

ON THE BALL

Issue 48



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AWARDS

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Welcome to ISSUE 48 of On The Ball - we can't quite believe that by the end of the year we will be compiling ISSUE 50 - we would never have thought we would reach such a grand total when we first jokingly called our fan club booklet "On The Ball"! How could we have known that 16 years later we would still be here producing this magazine?

Since the last issue so much has happened that it's hard to put it all into words. It seems to have been a few months of momentous events - Michael winning the Theatregoers Choice Award and of course the Laurence Olivier award for best actor in a musical. We know Michael has hoped to achieve this kind of recognition for his musical theatre career, and who'd have thought he would achieve it by dressing up and playing a Baltimore housewife?!

We now have a Summer of Hairspray and concerts to look forward to and we are sure we will see many of you along the way. It's rather like having your cake and eating it - not only do we get to see Michael acting on stage but there's also the chance to see him as "himself" in the Summer concerts.

When we wrote our letter for the last issue of On The Ball, we could hardly have known what was about to happen to Maureen as her illness came completely out of the blue. We had barely heard of the term "viral encephalitis" let alone the devastating effect it can have. Maureen has been assured of a full recovery but it may take a long time for the healing to be complete. We have both been overwhelmed by the love and support our family has received from all of you over the past four months and



we thank you for your understanding and your kind words. Michael's kindness and care during this time has also been wonderful, for which we thank him. Together we will overcome this difficult time and knowing so many people are keeping us in their thoughts has given us great strength.

There definitely won't be a fan club event in 2008 but we know you will all have many chances to see Michael and your friends during the course of the year.

Maureen & Gill

Cover photo by Dave M. Benett/Getty Images. Back cover photo by Pam Hancock.

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Hi Everyone,

Well it looks like 2008 is turning into the year of dreams coming true. Hairspray has become such a wonderful success and for me to be honoured with the 'Olivier Award' is simply the ambition of a lifetime realised.... and I'm sure you had a pretty huge part to play in my receiving the "Theatregoers Choice Award".

On top of all this I've started my own Radio show and hope I can welcome you all to have Sunday brunch with me. I have always loved doing work for Radio 2 and now have my dream job there. It means I'm working all the time at the moment but

when you love what you do and have the support of great friends, family fans and co-workers anything is possible.

I'm probably mad but there was no way I was going to go through the summer without doing some concerts so we've even managed to schedule those in. I can't wait to do a concert again and be on stage as myself and hope you get a chance to see me singing without a dress on this year!!

And throughout the year, at all of these special occasions, you continue to be there to encourage, support and share them with me and each other!

I hope you agree it never gets dull and as always thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Finally, on behalf of Gill and Mameen
thank you for the love and support
you have shown them throughout Mameen's
illness. We are all together because of
them and owe them a huge debt of
gratitude. Mameen is a fighter and
will be back to full health soon, I'm sure.

Meanwhile huge love to you all
and God Bless,

Mike
X



HAIRSPRAY SPRAYS AWAY THE GLOOMY WINTER

By Shannon Ryland and Marilyn Knoke



HAIRSPRAY! When we heard that Michael was going to be Edna Turnblad, there was no doubt whatsoever that we'd go, even though we'd flown over to see *Kismet* last summer. Part of our desire was based on hearing that Michael had seen the show on Broadway, had LOVED it, and had eventually auditioned for the part when it finally came to London... and it would be so GREAT seeing him again, doing something he really loves and believes in.

We arrived in London on Wednesday 16th January looking forward to the show, seeing Michael, and meeting up with some of our English friends. One of the first things we did (while still at Heathrow) was exchange our return tickets for tickets that gave us two extra days in London. We figured, why not? Shannon's vacation days are limited but – well, as we say, "It IS Michael..." And as Marilyn told her husband, it would be cheaper than flying back later in the year!

We first saw the show the evening of the day we arrived, and we were blown away by the pure energy of the cast! *Hairspray* is not "only" Michael! He's got an amazing supporting cast of "The Nicest Kids in Town" in addition to the other principals in the show. It's one thing to see the Travolta film and know that there have been many days of filming, editing, doing re-takes of the various dance scenes... but to see it non-stop on stage, where there's only the one

"take"... well, it has to be seen to be believed. The enthusiasm is amazingly contagious!

Michael was, as always, his wonderful, gracious, kind, and dear self with us and with all his fans. We spoke with him almost every day and had pictures taken with him a couple of times. He was in a real hurry once. It was dark, wet, and miserably cold. We were the only ones there, and we were only there because we needed to give him the little presents we had brought from Seattle. As he approached, we started toward him, but he said that he couldn't stop because he was late for rehearsals. (Edna was breaking in a new husband!) It was fine with us. We wanted to get out of

the elements as quickly as possible!

We often stood aside and observed the younger generation of musical theatre fans at the stage door. They wanted Michael, for sure, but they showed much enthusiastic appreciation for the young cast as well. It seemed to us that Michael had mentored, or at least set a good example, for the young actors. The cast displayed the same interest, graciousness, and kind patience as Michael does when they emerged from the stage door, and it was lovely to watch.

