

Hello and welcome along to ISSUE 47 of On The Ball. This edition contains some of your stories from seeing Hairspray, as well as reports from the many other activities Michael has participated in.

Can you believe that the end of 2007 is drawing near? This must have been one of Michael's busiest and most successful years to date. It hardly seems possible that at the beginning of the year we were looking forward to the tour and Kismet and now as we approach 2008 Michael is still working as hard as ever in his sensational starring role as Edna in Hairspray.

We know that many of you have already been to see Hairspray and are planning further visits, and that some of you still have that pleasure to come. Michael seems to be enjoying every minute of his latest role and it's wonderful news that he has extended his contract until October.

On a personal note we celebrated a special anniversary in November. It was 20 years since we had this photo taken with Michael at the stage door of Her Majesty's Theatre after we had just seen him in Phantom for the first time - a day which was to change our lives forever!



As it's the final OTB of the year we must end by extending our thanks to everyone who has assisted us during the last 12 months. We rely on help and co-operation from so many people but must make special mention of Simon and Phil (the management team), our family for their understanding, everyone who contributes to On The Ball each issue, especially James, and of course the wonderful Andrew who looks after Michael - and us - so well at the moment.

We look forward to the delights that 2008 is sure to bring - and to seeing many of you along the way!

Maureen + Gill

Cover photo by Jason Bell. Back cover photo by Carol Bethwaite

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Dear Everyone,

Well, I'm sat in my dressing room on Friday 7th Dec. Just got back from the "W.O.S." theatre award nominations where **HATESPEAK** got 10 nominations. We are all so thrilled and today I announced that I would be staying with the show until next October. I leave for my first proper holiday for 2 1/2 years in just 2 weeks time and I think it is fair to say this year couldn't have been more exciting, challenging and joyous and it seems it is going to have the most perfect ending I could have possibly imagined. I bet I'm making you feel sick!

Seriously, I can't remember a time when so much has happened and I

think there will be an announcement in the New Year that will be a really exciting new challenge for me. I hope it all works out.

The one thing that has been a constant factor through out this year has, of course, been the love and loyalty that you have shown to me.

Every new challenge has been met with a wave of positivity and support from nearly all of the fans and that really does give me the strength and courage to try new things and stretch myself in new directions. I try to never let you down and give you something

to enjoy in all the fields of entertain-
ment that I am part of. No one can
get it right every time but it is
never going to stop me trying.

2007 has been an amazing year
by anyones standards, so heres to
making 2008 an even more uplifting and
joyous time. You can't know how much
you mean to me being part of this
wonderful time.

God Bless and All my love Always

Mike
X



HAIRSPRAY:

Saturday, 27th October 2007, the big day had finally arrived. We left Swindon Station at 08.29am and arrived in London Paddington an hour later. After negotiating the London Underground, my mum Doreen and I found ourselves outside the Shaftesbury Theatre. This was just the beginning of a very memorable day out. Coffee was first on the agenda, followed by some retail therapy, and then lunch.

By 12.40pm we were making our way back to the theatre stage door. A few people were waiting so we joined them. Just over thirty minutes later the man himself arrived and happily signed autographs and posed for photographs. I found myself asking Michael if he would pose for a photo with my mum and he said, "Yes, of course!".

This was mum's big moment. She walked over to him and said, "I have waited 9 years for this", to which he replied, "Why have you waited so long?" We all laughed. My hands literally shook taking the photo, and Michael said, "Has it come out?" and a lady behind me said, "Bossy, isn't he?", which was followed by more laughter. Mum by now was chatting away to Michael about having to travel on the underground and they both agreed they didn't like it very much. Mum then gave Michael a kiss on the cheek, he told us to enjoy the show and then he was gone.

Only a short while later we were clutching our tickets and waiting with thousands of others to take our seats which were stalls, row A by the aisle.

Seats found, lights down, curtain up, the show had begun. From the first notes of 'Good Morning Baltimore' to the last notes of 'You Can't Stop The Beat' was a fantastic journey. Leanne was amazing as Tracy Turnblad, so much energy and what a lovely voice. Michael was superb as Edna Turnblad, the faces he pulled, the wigs, the dresses, WOW! Mel as Wilbur was a joy to watch and his duet with Edna, 'Timeless to Me' was



MY FIRST OPENING NIGHT!

By Susan Hammer

I left Seattle on 29th October around 8:00 pm and touched down at Heathrow the next day about 11:30am. A short taxi ride took me directly to the Shaftesbury Theatre and I was able to see Michael at the stage door when he arrived around 1:30pm. As you can see from the picture, he was clearly in very high spirits anticipating the opening night show. He wasn't able to stay very long since he said he "had a lot to do"!

Later, Chris Gaskin and I stood at the barrier right behind the photographers and watched as the celebrities entered the theatre. Chris, of course, knew more of the celebrities than I did (being from the

USA), but it was so much fun to see Dame Judi Dench, Lesley Garrett, Elaine Paige, Alfie Boe, and John Barrowman up close and hear some of the interviews! Ben James-Ellis' parents were interviewed for quite a long time and you could tell how proud they are of him.

After the show, we waited for Michael to appear. Our wait was rewarded as we saw him walking down the stairs; he stopped at the window, flashed a big smile and waved to all of us. Michael was then off to the opening night party.

What a night to remember!

A GREAT DAY OUT!

by Sandra Woodfield
and Doreen Hunt.



just absolutely brilliant; they both had a terrible time containing their laughter. Ben as Link Larkin was so good, so much energy was put into the role it made me tired just watching him. Our hands were red

from clapping so much and we left the theatre on a high with the songs going round and round in our heads.

