



Wednesday, 31st October 2007

BIG HAIR, BIG FUN... AND A HUGE NEW STAR



Here it is at last, the plump girls' feelgood, romantic comedy of a musical, whose dancing heels take a knockout kick at racist bigots in downtown Baltimore 45 years ago. *Hairspray* catches the heady, hopeful atmosphere of America teetering on the verge of Sixties cultural and political change. Rhythm and blues and Motown, then in their earlier stages, pump out the musical's seductive beat in the hectic dynamism of Jack O'Brien's production with Jerry Mitchell's quicksilver choreography. Agitation for civil rights, soon to gain powerful momentum, begins right here in the city. Sex and love, those vital ingredients without which no musical has legs, do not come in far behind.

Hairspray, now in its fifth Broadway year, sent the rare, sweet smell of success wafting through the Shaftesbury last night. Inspired by John Walters's camp, Eighties feast of a film it paints a wicked picture of blue-collar Baltimore, where girls crave their 15 minutes of fame on TV and boys crave girls. It comes at us in rare musical parts: the first part is low-camp satire and burlesque: Michael Ball deliciously fattened up and dragged down in bland frocks and lurid gowns, majestically slips into the role of the fat, foghorned laundress, Edna Turnblad, who responds to a large insult with a majestically contemptuous "Excuse me." Leanne Jones, in an astonishingly accomplished stage debut, plays Edna's big-sized daughter, Tracy, whose hair stands high as a beehive-and who hankers to become Miss Teenage *Hairspray* on local TV. The other part takes a radically political turn in a Baltimore where young blacks and whites cannot dance together.

It is through Jones's endearingly earnest Tracy, who dances with a lightness belying her size, that links between love, comedy and radical politics are forged. "I just think it's stupid we can't all dance together," Tracy says and leads the picketing of the local TV station. Here Tracie Bennett's witch-like, blonde and racist producer schemes to ensure her evil daughter, Rachel Wooding's Amber, beats Tracy for the coveted *Hairspray* title. The book by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan may culminate in typical, glorious absurdity when Ball bursts out of a giant can of *Hairspray* to sing the tremendous last number, *You Can't Stop the Beat*, but the musical is sustained by its attack on racial discrimination and its alluring, escapist, fairytale elements. Ben James-Ellis's would-be hunk, Link Larkin, collides with Tracy and love at first sight breaks out on both sides: "We won't go all the way, but I'll go pretty far," she sings, dreaming of an imminent, erotic future. And the record shop where Johnnie Fiori's exuberant Motormouth Maybelle puts her terrific voice to good effect draws blacks and whites together.

Marc Shaiman's urgent score, with clever, often witty lyrics written with Scott Whitman, keeps *Hairspray* pulsating with musical excitement as well as political anger. And Leanne Jones, as smitten, adolescent lover and Miss Teenage *Hairspray*, effortlessly commands the stage. She will hearten all actresses who imagine that only the pencil-thin can inherit the lead dressing room.

Nicholas de Jongh



Thursday, 1st November 2007

The story of Hairspray is absurdly simple. Tracy Turnblad is not going to let a few pounds destroy her dream of dancing on the Corny Collins TV show and, with it, her chances of winning the Ultra Clutch Hairspray competition, Miss Teenage Hairspray 1962.

Astonished to discover that her new black friends aren't allowed to dance on the show with her despite being able to dance Elvis off the table, she organises a protest march, determined to take down the town bigot (and the show's producer) Velma.

Jack O'Brien's infectiously upbeat production of this Broadway adaptation of John Water's film cleverly treads a fine line between spoof and sincerity. Race relations are well satirised, even though the underlying belief in equality for all serves more as a glib wish-fulfilment exercise.

The dance routines and the quality of singing put most West End musicals to shame, while the scope of Marc Shaiman's music incorporates references from Stax to The Shangri-Las via early r'n'b at the bat of an eyelid. Michael Ball is splendid as Edna Turnblad and newcomer Leanne Jones is pure delight as Tracy.

Claire Allfree

thelondonpaper

Thursday, 1st November 2007

HAIR, HAIR!



It's 1962, and 15-year-old Tracy Turnblad is about to turn conservative Baltimore on its head.

With an audience of London theatreland's finest last night, there was a buzz even before the lights went down.

What came next was a colourful, pacey, immaculately produced production that delivered on all fronts. It was impossible not to be taken in completely by the professionalism and joy with which the cast threw themselves into their roles. Michael Ball, as the heroine's mother Edna Turnblad, nearly stole the show, but with the talents of Leanne Jones and Mel Smith, there was plenty more to look at. Even if you've read the book and seen the movie, I urge you to revel in the spectacle again.

Alex Johnson



Thursday, 1st November 2007

Michael has a Ball in cult hit that's a cut above



Coming hard on the heels of the recent remake of the classic 1988 John Waters' movie starring John Travolta, this multiple Tony - award winning Broadway production, also based on the original film, hits the London stage running and never once pauses for breath. From the moment big-hearted Tracy Turnblad opens her eyes with Good Morning Baltimore, the production moves along at such a cracking pace that the audience isn't always given the time to laugh at all the scripts witty one-liners. "You have acne of the soul," Tracy memorably scolds her love rival Amber Von Tussle, while her mother later sighs, "I'm like a half book of green stamps – beyond redemption."

The production with its perspective skewed sets designed by David Rockwell, is full of visual jokes too, the faces of the backing vocalists appear through the posters on Tracy's bedroom wall for the chorus of Mama I'm a Big Girl Now and the Supremes style girl group The Dynamites literally stepping down from a billboard for their fabulous rendition of Welcome To The 60's.