One night we were able to help two fans when they asked Shannon, "Do you know where the stage door is?" (Did Elvis wear a white jump suit?) One was in a wheelchair, and you can imagine how difficult it was for them to maneuver in such a throng of happy theatergoers. The ladies had been fans for years but had never been to a stage door to see Michael in person. We were only too happy to bring them around the corner. While waiting, we saw Andrew come out to put something in the car, and Marilyn made him aware of the two ladies. When Michael finally came out, he was surrounded by the usual mass of fans. Our new friends became nervous that they would miss Michael because we were waiting back from the crowd, but he looked over and called out to them that he'd be right there. They were surprised with his acknowledgement and we could feel their exuberance. We



took pictures of the two of them finally meeting Michael and, as usual, he chatted with them showing great interest. They were thrilled! As we were about to part company, we discovered that their hotel was on the same street as ours. We walked them home, joyfully reliving their first meeting with Michael. Our stroll was unexpectedly interrupted when we met Emma Thompson on the street. She is such a nice lady, and we got more pictures! WOW, Michael Ball and Emma Thompson all in one night! We were so exhilarated that after dropping off our friends, we walked a block past our hotel! Ah, the adventures of "Michael-land."

One thing we two took advantage of was lining up at the front door of the Shaftesbury Theatre in the early morning hours to score the "cheap" seats. As any Michael Ball fan can tell you, "front row is where it's at", BUT - be forewarned, there's a lot that might be missed if you ONLY sit in the front row. (For example, you might miss the rats scurrying across the street!) We had previously seen *Hairspray* from good seats in the stalls and from the second balcony (which is a great place to get perspective). Still, WHY those front seats are available at only £25, well, we can't know, but it was just so much fun! In the show Penny gets tied to her bed by her whiney mother because she's "gotten arrested without Mother's permission." Who should come to rescue her but Seaweed. He rises from the orchestra pit on the left side, with a big grin to the audience, before he turns to rescue his love. That is a fun surprise and gets a good laugh from the audience. Well, on the first night that we were in the first row, wouldn't you know it, we were right in front of the place where Seaweed appears. Even knowing that he was coming didn't help - Shannon shrieked with shock! Poor Seaweed; he hesitated while gaining his composure. After the show, Shannon sought out Adrian (the actor) to apologise but he saw her first. He pointed and exclaimed - "YOU!" With some chagrin and a BIG smile, Shannon said, "You scared me first!" A great laugh and a big hug followed. The next time we got those same seats, Shannon stuffed her coat into her mouth "just in case."

When talking about *Hairspray*, everyone mentions Michael, Leanne, Ben, Tracie, and Adrian, as well they should; they MUST, it's SUCH a great cast! However, we'd like to add: pay close attention to Wendy, the

woman listed as "Female Authority Figure" - she plays three roles! She's Penny's mother, the "sadistic gym teacher," and the matron in the Big Doll House. Wendy is hysterically funny and, we think, somewhat underrated!

Michael's Edna is a performance NOT to be missed. If you haven't booked a flight or a train, or bought tickets yet - WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? *Hairspray* is amazing! You are transported to 1962 Baltimore,

USA and love every minute of it! Along with the "Nicest Kids in Town" this has got to be the HAPPIEST show in town; there's no way the fans leave the Shaftesbury feeling anything but renewed and exhilarated! We are so happy Michael chose to be part of this production.

Bottom line - Ours was a great trip because Michael, YOU ARE TIMELESS TO US!

IS IT REALLY OVER 23 YEARS?

By Michelle Rasdall



When I was 20, my mum and her best friend (my 'Auntie Maggie') all lived in Liverpool so trips to the theatres both there and in Manchester were a regular jaunt for us. One day, we all went to see *Pirates of Penzance* so that Mum and Maggie could ogle Paul Nicholas. Not being 'my thing', I went along rather reluctantly to keep them company as they had a spare ticket. Oh dear - what a way to get hooked! All three of us could talk of nothing but Michael on the journey home and whilst they have kept an interested eye on his career in the intervening years and go to the occasional concert, my hobby was launched. (Well I call it a hobby, my husband calls it something else....but as he often says when the next theatre ticket arrives on the door mat "I suppose Michael was in your life before me!!").

A year or so later I left home, started my own life in London, got married, had three wonderful children and carried on my 'hobby' with new MB friends I met

along the way. Whilst mum and I will sometimes go to shows, there has never been a time in the past 23 years when mum, Maggie and I were all at a show together. Mum has two false hips and Maggie is partially blind so a day out in London takes a bit of organising. However, on 7th February I finally managed to get the pair of them to London and treated them to *Hairspray* tickets. Their day was made complete when they had their photo taken with Michael (thanks for being so lovely with them Michael, and thanks also to Andrew for arranging signed photos for them as well).

They were so excited all the way home and had the entire train carriage in hysterics as the pair of them reminisced, in broad Scouse accents, at the top of their voices about "what a love Michael was"! They're now starting to plan their 70th birthday Michael treats - thankfully a year or so off as yet so I've got time to recover!

MY TOTALLY TERRIFIC TUESDAY!

by Liza Leathers



It all started on Monday night, on the 17th December when I had an email from Radio 2 asking me to ring their research officer Jenny. So on Tuesday morning I rang and spoke to the researcher who asked me about an email I had sent to Michael's show (due to be broadcast New Year's Eve). You may know that the radio asked for funny/sad/happy New Year's Eve stories for Michael to read out on the show. Well I sent in a very short story of my New Year's Eve in Australia.

The researcher wanted to know a little more and said she would be talking to Michael about it and advised me to listen to the show on the 31st.

I was all excited thinking my story would be read out by 'our man' himself. when the phone rang and it was Jenny the researcher again. She had spoken to Michael and he had decided he wanted to speak to me and include the conversation in the show!! At first I thought it was just a joke that maybe my sister had set up but when she said could I stay by the phone all day, as Michael would be ringing me, I started to get nervous as I realised it was genuine!

I told Jenny that I had to go out at around 5pm as I was going to see *Hairspray* (my Christmas present from my fiancé Stuart) she laughed and said "so does he!".

She said the call would come at around 1:00 - 2:00 pm and to keep the line clear and that was that.

