

# 'Hairspray's' infectious beat keeps rolling in Aurora



By **Chris Jones** · Contact Reporter

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**W**ith a live telecast staging planned for NBC in December and a Broadway revival also in the works, the masterful 14-year-old musical "Hairspray" is enjoying renewed attention. And that usually means the rights get restricted. So I suspect the [Paramount Theatre](#) of Aurora got in just under the wire with its genial, affectionate current staging of the travails of the plump revolutionary Tracy Turnblad, she who eats some breakfast and then sets about changing the world.

I've seen "Hairspray" a few times, as you can imagine. Every time I do, I'm always knocked out by the sheer brilliance of the opening and closing numbers. If you're into the second paragraph of this review, you might know those are "Good Morning Baltimore," a great driving anthem of urban affection and a protagonist's needs, and "You Can't Stop the Beat," a double-time feast of optimism that (to my mind, anyway) quite brilliantly links the plot of the goofy musical you've just seen with existential notions of

time and change.

I'm not saying that songwriters Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman were exactly David Bowie — just wanted to type his name one more time — but these are two of the best numbers ever written for the Broadway stage. They grab ya comin' in and they send you out on the highest of highs while also reminding you to get on the right side of history before it steamrolls you. Many shows have a killer opener or closer. Very few have both. This one does.

And while I'm going on about this musical's many charms, let us just say that while its goofy spirit of optimism about racial unity might be naive, it's also especially welcome in 2016.

The book by Thomas Meehan and the late Mark O'Donnell is so shrewdly toned, willing to take a few not-p.c. risks in service of some excellent gags but also dedicated to the lovability of such characters as Edna Turnblad (played here by Michael Kingston), the joke-shop proprietor Wilbur (Michael Ehlers), Penny Peniston (Landree Fleming) and Seaweed J. Stubbs (Gilbert Domally).

So is Amber Mak's Aurora "Hairspray" worth the trip? Absolutely.

I found the musical direction and vocal stylings a tad legato for my punchier tastes, and at the Saturday matinee I saw it was not always easy to hear the lyrics sung by Amelia Jo Parish, who is quite charming as T.T. but seemed to be not in full vocal health. The volume on the whole shebang could be turned up a notch. That said, a great deal of energy in the piece is derived from Mak's swirling choreography (this talented young director worked hard on some exceptionally cool transitions).

This is a show that relies on huge personalities (you just have to look at the original cast), and while both Kingston and Parish are sincere and honest, which is what matters most in any "Hairspray," both are a tad reticent to really communicate to the paying customers, even with the audience ready and willing to eat out of their hands. It's no surprise that the redoubtable E. Faye Butler kills with Motormouth's big number, but it is Domally, a late change in the role of Seaweed, who steps downstage when necessary and really grabs hold of the show.

In fact it's the secondary couple of Seaweed and Penny (Fleming is hilarious and wonderfully rooted, to boot) that impresses the most here. Among the actors, anyway.

If you're a big fan of this piece you really should hit the tollway to see what designers Linda Buchanan and Michael Stanfill have done with the look of the show. It's a lot less Baltimore than the original design but a lot more about the TV culture of the era, essentially depicting the beginning of the media-saturation era.

This is a Broadway-size spectacle, one filled with clever visual contrasts (continued in Theresa Ham's

costumes) between the monochromatic segregated past and the multicolor integrated present — a huge visual sculpture dedicated to the beat you can't stop.

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### **3 STARS**

**When:** Through Feb. 21

**Where:** Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

**Running time:** 2 hours, 30 minutes

**Tickets:** \$41-\$56 at 630-896-6666 or [www.paramountaurora.com](http://www.paramountaurora.com)

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