Outside the theatre we made our way back to the stage door. After a few minutes out came Michael, Leanne, Ben and Adrian (Seaweed) to sign autographs. Leanne came over first to sign our programmes followed by Adrian and Ben, and suddenly Michael was waving goodbye to everyone and going back in. My mum said "Oh no, I wanted Michael to sign our programmes as well". Ben was so nice and said, "Wait a moment, I will go and fetch him". We were amazed to see Michael come back with Ben and he said, "Sorry ladies, I didn't see you

over here". He then signed our programmes and told us to have a safe journey home. We thanked Ben very much for fetching Michael back out for us. They are all fantastic stars, every one of them and if you only ever get to see one show this year or next, make it *Hairspray* and you won't be disappointed!



YOU CAN'T STOP THE BEAT!

By Mark Witchell. Photo by Sue Witchell

I have been a fan of Michael since I was six years old and the Eurovision Song Contest in 1992 but *Hairspray* has to go down as one of the most enjoyable experiences I have ever had with Michael! What an exhilarating and

marvellous show it is. Truly the best West End Show I think I have ever seen! I have never seen an entire West End audience up on their feet clapping and dancing at the end and Michael was AMAZING!!

We managed to have a quick word with Michael as he arrived about 1.30pm and I had a photo taken with him! He sounded a bit croaky and said he was getting over a small cold. We also chatted to Leanne and Ben when they arrived. Leanne had been off for two shows, but said she felt much better and was looking forward to returning to the show! The show was brilliant - the entire cast were stunning. The dancing was spectacular and Michael and Mel really bounced off each other well (so to speak!).

I loved 'Good Morning Baltimore' by Leanne and thought 'Timeless to Me' from Mel and Michael was so funny. It brought the house down when Mel was holding Michael's boobs! Other highlights have to be 'Welcome to the 60's' and the show-stopping 'You Can't Stop the Beat' at the end of the show and Michael's spectacular re-entrance in the red dress! I think he has to sing this one in his next solo concert or tour!

Anyway we loved the show and went back stage afterwards and saw Michael and Ben and thanked them for a brilliant time. Michael didn't stay out long as it was very cold, but what a brilliant first time seeing the show! We are back on the 15th March and can't wait until then! Thank you to everyone involved in putting on a magnificent show!

hairspray

A SELECTION OF REVIEWER'S COMMENTS

As her mother, Edna, Michael Ball has the part of a lifetime. Obese and camp, Ball is the best pantomime dame London has seen in years. He and Mel Smith, in fine form as Tracy's dad, Wilbur, have a hilarious duet in which they celebrate the joys of married life.

The Herald – William Russell

Tracy's ample mother Edna is a drag role, played by Michael Ball. During the course of the plot, Edna swaps her cheap dirty housecoat and insecurity for sequins and self-worth. Ball turns in a funny and touching performance, resisting the temptation to go over-the-top.

'Timeless to Me,' the duet between Edna and her adoring husband Wilbur (Mel Smith), is a delight.

Bloomberg.com – Warwick Thompson

Hairspray is billed on the back of Michael Ball and Mel Smith, who play Tracy's parents Edna and Wilbur Turnblad. Ball seems in his element in a frock, gaining much comedy value from his ample bosoms and behind, while Smith plays Ball's straight man, milking the pair's duet 'Timeless To Me' with undisguised pleasure.

London Theatre Guide

Michael Ball in the Divine role seemed about as excitingly blasphemous a piece of casting as, say, hiring Michael Crawford to play Leigh Bowery.

In fact, the fat-suited Ball, who is appreciably better than John Travolta in the recently released movie version of the show, gives one of the warmest, funniest and most oddly touching performances in a musical that I have ever seen. When Edna is a housebound slattern, he resembles Nero in the wake of some disastrous hormone injection; when Edna is spiffed up and learns to appreciate the worth of her girth, he has a weird look of A. S. Byatt. Yet with wondrously supple and amusing timing, he packs in an extraordinary range of tones – from moments when he gruffly acknowledges his maleness to sequences

where he suggests a poignant shy delicacy and undimmed wonder in this woman who can't leave the house because she's ashamed of her bulk.

The Independent – Paul Taylor

There's even a delightful vaudevillian routine for Michael Ball, who plays Tracy's corpulent mum in spectacular big-bosomed drag and looks as if he's having the time of his life, and Mel Smith as her devoted, joke-shop-owning husband.

The Telegraph – Charles Spencer



In what has become something of a tradition, a man plays Tracy's mother Edna, a role it appears Michael Ball was born to play and he is obviously loving every minute.

The Stage

And Michael Ball is very funny as her muscular moll of a mum who once entertained dreams of being a designer. "I thought I was going to be the biggest thing in brassieres," Ball announces in gravel-voiced tones. What makes him so good is that he reminds us that heftiness is not incompatible with haute couture. Mel Smith, as Tracy's joke-retailing dad,

seems underemployed until he joins Ball in a front-cloth duo.

The Guardian – Michael Billington

And taking centre stage was West End star Michael Ball, who plays middle-aged American mother Edna Turnblad. It's little surprise his performance is so convincing, considering he waxes his eyebrows, shaves his chest, applies layers of foundation, dons a wig and slips into a fat suit during the 40 minutes it takes to transform him into the larger-than-life character.

Hellomagazine.com

Michael Ball deliciously fattened up and dragged down in bland frocks and lurid gowns, majestically slips into the role of the fat, foghorned laundress, Edna Turnblad, who responds to a large insult with a majestically contemptuous "Excuse me."

Evening Standard – Nicholas de Jongh

This joyous West End version, starring Michael Ball in the role of his life, makes it obvious why it swept the board at the Tony Awards.

At first Ball is scarcely recognisable as Edna, a put-upon laundress with a 54EEE bust. It is only when she discovers big-haired glamour that Ball turns on the floodlights, knocking everyone else off the stage.

