



By **Jeanné McCartin**

"Hairspray," the bubbly, bouffant storybook musical, is textbook perfect: Every element teases toward the right direction, enhancing theme, mood and magic.

Nutshell synopsis: "Hairspray" is set in the '60s — prep and pop rather than hippy, in a racially segregated Baltimore. Chubby Tracy Turnblad, the girl with brains and the beat, aspires to dance on the Corny Collins show, and maybe land its teen crooner Link Larkin — (underscore fat chance for a fat girl). — Oh, and while doing all that, she battles weight prejudice and fights for racial integration.

The vibrant Seacoast Repertory Theatre production starts with the set, a huge record player as the stage done in baby blue and bubblegum pink. For the uninitiated, SRT is a thrust stage (sans curtain), which allows it to set the mood the minute you walk it. And this fun, bright, well-suited piece does just that.

From the get-go the production shines. The musical features exquisite acting and is saturated with lovely vocals. As one woman in the audience was heard to say near the end of Act One and the start of Ashley Kelley's tune as Motormouth Maybelle, "this only keeps getting better." There's a tussle of unintentional stage-stealing going on, truly a treat.

Just realized another problem with the show, trying not to repeat accolades.

Carolyn Kimmel is Tracy Turnblad, the spunky, spitfire with an impeccable voice. The spirited character is thoroughly likable and believable in her skillful hands.

As another pointed out opening night, actor Michael Karraker could take his Corny Collins' act nationwide. True enough. He's seamless, believable and offers smooth, outstanding vocals. When he takes to the stage, Collins takes the stage.

Greg Kalafatas is a spectacular Edna. Kalafatas performs the female role with a disarming ease making Edna natural and endearing, rather than going for the oft-used brash and campy route. There's a lovely vulnerability and tenderness about this feisty "gal."

Zoe Blair Friedman is a deftly crafted Velma Von Tussel — the show's calculating, cutthroat villain. Everything about her is right. And, yes, she too brings truly apt vocals; her "Miss Baltimore Crab" is delicious.

Speaking of which, Ashley Kelley does what local audiences now expect from her — she rocks the house with her tunes. She's a blast as Maybelle. But when she sings she's so much more. Her rendition of "I Know Where I've Been," the tune that puts punch in the script's social issues, makes your hair stand at attention.

And so it goes: Justin Robinson as Link, Tracy's love interest, is spot on — his vocals truly a pleasure. Lisa McDonough is impeccable as Penny, Tracy's ditzzy and darling sidekick; ditto for Amber Smith as the chirpy, nasty Amber Von Tussel. Scott Caple charms as Wilbur Turnblad — snappy dresser, funny guy, and Kevin Smith Kirkwood is a super sassy Seaweed.

Both Jamie Bradley and Meredith Caple play multiple "Authority Figures," perfectly; most memorable Bradley's principal and Caple's prison guard.

To a person the ensemble is on its game: Aliya Dorner, Tricia Whitlock, Allicia Lawson, Jeremy Swift, Derrick Millard, Kari Buckley, Lauren Paley, Mallory Rinker, Randy Blake, Brandon Timmons and Patrick Dorow.

Director Brian Swasey has well-defined characters truly engaged with one another, well-appointed staging and snappy pacing, which means you never lose interest. Swasey also does a dynamite job with his choreography, which is smart and impeccably tailored to the smaller space. Love the band led by Musical Director Catherine York, lights by Annemaire Duggan, costumes by Rien Schlecht and the uncredited sky-high wigs.

With big hair and big heart "Hairspray" is thoroughly entertaining; a play with every hair in place and not to be missed.