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Another coup for Melbourne

Daniel Ziffer
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MELBOURNE has confirmed its status as Australia's musical capital with the news that big Broadway hit *Hairspray* will open at the Princess Theatre in October. The adaptation of John Waters' 1988 cult film will be the sixth musical to open in Melbourne this year, and the fifth musical to have its Australian premiere in Melbourne in the past three years.

"It's a Cinderella story," says the musical's composer, Marc Shaiman. "At this point it's now been around the world and everyone seems to get it ... even though it's about segregation and the civil rights movement of the '60s in America."

The stage version of *Hairspray* ran in New York for more than six years - it won eight Tony Awards - and has since opened across Europe and Asia. A 2007 remake of the film, starring John Travolta, Michelle Pfeiffer and teen heart-throb Zac Efron, was the 12th most popular film in Australia that year, outgrossing blockbusters such as *Casino Royale*.

"The characters that John Waters created - whether he knew it at the time or not - are just incredibly endearing and interesting and funny," Shaiman said. The various versions of *Hairspray* have always cast a male actor as Tracy's mother, Edna, and an unknown girl as the lead, something that excites Waters.

"If it's like everywhere else, we'll make a fat girl a star," he said, ahead of auditions in April. "Whoever is going to be the next fat girl star of Australia: I salute you." As it turns out, producers Paul Dainty and Village Roadshow will launch a nationwide search for a talented plus-size singing and dancing unknown to star in the musical.

David Atkins will direct the production, with *So You Think You Can Dance* judge Jason Coleman to choreograph.

A prominent composer and musical director, Shaiman has worked on more than 50 films and had a good feeling about *Hairspray* from its inception.

"When something feels that natural, it feels that natural for a reason," he said.

Shaiman's lyricist and life partner Scott Wittman knew there was "something special" about the show. "But it wasn't until it was in front of a paying public of all shapes and sizes that we really knew," he said.

The pair are incredibly busy: there is a planned sequel to the *Hairspray* film; a *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* musical for director Sam Mendes; and they are still tinkering with *Catch Me If You Can*, a musical version of the 2002 Steven Spielberg film about a young conman.

It opened in Seattle in 2009 but director Jack O'Brien and choreographer Jerry Mitchell - the original creative team on

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the *Hairspray* musical - are in London previewing Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom* sequel, *Love Never Dies*.

Shaiman and Wittman are in Los Angeles for Monday's Academy Awards ceremony. Shaiman, a five-time nominee, is also the event's musical director.

"Every time you do stuff and think about the allegedly 1 billion people watching, it's kind of freaky," he said. "I mean, Scott and I have written an opening number and in two minutes more people will hear and see that song ... than probably anything we've ever written."

Opening first in Melbourne

- *Wicked*, July 2008
- *Jersey Boys*, July 2009
- *Drowsy Chaperone*, January 2010
- *Fame*, April 2010
- *Mary Poppins*, July 2010
- *Hairspray*, October 2010
- *Rock of Ages*, April 2011

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