Newcomer Leanne Jones is brilliantly cast as Tracy, the plump girl who aims to break down racial segregation in 1962 Baltimore by having her friends dance alongside her on the Corny Collins' TV show. She may not be the strongest singer in a formidably vocal cast, but she certainly has the stamina for a physically demanding role and she positively radiates Tracy's sunny good nature, winning the audience over from the off. She also holds her own against Michael Ball in the role taken by Divine and Travolta in the movies as Tracy's larger-than-life mother.

With more than a hint of Shelley Winters about his character, Ball is wonderfully over the top yet still retains enough credibility to have the audience cheering 'her' transformation from raw armed washerwoman to glamorous diva. As Tracy's father Wilbur, Mel Smith's lugubrious talents are somewhat underused, but the Turnblads' love duet Timeless To me, although essentially, comedic, also conveys genuine warmth and affection.

Where hairspray loses points is in almost trivialising its underlying message about racial segregation – and also about the prejudice suffered by the overweight- by wrapping it up in so much fluffy fun. It's left to the two big numbers given to Johnnie Fiori as Motermouth Maybelle – Big, Blonde and Beautiful and the stunning I know where I've been – to enable substance to fight back against style. However, if you're looking for a night of absolute escapist entertainment that's both as delicious and wickedly sweet as eating candyfloss, this is the show for you.

Valerie Potter

Wednesday, 31st October 2007

Broadway musical leaves other shows looking thin on top

I don't know about yours, but my beehive had capsized with excitement even before the curtain had even gone up at the West End opening night of this Broadway musical version of *Hairspray*. Despite, I might add, furious back-combing and strenuous action with an aerosol in the gents to keep it erect. Normally, I go for the kind of windswept look that would count as a "hairdo violation" at the heroine's Baltimore High School. But I thought a bit of effort barnet-wise was appropriate for a musical that comes boasting eight Tony Awards. Was the show worth it?

Yes, yes and again yes. The piece takes us back to the early Sixties and a world before mass-obesity and worries about the ozone-layer had had time to make a chubby teenager with a spray-can begin to look like a dubious role model. So was this an innocent time in the Land of the Free? Not for blacks, it wasn't. Homing in on the Corny Collins television show, where teenagers try out trendy new dances, *Hairspray* exposes the segregation that relegated black kids to one "Negro Day" a month with Corny – or rather does until our portly 16-year-old heroine, Tracy Turnblad (an adorably starry-eyed and idealistic Leanne Jones) proves that she can not only out-Mash-Potato all the slim richer white kids but put an end to discrimination, too.

Powered by elating Sixties dance routines that are so infectious they will have to install compulsory seat-belts to prevent the audience from storming the stage, Jack O'Brien's production lays out perfectly the deal this show makes with the punters. It's a deliciously droll double-bluff: a giddy, high-spirited spoof of a youthful protest piece that, with the lightest of touches, manages to be the real thing at the same time.

As a fan of the original 1988 John Waters' film that starred Divine, the mountainous, no-holds-barred drag act, I had worried that the material would lose too much of its conscious comic tackiness when converted into a Broadway musical, despite the arch wit of the book, score and lyrics.

Michael Ball in the Divine role seemed about as excitingly blasphemous a piece of casting as, say, hiring Michael Crawford to play Leigh Bowery.

In fact, the fat-suited Ball, who is appreciably better than John Travolta in the recently released movie version of the show, gives one of the warmest, funniest and most oddly touching performances in a musical that I have ever seen. When Edna is a housebound slattern, he resembles Nero in the wake of some disastrous hormone injection; when Edna is spiffed up and learns to appreciate the worth of her girth, he has a weird look of A S Byatt. Yet with wondrously supple and amusing timing, he packs in an extraordinary range of tones – from moments when he gruffly acknowledges his maleness to sequences where he suggests a poignant shy delicacy and undimmed wonder in this woman who can't leave the house because she's ashamed of her bulk.

Hairspray knocks spots off *Grease* where the college kids are about as ethnically diverse as the Ku Klux Klan. Here, there are some great roles for black artistes, particularly Motormouth Maybelle, the R&B disc jockey who sings up a storm in Johnnie Fiori's knockout portrayal. And because it is about more than show business and contrives to be airy and fresh as well as knowing, it leaves *The Producers* looking a bit thin on top.

Paul Taylor

Wednesday, 31st October 2007

Ball drags out a hair-raising performance

★★★★★

It's *The Producers* all over again. Start with a classic film comedy, turn it into a Broadway musical, then make a film of that. With *Hairspray* it's the wrong order, because the film opened here first.

But finally the show has arrived in Britain, and this joyous West End version, starring Michael Ball in the role of his life, makes it obvious why it swept the board at the Tony Awards.

The original made in 1988 was the first mainstream work by underground director John Waters.

Set in the early Sixties, it featured his favourite performer, the grotesque drag queen Divine, and a young unknown called Rikki Lake.

The latter played the "pleasantly plump" teenager Tracy Turnblad, pursuing stardom as a dancer while challenging racial segregation in her home town of Baltimore, Maryland. The film's charm was its world of rainbow idealism – mocking its own sincerity with deliberately corny dialogue – where the handsomest boy in town could fall in love with the chubbiest girl.

The musical's lyrics are often a heart-warming hoot. "The we met and you made me, The man I am today," sings Link Larkin, the young Elvis wannabe. "Tracy, I'm in love with you, No matter what you weigh."

