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Hedwig and the Angry Inch: A Messianic Myth of Love

BY HEIDI BERKOWITZ

Hedwig and the Angry Inch is a tragic and comedic narrative about an East German aspiring rock star whose music reflects an enduring search for love.

The film, which was originally released July 20, 2001, reinvents the rock opera genre, taking it above and beyond its pop-culture appeal. Hedwig is no character from *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, but rather a hermaphroditic enigma of excess and fame, underscored by childish naiveté and a history of communist oppression.

Hedwig's story is pitiful and powerful, based on Plato's *Symposium*, most specifically the speech of Aristophanes; this movie utilizes Greek philosophy to convey the origins of love: "In the first place, there were three kinds of human beings, not merely the two sexes, male and female, as at present. The third kind shared equal parts of the other two, and whose name survives though the thing itself has vanished. The number and features of these three sexes were owing to the fact that the male was originally the offspring of the sun, and the female of the earth. That which partook of both sexes was born of the moon, for the moon also partakes of both. But Zeus, putting all his wits together, spoke at length and said: 'I propose now to slice every one of them in two, so that while making them weaker we shall find them more useful by reason of their multiplication; and they shall walk erect upon two legs.' Each of us, then, became but a tally of a man, since every one shows like a flat-fish the traces of being sliced in two; and each is ever searching for the tally that will fit with him. And this applies to the whole world of men and women – that the way to bring happiness to our race is to give our love its true fulfillment: Let every one find his own favorite, and so revert to his primal state." (Plato, *Symposium*)

The main character, Hedwig Robinson, formerly Hansel Schmidt, grew up trapped in the Eastern Block taking solace in American radio and singing along to David Bowie, Iggy Pop, and Lou Reed. Close quarters in the small apartment he shared with mother propelled Hedwig to convert the kitchen oven into a shrine for crypto-homo-glam-rock masters. Creative yet confused, young Hansel falls in love with an American GI stationed in Berlin, whose promises of freedom push the boy to assume his mother's identity and have a sex change operation. But the transformation surgery was botched, leaving Hansel as Hedwig, the owner of a Barbie doll style one-inch mound of flesh where his male member used to be.

Hedwig and the GI leave for America, taking up residence in Junction City, Kansas where the marriage ends after only one year. That same year brought the fall of the Berlin Wall, leaving Hedwig feeling exasperated and much like a great divide herself. She was on neither side of usual barriers, not man or woman, forced to stand as an "other" without directions to east or west. Hedwig scraped by monetarily with baby-sitting gigs and a few odd jobs, mainly the ones we call blow, until she loses her gag reflex – you do the math.

On one of these baby-sitting jobs, Hedwig meets the young Tommy Speck who becomes her musical protégé. Teaching him all about Rock and Roll, Hedwig renames the boy Tommy Gnosis (the Greek word for knowledge). The youth, then, in a fit of disgust and anger, steals

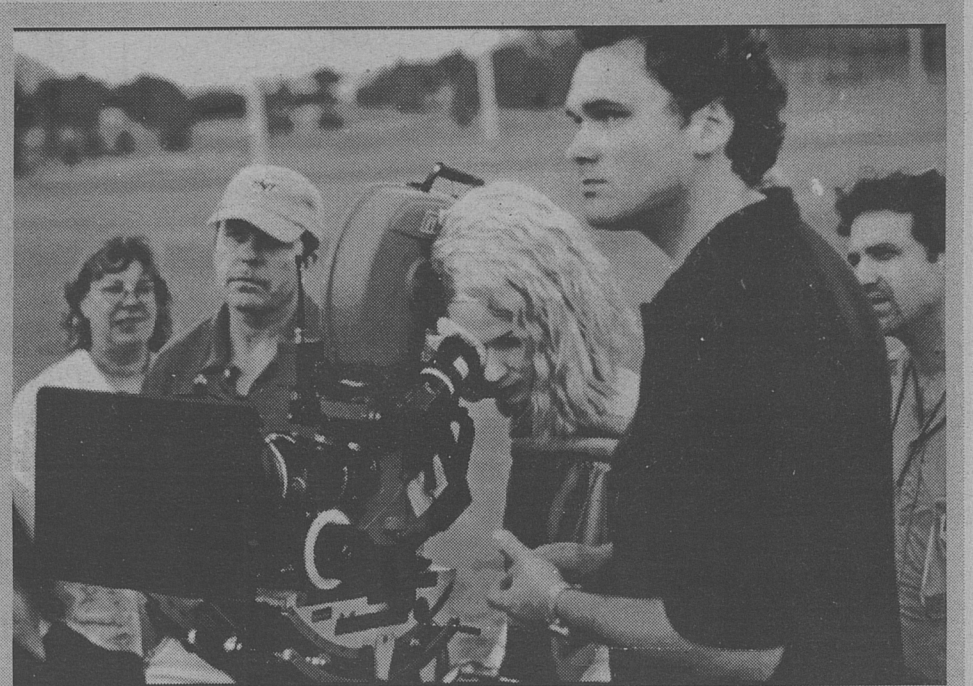
Hedwig's songs and goes on to become a rock star of epic proportions.

Hedwig's bitterness encompasses her as she tries to follow her dreams performing, booking cheap bar gigs at Bilgewater's chain of seafood restaurants. She follows the Tommy Gnosis tour hoping that one day she'll be appreciated as the true artist of the songs Tommy had grown famous for. Never a stranger to the tabloids, Hedwig and her band, The Angry Inch, plug along at infamy, belting out guitar driven ballads about the search for a love that will complete what is missing in each of them.

Similar to the wall that divided Germany into parts, Hedwig claims that people are also separates, continuously searching for the other half that will make them complete. When the halves think they have found their other, they try shoving and pushing themselves back together. They are making love in order to heal, although they know they will never be able to patch up that impossible divide.

The soundtrack accompanying *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is classic heavy-metal drama to the likes of Meatloaf and The Who, but profound in its message of accepting oneself, as opposed to a fleeting notion of "Paradise by the Dashboard Light." The title track, "Origins of Love", clue the viewer in to Hedwig's mentality more than any other song in the film. It is a musical interpretation of Aristophanes' speech, accompanied by a vivid animation sequence that further illustrates the love-quest theme.

Though most of the movie deals with this futile completion search, the closing message is permeated with existential resolve. Love is not meant to fix, but to compliment, not to heal but to help, and certainly not to define, but rather to present itself through individual eyes. Hedwig Robinson may have never been Hansel Schmidt, and is as ambiguous as the ending of the movie.



Starring: John Cameron Mitchell, Michael Pitt, Miriam Shor, Stephen Trask, Theodore Liscinski, and Rob Campbell
Written & Directed by: John Cameron Mitchell
Hedwig and the Angry Inch will be released on VHS and DVD in November.