

THEATER REVIEW

A rockin' night in Roosevelt Park

'Hairspray' lives up to its big, bright reputation at Plays-in-the-Park

By C.W. Walker

For NJ Press Media

"Welcome to the '60s," sings Baltimore teen Tracy Turnblad to Edna, her hard-working, stay-at-home mom in "Hairspray," currently onstage at Middlesex County Plays-in-the-Park at Roosevelt Park in Edison. She might as well be extending the invitation to all of us in the audience as well.

Of course, this is the early 1960s, the "Mad Men" era, before all heck broke loose. There are still advisors in Vietnam, The Beatles haven't arrived yet, and Jackie Kennedy is conducting White House tours. It's a time of flip hairdos, green stamps, saddle shoes and dance contests on television.

There are cultural stirrings to be sure — Civil Rights is in the headlines — but teenagers are still being called "nice kids" and the colors, all sunny yellow and happy hot pink, haven't marinated yet into psychedelic day glo.

It's a time of optimism, no better represented than by Tracy herself, a spunky chunky volcano of energy who, despite her plus-size, is determined to dance on the local "Corny Collins Show," a combination of "American Bandstand" and "Mickey Mouse Club." By the end of "Hairspray," Tracy will not only accomplish her dream, but improve Baltimore race relations by integrating the all-white dancing crew, liberate her agoraphobic mom and her mousey BFF, Penny Pingleton, and win the heart of Link Larkin, the local heartthrob. She'll also have a lot of fun doing it,



Cast members let loose in this scene from the Plays-in-the-Park production of "Hairspray." FILE PHOTO

and we will, too.

With the alliterative character names and the slight whiff of radical politics, "Hairspray" still carries bits of DNA from its original source, iconoclastic director John Waters' 1988 cult film. But then it was turned into a frothy, frolicsome award-winning Broadway hit that ran more than six years, followed by a popular musical film in 2007 starring John Travolta. It's important to note that Travolta, the star of "Grease" and "Saturday Night Fever," did not play Link. He played mother Edna.

The folks at PIP stick with tradition by having the role of the big housewife with the big heart played in drag. Richard Colonna's performance is less Travolta and closer to Harvey Fierstein's (who played it on Broadway), but even burdened with

HAIRSPRAY

Performances at 8:30 p.m. through July 23

Middlesex County Plays-in-the-Park, Roosevelt Park, Edison

Tickets sold day of performance only

\$7; \$5 senior citizens 60 and older; children 12 and younger are free

The box office opens at 5:30 p.m. and patrons are admitted to the seating area immediately after purchasing tickets

There are no refunds for any reason

732-548-2884; <http://www.playsinthepark.com/>

long skirts and a fake bosom, Colonna can rock with the best of them.

And make no mistake about it: this "Hairspray" does rock. Led by Melanie Porras as Tracy, who can do a mean shimmy on her own, there's a whole lot of shakin' goin' on. Among the standouts are Emily Jeanne Phillips as the puppyish wallflower Penny who transforms into a rock 'n' roll queen; Lyle Dungee as Seaweed, her Chubby Checker-like boy-

friend; Amber Palmer as his spitfire little sister, Inez, and Mimi Francis as Maybelle, his fiery, no-nonsense mom. The blonde duo of Cindy Chait as the uptight television producer and Amanda E. Braun as her spoiled daughter provide the villainy, such as it is; Jonathan Fishman as Wilbur, Edna's nebbish but lovable husband, provides the warmth, and Michael Fernandes as the Bobby Rydell-like Link provides



Melanie Porras stars as Tracy Turnblad in the Plays-in-the-Production of "Hairspray." FILE PHOTO

the romance.

Other standouts are Eric Harper as Corny Collins, Jaime Hayer, DeVaughn Johnson and Abena Mensah-Bonsu as the Dynamites, a local version of the "Supremes," and Moggie Bakes, who has a great time playing various female authority figures, including a tapping prison guard.

Director John Menter, music director Warren Helms and choreographer Lorinda Haver give their young enthusiastic and energetic cast plenty to do, either tearing into crowd pleasers like "The Madison" and the show's anthem, "You Can't Stop the Beat," or literally bouncing off Mike D'Arcy's candy-colored sets.

"Hairspray" manages the neat trick of being sly and innocent at the same time. There's lots of irony and double entendres, but somehow they don't weigh down the buoyant good spirits. "Hairspray" is everything a summertime musical should be: big, bright and sassy with a strong, infectious score. By the finale, you'll be clapping and rocking in the aisles. I guarantee it.

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