Tracy is played by newcomer Leanne Jones, on stage for most of the night as the compulsive dancer whose natural padding cannot spoil her lust for life – or for Link.

It's an impressive, exuberant performance and you can see why the director says she was instantly right for the role.

She is well supported by a large cast, including fellow newcomer Ben James-Ellis – a semi-finalist in TV's *Any Dream Will Do* – as Link, the ever wonderful Tracie Bennett as the vicious Velma Von Tussle, a gob smacking Johnnie Fiori as the black record shop-owner Motormouth Mabel and the rubber-faced Mel Smith as Tracy's dad Wilbur.

But the stand-out turn is Ball, scarcely recognisable as Tracy's mother Edna, complete with 54EEE bust. At first Edna is a put-upon laundress.

It is only when she joins her daughter and discovers big-haired glamour that Ball turns on the floodlights, knocking everyone else off the stage.

Don't expect effects or spectacle. This is good, honest song-and-dance fun, where the period pastels in the costumes and sets match the relentless up-beat of the lyrics and tunes.

"Prepare for something big!" say the posters: "Big musical, big comedy, big hair!" But the biggest thing about it, apart from Michael Ball's falsies, is its heart.

Simon Edge

Wednesday, 31st October 2007

Exuberant mix of mirth and girth

London's panto season effectively got off to an early start last night with the opening of *Hairspray*. Here is full-squirt, two-dimensional fun, at times almost dementedly full-on. It doesn't tickle you into mirth. It blooming well shoves you.

There are caricature baddies, garish costumes, front-of-curtain comic songs, a cross-dressing television star and no shortage of crumby gags.

Sitting in row C of the stalls last night, being assailed full blast by a hot-pumping Mama called Johnnie Fiori, was to encounter the sort of G-forces endured by America's earliest trainee astronauts. Miss Fiori has a Harley Davidson voice - without the silencer.

The setting is Baltimore, America, in 1962, where a television show talent competition is seeking Miss Teenage *Hairspray*. Tracy Turnblad wants to enter but there is a problem: she's a porker. Fat people are second-class citizens. Newcomer Leanne Jones, who plays Tracy, tonked her first West End song for six last night and didn't look back. Miss Jones is certainly built for the part - she could be the love child of Phil Vickery and Dawn French - but she works so hard on stage, hurling herself into the dance routines, that I fear for her future. Yes, she could lose too much weight!

The star names are Michael Ball and Mel Smith. Deep-dimpled Mr Ball dresses up to play Tracy's mum Edna, equipped with a bosom as big as the Malvern Hills. Mr Smith is her husband Wilbur and pushes out his gummy lower lip to fair effect. A love duet between these two got last night's biggest cheers, even though our Mel was corpsing through much of it. Tracy joins forces with Baltimore's blacks and, with remorseless energy, the two minorities - blacks and fatties - battle the show's skinny, wicked-witch producer Velma Von Tussle (Tracie Bennett).

Along the way Tracy falls for a handsome boy who is played by Ben James-Ellis, a semi-finalist in television's recent *Any Dream Will Do*.

Quite what the anti-obesity industry will make of the girth liberation message, Lord knows. But this exuberant, breathless production chokes all resistance, smothering all in its orbit.

What else would you expect from a show called *Hairspray*?

Quentin Letts

Wednesday, 31st October 2007

Stepping out with joy for all-round integration

★★★★

The great thing about John Waters' 1988 cult movie was that you felt every expense had been spared. But even if *Hairspray*, in the process of being turned into a Broadway musical, has lost some of its glorious tackiness, it retains its generous spirit: this is still a show that not only hymns physical difference but also the basic right to racial integration.

Even in its new theatrical form, the book by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan remains perilously thin. Unlike, of course, the show's heroine, Tracy Turnblad, a 16-year-old Baltimore girl who is extremely well-rounded. Avoirdupois notwithstanding, Tracy gets hooked on a TV dance show and determines to beat the favoured contestant to become Miss *Hairspray* 1962. Part of the show's good-hearted charm lies in seeing how Tracy, from her first experience of sexy black dancing in the school gym, determines to fight segregation on Baltimore's daytime TV.

At its best, the show gently mocks the naivety of white liberalism. "I wish every day were negro day," Tracy remarks of TV's monthly obeisance to Baltimore's racial divide. "In our house, it is," one of Tracy's black chums wanly retorts. At its worst, *Hairspray* lapses into sentimental piety. Where the show really scores is in its ability to integrate serious issues into a lightweight plot.

Jerry Mitchell's joyous choreography is the beating heart of the show. There is something Dionysian about it; and, if the show achieves the ecstasy one looks for in a musical, it comes largely through the dance routines.

But the performances, in Jack O'Brien's deliciously fluid production, underline the show's basic benevolence. Leanne Jones is a remarkable Tracy with a talent as high and wide as her scooped-up hair. She puts across Marc Shaiman's numbers with belting brio. And Michael Ball is very funny as her muscular moll of a mum who once entertained dreams of being a designer. "I thought I was going to be the biggest thing in brassieres," Ball announces in gravel-voiced tones. What makes him so good is that he reminds us that heftiness is not incompatible with haute couture.

Michael Billington

Wednesday, 31st October 2007

A welcome place to bring out your inner cheerleader

★★★★

As I've battled through its tiny, gridlocked foyer into the cavernous auditorium below, I have often wondered if the Shaftesbury Theatre has a death-wish; but seldom more than last night. Whoever decided to bring the stage version of the film *Hairspray* to London immediately after its remake has come bouncing on to British screens, gaining rave reviews and, no doubt, audiences for whom one viewing is enough?

