

Stone Circle Pictures
PRESENTS

Howard

THE HOWARD ASHMAN STORY

A FILM BY DON HAHN



RUNTIME: 92 minutes

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LOGLINE

The untold story of Howard Ashman, the brilliant lyricist behind Disney classics like ALADDIN, BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, THE LITTLE MERMAID and creator of musicals including LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS, whose unparalleled career and vibrant life were cut short by the AIDS epidemic at only 39 years old.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Howard Ashman grew up in an average Jewish family in Baltimore with an extraordinary love for musical theater. After college, he opened a theater in a derelict section of New York and struggled to put on shows, until his adaptation of Roger Corman's film LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS becomes a huge Off-Off-Broadway hit and catapults him into the limelight. Finally on Broadway, he collaborates with the Oscar- and Tony-winner Marvin Hamlisch to create the ultimately disappointing *Smile*. Embarrassed, Howard fled to Los Angeles and took up with a struggling gang of artists in a warehouse—Disney animators who had just been kicked off the studio lot until they could prove themselves. Along with Alan Menken, Howard writes the Oscar winning songs for THE LITTLE MERMAID. While the film becomes a global phenomenon, Howard is diagnosed with HIV—which he kept a secret in an era when AIDS is a death sentence and gay men are at the margins of society. After creating the initial songs for ALADDIN, Howard's health deteriorated and he wrote the lyrics to BEAUTY AND THE BEAST from his hospital. Howard died before he was able to see his final Disney films release, but the legacy of his work lives on in Broadway productions and live action remakes for a new generation.

LONG 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.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

DON HAHN

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 fool's 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.

Don Hahn
Director

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.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

DON HAHN (Director/Producer/Writer)

Don Hahn is a writer/producer/director whose credits include the worldwide phenomenon *THE LION KING*, and the classic *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*, the first animated film nominated for a Best Picture Oscar.

Hahn also served as associate producer of the toon-noir hit *WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT*. His other credits include *HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME*, *MALEFICENT*, *TIM BURTON'S FRANKENWEENIE*, and *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST* with Emma Watson and Dan Stevens. He is a founding producer of the DisneyNature series and films like *EARTH*, *OCEANS*, and *CHIMPANZEE*. He is also an award-winning director of documentaries *WAKING SLEEPING BEAUTY* and *THE GAMBLE HOUSE*.

Don Hahn | Selected Filmography

Howard (Documentary) (writer director) 2018
The Gamble House (Documentary) (writer director) 2017
Beauty and the Beast (executive producer) 2015
Maleficent (executive producer) 2014
Frankenweenie (executive producer) 2012
High Ground (Documentary) (producer) 2012
Chimpanzee (Documentary) (executive producer) 2012
Hand Held (Documentary) (writer director) 2009
Waking Sleeping Beauty (Documentary) (Director) 2009
Earth (Documentary) (executive producer) 2007
The Little Matchgirl (Short) (producer) 2006 Academy Award Nominee
The Haunted Mansion (producer) 2003
Atlantis: The Lost Empire (producer) 2001
The Emperor's New Groove (executive producer) 2000
The Hunchback of Notre Dame (producer) 1996
The Lion King (producer) 1994 Golden Globe Best Picture Musical Comedy
Beauty and the Beast (producer) 1991 Academy Award Nominee
Who Framed Roger Rabbit (associate producer) 1988

Lori Korngiebel (Producer)

Lori Korngiebel began her career in post-production. In 1998, she joined Disney Animation Studios where she worked with veteran producer Don Hahn on *FANTASIA 2000*, *ATLANTIS: THE LOST EMPIRE* and *LILO & STITCH*. After completing post-production work on Disney's *THE HAUNTED MANSION*, she joined DreamWorks Animation in 2004 where she worked on acclaimed films *MADAGASCAR* and *HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON*. In 2009, she rejoined Don Hahn at Disney to work on *WAKING SLEEPING BEAUTY*. Her collaboration with Hahn continued with the DisneyNature documentaries *OCEANS* and *AFRICAN CATS* and independent documentary films *HAND HELD* and *HIGH GROUND*. She went on to work as post-production supervisor on Disney's *JOHN CARTER* and as associate producer on *MALEFICENT*.

Alan Menken (Original Music)

Alan Menken is an American musical theatre and film score composer and pianist. Menken is best known for his scores for films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios.

