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## FILM

John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is a pretty, smart little movie with some real flashes of brilliance. This came as somewhat of a surprise to this writer, who was underwhelmed after witnessing the stage version late in its off-Broadway run a couple of years ago. Certainly, it was raunchy and funny enough to be entertaining, but it seemed bland, contrived and undeservedly self-impressed.

The musical was constructed as a concert by underground rock singer Hedwig, with most of the story's events and transitions conveyed through patter and stilted shifts in lighting and props. It was a case of too much suspension of skepticism in return for too little. Much to the detriment of the experience, the music itself sounded like half-baked sub-Meatloaf sludge, with only the slightest hint of its much-ballyhooed post-punk "rawness" and "attitude."

Thank heavens, then, that writer, director and star Mitchell decided to reinvent the story for a motion picture version. This stuff deserved a second chance, as it provides a rare "T" entry into the GLBT film subgenre. Opened up for celluloid, *Hedwig's* revolt against conventional social, sexual and political wisdom is refreshingly defiant.

Here is the convoluted story, as related in alternately deadpan and bittersweet voice-over flashback: A German boy is migrated by his mother to communist East Berlin, where she teaches sculpture to amputees. Little Hansel keeps himself busy listening to American Forces Radio with his head in the oven, the only real space of his own in their government-issue apartment. The strange amalgam of troubadours—including Anne Murray ("a Canadian working in the American idiom") and David Bowie ("an idiom working in America and Canada")—leaves a lasting impression on his fragile young mind.

Flash-forward: A U.S. soldier comes upon a barely post-adolescent Hansel sunbathing nude by the Berlin Wall and seduces him. They fall in love, and with the complicity of Hansel's mother, the G.I. coerces him into undergoing a sex-change operation.

This failed surgery is what transforms Hansel into Hedwig, with only the titular "angry inch" for genitalia. She arrives at her soldier's Kansas City trailer home just in time for him to run off with a young male lover as she watches the Berlin Wall crumble on television.

Embracing the absurdity of her situation, Hedwig baby-sits, turns tricks and starts a nowhere rock band with some Korean Army wives. She also finds a lover and protégé in a



Hedwig has a good reason for being angry

## Sex-change rock and sleazy shock

*Hedwig is a trans triumph; The Meat Rack is a trashy, campy relic*

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

individuals, we all physically were joined with our perfect other half. The songs serve as emotional subtext, revealing Hedwig's own obsession with becoming whole, an odyssey that's strangely, magically fulfilled at the film's end.

Mitchell ameliorates most of the play's weaknesses simply by using the language of cinema to rescue the story from its stage-bound claustrophobia and by placing the starring role back into his own capable hands after dubious interpretations by Donovan Leitch and Ally Sheedy. Stephen Trask's music is still more generic than it should be, preferring to reference rock's theatrical power rather than actually tap in for itself, but watching Hedwig's autobiography play out in the film's various surreal locales is always engaging and frequently enchanting.

Despite a minuscule budget of \$6 million, Mitchell and cinematographer Frank Demarco lend virtually every shot the visual acuity that, because it costs nothing but imagination, always has been the secret weapon of good independent film. The sunbathing sequence alone—in overexposed color, Golden Arches peeking over the west side of the Berlin Wall as the soldier woos Hansel with contraband American Gummy Bears, so unlike the flavorless German ones—is worth seeing *Hedwig* for, and there are plenty more that nearly equal its humor, pathos and inventiveness.

*Hedwig* bears more than a passing resemblance to that other queer rock musical, 1998's *Velvet Goldmine*, especially in its sense of aesthetic morality and artistic integrity. (It's no coincidence that both were overseen by that prescient producer of intelligent

young man named Tommy. She transforms him from an acoustic-strumming hick into a bona fide star via the teachings of rock's literate, sexually oblique Holy Trinity: Lou Reed, Iggy Pop and Bowie.

Tommy leaves Hedwig in the dust, assumes the pseudonym she invented for him ("Tommy Gnosis"), waters her musical ideas down to bland acceptability and repackages himself as a faux-morose balladeer and mainstream *Rolling Stone* cover boy.

Now, Hedwig and a ragtag band of rock 'n' roll vagabonds limp angrily across the United States, trailing Tommy's stadium tour and playing mall eateries in an attempt to cash in on her tacky tabloid fame as the skeleton in his closet. Much screen time is devoted to Hedwig's songs, which, with the frequent aid of some coolly childlike animated sequences, retell Plato's myth about the origin of love: Human beings fall in love because, before the gods cruelly divided us into