

## THEATER

# Vilanch Trades Beard For Heels In *Hairspray*

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Who better to play the loudest, funniest woman on Broadway than one of the loudest, funniest men in America? Bruce Vilanch, an actor and comedy writer, is perhaps best known for his full blonde beard and colorful spectacles. He currently dons the dress of Edna Turnblad, *Hairspray's* eccentric, full-figured matriarch. The feminine wardrobe is nothing new for Vilanch, who has been strapping on Edna's high heels since September of 2003 when he originated the role in the national tour of *Hairspray*. "I've even got her feet at this point," he says, laughing about the time he has spent as his alter ego. "I'm dancing around every night in high heels in a 35 pound fat suit and wig. So now I'm as tired as Edna, because Edna is exhausted!"

Vilanch comes to Broadway with a resume that most writers merely dream of. The former *Chicago Tribune* writer's jokes have been heard in the biggest awards shows, including the Oscars, Emmys, Tonys and Grammys. In total he has co-written 15 Academy Award telecasts and won six Emmy Awards. Another highlight in his illustrious writing career came with the publication of his book, *Bruce!: My Adventures In The Skin Trade*. In 1998 Vilanch began a four-season stint on the new version of *Hollywood Squares*, during which time he gained celebrity status for himself.

Vilanch recently took some time to chat with **The Record** about life as Broadway's favorite lady, and the road to the Great White Way.

**Edna Turnblad is a strong woman, but she doesn't show signs of a healthy self-esteem until the end of *Hairspray*. Does**



Photo Courtesy Richard Kornberg and Associates

**Comedy writer Bruce Vilanch has lost the beard and gained high heels in the process of starring as Edna Turnblad in *Hairspray*.**

I used to think I was I was a thin-faced person! Then one day I shaved. One critic said I have "the face of a canned ham." That statement has so many levels of

**Of the Oscar moments that you yourself have scripted, which are your favorites?**

One year there were two actresses that

came up to me and said "Hey, you were on 'The Simpsons'? That's so cool!" After I did the show they sent me a great bag of Simpsons swag. I love my Homer Simpson



I think it does. When I was much younger I had much less self-esteem, and now I don't care. I wanted to look like Robert Redford! I wanted to look like him, but I never wanted to *be* him. I *did* want to be Jackie Gleason, or one of the graceful fat guys. I knew what my equipment was and how I could apply it. I mean, I knew I could never be a romantic leading man. The wonderful thing about Edna is that she starts out with no self-esteem at all. She's a slob and she's afraid to go out of the house, and hasn't been out for a long time. And by the end of the show she's unbelievably glamorous, like Shelley Winters at the Academy Awards. She's all dolled up. She's accepted herself. She's big, blonde and beautiful!

**How much more beautiful did you feel after you got rid of your beard to play Edna?**

(Laughing) I don't know! I miss it on cold winter nights. I say, "My face is freezing, why is that? Oh I used to have a beard, now it's just baby skin that hasn't seen the sun in 32 years!" When you have a beard you sort of pull at it automatically, and you actually hypnotize yourself, stroking your beard, and I miss that in a way. But I've done it many hours, hypnotizing myself through the use of my beard...

**Do you think you'll ever grow it back?**

I'll see what happens. People keep saying that I look younger, and I would agree with them, but I do have jowls, which I used to keep cleverly hidden. It's amazing,

**With the face of a canned ham, why would you begin to write rather than act?**

I had a very deep voice, I was big, and I was very young. Whenever I would go to audition for things I was up against people who were much older than I was, who had track records and careers, and so I felt like I'd be banging my head up against the wall. I felt like I wasn't any particular type, because with the type I was, I was going to have to grow into it. So I leaned in towards the writing because I got validation, I got jobs and offers, so it sort of just happened that way. But I always knew that I would somehow try and work it in.

**Speaking of validation, being asked to write for the Academy Awards says a lot about your writing. How does one go about putting together material for such a large production?**

The great thing about the Oscars is that there's always a crop of new movies, so you get to write about whatever's been happening that year. So I always start with that. I try to marry what's been going on in the year of movies and what's been going on in the world. You've got people who don't go to the movies, but they know what's going on in the world, so if you can make a joke that's relatable... The example I always use was a few years ago when Billy Crystal was hosting and said something like, "It's the Academy Awards, and there are 5 million people watching, and Linda Tripp is recording it."

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beth I; Judi Dench who actually went on to win, and Cate Blanchett. There was a lot of talk about Queen Elizabeth, and since Queen Elizabeth was always in white face the host, Whoopi Goldberg, came out in white face and said, "Good evening, I'm the African queen." That was a joke that could only work at the Oscars. Because the audience knew that there was a movie called *The African Queen* that actually won Best Picture, so it was a great marriage, a unique situation. But my favorite things are just things that happen at the spur of the moment. Like when Michael Moore got booed by the crew when he made the speech. I was backstage with Steve Martin who had to come out and follow him.

**Now that you have had experience as an actor and a writer, how would you describe your ideal job?**

I would like to be the idle spouse of a wealthy spouse and be unemployed. I'd be a rich person's plaything. Where do I audition for that without having to go on "The Apprentice?"

**You've been spoofed on a number of television shows. Which was your favorite?**

"Saturday Night Live" has spoofed me so many times. Horatio Sanz and Darrell Hammond did impressions of me. I don't mind it, it's very flattering. Will Sasso played me on MadTV before he lost the weight. I did the voice of myself on "The Simpsons." There are certain people I haven't known since I was a child who

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**Okay, so let's say you're sitting down to dinner with Edna Turnblad. What do you talk about?**

Whether or not there will be any food left on the table!

**What would you two be eating?**

Everything! Edna is an equal opportunity consumer. Edna likes all the foods that are terrible for her. She just can't stop eating. She lives in 1962 before there was even Sweet N' Low. Everything had sugar in it. When you were going on a diet you didn't have a lot of help. For someone like Edna to go on a diet was really like depriving yourself of life. Everything she ate was lousy, it was loaded with sugar and loaded with fat, there was no Atkins. What's amazing now is, there's all of these things, and you *still* can't lose weight. I'm sure we'd have a lot to talk about. Edna's life is very hard, but she is strong in all the right places. She has a husband who loves her, and they have a very physical relationship, and she has a daughter who's really smart and feisty and is nobody's fool, and they have a very tight family unit. So she has a lot going for her, I mean she has her own demons, but her life is good. She just has to accept herself. Other people do, she just doesn't herself. That's what makes her story in the show so great!

To purchase tickets to Hairspray, visit [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com) or call 212-307-4100.