I couldn't sit still, I was drinking water after water after water to keep my throat clear (it was sore) and I was all excited and nervous at the same time.

Finally the phone rang and it was the producer. He asked if I was Lisa with a "z" or "s" and then told me to hang on the line. I waited 15 minutes which seemed like an hour. I heard Michael chatting away saying "you're listening to me, Michael Ball on BBC Radio 2 on New Year's Eve" and I heard two songs then he spoke - I heard Michael say my name and then we were chatting!!

I can't remember exactly what was said but he asked me if I liked this time of year, and if I had any New Year's resolutions. He said he liked Christmas

but isn't keen on New Year. I said I want to give up chocolate and then he asked me about the New Year in Australia. I told the story... nervous as anything... and he laughed in all the right places, asked me a couple of questions and all in a few minutes it was over. I said goodbye and thank you and I think I said "Have a happy New Year" but I'm not sure! The producer came back on the line and we had a little chat and he said it would be included in the show, in the third hour of the broadcast on 31st December. We said goodbye and I went back to my water!

Anyway, that night as I said, Stu and I were at *Hairspray*. We had central stalls row D, which are fantastic seats. The show was fabulous as before and the whole cast are just getting stronger and stronger... we loved it AGAIN! We even had a little dance at the end.

As soon as it was over we headed round to the stage door and surprisingly we were the first ones there! Then a guy appeared and put up a rope to avoid the door being blocked. I looked around and couldn't see any familiar Michael Ball fan club faces but a few youngsters were

gathering round and talking about Ben 'Link' James Ellis and a few people were going in the stage door. We waited for about ten minutes and the first few stars came out, namely Ben, Adrian and Paul. I smiled and said it was a fab show and then watched the girls mob them. We were still waiting for Michael... Next out was Terel - he accidentally knocked into me and we had a little chat starting with him apologising, which was nice. Then Dermot (the male authority figure 'Mr Pinky') came out and said "Blimey, I thought they'd all be gone by now," so I had a joke with him saying we were all in detention (as he puts Tracy in detention) so we had a little laugh. Ten minutes more had passed and I was really freezing, so was so glad when I saw Andrew (Michael's P.A.) come out. I called him over and gave him a Christmas card for himself and one for Michael and he said Michael will be coming this way in a second, so I said I'd wait a minute but asked him to pass on the card and a little present.

Michael came out about a minute after and was mobbed straight away by the youngsters who had previously nabbed Ben!

Stu and I waited and Andrew again

assured me Michael would come our way... I watched as he generously posed for photos, helped one girl with her camera phone and then signed umpteen programs... Then he said "Right, are we all done?" to which I said "No!!" and he turned round and laughed and headed over.

I said it was another fab performance and he thanked me. Then I said "This is the second time I've spoken to you to today". He said "Eh?" and I said "Australian chicken poo!". He really laughed then and said "Oh, it's you, how are ya sweetie?". I said I was good thanks and he said "You don't smell of it," and really laughed.

I said "I should hope not, it was ten years ago!". We both laughed and I asked if I could have a picture with him to which he said "My pleasure". He put his arm round my back and Stu took the picture. We then chatted a couple of sentences about going away for Christmas and I said I hoped he had a good one he said "Same to you, lovely" and headed to the car.

Stu said "Merry Christmas Michael,"

and Michael said "You too mate", to which Stu said (massive surprise as he is usually shy) "Can I have a picture with you?" Michael said "Of course mate" and I took the camera and with Stuart's and Michael's instructions I took the photo of them. Stu shook Michael's hand and he joined Andrew in the car. We waved him off and then headed back to the station.

I was frozen on the outside but I was all warm inside! Stu was totally star struck and we talked about Michael ALL the way home!!

On Wednesday we went to see Stu's parents and he took the photos to show them and we still couldn't stop talking about it!

It always amazes me how generous Michael is at the stage door after a show and I feel I was really lucky this day as he had been working long hours recording the radio show and then playing Edna... thank you Michael, you're a shining star!

I hope you all enjoyed my story, it was a truly amazing day that I will never forget.



MAKING UP FOR LOST DECADES by Nan Garcia

2007 was an eye-opening year for me. I discovered the talent that is Michael Ball. Don't ask how I managed for so long without enjoying that wonderful voice and knowing about that incredible person, but somehow I did.

Les Misérables has always been my favourite musical and I had seen it numerous times in New York City. Then the 10th Anniversary Concert aired on American television months after the live performance in London. I enjoyed seeing it performed in the concert format and was intrigued by that guy playing Marius but had no idea who he was. I had never seen that face before. I continued to enjoy the concert and actually ordered the videotape... and that was that.

Some time later, Andrew Lloyd Webber's 50th Birthday Celebration aired. Being a fan of Andrew Lloyd Webber's music and also of Donny Osmond and Antonio Banderas, I glued myself to the television to watch. Then along came this guy and sang 'Gethsemane'. Wow! What a voice! He seemed vaguely familiar but I could not place the face. I also ordered this videotape and added it to my library and life went on.

In 2005, my local television stations were raving about Andrew Lloyd Webber's new musical *Woman In White* on Broadway. This sounded great! Here was a new musical that I would definitely go and see. They mentioned the names of the stars but none seemed familiar. It would not make a difference not knowing who actually starred in the show because this was an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical. It would be great. Yet with a new job to deal with and family affairs in the midst, I kept putting off going to see the show. Next thing I knew, it had closed and I never got to see it.

Then, one rainy New York weekend in 2007 I was in the "let's listen to musical theatre music" mood. I then remembered about the *Les Mis* and the Andrew Lloyd Webber videos and dusted them off. I played one and then played the other and... voilà! I realised

that the amazing voice was on both videos. After viewing the credits at the end I realised I finally was able to identify that guy with the great voice. His name - Michael Ball!

