



SYNOPSIS:

Born in Baltimore, Howard Ashman grew up loving musical theatre. After studying at Boston University and Goddard College, he earned his Masters degree at University of Indiana. In 1978, Howard came to New York and opened a Off-Off-Broadway theatre, which he initially subsidized by writing cover copy for book publishers before it became the talk of the town. His success adapting a Kurt Vonnegut novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, led Howard and his song writing partner, Alan Menken, to adapt the Roger Corman film *Little Shop of Horrors* for the stage—which quickly became a cultural phenomenon in New York City and beyond.

His success led him to a dream collaboration with A Chorus Line composer Marvin Hamlisch on the musical *Smile*. But the production was plagued with changes, and after investors bailed it soon crashed when it opened on Broadway. Humiliated, Howard fled Broadway and answered Disney Studio Head Jeffrey Katzenberg's call to come to California and work for Disney. Howard immediately gravitated to animation where he could bring his musical theatre skills to a new medium. Menken joined him and the result was the Oscar winning score and songs for *THE LITTLE MERMAID*. But in the background of the triumph of *MERMAID*, Howard was diagnosed with AIDS, at a time when the disease was untreatable and a virtual death sentence.

Howard kept his illness a secret and instead of slowing down, dug into two new musicals for Disney. The first, *ALADDIN*, yielded brilliant song demos inspired by Fats Waller, but the story crashed and went into rewrites. Ashman and Menken began work on what would be one of the overwhelming hits of their collaboration: *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*. During production Howard's health declined and much of the team moved to New York to continue work by his bedside. His partner, Bill Lauch, went into construction on a house for them to share in upstate New York. However, Howard's health couldn't last and he died in March 1991 at 39 years old, having never seen the finished *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*, or *ALADDIN*, which would always live on as his legacy.



Produced by Stone Circle Pictures, "Howard" premieres Friday, August 7, streaming only on Disney+.

DON HAHN'S DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I was ten years into my career when I met Howard, and like most of the new artists at Disney animation we were learning from the masters of Walt Disney's generation. We were becoming experts at animating stories, but not in making musicals. In the decade before, the press had pronounced the Broadway musical all but dead. The stage was set for Howard Ashman and his brilliant songwriting and composition colleague Alan Menken to reinvigorate the musical, and teach us how to tell stories in song.

Howard left us during the making of BEAUTY AND THE BEAST. Since then, I've wanted to tell his story. I could never forget my time with Howard—from watching him in story meetings articulate what was right or wrong about a moment and why, to working with Linda Woolverton on the script to BEAUTY AND THE BEAST. I watched him get sicker and sicker before my eyes, until he couldn't speak or see or write anymore. And since then, I've watched his work entertain and inspire audiences in a profound way.

HOWARD is a story of a brilliant man, like no other I had known—a man who lived a joyful life with a tragic ending, a man who, with Menken, brought back the musical and in doing so brought back the moribund animation business at Disney.

I didn't want to make a puff piece about Howard. That would be too easy. I didn't want old guys reminiscing about how great he was, how generous he was, or how smart he was, all of which are true, and none of which needed to be said. His work said all that. Instead, I wanted to make a film that transported the viewer to the rooms that Howard was in. More than anything, I wanted Howard, one of the great storytellers of our time, to tell his own story in his own words.

HOWARD tells his own story here, with his closest colleagues and family members narrating. We didn't need a parade of talking heads as much as we needed authenticity. Photographs and clips need to put you in the theatre seats where Howard worked his magic. I wanted Howard himself to express, as much as possible, not only what he did, but what he was thinking when he did it. I wanted to celebrate his talent and understand the pain of his AIDS diagnosis to the people closest to him. I wanted to bring Howard back to life through his words and music, at least for 90 minutes, to testify to his genius and let an audience draw the conclusion that I drew nearly three decades ago: that this one man revolutionized the musical first through his Off-Off-Broadway hits and then through his work at Disney.

There is risk in telling a story with found footage. We are used to biographies packed with talking heads eulogizing their subject. In HOWARD, it was more important to time travel to the latter part of the 20th century and put you in the room with Howard. Because of this, HOWARD is made all with period footage,



often from grainy VHS, old tape recordings from cassette song demos, and answering machine tapes that hiss with age. But I believe that the audience will forgive yesterday's analog quality media when they hear what Howard says to instruct and enlighten us on his craft.

The result has been cathartic for me as a filmmaker. I thought I knew Howard when I worked with him on *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*, but the truth is I didn't know him at all. The years of research, of listening to demo tapes, of digging through his archives in the Library of Congress, were like peeling back layers of his life and revealing not only his process and insecurities but his genius as well. The result is an intimate portrait of an artist whom I've grown to love and value for the legacy that he's left us all.

