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Review: 'Hairspray'

POSTED: Monday, October 1, 2012, 5:24 AM

By Jim Rutter

FOR THE INQUIRER

John Waters brought the bulk of his axe collection to *Hairspray*'s movie grindstone, and Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan's book of the musical makes no attempt to minimize the story's crusades for civil rights, acceptance of differences, and the perennially controversial notion that the big girl with big hair can win the hunkiest boy in town with her big heart.

In 1962 Baltimore, proudly plump Tracy Turnblad (Victoria Mayo) wants to win a spot as a dancer on the Corny Collins TV show, achieve racial integration on television, earn her mother's respect and fall in love with Elvis-knock off Link Larkin (Nathan Meyer, whose honeyed voice earns the comparison). Along the way, she encounters racism, sexism, and a slew of insults about her appearance from the white establishment.

Three things prevent the Media Theatre sparkingly sung, superbly danced rendition from disappearing into this aerosol-fueled haze of sixties social justice issues.

One is not to the show's credit: in the spoken lines, the majority of the cast can't capture the camp of the characters. Most jokes sail by unnoticed (in fairness, few will get period humor referencing Khrushchev's shoe and Debbie Reynolds), and in acting, only Jennifer Bissell avoids this fate as Tracy's skinny sidekick Penny. Appearing as a tiny scarecrow in a towering wig, she garners laughs by ambling through clunky gestures and tweaking the tonal shifts of her voice to match.

But what the cast misses in the text, they embody fully in song, their bright, proud voices bubbling through the poppy tunes. Dann Dunn's direction humanizes these cartoonish characters by shifting the emotional center of the story into a touching tale of mothers and daughters, battling both across the generations and in the struggle to help the next one finds its way.

Dunn's dazzling choreography integrates simple steps into joyous ensemble numbers bursting with an exuberance that borders on ecstasy, transforming picket lines into dance parades and infusing the entire production with a buoyant sense of life.

Sure, the 60's era issues still drive the story, but Mayo steals the show. She radiates optimism and cheer, as if Troy Martin O'Shia's lighting coated her in an ebullient glow, and her blue-shaded eyes, beaming smile and heart ready to burst easily outshine the axe-blades of social commentary. For two-and-a-half hours, I found it impossible not to watch her sing.

Hairspray. Through November 4 at the Media Theatre, 104 East State St. Media, PA. Tickets: \$27 to \$49. Information: 610-891-0100 or mediatheatre.org

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