Daily Express – Simon Edge

But at the heart of this essentially teenage trash comedy, it is a number by Tracy's parents that steals the show. Mel Smith, his features more and more, er, tired with every passing year, is an appealingly kindly dad, Wilbur Turnblad, while Michael Ball is clearly having a ball as Tracy's mountainous mother, Edna (played by Divine in the original movie). Their duet, 'Timeless to Me', a hymn to enduring lust far into saggy, baggy middle-age, got the night's loudest applause.

Timesonline – Christopher Hart

AFTER 15 YEARS... A DECENT PHOTO..!

By Lisa Hutton. Photo by Kate Smith



As I headed to London to see *Hairspray* with my friend Kate, I wondered if we'd get the chance to see Michael arrive at the stage door; oh what a treat that would be. I have followed Michael for many years and have been to so many stage doors I've lost count; but so far only the one photo exists of us together and even then Mum had cut the top of Michael's head off! Having worked for Jane McDonald for seven years I find it hard to push myself to the front, but today was the day!

After waiting at the stage door for ten minutes, yes, just ten minutes, Michael arrived and jumped straight out of the car in front of us; here was my chance but I was too slow off the mark and he was surrounded in seconds. I negotiated my way to the front and here I was, face to face with Michael, as I grinned from ear to ear Michael agreed to have a quick photo taken - now where was Kate? Luckily she was ready for the photo and "click" - a perfect photo now exists of

Michael and I... oh, what a wonderful moment!!

Needless to say *Hairspray* was just wonderful and you could see how much fun Michael was having; as I enjoyed the show I couldn't help feeling extra happy as at last I have a fabulous photo... I just hope it's not another fifteen years before I can get that close again... But rest assured when Michael's still going, I'll be there..!

NICOLA & MICHAEL

Nicola Pamphilon meeting Michael at the stage door of *Hairspray*.

Photo by Sue Ashton



SWING ON A STAR

Almeida Theatre, Islington – by Jen Garner. Pictures by Nan Lightfoot



This was simply the most enjoyable and momentous evening imaginable organised by Jonathan Pryce. It was a Charity Concert in aid of 'Friends United Network'. F.U.N. is a befriending charity for children from disadvantaged single parent homes in North London.

Nan and I arrived late afternoon to pick up our tickets from the Box Office and to our delight and surprise bumped into Andrew. He told us that Michael was just round the corner and sure enough within five minutes, a silver car arrived and out stepped Michael smiling broadly. Nan must have looked away embarrassed because he greeted us with - 'it's no use turning away as if I couldn't see you!' He was just as lovely and relaxed as ever, although tired with the opening of *Hairspray* and all the promotional work he had been doing.

Thrilled with our lovely unexpected encounter, we wiled away the next hour or so in the very pleasant Islington high street before mingling with other guests and fans (Barbara, Jean, Heather, Jenny and a few more). The canapés and champagne flowed – all very nice indeed!

Although we were sat in the rear of the circle, we had an excellent view, as the theatre was quite intimate. Michael's

'Feeling Good' reflected the feelings of everyone around us.

His duet with Jonathan Pryce 'What a Swell Party This Is' completely summed up the whole occasion perfectly. Michael looked very smart in a dark suit, black tie and gleaming white shirt.

Imelda Staunton wooed us with her beautiful singing voice and Jonathan sang 'Something Stupid' with Dame Judi Dench who is so lovely, natural and talented.

Michael introduced David Morrissey and said how nervous he knew he must be as it was his singing debut! You really would not have known as he raised the roof when he sang 'Viva Las Vegas'.

The Rat Pack entertained us wonderfully with favourites such as 'I Get a Kick Out of You', 'I've Got You Under My Skin', 'Try a Little Tenderness' and 'Mack The Knife'.

As always, Michael shone 'brightest of bright' and nearly brought the house down with his interpretation of 'Birth of The Blues'! This is such a great song and was a totally inspired choice. The Almeida 'swung along' and erupted in appreciation of his rendition of this timeless classic.

Michael put his heart and soul into the finale, which was everyone singing 'Stand By Me'.

Afterwards stars and audience alike, gathered once more in the reception area to listen to a band called 'String Fever'. (We thought they would be a good warm up act at a Michael concert!) More canapés and champagne flowed and after 'Good Nights' and a group photo of all the guest performers, Michael left.

Nan and I lingered a while, soaking up the atmosphere and enjoying the music.

*Below, L-R:
David Morrissey, Imelda Staunton,
Michael, Dame Judi Dench and
Jonathan Pryce*



WELL WORTH THE WAIT!

By Lynn Parkinson



Our day started at 4.30 in the morning with the radio signalling it was time to drag ourselves out of bed and prepare for the long day that lay ahead for my husband and I.

By 5.50 am, we were ready to set off to drive to Manchester Piccadilly station to catch the 6.38am train to Crewe, in order to meet up with the 7.35 Virgin Express to London Euston.

We arrived at Euston around 10.20am, and promptly made our way to our base for the evening, which was the Novotel Hotel on Euston Road. After checking in and leaving the baggage, off we went in search of the 'Hairspray Salon' in order to recce the best spot to see Michael. Although it was the 3rd November, the weather was absolutely glorious, with bright autumn sunshine filtering through the narrow streets on the way to the Shaftesbury Theatre.

After a brief stop for refreshment in one of the many coffee shops around the area, we arrived at the theatre, only to find we were not the first to arrive at the stage door, and as we were a little too early to expect Michael, we went to look around Covent Garden to pass an hour or so.

Back at the stage door, we were glad we had brought our winter coats as the warming autumn sunshine had given way to grey skies, and a rather chilly wind (why is it always windy around theatre stage doors?).

As with many of the times I have waited at stage doors with my husband or friends, I always seem to bump into someone I know, and it is always a pleasure to have a conversation with people from different walks of life who have one thing in common – Michael!