Well, if the impresarios have goofed, they've goofed happily, for the musical is as delightful as I recall it being on Broadway three years ago and more immediate than it could ever be in the cinema. True, the tale of chubby, chunky Tracy Turnblad, who wears what looks like a lacquered wolverine on her head and thinks she resembles Jackie Kennedy, is unashamedly and, at times, absurdly sentimental. But when Leanne Jones's Tracy is bounding about the stage exuding all-American resilience and optimism — well, she brought out the inner cheerleader I didn't know I had.

Her world is Baltimore 1962, a place evoked by dresses vaguely indebted to Doris Day and male clothes seemingly designed for aspiring golfers, and her miniworld is the Corny Collins Television Show, which allows kids to dance and maybe even win the Ultra-Clutch *Hairspray* Company's annual Miss Teenage *Hairspray* Contest.

The musical resembles *Grease*, then? Yes, but only a bit, for *Hairspray* is wittier, funnier, more good-natured and, without being pretentious, more morally and politically aware. Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan's book is a salute to difference. That's defined both as being fat, like Jones's Tracy or Michael Ball as her gloriously bloated mother, and, more seriously, as being black in racially divided Maryland. So our heroine's aim isn't only to do well on the dance floor, beating her plastic-doll schoolmate Amber, but to integrate Corny Collins's show, besting Amber's ruthlessly ambitious, racially bigoted mother, Velma. Since Rachael Wooding's Amber has "acne of the soul", and Tracie Bennett's Velma something like spiritual smallpox, it is obvious she will succeed. But anyone would forgive the show's wishfulness, given the ebullience of Marc Shaiman's rock, which might have been written for and delivered by Elvis himself, and the quality of Jack O'Brien's cast, which matches its Broadway counterpart for energy.

There are stand-out black performers in Johnnie Fiori's magnificent music-shop empress and Adrian Hansel as her son Seaweed and, from Ball's vast dimpling rhino of a Mrs Turnblad and Mel Smith as his/her not-exactly-wee husband, two actors with enough sly sense of mischief to embellish any upmarket panto at Christmas.

What is surprising is that the show gently spoofs itself and what's refreshing is the sophistication of its jokes. As friendly and unfriendly whites pack into Fiori's music shop, someone remarks that "if we get any more in here, it'll be a suburb". You wouldn't get lines like that in *Grease*, *Fame* or any other ode to American high-school life. No wonder I left the Shaftesbury thinking it was a pretty welcoming place after all.

Benedict Nightingale

Wednesday, 31st October 2007

BIG HAIR, BIG HEART, BIG FUN

TENSE nervous headache? Feeling a little peaky? Hungover? Then for heaven's sake give this show a miss. It will strike you as a terrifying vision of hell. All that noise, my dear, and the people.

If you are up for a good time, however, and especially if you are a teenage girl who has just downed a couple of illicit alcopops, it will strike you as heaven on earth. You will laugh, you will scream, you might even shed a sentimental tear or two. I even managed to make quite a night of it myself, and I'm male and middle-aged, as the National Theatre boss, Nicholas Hytner, is fond of pointing out.

The mystery about this ebullient and good-hearted show is that it has taken so long to arrive in England, and then only to find a berth at the Shaftesbury, which, after such jaw-droppingly terrible shows as *Napoleon*, *Lautrec*, *Batboy* and others too ghastly to recall, is widely regarded as a graveyard for doomed musicals.

But on Broadway, *Hairspray* is a smash hit. I caught it there five years ago, and it is still going strong, having grossed some \$200 million to date.

Based on the 1988 John Waters movie, and recently turned into a film musical starring John Travolta, *Hairspray* tells the story of Tracy Turnblad, a short, rotund teenage schoolgirl who is determined to become a star dancer on the Corny Collins TV pop show.

The year is 1962, the action takes place in Baltimore, and the irrepressible Tracy is determined not to let her chunky body rule out her chances. She endures insults and malice along the way, but sticks to her guns, and even succeeds in gaining the love of the town hunk. And she instinctively sides with the black youngsters, who are allowed to participate in the strictly segregated show only on special "Negro" days. The show, which appears to have barely a thought in its head, is actually a touching protest against prejudice, and a celebration of the birth of America's civil-rights movement as Tracy brings the racial barriers crashing down.

Mercifully, *Hairspray* never descends into worthiness. Not that it could, with its preposterous hairstyles, kitsch, retina-bruising designs and a superb pop score by Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman, which gloriously captures the sounds of pop before the arrival of the Beatles – girl groups, rock and roll, rhythm and blues and an amazing gospel number that almost lifts the roof off the theatre. There's even a delightful vaudevillian routine for Michael Ball, who plays Tracy's corpulent mum in spectacular big-bosomed drag and looks as if he's having the time of his life, and Mel Smith as her devoted, joke-shopowning husband.

The lyrics occasionally aspire who insists: "You can say I'm a bigot but it's just not true/ I love Sammy Davis and he's black and a Jew."

Director Jack O'Brien, who alternates raucous musicals like this with superb revivals of Tom Stoppard at the Lincoln Centre, ensures that sentiment and laughter are mixed in just the right proportions in a show that offers a sugar-rush of pleasure. Jerry Mitchell's choreography is splendidly effervescent and newcomer Leanne Jones, straight out of drama school and making her professional debut, has exactly the right bubble and bounce as Tracy, moving with a lightness of foot that belies her avoirdupois.

