

THEATER REVIEW: Reagle's irresistible 'Hairspray'



Mark Linehan as Corny Collins holds the mike for Marissa Perry as Tracy Turnblad as she sings on the Corny Collins show while some of the Council members look on.

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GHS

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WALTHAM — Whatever progress our country has made in overcoming discrimination toward people of color and anyone of extra-plus body size didn't happen exactly the way it's portrayed in the musical "Hairspray."

But that doesn't stop this fizzy piece of revisionist history from being totally irresistible, even at this stage in the history of the show. After opening on Broadway in 2002, it won eight Tony Awards and ran for nearly seven years. And it had a successful national tour that came through Boston. But even if you've seen the show before, you'll find that it continues to feel very fresh in the hands of Reagle Music Theatre. And much more appealing than the film version that's based on the musical.

Reagle's production is being directed by the only two actors from the Broadway show to have lasted the entire run -- Todd Michel Smith and Judine Somerville. They may have had relatively small roles -- he played one of the council members, IQ, and she one of the three Dynamites -- but they clearly absorbed the spirit of the show and learned the details of what makes it hop, spin, bubble and twist. And they've brought all they absorbed and learned to Waltham.

They also brought Marissa Perry, the last actress to play the role of the unlikely heroine, Tracy Turnblad, on Broadway. She's a dynamic, cute, fireplug who can dance up a storm, belt out a song and amp up the power in the house. She's short, but not overly stout, perhaps due to all that exercise she gets on stage.

You can't help but love the character of Tracy Turnblad and her irrepressible, inclusive spirit that makes her certain she has a real shot at winning the Miss Teenage Hair Spray contest on the Corny Collins television show -- as well as the heart throb Link Larkin -- and integrate the show, if not all of Baltimore, in the process. All of this, in spite of the fact that she's not your conventional beauty or body type.

OK, so history didn't happen this way, but surely those who helped to change history had something of Tracy Turnblad in them -- a refusal to let anything stand in their way or get them down as they pursued their dreams of a better world.

The first act of the show, which is set in 1962, is a series of non-stop, upbeat Motown r&b numbers that are sure to get your juices flowing and paste a permanent grin on your face with their cute, sassy, sometimes slightly naughty lyrics. The Robinson Theatre hasn't shaken like this in a long while as the musicians throw themselves into the music as much as the singers and dancers do. The dancers are spectacular, as they always are at Reagle, and they display their early 1960s moves to a very snappy beat. You probably haven't seen an audience of mostly older people feel so young or good about themselves in a long while as they bounce to the music.



The opening number, "Good Morning, Baltimore," plunges us right into the spirit of things. "Mama, I'm a Big Girl Now" is very cute as Tracy, Penny (Tracy's sidekick), and Amber (Tracy's conventional, self-absorbed antagonist) sing in defiance of their mothers, while their mothers snap back the refrain "Stop, Don't, No!" Another hit, "I Can Hear the Bells," has Tracy dreaming that she and the Elvis wannabe, Link Larkin, are in love.

By the end of the first act, Tracy has fit right in with the African-American students during detention. "This is a rainbow experience," says one of them when Tracy is surprised at how integrated detention is at her school. She learns from them the dance moves that win her a spot on the Corny Collins TV show where she announces that her goal is to become president of the world and that her first act will be to make every day Negro Day, the one day of the month that blacks are allowed to dance on the Corny Collins show.

The act ends at the inner-city record shop run by the African-American Motormouth Maybelle, played with great style and warmth by Angella Brichett, as she sings "I'm big, blonde and beautiful" (blonde because she dies her hair).

Dan Dowling Jr. is very believable and touching as he plays Tracy's mother, Edna, in drag as the role is traditionally played. You'd believe he was a woman -- a very ample one -- if it weren't for his deep voice, which becomes a running joke. He and John Macero, as Tracy's dad, Wilbur, brought the house down during the second act of the opening performance with the sweet, comic love-duet "You're Timeless to Me." Macero perfectly captures the loveable Wilbur who sees no flaws in his wife and runs the Har-De-Har Hut, a joke shop.

Nick Peciaro as Link Larkin has great dance moves and a young Elvis-like look, but he could use a little more chemistry with Tracy. Mark Linehan nails the role of Corny Collins with his easy, suave style and openness to change.

Davron S. Monroe as Seaweed J. Stubbs is a great dancer and is appealing as he crosses the racial divide to fall in love with the white Penny Pingleton.

R. Glenn Michell is brilliant as he slides between four very different characters.

The playful sets are part cartoon and part realistic, catching the spirit of the musical.

By the time the show ends with the number "You Can't Stop the Beat," you'll know you can't stop it, and you'll be glad to be swept up by it.

FYI

WHAT: "Hairspray"

WHEN: Through Aug. 22

WHERE: Reagle Music Theatre, 617 Lexington St., Waltham

COST: \$35 to \$57; \$10 for children accompanied by an adult

INFO: 781-891-5600;

www.reagleplayers.com

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