Eventually Michael turned up, rather later than we expected, (2.00pm) and was in a rush to get inside. He told us he was late due to just coming from the dentist having had root canal treatment on his teeth, and as his mouth was still swollen he didn't hang around and was inside the theatre in a matter of seconds.

The rest of the afternoon was spent touring around Covent Garden and the surrounding area, and enjoying a gorgeous pre-theatre meal in one of the many restaurants on Drury Lane.

By 7.30, we were in our seats and eagerly awaiting the opening of *Hairspray* - would it be like the film

version or better or worse?

Well, I can tell you, from the moment the curtain went up, the show was absolutely fantastic! Although I went to see Michael as the star of the show, Leanne Jones was absolutely superb as Tracy Turnblad – the energy and vitality she gave to the part was outstanding for an unknown actress who was in her first West End role.

The only downside of the show for us, was not being able to see Ben as Link Larkin - apparently he was unwell, and Link was played by understudy Neil Toon.

Michael was a sheer delight in the role of Edna. He brought a believable amount of humour and sentiment to his part – it is surely a part that was made for him. If anyone wants to compare how good Michael is in the role, go and watch John Travolta in the movie version, then watch Michael in this part, for me there is no contest, Michael wins hands down. You certainly wouldn't have believed that he had had root canal surgery just a couple of hours earlier!

The show had been well worth the months of waiting, and we were not let down, but we didn't want the day to end just yet, so we staked out the stage door to see if I could get a quick photograph with Michael as he left. As you can see, Michael was very obliging, and posed for a lovely photo with me (the red ribbons around my neck were from the exploding hairspray can at the end of the show).

It was then time to head back to the hotel for a well earned drink and a good night's sleep before our journey home the next day.

I have booked to go and see the show again next March, but don't know if I can wait that long!

BUDDING DRUMMER
Lynn wrote to Michael's drummer on the tour, Ralph, to ask if there was a chance that her son Adam, keen to follow a career as a drummer, could have a few words with him when the show was in Manchester. Ralph kindly invited Adam on stage, as the photo here shows, and gave him some very useful tips.



HAIRSPRAY HAMPER



By Ruth Whiting. Photo by Dorothy Ashmore

We had been looking forward for a long while to seeing *Hairspray* for the first time on 8th November and having successfully met up with Di at Oxford Circus, we sauntered down Oxford Street, stopping off at M&S to buy some mini doughnuts to complete the mini hamper, our present for Michael which I had brought with me carefully from Cheltenham.

We met up with Jill and Jayne from Burnham on Sea at Tottenham Court Road and made our way to the stage door in Grape Street to wait for Michael to turn up!

I chatted with Dorothy from Lowestoft who recognised my face from the forum - it is such fun to meet new people at the stage door. We saw some of the cast go in and it was particularly nice to meet Leanne Jones who plays Tracy.

Michael soon came strolling down the road and greeted us all with a cheery "Hello, my lovelies!" - we can't get enough of that sort of greeting!!

He chatted to some fans including Catherine who I had not seen since the concert tour so lovely to catch up with her news.

I presented Michael with his hamper and he said "Oh, thank you!" then we read the labels on the goodies together. These included

some chocolate Mistletoe Kisses which said 'at least you won't catch a cold from these Michael' which made him smile and some figs to bring back memories and 'at least it gives you something nice and healthy to eat!'

The tag on the hamper said 'Share some of this with Edna, Michael' and Michael said "There will be some sharing soon!". I think the mini doughnuts would have gone down very well!!

Michael stayed chatting and said to us all "Does anyone want photos then before I go in?". He was so charming and Jill and Jayne enjoyed their first stage door experience. Jill has said to me since "Thank goodness I didn't go for that coffee!!"

Michael went into the theatre with a cheery "Enjoy the show, see you all later!" and we went off to have our lunch in an Italian restaurant round the corner. On the way back to the theatre to see the show I spotted a chap sitting outside a cafe in Shaftesbury Avenue with his back towards us and thought 'I know the back of that head' and sure enough it was Mel Smith taking a quick bite of lunch before he hurried in to get into his Wilbur costume!!

Here I am pictured in a Michael clinch with his hamper securely clinched in his other hand!

When Lorraine Kelly interviewed Michael on LK Today, she hit the nail on the head. She said you just come out of the show feeling better than when you went in. And that's at the centre of its success. Its got underlying messages, and important ones but they are not approached in a preachy way. Having grown up in a time when on TV you'd see things like 'Mind Your Language', 'Love Thy Neighbour' even 'The Benny Hill Show'. I had a couple of moments where I did feel at first, a little uncomfortable about laughing at certain things said. Those programmes have become unacceptable viewing now their comedy is in poor taste... I soon realised though that in *Hairspray* land it was ok to laugh because you're laughing with the characters, not at them. No, *Hairspray* is very different to those old 70's shows because it isn't derogatory at all; instead it is celebrating those differences and in doing so putting everyone on a level playing field.

The show (I'm reliably informed) has remained faithful to the time in which it was set, it hasn't compromised itself. If only *Kismet* had had this much conviction. The production might have matched the cast's performances. I never thought anything could ever beat the feel good factor of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* but I was wrong! *Hairspray* has done just that, with its great score (and the great playing of it), colourful sets, audience participation and brilliant cast performances, you come out of the theatre three feet off ground and grinning from ear to ear.

I think the casting of this show has been perfect and everyone gives their all to it. Leanne is such a talent, great voice, Heaven knows where she gets the energy to do two shows in one day. She seems very down to earth and I hope this is the beginning of a very long career for her. Having lost out in the race to be Joseph, Ben is getting his shot at the big-time, with the role of Link Larkin. Some might say it is not as good a role. But here he gets to learn his craft in a big HIT show but under less pressure than there would have been had he won the 'Any Dream Will Do' competition. Ben is a great mover, has a good voice and I hope he'll also have a long career in front of him. He might not have walked straight into the lead

OH BOY, WE CAN HEAR THE BELLS!

by Marie Thomson. Photo by Jason Bell.

role but he should take heart, starting out as juvenile lead didn't do Michael any harm, did it? Mel Smith makes a great Wilbur - it's a shame the role is not a bit bigger really. Of course 'Timeless To Me' is the real high point. I bet some fun was had rehearsing this. The whole cast are amazing with special mentions to Johnnie Fiori's wonderful voice, Elinor Collett's brilliantly funny performance as Penny and Adrian Hansel as the fantastic all singing all dancing Seaweed.