In the weeks that followed, I asked at a few local record stores if they had any Michael Ball albums. I got the "Michael who? Do you mean Bolton or maybe Bublé?" lines. I insisted on the name and all they could come up with was the *Les Mis* 10th Anniversary album. I figured he was just another Broadway/West End performer and had no additional recordings. What a shame. Then one day I decided to do an internet search and what a wonderful surprise to find out that there was a whole Michael Ball world I knew nothing about. I had just discovered decades of music I did not know existed. Thanks to sites like the Michael Ball Fan Club and Justball.net, I was able to learn about the man and his music and so my Michael Ball fascination continued to grow. I was only able to get a couple of albums through local internet sites in the U.S. so Amazon in the U.K. became my new best friend. I can now boast that I have all of his albums and videos (although I can only play those Region 2 videos on my computer).

It had just taken me almost two decades to discover the most brilliant performer I have ever known! I'm a bit slow, what can I say?

It kills me to think that Michael spent so much time in New York in 2005 and 2006 and performed concerts in 2004 and I was ignorant to his existence. He was basically in my backyard and I was not aware of him. What was wrong with me?

So I spent time on the internet reading about him and watching You Tube video clips of interviews and performances of Michael for there is no other coverage of the man in the States. Then the announcement was made that Michael would be starring in *Hairspray*. I had seen the Broadway production and knew it would be a hit in London as it was here.

I had been planning my trip to London and Paris in January 2008. I now had to make a few changes to my itinerary. It read something like this: the Louvre, Eiffel Tower, Windsor Castle, Stonehenge, Oxford, and then the Shaftesbury Theatre. I just HAD to see one of England's most precious natural resources, Michael Ball.

I had read the *Hairspray* reviews by both the critics and the fans and knew how well it had been received in London. As I stated, I had seen the production in New York but nothing prepared me for the energy I felt as soon as I walked into the theatre. And this is before the show got underway. As soon as the curtain went up and Leanne Jones began to sing, I knew this was not the same as the New York production. I was amazed at the talent and enthusiasm that was pouring out of the cast as they made their way onto the stage. And then the moment Michael appeared, the house went crazy. Needless to say it met my expectations and then some. Never having been part of the performing arts, I had always wondered how performers could come out day after day and give it all they've got in their performances. After seeing and hearing the reception this cast received, I understand it a bit better. How could you not respond to the warmth and love the audience was transferring onto the performers? All I could say about the show is WOW!

At the end of the show, I found myself walking to the stage door. I had heard that Michael was having problems with his back and chances were that he would not come and see the fans. Boy was I wrong! He came out as pleasant as could be and took the time to meet and greet all that were waiting for him. Never had I seen such mutual admiration between fans and an artist. In all this amazement, I didn't know what to do or say! All I was able to do is hand him my *Hairspray* programme which he gladly signed. I was in awe and not a word came out of my mouth. I stepped away and managed to compose myself enough to take a picture of him. And yes, I forgot to get in the picture with him.

I walked away towards my hotel still in

wonder. I had actually seen Michael Ball perform live (even if he was wearing a frock) and had the opportunity to meet him. At age 43, I felt like a teenager seeing her teen idol for the first time. Living all my life in the New York City area, the theatre has always been a part of my life. I can honestly say that I never found the desire to wait outside any stage door for any performer until this day. And I would gladly do it again to catch a glimpse of Michael Ball.

I came home on January 20th and have been asked by many how my trip went. I tell them all about the sites and then add that I actually met Michael Ball. Many of my family and friends cannot tell you who he is or what he sings. All they know is that I have become one of his biggest fans on this side of the Atlantic.

In mid-February, during an especially dreary week here in New York where there was snow on the ground, followed by sleet, then followed by below average temperatures, I was definitely feeling the winter blues. Remembering my time in London and especially my experience at *Hairspray*, I decided to go and see it again. I went with all the expectations I had taken with me to see the London production... and was I ever disappointed. At the present time George Wendt (Norm from *Cheers*) is playing Edna and cannot compare in ANY way to Michael's Edna. That enthusiasm I saw in London is lacking in New York cast.

So I'll go back to YouTube broadcasts of his appearances and news from MBFC as well as following Kirsten and Julia's adventures. I'll also have to set my alarm clock for Sunday mornings to hear his new radio show come April - it will be airing at 6:00 AM my local time. In the mean time, I'll keep a vigil that Michael will have pity on his American fans and come on over and perform a proper concert in the states some day soon.

And yes, I will return to London to see him on his final performance on October 25th. I have purchased my ticket to the show. Now all I have to do is take care of a few logistical issues. Silly things like airfare, hotel, and time off from my job.

See ya in October!!

Mel's Last Night...and The 'Kiss'

Words and picture by Carol Cox

Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh, Jimmy Stewart and Katherine Hepburn, Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, Ali McGraw and Ryan O'Neal, Mel Smith and Michael Ball... all to be remembered for their great stage kisses! Most of us who were at the matinee January 26th knew there would probably be a few lines that weren't exactly in the script (and knowing Michael probably wouldn't miss the chance) we, the audience weren't disappointed!

Mel Smith is a funny character to begin with and his portrayal as Wilbur Turnblad was a masterpiece of casting. When it came to Mel's last day in *Hairspray*, the audience were the ones to reap the benefits! Everything went along as rehearsed (with the exception of Mel coming onstage with a big white flower in his lapel) until they got to 'You're Timeless To Me' and then, well, all heck broke loose. Edna got the best of Wilbur, no, I mean, Wilbur got Edna's best. They were both giggling and laughing throughout the song and we got a feeling that something was up.