His scores for *THE LITTLE MERMAID* (1989), *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST* (1991), *ALADDIN* (1992), and *POCAHONTAS* (1995) have each won him two Academy Awards. He also composed the scores for *LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS* (1986), *NEWSIES* (1992), *THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME* (1996), *HERCULES* (1997), *HOME ON THE RANGE* (2004), *ENCHANTED* (2007), *TANGLED* (2010) and *SAUSAGE PARTY* (2016), among others. He is also known for his work on musical theatre works for Broadway and elsewhere. Some of these are based on his Disney films, but other stage hits include *LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS* (1982), *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* (1994) and *SISTER ACT* (2009).

Menken has collaborated with such lyricists as Howard Ashman, Tim Rice, Glenn Slater, Stephen Schwartz and David Zippel. With eight Academy Award wins (four each for Best Score and Best Song), Menken is the second most prolific Oscar winner in the music categories after Alfred Newman, who has nine Oscars. He has also won eleven Grammy Awards, a Tony Award and other honors.

Chris Bacon (Score Adaptation)

Chris Bacon burst onto the film scoring scene with his full throttled score for Duncan Jones's hit thriller *SOURCE CODE*. Having cut his teeth as a protégé—orchestrating, co-composing, and writing additional music—of James Newton Howard (on films like *GNOMEO AND JULIET* and *KING KONG*), Bacon made his solo debut with the score for *ANGELS FALL* and hasn't looked back. He gave animated accompaniments to *SPACE CHIMPS* and *ALPHA AND OMEGA*, and composed the dramatic score for the war documentary *HIGH GROUND* produced by Don Hahn. Chris also wrote the underscore for the second half of NBC's *SMASH* season one, which earned him his first Emmy Award Nomination. Chris recently received his second Emmy Award Nomination on *BATES MOTEL* for best Original Dramatic Score for a Series. He has also contributed additional music to David O. Russell's Academy Award nominated *AMERICAN HUSTLE*, Marvel Studios' *AVENGERS: AGE OF ULTRON*, *PADDINGTON* produced by David Heyman, and Sony Picture's *GOOSEBUMPS*. His most recent work includes Rob Reiner's *BEING CHARLIE* and ABC's TV drama *WHEN WE RISE* starring Guy Pearce and Mary-Louise Parker, the Amazon reboot *THE TICK* directed by Wally Pfister, starring Jackie Earle Haley, and the Fox feature *SNATCHED* directed by Jonathan Levine. Upcoming for Chris is the Paramount animation-adventure feature, *SHERLOCK GNOMES*. Bacon grew up in Utah, learning playing piano and saxophone before studying music composition in college. He moved to L.A. to attend USC's film scoring program, which resulted in his apprenticeship with Howard.

Stephen Yao (Editor)

Stephen Yao attended Biola University and since has edited everything from short films to music videos, but he is most passionate about editing documentaries. His documentary work has included clients such as Sports Illustrated, VICE Sports, ESPN, and Fox Sports 1. His EPSN 30 for 30 short film *THE ARNOLD PALMER* was nominated for a Sports Emmy. Stephen met Don Hahn and Lori Korngiebel while working as a post-production coordinator on Disney's *MALEFICENT*.

Gary Rizzo (Rerecording Mixer)

Gary Rizzo won the Academy Award for Best Sound for *INCEPTION* and again in 2018 for *DUNKIRK*. He was born and raised in New Jersey. He was Valedictorian of Full Sail Center for the Recording Arts, graduating in 1993. Gary's professional career as a Re-

Recording Mixer began in 1995 at Skywalker Sound. There he started out working on such films as TOY STORY, THE LOST WORLD: JURASSIC PARK, and TITANIC. Gary has worked on over 150 films. Some of Gary's most notable work includes mixing dialogue and music for TRON: LEGACY, HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON, and HELLBOY. Additionally, he was nominated for Best Sound For THE INCREDIBLES (2004) and INTERSTELLAR(2014).

Jon Polenz (Producer)

Jon Polenz is a non-fiction media producer based in Austin, Texas. He has produced over 200 long form interviews with business and world leaders like Mark Cuban, Ted Turner, Sheryl Sandberg, Steve Wozniak, Michael Lewis, and Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Conner, as well as the founders or senior executives from Match.com, Honest Company, Ancestry.com, Zendesk, Houzz, Gilt Groupe, TuneIn, Kaiser Permanente, and Visa. His work has been distributed by *Fast Company*, *Mashable*, *AOL*, *Glam.com*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Forbes.com*, and Pearson Publishing. The interview series he produced with Jesse Draper has been featured in *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Wired*, *Fast Company*, *USA Today*, *Business Insider*, *AdWeek*, *LA Times*, and *Financial Times*. Segments have also appeared on Fox News, NBC News, and CNBC. Polenz is a graduate of Rice University and holds an MFA from the Stark Producing Program at the U.S.C. School of Cinematic Arts.

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