The show might be less slick than in New York but there is no mistaking its big, raucous heart. I saw *Hairspray* at the final preview rather than the press night, and the audience's whooping response and spontaneous standing ovation suggest it could prove to be the big hit that has eluded the Shaftesbury for so long.

Charles Spencer

THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

Sunday, 4th November 2007

Panto season has arrived early this year

Tracy Turnblad is the Billy Elliot of Baltimore, 1962. The adolescent heroine of Hairspray is scoffed at for being both white trash and horizontally challenged – a girl of voluminous girth. In this buoyant Broadway family musical, it initially seems she'll never get to dance with the other teenyboppers on Corny Collins' hit TV show.

To realise her dream, Tracy (newcomer Leanne Jones) has to battle with the sneering wicked witch of a producer, Velma (Tracie Bennett), and her slim blond brat who has, hitherto, been the starlet of the show. However, Tracy has go-getting determination; she can boogie and Collins spots her talent. So she does go to the rock**roll ball in the end and she wins the heart of her bequipped Prince Charming. More significantly, she manages to end racial segregation in the process.

The combo of tongue-in-cheek comedy and political protest is remarkably joyous. A flimsy Stars in Her Eyes storyline morphs into a local revolution as Tracy struts her stuff on the dance floor and simultaneously spearheads a resistance movement against the authorities' xenophobic policies. Everybody – black and white – is doing the twist together by the end. Punters from the Department of Health may throw up their hands at a clinically obese role model who doesn't hate her weight. But Tracy's innate confidence is also a great antidote to the present size zero obsession and the self-scorning craze for putting yourself under the knife.

Directed by the Tony winner Jack O'Brien, this production contrives to be slick but also playful and warm. Brightly coloured, cartoony sets whizz in and out on wheels. The plot is tighter and the script funnier than in the original 1988 film.

Essentially, this is a kind of ebullient panto that has arrived in town a month early and will surely enjoy a long run. Michael Ball is having a blast in the Dame role as Tracy's mum. His salt-of-the-earth Edna is ludicrously charming: a mountain of flesh with twinkling, twirling flamboyance. Even if Mel Smith, as the affectionate Mr Turnblad, is not Ball's match as an actor or singer, they make a delightful odd couple, almost corpsing with laughter in their jokey, smooching duet.

Johnnie Fiori is also storming as the lady DJ, Motormouth Maybelle, belting out the rousing anthem "I Know Where I've Been". Bouncy fun.

Kate Bassett

The Observer

Sunday, 4th November 2007

That's what I call lift - Hairspray triumphs on the West End Stage. A really fantastic hair day

A gorgeous new star, great actors and a big heart: Hairspray is the musical with everything

Buoyant, bouffant and big-hearted, Hairspray is girly, curly pleasure. At a stroke, this show should change for ever the reputation of the Shaftesbury, until now renowned as the natural home of musical stinkers.

Jack O'Brien's production has a new star in Leanne Jones: it's amazing that this is her professional debut. In Michael Ball and Mel Smith, it has two established stars being surprising. It's driven by a really sharp script and lyrics, but also by Jerry Mitchell's terrific choreography and by Marc Shaiman's non-stop, grab-you-by-the-legs, gospel, rock and doo-wop music. Johnnie Fiori is magnificent as the gold-laméd Motormouth Maybelle; the beautiful Dynamite girlband shimmer husky-voiced across the stage in red glitter. What's more, despite all the glitz and bounce and brass and jokes, this is a musical with bottom. Big bottom. Based on John Waters's 1988 cult movie, the show has been a five-year-long hit on Broadway and has recently been filmed with John Travolta in the dame role (will all boyish baritones now start trying to be women?). Set in Baltimore in 1962 - a place of racial bigotry and perfectly tended teeth - it stars a short plump teenager, daughter of a laundress, who sets her sights not merely on appearing on the 'Corny Collins Show', a teenage dance programme sponsored by a hairspray, but on being crowned that year's Miss Hairspray. The favourite is a glossy, skinny blonde, being pushed to fame by her even glossier, blonder, skinnier mother: 'We can learn a lot from the mistakes of Miss Debbie Reynolds.'

With the lightest of touches - it continually sends up the possibility of being meaningful - Hairspray is about people being excluded, ignored and made to feel weird. 'They don't put people like us on television,' sighs Mrs Turnblad over her iron. When Tracy becomes intoxicated with the dance routines of her black schoolmates - who are allowed only one segregated day on the dance show - she ingenuously exclaims: 'I wish every day was Negro Day.' 'In our house, it is,' says one of her friends.

You know Leanne Jones is going to be musical newcomer of the year from the moment the curtain goes up on one of David Rockwell's perky, cardboard interiors, designed to look like pastiche birthday cards for Sixties teenagers. Propped on her pillows, cushioned on enormous tresses, Jones belts out the opening number so vigorously you're surprised she can stay in bed.

Michael Ball, not what you'd call intuitive casting for Mom, is a revelation. He starts the show in a housecoat and support stockings: he/she is mountainous, saggy-breasted and (crucially) straggle-maned; he ends up looking like an animated knickerbocker glory, with high, coiled hair and swirling silky dress. He plays the Dame card terrifically well; most of the time with a voice pitched like a woman's rather than a panto parody, so that when he drops into male gruffness the comic effect is really comic. When the women anti-segregationists are banged up, the jail is filled with the sound of female shrieks and squeals. Ball's bass tones cut through the high-pitched hullabaloo: 'It's just us girls in the big dark house,' he booms, as he pulls the bars away.