When Wilbur told Edna "it's Jewish for kiss me again", Edna/Michael and Wilbur/Mel pursed their lips as usual but instead of the little lip to lip peck, Edna grabbed Wilbur and planted a big juicy one smack on the lips... and with arms wrapped around each other and what seemed like forever, proceeded to give each other mouth to mouth resuscitation. The audience was screaming by this time and you couldn't hear much but when Edna/Michael asked "Does the Talmud say anything about tongues?", the entire audience shrieked with laughter.

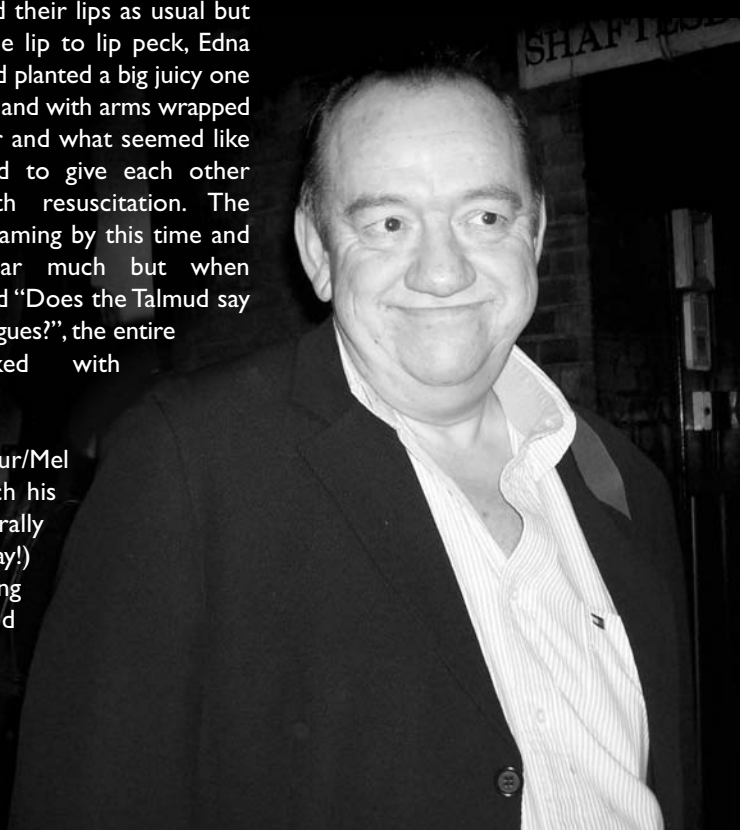
By this time, Wilbur/Mel was trying to catch his breath (Edna literally took his breath away!) and was still laughing so hard, he could hardly continue.

Mel muttered something, but was still laughing and therefore it was

unintelligible to where I was in the second row. Finally, he told Edna/Michael "Where were we?" while still trying to recover from that lipsmacker. They finished the song, both with big grins on their faces and finally made their exit ("oh, yes you can!") to the wild applause of the entire house.

At the evening performance, everything went according to script and at the end of the show, when the entire cast did their bow, Edna/Michael stopped everyone by saying "Ladies and gentlemen" twice to get everyone's attention and proceeded to make us all have lumps in our throats and a tear in our eye when he announced "I'm not saying this as Edna, I'm saying this as Michael," and then told the audience it was Mel's last night in his usual British accent. The cast onstage acknowledged Mel with a rousing foot stomp and the audience cheered wildly.

Anyone who was there caught a memorable glimpse of Michael and his sense of humor... and Mel Smith may never forget his last night in *Hairspray*! They're both timeless to me!



OLIVIER FUN

BY BEV MELBOURNE. PHOTOS BY SHARON SCARROTT



What a day we had on Monday 10th March at *Hairspray* – the day after the Olivier Awards ceremony. I arrived at the stage door around 4.30 pm (no way were we going to miss Michael today!!) Surprisingly there were only six of us there and Michael arrived at approximately 5:10pm.

He got out of the car to cheers and applause from our little group. I asked him if he had 'it' with him and he then produced his award, which had been carefully wrapped by "her indoors"!

As you will see from Sharon's beautiful photos he then proudly showed it off and posed for photos - and told us to look out for it during the show.



Photo by Jo Hale/Getty Images Europe

He said that it had been a nerve wracking night last night (tell us about it!) but was understandably delighted by his win. The show was wonderful as usual and the Oliviers did indeed make several appearances.

During Edna's first scene, three of them were on the table - then when Tracy first appears on television, there was one on the table. Later, when Wilbur demonstrates his invention, there was one inside the can.

We thought that we had seen the last of them but Michael's had one more appearance to make. In the finale when the can opened and he made his entrance he

had the Olivier in one hand and a cloth in the other and proceeded to give it a polish before handing it to one of the boys!

It was a wonderful moment - very funny and he received a huge and well deserved ovation!

At the end - the creative team came on stage and explained to the audience that it had been a very exciting night last night when their "three leading ladies" had won awards as well as the show itself.

Michael came out for a few minutes after the show to sign items before explaining that he was going back in for "a bit of a party".

We had a brief chat about the statuettes and I said that I think I spotted them all - then he was off, but as I said it was so wonderful to be part of a very special night for Michael and everyone at The Shaftesbury.

WOS THEATREGOERS CHOICE AWARDS

Year on Year Show at the Lyric Theatre – 24 February 2008



Photos copyright: www.whatsonstage.com

Congratulations go to all of the cast and crew of *Hairspray* for winning seven awards at the Whatsonstage Theatregoers Choice Awards including the See Tickets Best Actor in a Musical award for Michael.

