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Hairspray—Extra Firm Hold

TUESDAY, 26 JULY 2011 13:16 | KIM LUKE [A&E - THEATER](#)

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Cabrillo Stage turns up the volume

Santa Cruz, we have a problem. The capacity of Cabrillo's Crocker Theater is 523, and there are 13 performances of Cabrillo Stage's smash hit production of "Hairspray" left on the calendar. You do the math—and then get yourself a ticket, stat.

Last weekend's opening of the Tony Award- winning musical played to a full house, one that squealed with bobby sox enthusiasm, laughed at every gag, whether over the top or nuanced, and rose to their feet en masse—for a standing ovation, and to dance along with the talented cast during curtain call.

"Hairspray" is a coming-of-age story. In this cleverly written show, the story is set in 1962 and the setting is segregated Baltimore and its local televised teen sock hop, The Corny Collins Show. This show within a show (one of my favorite devices) features The Nicest Kids in Town, and once a month —Negro Day. This subtle hint in the second song of the show alerts us to the savvy subterfuge ahead.

As we watch these teenage characters come of age, acting out against parental wishes, finding love, and speaking up for themselves, the adults involved also come of age as they open their post-1950s minds. The other main character coming of age before our delighted eyes is, of course, America, on its path toward racial integration.

The show is based on John Waters' 1988 film of the same name, and the stage version, by the team of Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan (book), Marc Shaiman (music and lyrics) and Scott Wittman (lyrics) maintains Waters' sense of the absurd wrapped in rose-colored nostalgia and toe-tapping, finger-pointing, fault-exposing fun. It has a good beat that's easy to dance to.

Monica Turner as Tracy Turnblad has us at hello, or in her case "Uh, oh, oh," the first line of the first number, "Good Morning Baltimore." The blind optimism embodied in her voice, dancing feet and bouffant hair-framed wide-eyed face make her instantly sympathetic and lovable. Ashley Rae Little, as Tracy's BFF Penny Pingleton, nearly steals scenes throughout, her full-body personification of teen awkwardness, naivete and clumsiness hitting every comic mark.

Kudos to Tony Panighetti as Edna Turnblad, mother of Tracy. In a role designed to be played by a man, he embraces the aspects of loving wife and doting mother, and avoids any "man in drag" clichés. Panighetti is escorted lovingly by Doug Baird as Wilbur Turnblad. Their portrayal of playful, loving and often randy life partners

is heartwarming.

The production welcomed back Lile O. Cruse, longtime Cabrillo Stage artistic director, into the orchestra pit as conductor and musical director. The 14-piece live orchestra delivers the sugary pop hits, the love songs and the blues with equal aplomb.

The perfect soul mate to Cruse's music direction is the choreography, provided by director Janie Scott. The pure joy portrayed in the ensemble numbers is only surpassed by the moves themselves—expect to see the Mashed Potato, Frug, Monkey and Madison. And if you don't know what these are, you'll want to after one sitting.

Clever and minimal staging works well, setting the tone and flavor of the era and playfulness of the show without overpowering. Most outstanding is the use of onstage cameras, filming the show-within-a-show, projecting back to the audience in period black and white glory, reminding us of the somewhat simpler age in which this "black and white" story takes place, and also, to this viewer, pointing out how we as a culture have come of age in another sense, a technological age, and become addicted to anything on a screen. I'm certain that all eyeballs focused on the screens instead of the live action for

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much of these scenes. And who could blame them—it's a fantastic device that worked seamlessly on many levels.

"Hairspray," the product, keeps unruly hair in place. "Hairspray," the Cabrillo Stage hit, keeps you humming, bopping, and maybe entices you to be a little more unruly.

For more information, visit Cabrillostage.com.

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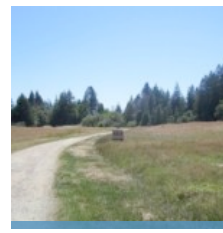
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