coverage was picked up in 87 countries. An early count this year showed Latin American countries from Argentina to Venezuela, and Panama to Paraguay (though not Nicaragua) signed up, with Asian countries putting in early bids as well.

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