As well as Michael's award, *Hairspray* won the categories for:

Best Actress in a Musical

Leanne Jones

Best Supporting Actress in a Musical

Tracie Bennett

Best Supporting Actor in a Musical

Ben James-Ellis

Best Director

Jack O'Brien

Best Choreographer

Jerry Mitchell

and **Best New Musical.**

These awards were voted on by the readers of www.whatsonstage.com and were presented at a concert and awards ceremony at the Lyric Theatre on Sunday 24 February. Michael, Leanne, Tracie and Ben were on hand to collect their awards and as the photos show, they were all delighted with their achievement. A record 25,000 people voted for the awards this year, in a fiercely fought contest, with only .6% being the margin between Michael and second placed Lee Mead.



WAHOO!! WHAT A WEEK!

By Anna Felices



Between having tickets to see *Joseph*, *The Sound of Music* and *Hairspray* in the space of three days, not to mention my brother's 25th birthday house party on our first night, this trip to London was going to be one of the most eventful, tiring and memorable yet. But, man, was it worth it!

For starters, at my brother Jon's house party, I was introduced to yet another Michael Ball fan (of our younger generation - we are slowly taking over the world, ha ha!) It was a funny moment actually, because when my cousin, Jenny, introduced us and randomly brought Michael into the conversation, I was sure she was using this as yet another opportunity to tease me, but imagine my surprise when the girl screamed with delight at the prospect of being able to talk about him for the next half hour - which we did! Jon wasn't impressed - according to him there are already "too many Michael Ball fans in the world", to which I replied, "there can never be too many".

We had a nice chat and, insane as she was (and very into older men!), she was nowhere near as obsessed a fan as any of us (their words, not mine).

Our first West End adventure involved going to see *Joseph*, which, as her favourite ever musical, was the perfect birthday present for Jenny's 18th... although I'm certain there was another reason for seeing it too. Oh, that's right; I was there to see Lee! This was also a bit of a turn of events. You see, not being a *Joseph* fan, it probably took me until the quarter final to watch 'Any Dream Will Do'... but, as I learned at the age of 3, sometimes it only takes 4 minutes to hook a fan!

Something that occurred to me after seeing *Joseph* was how accurate the description of Lee being the next Michael was... eventually. The reality show had proved he had a voice and could act a song, and now he was proving he could really play a character as well. The only difference is that he's

dived straight into the music scene.

I also feel that Jenna Lee-James, who played the Narrator, deserves a mention. Her voice blew me away! She's definitely one of the best female singers I've heard in a while. She was so awesome my jaw actually dropped. Her heels were something else though, how she managed to move around the stage like she did is beyond me. I honestly don't know how some women do it!

The finale was spectacular, with the whole cast doing their dance routines and the brothers were phenomenal, and Jenna and Lee having their solos before the big finish... Lee on the platform rising higher and further into the crowd... there's one role you couldn't play if you suffer from vertigo - I was having issues just looking up at him! (The confetti coming down on us didn't help much, either.) That part was quite scary really, because although he must have been harnessed on somehow, there was nothing for him to hold on to.

There was just the multicoloured sash-type thing draping back down to where the platform started, and he was standing there with the microphone, singing his heart out. It was a phenomenal finale that really took your breath away.

On to the best night, ahem, I mean the last night of the trip, and the last show... well, they always say save the best for last, don't they? It's hard to know where to start, but I'll do my best.

I love the opening number. Other than being completely original, it suddenly seems like such a time-waster having to get dressed in the morning! The show really is so much fun, and there's so much energy and so much happening on the stage, there were times you didn't know where to look, for fear of missing something... now there's a handy excuse to go again! I always find myself amazed with the level of talent involved, not just the cast but everything, because it's just so much more dazzling than anything you imagine. All the characters were so perfectly cast; I even didn't mind that we had Nicky Griffiths, the understudy, playing Amber, although I would have loved to see Rachael Wooding.

I loved the dance numbers, they were so vibrant and so full of life; plus the dancers really get put through their paces. What really blows you away with these casts is that they're fantastic as an ensemble, but when they have their solo numbers, that's their chance to shine and, boy, do they ever!

Starting with Leanne - God, what a voice! The opening 'Good Morning, Baltimore!' has to be one of the best opening numbers I've ever seen... if not THE best. It really sets off the whole show, really pulls you in and keeps you hooked throughout, because you know this girl has a dream and you want to see her achieve it.

Ben was without a doubt the perfect Link. 'Any Dream Will Do' showed he had talent, although I couldn't see him as *Joseph* (I thought 'Grease Is The Word' seemed more his thing, but I can understand why he chose to go for *Joseph* in the end).

It's important for any young performer starting out to find the role that is uniquely them, the one to bring them into the spotlight, and both Leanne and Ben have succeeded greatly with their roles... with the awards to prove it!

Elinor Collett was the one who really surprised me, because I didn't know anything about her and had only heard her sing a very little bit on the Royal Variety Performance. She was hilarious as Penny, so awkward and klutzy, and inhibited to a point... maybe that's why I liked her, she reminded me of a younger me! Her singing's something else though, really bowls you over.

I also thought Ian was great as Wilbur. It's not the most involved role but I really enjoyed his interpretation of the character and it was a very good performance... specifically in one very memorable scene!

Which brings me finally to Michael and the revelation of possibly his best role to date! I must admit I was slightly dubious about it at first, not least because I've only ever seen him in the *Woman In White* and it just didn't seem right that I should only ever see him play roles in a fat suit (or, in this case, a fat suit and 'chicken fillets'), but knowing these are the roles that prove his worth as an actor won me over. Plus, once I was actually given permission to book for a third musical, no way was I passing up the chance.