And then we come to Michael's performance of Edna. It has pretty much received universal praise from punters and critics alike... and rightly so. This performance is all about Edna. I was surprised at how quickly I forgot that it was Michael under all the costume etc and believed in the character. It's all about her personality, her mannerisms. It must have been very tempting for the composer to drastically alter the score in the light of having such an accomplished voice on board. There are several occasions where they could have put in a big belting 'hushabye reprise' type note in there, to remind us all (as we need reminding) of what Michael can do with his voice. They don't because then that would break the illusion and it would be Michael on stage, not Edna. In a way his understatedness with regards to his own singing performance only breathes more life into Edna's character. The only time you are reminded that there is a man playing the role is when the script reflects it - for example you're happily buying into the illusion when Edna answers the phone (I'm paraphrasing here) and says "Hello, yes this is Tracy Turnblad's residence... and no I'm not her father!" - brilliant!

'Timeless To Me' is comical, touching and playful all at the same time. Michael (and Mel for that matter) looks like he is having so much fun, like it's a real joy to be at work. For me part of the problem with John

Travolta's Edna is there wasn't enough of a difference between down trodden Edna and transformed Edna. This is something Michael certainly can't be accused of. At first Edna is sloppy, self conscious about her appearance, hardworking but with no real satisfaction in her work and scared of the world outside. But with Tracy (and her friend's) encouragement she turns into a confident, beautiful woman. Michael's performance of Edna is truly amazing on stage he is completely Edna, you totally believe in her relationship with Tracy and of course Wilbur.

Some might say I'm biased... perhaps ever so slightly but on this occasion that universal praise seems to be backing me up.

I think the show is a big ol' dose of happiness, which will hopefully be rewarded handsomely and if Michael's portrayal of Edna doesn't win him an award, then there's simply no justice in the world!





A REAL RED LETTER DAY!

by James Gaden. Photo by Sara-Louise Russell.

When it was announced that Michael was going to be in *Hairspray* a few months back, I knew for certain that was going to be my Christmas treat. I've been all over the place this year, going to various gigs and a last minute whistle stop trip to London last month when I was invited out of the blue to the launch party of Queen's live DVD and album. I knew looking at my funds early on in the year and what was scheduled, it was either go and see *Kismet* before Michael finished there, or hang on for *Hairspray* - both just wasn't a real possibility.

The London shows I've enjoyed the most have been the less traditional ones, such as *We Will Rock You*, *Chicago* and *Saturday Night Fever*. I figured *Hairspray* was going to be much more my thing than *Kismet*, so I booked my tickets way back, put them in my safe and the next thing I know it's a couple of days until the show! Where has the year gone?

After hearing about *Kismet* and listening to what Michael, critics and some of the

fans had to say, I'm not too disappointed in missing that. *Hairspray* sounded much more fun and that's what I like, and every single review I'd seen of the show was positive, so I was really looking forward to it.

I'd had nothing but *Hairspray* on my mind for the couple of weeks leading up to the show because I was working on this very magazine which as you can see is something of a *Hairspray* extravaganza. I got everything finished off that had been sent to me so far, but there were still a couple of outstanding pieces - one of which was Michael's letter!

With the postal service being what it is at this time of year, I said to Maureen if Michael had written the letter by Friday, I'd be right there in the theatre and I would happily pick it up and take it back to my office to scan it in for the magazine. Maureen thought that was a great idea and said she'd speak to Andrew about it. I left it at that and soon I was on my way to London with Sara-Louise, who

came with me to see Michael in Scarborough earlier this year and has become quite a fan of his in her own right.

The trip down to London was three uneventful hours on the train so I won't bore you with any of that. We got checked into the Travelodge Hotel which was right next to the theatre, had a nice afternoon just wandering round Covent Garden, had a lovely Italian meal before the show and then it was into the theatre, ready for curtain up!

I'd never been to the Shaftesbury Theatre before and I thought it was a very nice place, and smaller than it looked on the seating map - which was fantastic because my excellent seats on the map turned out to be closer than I thought - I was only four rows from the stage and I could see everything perfectly.

When the show started with Tracy in bed with the audience looking down on her, I knew this was going to be a show I'd

enjoy. It put a smile on my face from the very first scene, and it never left all evening! I was really impressed with Leanne Jones, I thought she gave an excellent performance as Tracy.

I thought the choreography and the up-tempo numbers were just infectious fun and I can't fault a single member of the cast - as so many other people have commented, everybody seemed perfectly suited to the role they played.

What I really liked about the show was the amount of humour. I thought the balance of comedy, dancing and a top notch foot tapping score performed with such gusto made for a perfect production.

Then of course, there's Michael himself. Every time he takes on a new project, he impresses me. When I saw him on the 'One Voice' tour he picked some totally left field numbers and made them his own. Now he takes the role of Edna and I was amazed. I like John Travolta, but frankly, I think John Travolta's Edna looks like John Travolta in a wig. By sharp contrast, Michael transforms himself! Even when he plays Edna as the drab, self conscious mum doing the ironing, he looked and talked like a mum would, scolding Tracy for wanting to be on the television and playing it down. And when Edna finds her self confidence - wow!

I thought Michael gave a stunning

performance, looking different, singing different, moving different - and for someone who downplays his dancing abilities I thought he was very good indeed! Plus he got to really use his skills for comedy in this role - there's no wonder he's enjoying it so much!