Mel Smith as the Daddy has too little to do (and his hair doesn't get a makeover) but he does that little with such sad-sack amiability that he's a consistently benign presence: his 'Timeless

to Me' duo with Ball is one of the unexpected showstoppers; when they kiss, it's more kind than camp.

Apart from anything else, this is a really good hair play, in which the highest of compliments concerns 'the record-breaking extreme your hair has reached' and in which you can guess what's between people's ears by looking at what's on top of their heads. The appealing Elinor Collett - the oomphless best friend with Bambi legs - is a case in point. She falls for Seaweed, an ultra-accomplished black dancer elegantly played by Adrian Hansel: 'I'm very pleased I'm scared to be here,' she squeaks, as she finds herself close to black faces for the first time in her life. By the end of the show she has become a free, wild thing: you can be sure of that, since her lank locks have been transformed into a bouncing tangle of corkscrew curls.

There are flick-ups and beehives and backbrushed nests, secured with bows and forehead-clenching hairbands; there's a Philip Treacy sculptural moment when three girls parade under hairdos which variously look like enormous pricked ears, a spindle and a spiral. Tracy drops extra layers on to her barnet so that it becomes as fluffy and full as a Russian fur hat. There have already begun to be hair tributes from audience members, who arrive bouffanted and beehived; these are likely to be more and more extravagant as the show takes off.

This is part of a new upsurge for the musical in London, which has been largely in a slump - too many vapid shows, too many revivals, too many dully replicated adaptations of movies. Now it's all looking more promising: last month, the austere, high-minded and spirited Parade opened at the Donmar; next year Jersey Boys, a documentary musical about Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, arrives in the West End from the States and Marguerite, a Second World War love story based on La Dame aux Camelias, has its world premiere at the Theatre Royal Haymarket. Dissimilar in content and style, the important thing these shows have in common is that they all have proper subjects and are all setting out to explore those subjects in their own way: non-synthetically. What makes Hairspray irresistible is that it has not a moment of earnestness - it comes on like theatrical bubble-gum, all pink, poppy and elastic - and yet it bats more winningly for the right side than many more po-faced offerings. Hairspray deserves a permanent wave.

Susannah Clapp

SUNDAY EXPRESS

Sunday, 4th November 2007

Big-hearted beauty is here to stay

★★★★

Hardly a week went by last autumn without another new musical opening in the West End. Most of them are still with us, with *Wicked*, *Spamalot*, *Dirty Dancing* and *Cabaret* each celebrating their first anniversaries recently, but if the pickings of new arrivals this year have been thin, *Hairspray* is a large, lovable tribute to the plus sized that turns out to be the most happy, funny and sunny show in town.

We may have to wait five years for it to travel here from Broadway (even the film version got here earlier this year), but this is both a keeper and a corker, pitch perfect in every sense.

A day-glo tribute to the early Sixties, a time when, as the song here goes “everybody’s groovin’ to a brand new sound”, it offers a freshly-minted and irrepressibly groovy score by Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman that brilliantly pastiches and lovingly honours the period, instead of offering a recycled jukebox of past pop hits. The show may be full of big hair but it has an even bigger heart. It also has a surprisingly subversive spirit: not just in the matter of fact (and fat) cross-casting that has the West End’s leading musical man Michael Ball turn leading lady to play Edna Turnblad, an agoraphobic plus-sized mum to her equally voluptuous daughter, Tracy but also in the awakening of social activism that Tracy embodies in her attempts to conquer sizeism against herself and the racial segregation of racial society in the Sixties.

As it chronicles her ambition to join a TV dance show and make sure that her black classmates can do so too, this gloriously bubblegum musical; gives audiences something else more serious to chew on. A show about the acceptance of difference itself makes a difference.

Nevertheless, Jack O’Brien’s endlessly witty production, kept in constant motion by Jerry Mitchell’s agile choreography, stays light on its feet, even in the top-heavy case of Ball and his 54in triple-E chest. That’s partly thanks to the wonderful warmth of Ball’s performance, only his still-boyish dimples betraying his identity beneath the padding.

Mel Smith lovingly plays husband Wilbur, though he can’t always resist his trademark mugging, but it is adorable newcomer Leanne Jones as their daughter, Tracy who galvanises the action with an irrepressible energy: she is fat, funny and fabulous and so is the show.

Mark Shenton

Sunday, 4th November 2007

Hairspray has a hold on me

★★★★

Just when being a supersize has become a mortal sin, Tracy Turnblad rolls into the West End. She's a ball on fun, chubby and cheerful but oh, so light on her sturdy stumps and determined to be, er, huge on the Corny Collins television show as a dancing queen.

Hairspray is set in the segregated Sixties in Baltimore, when being fat was a fault (Tracy's generously portioned laundress mother, a warm and wonderful Michael Ball in glamorous drag, reminds her: They don't put people like us on television, except to be laughed at) but being black was a crime.

That means both Ten-ton Tracy (Leanne Jones) and skinny, black Inez (Natalie Best) are turned away from auditions for the title Miss Hairspray 1962.

Here's proof that a musical can both have depth and be a send-up of a protest show as light as hairspray. It tackles racial prejudice and fattism with a spring in its step and a goofy tongue in its cheek.

Jones, making an appealing professional stage debut as dizzy Tracy, sings and boogies for all she's worth. ('Not bad for a white girl,' says a break-dancing black guy.)

