

'Hairspray' is bright, bubbly fun

By Alec Kerr

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CONWAY — The Eastern Slope Inn Playhouse stage has been sent back to a cheery version of 1962 with the non-stop song and dance fun of "Hairspray," which opened Tuesday and is playing through Aug. 7.

"Hairspray," like "The Producers" before it, is a musical based on a film in which the musical then inspired its own film. The story is a bubblegum version of the civil rights movement told through the integration of an "American Bandstand"-style dance show.

The leader of this revolution is Tracy Turnblad (Amber Coartney), an overweight girl with a good heart, gumption and a wish to dance on the "Corny Collins Show" and to win the heart of the show's dreamboat star Link Larkin (Peter Carrier). When she gets her wishes on both accounts, she sets out for something bigger: blacks and whites dancing together.

While the plot is a sugarcoat, the themes of racial equality are handled sincerely and honestly. The show also deals with issues of bullying of those who are different. The Tracy character proves her taunters wrong with confidence and a refusal to be anything less than herself. It is a good message, and, while real life is rarely this easy, every once in a while it can be.

The Mount Washington Valley Theatre Company's production is

appropriately bright and colorful. This is a show that jumps from one song to the next very quickly, and director Nathaniel Shaw keeps the energy level high and the pacing brisk. The choreography, also by Shaw, is a creative hodge-podge of popular dance moves from the era.

In a tradition dating back to John Waters' original 1988 film, the role of Tracy's mom Edna is played by a man in drag. Richard Sabellico, previously seen raising hell in "Damn Yankees," takes on the role previously played most famously by Divine in the original film, Harvey Fierstein in the original Broadway cast and John Travolta in the 2007 film.

Sabellico's performance gets big laughs with his manly voice coming out occasional on certain line readings. It may be an easy gag, but it is an effective one that is well delivered. Sabellico shares a sweet and tongue-in-cheek ballad with Craig Holden as Edna's husband.

Physically Coartney is miscast as Tracy. Coartney may not be a twig, but she is by no means the big girl that Tracy is supposed to be. Most of the fat jokes at Tracy's expense therefore become head scratchers as you think "But she isn't even that big." The role of Tracy is meant to be empowering for girls who are heavier and that aspect is somewhat missing here.

In terms of performance, though, Coartney nails it. She is bubbly and full of warmth and good cheer. She has a strong voice as well that is nicely showcased in songs like "Good Morning Baltimore," "Mama, I'm Big Girl Now," "Welcome to the 60s," "Without Love" and "You Can't the Stop the Beat."

The rest of the cast is equally solid. Catherine Yadain and Lizzy

Palmer provide some quality villainy as mother and daughter who conspire to use the “Corny Collins Show” for their own gains and attempt to suppress all things different.

Kelsey Thompson as Tracy's dorky friend Penny gets laughs whenever on stage. Andrew Malone has a powerhouse voice and smooth dance moves as Seaweed Stubbs and steals the show on “Run and Tell That.” Tunisia Hayward as the jive talking Motormouth Maybelle also has a notable voice and shines on “Big, Blond and Beautiful.”

This is a show that looks as light as cotton candy, but does provide a bit more substance. It is a show where everyone on stage, even the villains, smile widely. Those smiles transfer over to the audience rather quickly and stay on throughout the show.

Tickets are \$3

However, Flex Passes, good for four admissions for \$100, are available, as are group rates. For information and reservations, call the box office at 356-5776 or visit the Mount Washington Valley Theatre Company website at www.mwvtheatre.org.