

R.I.'s big, fat summer stock sensation

BY DAVE CHRISTNER

Theater, musical and otherwise, is at its best when it serves not only as a vehicle for entertainment, but when it delivers a credible social message within the structure of a story well told. That's why Theatre by the Sea's rousing production of "Hairspray" is a splendid example of the very best that theater can be right from its opening number.

That number is "Good Morning Baltimore," sung by Tracy Turnblad (Erin McCracken) and the company, who set the stage for things to come. Baltimore of the early '60s is, like it or not, awakening to an era of racial equality absent since the conclusion of the Civil War almost 100 years before. But this "war" measures progress in music and disarms the rebel yell with clever lyrics and perfectly executed choreography.

Adapted from the 1988 John Waters film of the same title, "Hairspray" brings a microcosm of the battle for integration in a single city to national awareness. The story's message is simple: Civil strife is no longer going to be tolerated as a way of life for African-Americans. But the medium is the message — Tracy's struggle to find herself and love within the context of the much larger issue of integration is what makes the story so compelling.

Mark O'Donnell and Thomas

Meehan's book — along with Marc Shaiman's music and Scott Wittman's and Shaiman's lyrics — makes the show work at the most fundamental level, creating identification with and an interest in what happens to individual characters.

Of course it is director Russell Garrett and a bevy of fabulous actors who are responsible for making this jump from the stage to the hearts and minds of audience members. No problem there.

McCracken, who studied under Florence Birdwell at Oklahoma City University, known for producing Broadway stars Kelli O'Hara and Kristin Chenoweth (and, incidentally, where I played freshman basketball back in the day) makes a terrific Tracy. Her dynamic voice rocks the rafters in the old barn, and she's as nimble afoot as a gazelle.

Veteran local actor Tom Gleadow brings to the role of Edna Turnblad a kind of vibrancy and humor missing from others I've seen in the role. I saw Harvey Fierstein play Edna in the Broadway production of "Hairspray" a few years ago; he was terrific, but I liked Tom Gleadow's portrayal even better. The difference is that Fierstein was himself first and Edna second; Gleadow is Edna first and himself second, third, and fourth. His own persona never gets in the way of the role. He isn't a man playing a

woman; he is a loving wife and concerned mother, Edna, in all her rumpled glory. His duet of "You're Timeless to Me" with the equally talented Sean McGuirk as Edna's more than a little eccentric husband, Wilbur, is a show stopper and a moment to be forever cherished.

Tracy's gal-pal, Penny Pingleton, played by Prout School graduate Alexa Shanahan, is another local who lights up the stage with her strong, yet melodic, voice and nimble footwork on the boards.

The Turnblad clan and Penny are pitted against the white establishment represented by Velma Von Tussle (Rebecca Gibel) and her daughter, Amber (Rosalie Burke), as they try to integrate a popular teenage dance show on local television. With the help of Cory Collins (Jay Leland Krottinger) and teenage heart-throb Link Larkin (Zach Trimmer), Tracy manages not only to outrage the white establishment but to fall in love with Larkin while learning of a black culture in Baltimore that, aside from their music, she knew nothing about.

Motormouth Maybelle (Yvette Monique Clark) heads up the black community that includes her son, Seaweed J. Stubbs (Antonio Tillman), his sister, Little Inez (Lisa Finegold), a Supremes-like trio called The Dynamites (Sydni Beau-doin, Kimberly Lowe and Roslyn

Seale) and a vastly talented ensemble. Tillman is a gifted comic, delivering line after line of the script's understated humor flawlessly. The Dynamites delivery of "Welcome to the '60s" takes you right back to Motown.

In her beautiful rendition of "I Know Where I've Been," Clark along with the company elevate this musical comedy to a much higher level, to that of a moving tribute to all those who worked and continue working so hard to secure civil rights for all our citizens. But that is the message beneath the medium; this is a high-energy, foot-tapping, body-swaying, sing-a-long kind of show that leaves you reeling with good vibrations. Bert Scott's scenic design and Marcia Zammarelli's costumes are phenomenal.

If you haven't seen Theatre by the Sea's production of "Hairspray," you haven't seen just how good musical theater can be!

Dave Christner is a South County playwright and novelist.

e Performances are Tues.-Fri., 8 p.m., Sat., 4:30 & 8:30 p.m., Sun. 5 p.m. Matinees Thurs. 2 p.m. Tickets \$39-\$54. (401) 782-8587. www.theatrebythesea.com.



Mom, do you dance? Erin McCracken, left, as a terrific Tracy Turnblad, and Tom Gleadow, right, also a sensation as her mother, Edna Turnblad, highlight a great show in Matunuck. PHOTO BY MARK TUREK

THEATER REVIEW

'HAIRSPRAY'

Book by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan

Music by Marc Shaiman

Lyrics by Scott Wittman and Marc Shaiman

Directed and choreographed by Russell Garrett

Through Aug. 13

Theatre by the Sea, 364 Cards Pond Road, Matunuck

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