Tracy is an airhead, but with the few braincells that are neither squashed by her massive, backcombed coiffure nor poisoned by the exhaustive application of hairspray, she's worked out that there's much to learn from the way her black classmates move.

But they are allowed on the show only once a month on 'Negro Day'. 'I'd make every day Negro Day,' says our Trace. 'I just think it's stupid we can't all dance together.'

So civil rights becomes a protest issue worth making a song and dance about to Marc Shaiman's pulsating score of Sixties Motown, rhythm and blues and gospel.

The book and lyrics are stuffed with delicious political incorrectness. When Tracy's spectacled, frumpy friend Penny (terrific Elinor Collett) kisses Seaweed Stubbs (Adrian Hansel), she roars: 'Now I've tasted chocolate, I'm never going back.'

Seaweed says that, naturally, being black, he has a knife in his pocket; his mom observes that if she gets any more white people in her house, 'it'll be a superb'.

Jack O'Brien's production fizzes with sparkling performances: Johnnie Fiori's Motormouth Maybelle play's Seaweed's mom who brings blacks and white together in her record shop; Tracie Bennett screams as the Cruella-like producer Velma, who wants her daughter to be the new Miss Hairspray; and Ben James-Ellis, runner-up in BBC1's Any Dream Will Do, is a dreamy Link Larkin.

This is going to be a big, fat, award-winning hit. A must-see for every teenage dreamer who believes anything is possible.

Georgina Brown



Sunday, 4th November 2007

It's trashy, it's cheesy, but there's no denying that Hairspray is a stylish product

★★★★

There must be something like 25 musicals on around the West End now. This makes the more serious-minded hang their heads in despair. They may very well be right, but to cheer themselves up they could go to see *Hairspray*, the 26th musical in town. It's preposterous, but preposterously enjoyable.

Originally a film by John Waters, it then became a musical, which in turn inspired this year's film remake with John Travolta. Here is a new production of the 2002 musical version, which mercifully retains much of Waters's distinctive sensibility. His attitude to the minutiae of American trash-pop culture is oddly reminiscent of John Betjeman's to *Metroland*: a kind of fastidious scorn mixed with real affection, a mix perfectly understood and embraced by the director, Jack O'Brien. Much of the humour here is in the tacky little details, such as the hot-dog stand bearing the legend "Fun on a Bun!".

The plot is roughly the *Cinderella* myth transplanted to 1962 Baltimore. Tracy Turnblad is the fat girl who longs to capture the heart of school hunk Link Larkin. But Link is dating the pretty, thin and vile Amber Von Tussle. Tracy, however, through sheer determination and friendship with the "coloureds", learns to strut her ample stuff very funkily indeed, and wins a place on the Corny Collins TV dance show. But she also has a social conscience – "If I was president, I'd make every day Negro Day!" – and wants the Corny Collins show to embrace integration and feature her new friends. Aryan Amber and her even more evil mother, Velma, scheme against Tracy every step of the way.

The story's pretensions to having a serious message are a little dubious, but allow for some great dancing. None of the cracker boys ("racist word for 'white man'" – Webster's Dictionary) can match the astonishing snake-hipped jive of lead dude Seaweed J Stubbs (Adrian Hanel), whose moves attract the attentions of alabaster-skinned Penny: "In my ivory tower / Life was just a hostess snack / But now I've tasted chocolate / And I'm never going back!" The show's cheerfully insensitive scattering of words we find embarrassing nowadays, such as "negro" and "coloured", is bizarrely refreshing. Waters's serious point here, if he has one, might be that there is Racism and there is racism. And the second, paltrier sort is best blown away by laughter.

Leanne Jones, as Tracy, dances her bobby socks off, and sings with a voice of outstanding warmth amid a lot of painful though comical shrillness; and Ben James-Ellis makes a very likeable Link. As my invaluable companion for the evening, Miss Katie Holland, 8, pointed out, he was previously a finalist in *Any Dream Will Do* and clearly has musical-star quality. (I would never have known but for Katie.)

Tracie Bennett makes a lavishly grotesque Velma Von Tussle, bravely sporting make-up to look like a hard-faced old bag, teetering around on canary-yellow stilettos, spewing fake winsomeness and real bile. But at the heart of this essentially teenage trash comedy, it is a number by Tracy's parents that steals the show. Mel Smith, his features more and more, er, tired with every passing year, is an appealingly kindly dad, Wilbur Turnblad, while Michael Ball is clearly having a ball as Tracy's mountainous mother, Edna (played by Divine in the original movie). Their duet, *You're Timeless to Me*, a hymn to enduring lust far into saggy, baggy middle-age, got the night's loudest applause.

We were actually singing the finale as we stepped out into the street: “ ’Cause you can’t stop the motion of the ocean, or the rain from above . . . ”

Who says musicals can’t be profound?

Christopher Hart



Friday, 9th November 2007

SHOW'S A BREATH OF FRESH HAIR

Hairspray, you can bet on it – I turn my back for a moment and a star is born.

I missed the London opening of this hit Broadway musical and by the time I caught up with it, the town had been buzzing for days with the name Leanne Jones.

Fresh out of stage school, she's back-of-the-neck hair-raising as dumpy Tracy Turnblad, whose strength of personality and dynamic dancing – so electrifying you would think she's been plugged into the mains – wins her the title of Miss Hairspray.

Tracy's overweight and is kind to minorities, which goes down in 1960s Baltimore about as well as do the black kids from the other side of the tracks.