I liked the fact that members of the cast ended up coming through the crowd near the end and the finale of 'You Can't Stop The Beat' was as good a finale as you could imagine. Talk about leaving the audience wanting more!

After the show I turned my phone back on (I'm a conformist in the theatre, just a maverick the rest of the time) and I found I had a text from Maureen. She'd told Andrew I was going to be there and he was going to look for me at the stage door. I was going to demand the letter with menaces but it turns out Maureen and Gill already have that covered...

Sara and I waited outside and I laughed as Ben James-Ellis came out and was damn near mugged by adoring females - my heart went out to him, I know only too well what that's like. A few minutes later Michael came out and got similar treatment.

I found myself next to him and I said "I'm James, I do 'On The Ball' for Gill and Maureen." He replied "Hiya mate, listen, I'm really sorry, I haven't done the letter yet, but I have started it. It'll be done

tomorrow, I promise!" I don't know what Maureen and Gill do to him if he doesn't deliver, but the terror was evident so I assured him that was ok and asked if I could have a photo with him while his face was still intact. He happily obliged and Sara took the beauty you see opposite which I will happily add to my celebrity encounters hall of fame on my website!

I asked Michael to sign some of his CDs for me and he asked if they were all for me, and I told him one was Sara's but the others were mine because I was a sycophant. He grinned, kindly signed them and he made his way to his car. I talked to Andrew who seemed equally fearful of Maureen and Gill - I felt a little like I worked for the mob, especially as I was dressed all in black. He even showed me the half written letter to prove it was in the process of being done! I provided Andrew with an addressed envelope and my card and the letter came through first thing Monday so it all worked out fine.

Sara ended up ringing her friends straight away telling them all smugly she'd just met Michael Ball and I was equally happy. I ended up seeing a fabulous show, I got to meet Michael, got a great picture and my CDs signed, and it was a perfect night. If things had been left to the Daily Mirror I'd have probably ended up seeing Mel Gibson and Michael Bolton, but as things stood, I was pretty happy with the way the night turned out!

ANGELA HAZELL

September 1937 - December 2007



Angela, who was an avid fan of Michael's, sadly and suddenly passed away on Tuesday 4 December.

Over the years she derived great pleasure from Michael's singing and shows both here in the UK and in America and with her friendly and outgoing personality made many friends whilst standing at the stage door. She just loved the excitement of it and was in her element!!

As close friends we have wonderful memories of hilarious post show evenings with plenty of food, fun and laughter, weekends with Ken and Angela in Bristol and many, many phone calls (yes, very old fashioned but we loved talking to each other!!)

Angela, we shall certainly miss you...

Anne, Margareta, Gill, Sue, June, Maureen, and Sharon.

Photo by Anne Chynoweth

MICHAEL'S BLACK COUNTRY BABES!

by Kim Downing



Well, we've been travelling around the country to see Michael now for a long time. We've had adventures in all kinds of unlikely places – been turned off the car park in Manchester (not our fault – really!), got lost in the pitch dark by taking a wrong turn and ending up touring the Peak District at midnight, stopped by a police car when returning home from Northampton, swamped under water at Cardiff – and that's just a few examples! We've done tours, theatre shows, outdoor concerts – you name it, but for the first time ever it looked as if we weren't going to make the show we'd set out for. It was October 18th 2007, we'd been waiting for this day for so long as it was our first visit to see *Hairspray* and there we were, stuck in a traffic jam on the way to the train station. It was a journey that should have taken about 15 minutes but due to an earlier accident blocking the road we were still in the car an hour after we started off. There was some choice language in the air that morning, I can tell you! And of course, there was the

inevitable car in front which kept letting everybody in from every side road imaginable, at one stage I'm sure he must have heard Faye's irate screams of "Go FASTER!!" When we finally made the station you have never seen four people move so fast from the car park to the platform, we literally made it by a few short minutes – but make it we did, and at last we were really on our way to see Michael in *Hairspray*.

Thankfully there were no more delays, we arrived at Euston on time and headed straight over to the stage door of the Shaftesbury Theatre. We were the first there and Faye and I took up our positions while our mums decided it was far too early to hang about and potted off to get a coffee somewhere (you know, I really think they have this stage door lark sussed! We stand there for ages, afraid to move in case Michael turns up, while they go off and yet they always manage to get back at just the right time to see Michael arrive, can you believe it?) Anyway, a few more people

we often see began to turn up, including Kerstin and Julia from Germany. We had much to talk about (mainly about when we met up at another stage door, a few weeks earlier – a memorable day indeed, but that's another story!) Time always seems to pass more quickly when you're nattering away with fellow fans but after about an hour and a half everyone kept checking their watches and looking anxiously at every car that went by! At last the cry went up "He's here!" and cameras were switched on in anticipation. So we were all a little taken aback when the taxi door opened, and Michael rushed past us, apologetically saying "Sorry, I'm bursting for a pee, I'll come back out though". I have to say there was much laughter and more than a few comments from certain individuals (I wouldn't dream of saying who – no, really... unless, it was made worth my while with... oh, let's say, a ticket to see *Hairspray*, maybe!). True to his word he reappeared in a couple of minutes and was chatting and signing things for people. I was standing against

the wall watching all this and trying to appear nonchalant (but, as always, failing miserably!!) when I heard Faye's mum ask Michael if we could have a group photo taken with him. I found myself saying "Yes, The Black Country Babes" (Why, oh why do these utterances always seem to come out of my mouth on occasions like this? It wasn't quite "I carried a water melon", but very nearly!!). Anyway, Michael seemed to like that title and was most amused by it so I think henceforth we shall be known by this name!

