

Hairspray

Hairspray is another one of those convoluted examples of entertainment recycling. Like *The Producers*, it's a movie musical spun off from a Broadway show itself spun off from a cult movie. Baltimore native son John Waters—he of the perverse and profane—wrote and directed the original *Hairspray* in 1988 and, in fact, softened his grosser side to deliver a deadpan take-off on the high school life of his own youth. Even his favorite actor(ess), Divine, an in-your-face transvestite, was more cuddly than audacious as the character Edna Turnblad. The musical, launched five summers ago, mainstreamed Waters' story even more, turning it into a bouncy musical, but keeping the Divine character as a woman/man in the person of the flamboyant Harvey Fierstein. This new incarnation uses the same device again, but softens it even further with John Travolta donning a fat suit. That transformation has been highlighted in the hype for the movie, but, while it may be initially disconcerting, it doesn't add—or subtract—from the film, which is, basically a lively romp in Sixties nostalgia.

It's spring 1962 in Baltimore, and all the teens are passionate about the afternoon Corny Collins (James Marsden) dance show (modeled on "American Bandstand"), especially Tracy Turnblad (Nikki Blonsky), who, though short and chubby, desperately wants to audition for the show. Protective mom Edna (Travolta) does not want Tracy in the limelight, while dad Wilbur (Christopher Walken) urges her to follow her dream, and nasty station manager Velma Von Tussle (Michelle Pfeiffer) will do anything to keep her off the program. Tracy not only eventually triumphs on the show, but even racially integrates it.

What this *Hairspray* has in abundance is ebullience, especially the perpetual effervescence of young Blonsky, an 18-year-old from Great Neck, New York, who bounces through the picture like a rubber ball—a rubber ball that can sing, dance, and even emote a bit. The overall spirit of this musical is very reminiscent of the 1970's *Grease*, i.e., a knowing, yet affectionate, trip around everybody's high school in the late 1950's, early 1960's. The targets are easy: really Big Hair for the girls and really slick hair for the guys (thus the need for products like the Ultra-Clutch Hairspray the dance show hawks), plus puppy love and crushes, weekend hops, poodle skirts...you get the picture, most of it zestfully handled by director Adam Shankman and his team.

Shankman himself is a veteran Hollywood choreographer, and here the musical numbers give him a chance to show off some good moves. And though—like other directors of recent movie musicals (*Chicago*, *Rent*, *Moulin Rouge*) he uses a too-restless camera, he at least avoids incessant cutting and gets in enough wide shots to show some effective ensemble dancing. The music is purposely banal—like *Grease*--but cute and decidedly upbeat with numbers like "Good Morning, Baltimore" and "You Can't Stop the Beat," both delivered by young Blonsky. Some lyrics try to slice a little, but they never cut very deep--as John Waters' original lines might have—and the most Watersque moments come when easy fun is made of the classic, repressed Prudy Pingleton (Allison Janney). One number is a show-stopper because it is so different and sincere: the duet "You're Timeless to Me" between Edna and Wilbur where they twirl from

their crummy apartment to his novelty shop confessing their love—it got spontaneous audience applause from my preview crowd.

Older folks will get the period references and groan mildly as their youth is playfully skewered. Younger filmgoers will probably take to the talented youngsters—besides Blonsky—in the cast, including Amanda Byrne (as Penny), Zac Efron (as Link), and Elijah Kelley (as Seaweed). No one will be shocked by the benign racial harmony message. The mixed audience I saw it with certainly got with the easy beats, appreciated the smart (and quaint) dancing, and enjoyed the enthusiasm of stars like Michelle Pfeiffer (as Velma) and Queen Latifah (as Motormouth Maybelle) mugging to the hilt--which is part of the films' point. (*"Hairspray" is rated "PG" and runs 117 mins.*)

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