Lewis Center for the Arts’ Program in Theater presents the musical *Hairspray*

*Directed by senior AJ Jones and featuring senior Alex Daniels in a new take on the Broadway hit musical in which questions of identity and race are brought to the forefront*

*Photo caption: Alex Daniels who will be featured as Tracy Turnblad in rehearsal for a Lewis Center for the Arts’ production of the musical *Hairspray* that raises new questions of identity and race*

*Photo credit: Justin Goldberg*

What: *Hairspray*, the musical based on the 1988 John Waters film. Questions of identity and race are brought to the forefront in this new take on the hit Broadway show.

Who: Directed by theater senior AJ Jones and featuring theater senior Alex Daniels as Tracy Turnblad, presented by Princeton’s Program in Theater

When: March 10, 11, 12, 14 and 16 at 8:00 p.m.

Where: Marie and Edward Matthews ’53 Acting Studio at 185 Nassau Street, Princeton
Tickets: $12 general/$11 students & seniors when purchased in advance; $17 general/$15 students & seniors at the door

(Princeton, NJ) The Lewis Center for the Arts’ Program in Theater at Princeton University will present *Hairspray*, the hit Broadway musical based on the 1988 John Waters film, directed by senior AJ Jones and featuring Alex Daniels as Tracy Turnblad, on March 10, 11, 12, 14, and 16 at 8:00 p.m. Performances will take place in the Marie and Edward Matthews ’53 Acting Studio at 185 Nassau Street in Princeton. Talkback discussions with the audience will follow the March 12 and 14 performances.

*Hairspray* received eight Tony Awards including Best Musical, Best Original Score, and Best Book of a Musical in 2003. With music by Marc Shaiman, lyrics by Scott Wittman and Marc Shaiman, and book by Mark O’Donnell and Thomas Meehan, the musical is set in 1962 Baltimore where teen Tracy Turnblad dreams of dancing on *The Corny Collins Show*, a local television dance program. When Tracy wins a role on the show, she becomes an instant local celebrity and uses her newfound fame to launch a campaign to racially integrate the show.

Jones, the senior who co-proposed the production with fellow senior Daniels as their thesis project for theater, plans to take a different approach to the show. Tracy, written as a white character, will be portrayed as a biracial teen, a reworking that the duo hopes will help audiences explore the racial tensions central to the show more deeply. “We also plan to take a more gritty approach to the show than is typically done,” notes Jones. “Our sets, costumes and props will be more minimalist with greater focus on the characters and actors. We also will mix elements of the sixties with more contemporary elements that we hope will tie the racial issues of the show and its setting with issues of race and identity we are facing now.”

“I’ve been interested in the role of Tracy Turnblad for a long time,” notes Daniels, “but I would not typically be cast as this white character. By representing Tracy as a biracial teen, it provided me a role through which I could explore a reconciliation of my own identities.” Tracy’s mother Edna, who is traditionally a white male actor in drag, will instead be played by an African-American male in drag, while her father will remain white. Daniels also notes the lack of
narratives representing biracial characters searching for their identities in the theatrical canon and wanted to give voice to that community through their approach to the show.

Daniels, a sociology major from Exton, Pennsylvania, who is pursuing certificates in theater and African American studies, has been performing since she was in the third grade, mostly in musicals. She applied to and auditioned for a number of conservatories before choosing Princeton, which she felt provided an education that allowed her to balance both her academic and artistic goals. Her independent work investigates African Americans in theater and the extent of available roles. Her junior year research examined audience diversity at Broadway shows. She has performed in a number of other Lewis Center productions, including roles in *Singin' in the Rain*, *Macbeth*, and a unique musical, *Annie & Rose*. She has also performed with Princeton University Players and The Triangle Club, for which she also served as vice-president. Daniels participated in a Princeton-sponsored internship two summers ago at The Public Theater and is a Lewis Center Student Arts Peer Mentor. She began taking theater courses her sophomore year, including an introductory acting course with the late Tim Vasen. Daniels also notes the influences of Brian Herrera's course "Playing Against Type" and two courses with former Princeton Arts Fellow and theater artist Aaron Landsman.

Jones is an anthropology major from Occoquan, Virginia also pursuing a certificate in theater. She looked at a number of schools that balanced academics and the arts and liked that Princeton offered a certificate opportunity (similar to a minor) in addition to a major in another field. She knew she wanted to pursue theater upon entering Princeton, having been a performer in high school. Jones began with an introductory acting course and also took a playwriting course with R.N. Sandberg. During her four years at Princeton, she has performed with The Triangle Club and directed a production for Grind Arts Company. Her senior thesis in anthropology about women who have Turner Syndrome does not have a direct connection to her thesis project directing *Hairspray*, but she sees a relationship in using media, such as performance, as an effective means to present research to a broader community.

Through the Program in Theater's wider casting process this year, the *Hairspray* cast includes a number of students who are new to theater and to the Lewis Center. The cast includes Achille
Tenkiang ’17, Paddy Boroughs ’18, Allison Light ’18, Carly Maitlin ’19, Abby Spare ’20, Currie Engel ’19, Ben Diamond ’19, Evan Gedrich ’18, Abby Jean-Baptiste ’18, Isaac Piecuch ’18, Danielle Stephenson ’20, Adam Hudnut-Beumler ’17, Luke Pfleger ’17, Marshall Schaffer ’20, Natalie Plonk ’18, Bria McKenzie ’19, and Jasmeene Burton ’19. A musical ensemble, directed by Vince di Mura, the Lewis Center’s Resident Music Director and Composer, serves as the band for the show.

The audience talkbacks scheduled in conjunction with the show will be led on March 12 by professional stage, film, and television actor Richard Prioleau and, on March 14, by Assistant Professor of Theater Brian Herrera, author of Latin Numbers: Playing Latino in Twentieth-Century U.S. Popular Performance (University of Michigan Press, 2015), which was recognized with the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism.

The Lewis Center’s Program in Theater annually presents a major, professionally produced play, which this year will be the musical Into the Woods, opening April 14, as well as a number of student senior thesis productions throughout the year. The current season will conclude with a new play written by senior Edwin Rosales about a modern immigrant family struggling to find their place in both the U.S. and their homeland of Mexico and a musical exploration of themes of identity in the work of Stephen Sondheim.

Tickets for Hairspray are $12 general admission and $11 for students and seniors when purchased in advance, and $17 general admission and $15 for students and seniors purchased the day of performances at the box office. Tickets are available through University Ticketing, which offers the convenience of online ordering and print-at-home tickets. To purchase tickets online visit http://arts.princeton.edu/events/hairspray/2017-03-10/ or call Princeton University Ticketing at 609.258.9220, or stop by the Frist Campus Center Ticket Office. Tickets will also be available at the door prior to performances.

For more information on this event, the Program in Theater, or the more than 100 performances, exhibitions, readings, screenings, concerts and lectures presented each year by the Lewis Center for the Arts, visit arts.princeton.edu.

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