

**Marie Bennett (University of Winchester): Dragging his Stardom into the Twenty-First Century: John Travolta and “Hairspray”**

*Before being cast as the protagonist in “Saturday Night Fever” (John Badham, 1977), John Travolta was not a well-known performer. However, the film’s resounding success and his subsequent starring role in “Grease” (Randal Kleiser, 1978) the following year led to him becoming a recognisable face and household name. Indeed, the popularity of “Grease’s” soundtrack in the United Kingdom meant that clips from the film were regularly broadcast on the chart show “Top of the Pops” during 1978, thereby additionally bringing Travolta to the notice of people who had not seen either film. It is therefore fascinating that, thirty years after he played the role of Tony Manero, Travolta featured in a musical once more. His surprise casting as Edna Turnblad in the remake of “Hairspray” (Adam Shankman, 2007) allowed audiences to witness Travolta dance again – and in yet another successful film musical. His previous successes in film musicals meant that the producers of Hairspray saw the commerciality of Travolta playing the role of Edna. But, perhaps more intriguing, is Travolta’s decision to feature in another musical not as leading man, but in the guise of an overweight woman.*

*Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin argue that, in the West, musicals are ‘easy to read as queer’ (2006: 72), because they feature elements socially constructed as feminine, such as music and dance, and also because they encompass a utopian aesthetic. In this paper, I will explore Travolta’s portrayal of Edna, with reference to his acclaimed starring role in Saturday Night Fever. Incorporating gaze theory, and referencing the analyses of Chris Straayer (1995) and Michele Aaron (2004) with regard to film portrayals of characters in drag, I will argue that, as the character of Manero can be (and has been) read queerly, this provides an interesting stance from which to analyse Travolta’s portrayal of Edna in terms of portrayals of masculinity and gender.*

**Vita:**

*Marie Josephine Bennett is a PhD student at the University of Winchester, England, where she is examining representations of LGBTQ characters in Hollywood film musicals in the first decade post Stonewall. Publications include chapters in *Protest Music in the Twentieth Century* (2016) and *Cinema Invites Other Gazes* (2016).*