I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but Michael really was born to play Edna Turnblad. Besides the greatly appreciated comic element he brought to show (which we all know he does so well in general), there was such a real sense of emotion and tenderness... at times you really did forget that that wasn't a woman. Who knew I'd get so much joy out of seeing Michael performing in a dress, but I've said it before and I'll say it again: the man can act! Between all his little comic lines (of which there were many), his moments of, oh, shall we call them, 'UN-lady-like' behaviour (SO unexpected, loved it!) and, of course, the best ten minutes of pure comedy gold in the form of a male/female (well, technically, anyway) love duet! I knew that scene would be funny (it had to be), but I did not

expect it to have everyone in the audience roaring with laughter... throughout the entire number, and that's no exaggeration. The best thing about it was that even Michael and Ian cracked up, which of course made us all laugh even more. And I loved that they did because it made it a bit more human, probably the only time you appreciate Edna being a man... and understand why she needs to be!

I adored the final number with a passion, not least because it just seemed to keep going! The closing of a show has to be just as explosive, if not more so, than the opening number, and I have yet to see a closing number that gave me a buzz like this one did.

When we came out my head was all over the place, part of me still living the musical, but part of me mentally preparing myself for the circus that is the stage-door. It's important here to understand that meeting Michael and getting his autograph and a picture had literally been my childhood dream! That's, what, eighteen years of hoping and praying for the day when you will finally get that moment... pretty nerve-racking when you think about it, but I managed to calm myself enough by getting Leanne's autograph first.

It was a bit bizarre when Michael finally came out, not least because I almost (almost!) didn't see him, but with perseverance and determination I kept going forward until there he was, standing in front me, right before my very eyes! It's probably a good thing it was one of those 'hold out the brochure and he'll get to it' moments, because I became so star-struck I was physically unable to speak or move again for several seconds. Luckily I got over that, otherwise I may not have got the chance to ask for a photo... and I'm still smiling!

The one downside was that, between all the people still there and being so overwhelmed by that point, I couldn't find my voice and had no chance to say anything after that. I'm not worried though, I finally achieved my dream and next time I'll be much more at ease. I hope!

FROM CHITTY CHITTY BANG BANG TO HAIRSPRAY

By Kate Smith



At the age of two my granddaughter, Amy, was mad keen on the 'Making of Chitty' DVD featuring Michael and wanted to watch it every day. She knew every song and loved the Old Bamboo dance. She almost lived in the t-shirt – which I got Michael to sign for her! For her third birthday we took her to the show – she was dancing in the aisle for most of the time.

Now aged six, I took Amy to see *Hairspray*. We had a slightly eventful journey from Oxford to London – which included six of us having to run along Oxford Street to get to the stage door in time to see Michael arrive, we made it with just five minutes to spare.

While we waited we saw a few other cast members arrive – then my friend said "Who's this walking up the road?" It was Michael.

We crossed over and I asked him if Amy and I could have a photo with him. Amy was so

excited – she has heard me going on about Michael and has listened to me playing his CDs and DVDs for years, and now she was standing right next to him and he was chatting to her! He said that he loved her coat and he also signed a photo of Edna for her. She was thrilled. What a wonderful photo we got, taken by my friend Lisa – we go all over the country together to see Michael.

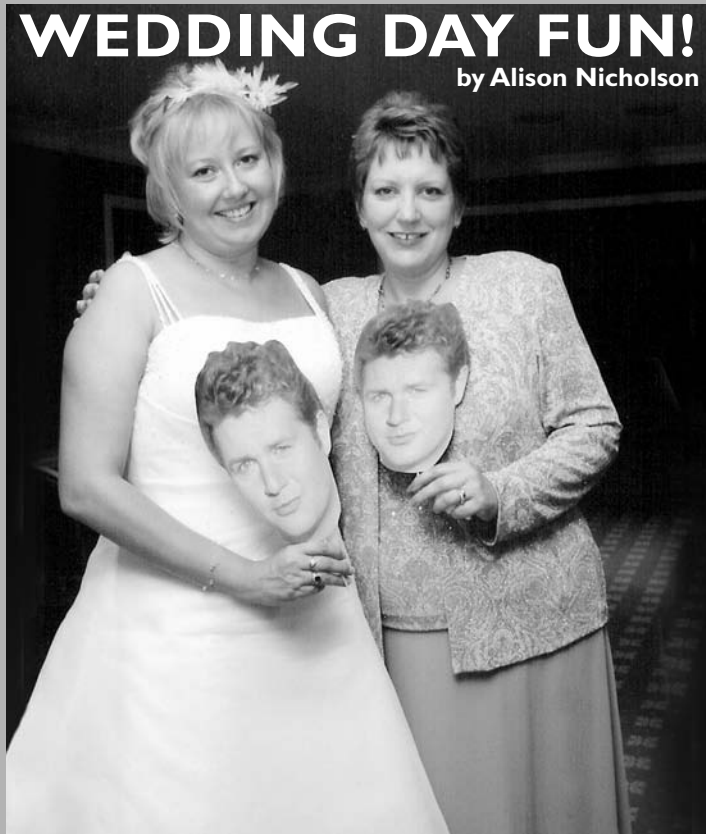
Amy enjoyed *Hairspray* so much – she was singing along and dancing in her seat – it ended all too soon. Amy asked if we could go back to the stage door after the show – I didn't need any persuading! She got her programme signed by Michael, Leanne and Ben – as well as a photo with Ben.

She has been talking about her special day ever since – and shows her photo with Michael to everyone. She is well and truly hooked – asking when we can go again. Very soon I think!



