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'Hairspray' is 'do-whopper

By Alexander Stevens/ Staff Writer
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Energetic musical lives up to its reputation and Tony Awards

The basic conceit of the hit musical "Hairspray" is that a chubby teenage girl, through sheer force of will and quirky charisma, can lead an entire community to racial enlightenment.

Hokey, yes, but don't doubt the power of one girl: Every night through Nov. 1 at the Colonial Theatre, audiences are getting swept up in the dynamic energy of a teen tornado.

Her name is Carly Jibson, 19, and she's currently nailing the role of Tracy Turnblad, the feisty little teen who never takes no for an answer. Jibson may not be a step-perfect dancer or a note-perfect singer, but who would notice? Jibson, like Tracy, is all about spirit and heart.

It's hard to imagine a more entertaining night out, as Marc Shaiman (music and lyrics) and Scott Wittman (lyrics) turn John Waters' campy 1988 film - Waters' rare but refreshing swim in the mainstream - into a musical.

This is Baltimore, 1962, and little Tracy has big dreams - she wants to be a dancer on the Corny Collins TV show, where her squat dimensions will be a sharp contrast to the telegenic teen squad that currently rules the show...

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Link (Austin Miller), Penny (Sandra DeNise), Seaweed (Terron Brooks) and Tracy (Carly Jibson) can't stop the beat at the end of 'Hairspray.'

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Tracy's character is well established before she speaks a single sentence: In "Good Morning Baltimore," she sees poetry and promise even in a city like Baltimore. "Some day the world is gonna see/ Baltimore and me"). And when Tracy's commitment to her newfound cause wavers late in the show, it's the anthem "I Know Where I've Been," sung beautifully by Charlotte Crossley, that clears Tracy's vision. And "You Can't Stop the Beat," a foreshadow of the youth-fed movement of desegregation and acceptance that would become the hallmark of the 1960s, is the song you'll be humming on your way out of the theater.

There's nice supporting work in the show as well. Bruce Vilanch provides much more than camp appeal and TV star power. He proves he's a capable actor (actress?) in the cross-dressing role made famous by Divine in the film. His quick wit came in handy when a telephone missed its cue to ring on opening night. And his added line about "red socks" got a huge reaction - even as he spoke it, the Red Sox were stealing game one in the Yankees series.

Sandra Denise, as Tracy's best friend Penny, suffered from a problem that occasionally plagued other performers: The cast would sometimes take the campiness a bit too far. (Could we take the mugging down a notch?) Everyone - the performers and director Jack O'Brien - should trust the material a little more. But there is also something endearing about Penny's startling transformation.

Points, too, for Austin Miller as Link. Playing the hunk can be a thankless role, but Miller provides not only the requisite perfect features and body, but also an appealing charm. No wonder Tracy is smitten.

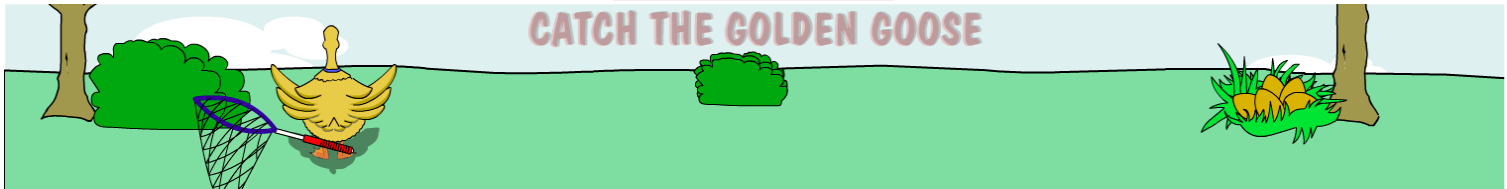
But the center of attention never drifts far from feisty Carly Jibson and her hilarious ability to deliver each line as if she's in total crisis mode - appropriate for a teen. Alternately petulant, empowered and hormonal, Jibson sings, struts and dances with a joyous lack of self-consciousness that should serve as a lesson for us all. If you don't come out of the show thinking - "I should dance more often" - then you've missed one of its profound messages about participation.

Profound? Maybe I'm still caught up in the wonderful wave of energy that sweeps through this show. Dismiss "Hairspray" as frivolous fun if you want, but the reason it intoxicates its audience is because it gets so many things right.

"Hairspray" plays through Nov. 1 at the Colonial Theatre in Boston. Tickets are \$30-\$97. Call 617-931-2787.

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