And so onto the actual show. I had heard good things and was expecting to like it, but I didn't think it would be THAT good – what a brilliant, uplifting show it is. And Michael makes an absolutely incredible Edna Turnblad. That first appearance he makes onstage, as the homely, rather downcast mother of Tracy is perfect. He plays it just right, hams it up in the right places with a touch of pathos in others. (And oh – that pained expression on his face as he's doing the ironing!) The cast just seem to gel together, there are some wonderfully talented people there. Leanne, in particular, has a fantastic voice and from that first scene and rendition of 'Good Morning Baltimore' she proves that she was completely the right choice for the role of Tracy Turnblad. But all the characters seem to have been cast so brilliantly, that was the first thing that hit me about the show. In any production, you usually get good lead characters but I really think this is the first show I've been to where everyone is excellent and fits the role they're playing like it was made for them.

Ben James-Ellis is perfect as Link Larkin (and I must admit, I wasn't a great fan of his in the Joseph show) and

Mel Smith makes a great Wilbur. But also I think mention should be made of Elinor Collett who is faultless in her role as Tracy's friend Penny Pingleton, and Adrian Hansel as Seaweed. The ensemble numbers are so upbeat and full of energy it's difficult to stay sitting in your seat – the cast of this show certainly can move! It's really difficult to choose high points in a show which is such a success from start to finish but I would have to say Michael and Mel's duet 'You're Timeless To Me' is among them. There is so much humour in this and yet they also manage to show the affection between Edna and Wilbur. Somehow I think this duet is going to get more fun as the show goes on! The transformation of Edna from the self effacing woman who won't leave the house to the confident person at the end of the show is so well portrayed by Michael and you can tell he's just having the best time in this role. As other people have said, the audience reaction is truly amazing. It's like the audience is a part of the show, as if we're there as participants, not mere observers as

is normally the case at the theatre. The end of the show saw us all on our feet, clapping and cheering along.

And so it was a happy foursome that got on the train that night to return to the Midlands. The day may not have got off to a very good start but it certainly improved one hundred percent and we were all talking about how much we loved *Hairspray* and when we would be able to get to London to see it again. In fact, we have since done just that and believe it or not, enjoyed it even more the second time around! We agree that, in all the time we've been fans of Michael (from before the very first concert tour he did, 15 years ago when he was a mere dot on the stage from the only seats I was able to get way up in the circle!) this is one of the best shows he's been in. It's so happy and energetic, when you come out of the theatre you somehow feel that the world is a more cheerful place – and there's not all that many occasions that make you feel that way nowadays! I couldn't get those songs out of my head for days afterwards, I kept walking down the street humming 'Good Morning Baltimore' (to the bemusement of passers-by!) But if ever a London Cast Recording is needed it certainly is for this show!

When I first heard about the news that Michael was going to be in something called *Hairspray* – and that he would be playing a woman, my first reaction was a sort of bemused "Wha-aat?". But you know what – he has certainly made the right choice with this role... chicken fillets and all!!



MICHAEL BALL'S HEAVEN & HELL

This article originally appeared in The Telegraph. Photograph by Carol Bethwaite.

Great holidays...

Which was your best holiday?

My best holiday was during the Millennium year when I went to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to do a concert. After that, I travelled on with my family to the idyllic island of Pangkor Laut, for a three-week holiday and the wedding of my step-daughter.

Pangkor Laut lies off the Malaysian coast, and is the most magical place I've ever visited. I was thrilled to be in this wonderfully sunny location, with palm-fringed beaches, a beautiful blue sea, and a lovely cocktail bar close to hand. Also, unlike many other islands in that area, Pangkor Laut is not too touristy.

And the best hotel you've stayed in?

The hotel that impresses me most is the Merrion in Dublin. The food and service are wonderful, and the building itself is steeped in history. It's a lovely oasis. I also have another favourite place to stay. It's a friendly, family-run, bed and breakfast guesthouse with a licensed restaurant, called West Stoke House, in West Stoke, West Sussex. We always stay there for New Year.

What do you need for a perfect holiday?

I just need to be at an airport to take an aeroplane that turns left at the end of the runway and takes me away. It doesn't really matter where I am going, but holiday sunshine is vital to me. I love lying around sunning myself with the family, and I like a bit of peace and quiet. I also appreciate one day's rain

on each holiday - that's important because it allows me to stay indoors and do nothing at all.

What do you always take with you?

Spare credit cards and a pashmina to counteract the air-conditioning draughts on the flight. I also always take plenty of books to read.

What's your best piece of travel advice?

Always thoroughly check out your destination and hotel prior to departure. When I was going on holiday to Antigua in the West Indies with Kathleen, my partner, and step-daughter, Emma, Timothy Dalton, who'd just finished filming one of the James Bond movies, recommended an hotel on the island. But it was horrible, more like a hostel, and it smelt of gutted fish.

Where do you want to go next?

We always look forward to spending two weeks every Christmas at The Landing, Harbour Island, in the Bahamas, which is owned and run by India Hicks, god-daughter of the Prince of Wales.

... and disasters?

Which was your worst experience on holiday?

I'd never return to Barbados. The last time we visited there were so many people I recognised and knew from my working life that the holiday was more like being on a works outing.

What's the biggest packing mistake you've made?

I always used to pack too

much. Now I pack less and buy more when I arrive at my destination.

Which is the worst hotel you've stayed in?

A chain hotel in Brighton. It proved to be dirty, the food and service were awful, and the bar was full of undesirables. I stayed there for just 18 hours, then packed my bags and moved to the Grand Hotel on the seafront.