WEDDING DAY FUN!

by Alison Nicholson



I have been a huge fan since first seeing Michael in *Les Misérables*, and then in the Eurovision Song Contest. Since then I have been to see him at every opportunity. Five years ago I met my husband and we had a deal that he would accompany me to Michael Ball concerts if I went with him to a sporting event – so I have been to football, rugby and cricket matches every year since.

On our wedding day, our best man surprised me, knowing what a fan I was - with all the boys lining up for a photo with a picture mask of Michael Ball – it was so funny and was certainly a highlight to remember.

I have included a couple of pictures of the boys with the masks and me and my Best “Woman” (the Best Man’s wife actually) holding said masks.

When we got back to our room after the wedding reception – the room was also covered in these masks!



hairspray

by Judy Silan

I have seen the original movie, saw the show on Broadway as well as the national touring company production and caught the new movie four times back to back on the flight to London but NOTHING prepared me for Michael's portrayal of Edna Turnblad.

Although Michael had a really bad cold, it never showed in his performance. (Well, ok, he sneezed on stage once) and I actually think it enhanced Edna's voice.

From the moment he appeared as Edna, Michael was gone and there was... MY MOTHER! Between the housecoat, the attitude in every line he delivered and the looks on Edna's face - even the body language was exactly how I remembered my mother while growing up.

'Mind your manners!' (and including friends in the reprimand)

'Turn that down!'

'You'll have to get through this first!'

'Fame has got to your head and left you wacky!'

'I really didn't care for them.'

From the singing of bad commercial jingles to the obnoxious purse to the 'mean mom' glare, Michael was the perfect 60's mom. I was in tears laughing. But what really got me was the scene in the record store when Edna comes in, starts talking "Hi, I'm Tracy's mom," and then turns around and screams 'WILBUR!!' I almost fell out of my seat. I can't tell you how many times my mother did that.

Mel Smith was absolutely hysterical and the perfect man for the role of Wilbur Turnblad. 'You're Timeless To Me' was one of the most memorable duets ever performed on stage.

Leanne Jones was positively adorable and Johnnie Fiori was just outstanding as Motormouth Mabel. What a voice! The rest of the cast was in top form too and the show is pure energy from beginning to end.

After the show I waited for Michael at the stage door and told him that all he needed was guilt (most notable in Italian and Jewish mothers) and he could have been my mother. He replied "I can do guilt!".

What an amazing production! I saw the show again Saturday 15th and am now counting my pennies so I can go back again.

A CD of this cast would be just perfect - that would be a 'hint, hint' kind of thing to those in charge!

FLOATING ON CLOUD NINE

by Laura Craig



Here is my experience of the matinée performance of *Hairspray* on 15th March 2008.

My Mum and I were first of all flying over to the East Midlands on Friday night to stay with a friend, Laura Staveley, and then travelling down to London for the matinée the next day.

Our flight over to Laura's was leaving at five to seven on Friday evening, so my Mum and I arrived at Belfast International Airport at five o'clock. When we got to the check-in desk and the lady there asked us where we were flying to, we told her the East Midlands, and she said that the flight was going to be delayed until half past eight.

So I rang Laura and told her that we wouldn't be arriving there until half past nine. Then, half an hour later, there was a further announcement that our flight was delayed until half past nine. So yet again, more calls to Laura to tell her that we wouldn't be arriving until half past ten. We did eventually arrive in the East Midlands at 10:30.

Now, I'd arranged to meet Brenda Kemeys on Saturday and she sent me a text message with an update on what had happened at the stage door earlier that evening and as soon as I received her text message, I knew I had to let her know the situation. When I did tell her, she said that she hoped we got there in time.

The next morning, when the three of us were on the train, (it was around the time when Michael was arriving at the stage door), Brenda sent me another text and asked where we were. I told her we were still on the train. She must have explained the situation to Michael because a few minutes later, I received yet another text saying that Michael would do his best to come out between the shows and see me. Brenda also said she would come and find me in the interval.

Now onto the show. It was fantastic from start to finish. The energy the cast put in is unbelievable. For me the highlights were 'Timeless To Me' and 'You Can't Stop The Beat'.

Now, onto after the show. We went round to the stage door. Some cast members came out, (including Ben James Ellis, who was great with people who had come to see him).

Anyway, onto Michael's arrival at the stage door. He came out and said, (to the crowd in general), "You'd better be quick, 'cos I've got fish, chips and mushy peas waiting for me inside."

A couple of people got photos and things signed, and he said, "Does anyone else need something signed?" And I held my programme up and made my way towards him. As I got to him, he said, "Hello you. You made it then. You had difficulty getting here, didn't you?" I said something along the lines of, "You could say that, Michael!" As soon as he heard my accent, he said, (in a Belfast accent), "It's great to hear that accent!" And I nearly died with laughter and delight. He signed my programme and I got a photo with him as well.

It was the perfect end to a perfect day.
THANK YOU MICHAEL !

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.

"SOUTH" GET-TOGETHERS FOR ALL MICHAEL BALL FANS

New fan club members are very welcome, every two months (next one will be Saturday 17th May – contact us for details) at the BIC in Bournemouth, Dorset. We meet up in the café area



inside main foyer from 2:00pm to 4:00pm.

Anyone interested in joining us for tea-coffee and chat about "our favourite man", please contact Jill Clark or Barbara Mills:
email: lilaclondoncorgi@yahoo.co.uk
or post:
30 Whitehaven Park, Chapel Lane,
Blackfield. Southampton. SO45 1YZ.

We would love to see you, (we have had 13 of us at some of our get-togethers - so it's "growing" and it would be really nice to see you all whether you are a new fan or a not so new fan)

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