To know a person completely in the course of a film is probably a fools errand, but without the distractions of conventional documentary, I know you will understand him more, you will learn from him, and you will be inspired by this unique, brilliant, and empathetic artist—and what he has to teach us about life.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

"I set out to let Howard tell his own story...maybe it was my way to bring him back and share his genius. If you were making a film about one of the most gifted musical storytellers of the 20th Century, why wouldn't you let him tell his own story." —Don Hahn

Why Howard Ashman?

The film is highly personal to director Don Hahn since he produced *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST* and collaborated with Howard closely on the film, which became the first animated film to be nominated for a Best Picture Oscar. Howard was never able to see the finished film or share in the accolades when the film was released. His story has been largely untold, and yet his work has become the soundtrack of generations and audiences around the world—on the screen and stage.

Why Now?

The prime of Howard's creative achievements was in the 1980's and early 1990's—almost 30 years ago. With the passage of time, it's clear that Howard's work was not just a fleeting fad, but rather a lasting body of work which continues to stand even today. Stage productions and remakes of the films with which he graced with his lyrics are now coming back to be retold and reimagined for new generations.

The Music



During the course of production Hahn had told Alan Menken that he was working on a documentary about Howard. When he was finally able to send Menken a ruff cut of the movie, Alan screened it and called right back.

"He said, 'Don, I have to score this movie.'" said Hahn. "I fell off my chair. Alan worked over the holidays and wrote one of the most personal and touching scores that I've heard from him." Alan brought in our friend and composer Chris Bacon to adapt his score to the film and the result is breathtaking.

Dramatic Construction

Howard recounts Howard Ashman's life using the words of his closest colleagues and family members to narrate the story. But most importantly it is Ashman's words that viewers hear, instructing us on his approach, schooling us on his work and how he crafts the foundation, structure, rhythm, and turning points of a film. Director Don Hahn puts Howard forward as the voice telling his own story.

Hahn's film shows a life of joy and struggle of a brilliant lyricist who, with his collaborators, reinvigorated musical theatre by virtue of his work with Disney and on the Off-Off-Broadway stage. Broadway musicals had become a mixed bag by the time Ashman left the Great White Way to work with Disney in California. It was there that he found the safe space to mix animation and a genre that he knew too well, American musical theatre.

The Director

Don Hahn has made his career by building powerful teams of artists to tell compelling stories to a worldwide audience. The films that he has produced, including BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, THE LION KING, and THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME qualify as the highlights of the animation renaissance of the late 20th century. His love of the documentary form moved him to take risks as a filmmaker in a genre where he felt there was no set model or rule that couldn't be challenged. With his directorial debut WAKING SLEEPING BEAUTY, Hahn told the story of the animation renaissance at Disney with honesty and candor.

Kenneth Turan of the LOS ANGELES TIMES said, "This tale of artistic reincarnation is a classic show business story, not lacking in temper tantrums and clashing egos, and as told in "Waking Sleeping Beauty" it's got a terrific inside Hollywood sensibility plus an unblinking candor that lets the chips fall where they should. Which, given who made it, is something of a pleasant surprise." The film was selected for Telluride, SXSW and Toronto International Film Festivals.

With HOWARD, Hahn turns his craft to telling the story of his collaborator and friend with all vintage footage, an approach that is at times voyeuristic and at times deeply emotional as he combines Ashman's song demos, work tapes and interviews into the heroic story of Howard's life.



Images & Recordings

The images for the film came first from the vast collection of Howard's memorabilia in the Library of Congress, but Hahn and his long time producer Lori Korngiebel also set out on a treasure hunt to find recordings and footage that had never before been seen. Executive Producer Jonathan Polenz, had completed extensive research to find long lost talk show segments featuring Howard, as well as an incredible radio interview where Howard recounts his life in great detail.

The Disney archives had only a short interview with Ashman and Menken recorded for THE LITTLE MERMAID, and very little had been shot for ALADDIN and BEAUTY AND THE BEAST since Ashman was becoming more visibly sick. A goldmine of images came from Howard's sister Sarah and his partner Bill Lauch. Kyle Renick, Producing Director of the WPA Theatre, had hours of taped interviews of Howard made during the last year of his life. Hahn and Korngiebel spent two years looking for audio of the November 1989 THE LITTLE MERMAID press junket held at Walt Disney World. After virtually giving up the hunt, a reporter contacted Hahn one week before the final mix with a recorded interview of Howard and Alan made at that junket.

"He said, 'I heard you were making a documentary about Howard Ashman and I have a twenty minute interview with Howard and Alan that I did during the Orlando Press Junket for Mermaid,'" said Hahn. "I got the file from the reporter and could not believe it...it was smart, funny and fantastic." It's one of many audio treasures in the film.

Title: "Howard"
Category: Documentary Film
U.S. Premiere: Friday, August 7

Interview Subjects: Alan Menken
Bill Lauch
Paige O'Hara
Jodie Benson

Directed by: Don Hahn

Written by: Don Hahn

Producers: Don Hahn



Lori Korngiebel
Jonathan Polenz

Production Company: Stone Circle Pictures

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