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Hairspray Teases a Smile from a Stone



Oh stop, Cabrillo Stage, you're hurting my smile muscles, and you've done it before! Now, with a great-looking, full-tilt production of *Hairspray*, Cabrillo dances, sings and storytells its way right Over-The-Top to the intersection of crooning Elvis and the dazzling Supremes, with a fable of teen love, teen rebellion and teen triumph set in the Snazzy Sixties whose civil rights turmoil is translated into the language of musical theater and dresses real cool. Sounds like fun, eh?

Prepared for the possibility of cringe-inducing Pony-dancing pop protestors shimmying their way through "Oh gosh

why don't we all get along" solutions to segregation, it was quickly clear that Hairspray just defies all resistance and carries the audience along with torrential energy to the inevitable happy ending—you just have to give up and love it. Like Hair or Jesus Christ Superstar before it, Hairspray's exciting production numbers, colorful sets and costumes, fast-moving choreography and hummable tunes is as good a way to get a message across as from a pulpit or a schoolroom. Hairspray won the Tony for Best Musical, Best Book, Best Score and five other Tony's in 2002. This musical, in other words, was like a big box of chocolates for Cabrillo Stage, and they bit them all open, enjoyed them with gusto and now let the audiences in on the feast.

The story revolves around zaftig Tracy Turnblad (Monica Turner whose singing and dancing is blazingly good), the bouffantest girl in school who wants to dance in the Corny Collins Show on television, hoping to win the heart of dreamboat Link Larkin (Blake Collins, another triple-threat singer-dancer-actor whose Elvis moment was perfect) but she just isn't Corny Collins material, according to the producer, Velma Von Tussle (a deliciously dreadful Kate McCormick). The irrepressible Tracy wins over Corny Collins (Bobby Marchessault, perfect for the belting singer-salesman role) with the "Negro dancing" she learned in Detention with Seaweed J. Stubbs (Corey Liggins, a fine voice and presence) and his friends (all guilty of Attending High School While Black). Tracy becomes convinced that integrating the Corny Collins Show will make a difference. Joining her in her efforts, her mother Edna Turnblad (Tony Panighetti in impeccable drag) and father Wilbur (Doug Baird) form an unlikely alliance with MotorMouth Mayelle (Jennifer Taylor Daniels, an extraordinary gospel singer and redeeming presence onstage), organizer of the Negro dances.

Large colorfully-patterned cartoony cutouts serve as much of the set by Skipp Epperson, brilliantly locating an era and an upbeat atmosphere, adding light and information—not least through the terrific device of large wavy cartoon-shaped black-and-white television screens above the heads of the teen dancers.

Working every inch out of her Big Blonde and Beautiful role, Jennifer Taylor Daniels brought the soul of soul to the stage in her jawdroppingly soaring gospel rendition of "I Know Where I've Been," one of the few moments when the breathless momentum of the singing dancing mugging stopped and the audience and the show can find a real beating heart.

I really looked forward to seeing Tony Panighetti in his Edna role, as he was spectacular in the Cabrillo Stage production of Scrooge. In this show, his performance added a thread of poignancy to the otherwise relentlessly cheerful production. Tenderly in love with husband Wilbur, stay-at-home Edna is the only person in the show who doubts him/herself, not just because of her size (rubber tires round the middle girth) but her status as stay-at-home housewife. The "You're Timeless to Me" duet between Baird and Panighetti was so touchingly funny because, like the best of the rest in this show, the emotions—though exaggerated, ring true. Panighetti in appropriate moments allows the veil of his character to shift open a crack, and the actor transforming himself shows through—fascinatingly.

Hairspray continues at Cabrillo Stage through August 14.

CAPTION: Tony Panighetti as Edna, Monica Turner as Tracy and Bobby Marchessault as Corny Cornwell.

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Museum of Art & History Gets All Fired up about Clay