The message is that different is good – there's room for all shapes and sizes and colours, especially when it comes to singing, dancing and falling in love. Marc Shaiman's songs, with lyrics co-written with Scott Wittman, are foot-tappingly catchy, there's a witty script by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan, and Jerry Mitchell's stunning choreography leaves most other musicals gasping for breath.

It's this crackerjack energy and some stellar performances that lift director Jack O'Brien's production close to a place in the musical theatre hall of fame. Michael Ball, pictured with stage husband Mel Smith, gets top billing and proves what a brilliant career move it was to take on the cross-dressing role of Tracy's mother, played by John Travolta in the recent movie version.

Inflated like a Zeppelin, he's irresistible, and there's super support, too, from Tracie Bennet – a sexy Coronation Street blast from the past to those with good memories – as a pushy mother, and Elinor Collett as the gawky heroine's gawky friend.

A feelgood show? No, this is a feelgreat show that will give you the very best of hairdays.

Bill Hagerty



Friday, 2nd November 2007

A brush with weighty issues



Somewhere beneath the skin and shock-absorbing layer of body fat of cult-film-turned-stage-musical *Hairspray* lurks a problem.

The story tells, of course, of teenager Tracy Turnblad - a girl The Who would have described as "meaty, beaty, big and bouncy". Her ambition to appear as a dancer on her local TV pop show in 1962 Baltimore includes a growing determination to see the show racially integrated. The ridicule and aspersions Tracy receives because of her build give her common cause with the black kids. Yet while it is refreshing to see (as a programme essay notes) "a girl whose weight isn't the most important thing about her", there is something too glib about, in effect, treating fat people as honorary blacks for the sake of a yarn.

The show is not just affirmative but passionate about racial equality; if Nina Simone were still alive, she would cover the second-act number "I Know Where I've Been". But the fat business is treated as a bit of fun, and it plays calculatedly on what we will and will not consider grotesque. Leanne Jones' Tracy is not grotesque: although built for comfort rather than speed, she is some sizes more svelte than the young Ricki Lake in John Waters' original 1988 film.

Michael Ball as her mother Edna is grotesque because s/he is basically a pantomime dame in a fat suit (all those costume changes!), and moreover is filling the shoes of the late Divine, whose entire career was founded on bad taste. Of course, corpulent people are acceptable in entertainment, but you wouldn't want one of us living next door. Then, by association, the matter of racial equality is trivialised on the rebound: big dance number, healthy diet, end of problem.

However, in every other respect, this is one of those pesky shows that absolutely refuses to be disliked. Ball is terrific as Edna Turnblad; he relishes the "draggier" moments (the extravagant frocks, the sudden drop to basso for a word or two), but also knows how and when to - well, I hesitate to use the word "underplay" of a show like this. Jones, in her professional debut, deserves a prosperous career in more than just big-girl roles; she energetically sells Tracy's indefatigable good heart even when things are at their blackest. Making a now rare stage appearance as father Wilbur Turnblad, Mel Smith may need a bucket to carry a tune, but his and Ball's duet "Timeless To Me" is a masterclass in schlock.

Tracie Bennett turns in a gleeful performance as harridan Velma Von Tussle, the TV show's producer and the mother of Tracy's arch-enemy Amber. Johnnie Fiori as Motormouth Maybelle is commanding when she speaks and spine-tingling when she sings; in fact, this show with its custom-written pastiche numbers has more soul than the supposedly "authentic" but passionless Motown revue *Dancing In The Streets*.

I struggled hard to resist being washed away on the wave of feelgood this show generates but, in the end, washed away I was.

Ian Shuttleworth



Wednesday, 7th November 2007

Critics' Choice



I confess. I wanted to hate 'Hairspray'. I've nothing against its loveably chubby heroine Tracy Turnblad (victim of her school's anti-fat bimbos), who teams up with the black kids from Special Ed to overthrow '60s racial prejudice and fulfil her dreams by (get this) busting their non-white dance moves on primetime TV. It was actually the thought of Michael Ball in drag which made me want to change profession.

But thanks to Jack O'Brien's insanely uplifting production, I'm eating my words. True, O'Brien can do nothing to plump up the size-zero plot, a spindly coathanger for makeovers, momma/daughter bonding, starry-eyed snogs and XXL emotional razzmatazz. True, the lyrics sometimes suck – Maybelle (the show's black big momma) has to get her mouth around a rack of chunkily affirmative couplets whose only relationship to rap is putting a 'c' in front of it. And true, the black/fat equivalences (Tracy's chums' ancestors were slaves, she's enslaved by the cheeseburger) might be troubling if thought were the object here.

Luckily, it isn't. This may be brainless pleasure, but its heart (a lovely duckling who wins through without becoming a nasty swan) is triumphantly in the right place. Its butt is in the right place too, thanks to Jerry Mitchell's glorious seat-shimmying choreography. Leanne Jones (Tracy) shakes it with innocence and charm; her blonde oppressors (ma-and-daughter team Tracie Bennett and Rachael Wooding) make great pre- and post-menopause versions of psycho-Barbie. Ball's fat-suit lends him delightful comic gravitas as Tracy's ma; his duets with hubbie Mel Smith make nicely affectionate vaudeville. And the encounter between black and white music gives the score booty-shaking zing. Beyond that, it is, essentially, a two-and-a-half hour fantasy that Oprah's target audience could stick their supersized hopes up the super-toned ass of WASP America. But what's not to like about that?

Caroline McGinn