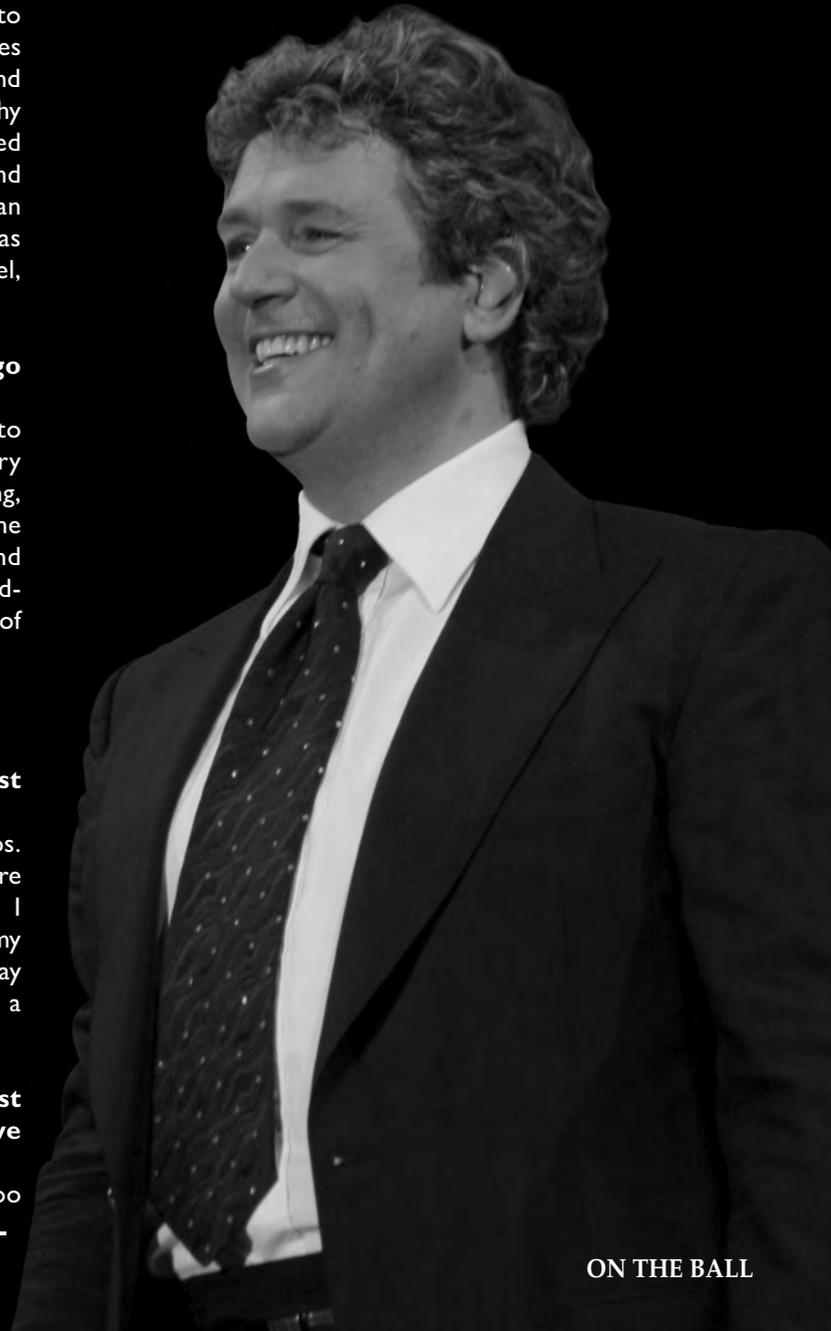
What do you avoid on holiday?

Crowds.

What do you hate about holidays?

I hate the travel to and from my destination. Everything is such a hassle - the crowds, the queues and the security checks. I'd like to just press a button and arrive at the end of my journey.

If I had plenty of money, I'd probably consider hiring a private jet for travel. I'm always quite glad to return from holiday because my home in Britain is really where my heart is, which makes the going home so much better.



THE MICHAEL BALL FAN CLUB ONLINE

You can find our website at

www.mbfc.co.uk

Our site features a very active forum where many a debate has gone on between fans from all over the world. You can also find all the latest news and photos - why not check it out today?

There is also a Fan Club Members Forum for fan club members only. The password to access it is 'forever'.



MOVING HOUSE?

Don't forget to let us have your new address so you don't miss out on any important information.

Please remember to enclose a stamped addressed envelope if you want a reply to your letter.

INFOLINE NUMBER



UK Members:

0871 221 7811

Overseas:

+44 8707 422224

PEN PALS / TRAVEL TALK

This section is for those of you who either want to meet up with fellow fans in your local area or get in touch with people from further afield. Maybe you want to find a travelling companion or maybe you simply want to arrange a get together to chat about Michael. To be included simply drop us a line with your details at our usual address.

**JILL CLARK, 30, WHITEHAVEN PARK,
CHAPEL LANE, BLACKFIELD,
SOUTHAMPTON, S045 1YZ.**

Barbara Mills and Jill Clark are planning to hold get togethers for all Michael Ball fans in the south of England at the BIC in Bournemouth every two months. The next one will be sometime around the middle of January 2008. If you are interested please get in contact with Jill Clarke (lilaclondoncorgi@yahoo.co.uk) or alternatively contact Barbara Mills via email (andrew@jazzy123.force9.co.uk). Otherwise, drop Jill a line at the above address, and they will be happy to give you full details.

**RIA FAUCI
5 WELLS MANOR LANE, APT.72,
RHINEBECK, NY 12572, USA**

Ria would greatly appreciate it if the two lovely ladies who took photos of her with Michael on August 27th at the stage door of the Royal Albert Hall could please contact her. She was with a group of fans including her two penpals Di and Ruth from the Gloucestershire area.

**CALLING ALL
SOUTH YORKSHIRE FANS!**

We have monthly meetings at Meadowhall for coffee and Michael chats and would love you all to come along and join us.

Anyone interested just drop me a line or email to:

**Ann Watson
44 Constable Close, Flanderwell,
Rotherham, South Yorkshire, S66 2XG**

**EMAIL:
june.hartnell@btinternet.com**

