

Movie Review: 'Hairspray'

by James Hebert

It has taken nearly 30 years for John Travolta to make it from 1959 (in "Grease") to 1962 (in "Hairspray"). In his defense, the man's been busy, what with getting a sex change and gaining about 200 pounds.

'HAIRSPRAY' - John Travolta, as Edna Turnblad, and Nikki Blonsky, as Tracy Turnblad, star in the remake of 'Hairspray.' CNS Photo courtesy of David James. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Travolta is the expansive Baltimore mom Edna Turnblad in "Hairspray," the new movie based on the recent musical adapted from the original '88 film, which had the bad taste not to be based on any production beyond the workings of John Waters' brain.

If Travolta's fat-suited turn in the lighter-than-aerosol musical feels like stunt casting - and his Baltimore patois goes down like a bad crab cake - it at least upholds the Edna legacy of sticking a large man in the lady's shoes. (The ex-Edna club includes Divine, Harvey Fierstein and Bruce Vilanch.)

And it works as well as most of "Hairspray," a goofy bouffant of a movie primed with rich '60s atmosphere and held together by the gloss coat of Marc Shaiman's swinging music, which draws heavily from the school of Early Hepcat.

The mod mood, the Jackie O 'dos and the pastel hues paint such a period feel that when an Esso gas station pops up early on, it's as if we've stumbled on the set of "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg," the 1964 French confection whose climax immortalized the Esso name.

Although racial integration is a key "Hairspray" theme, the movie's sensibility is more Darin than daring. It does take a shade more sober of an approach to the subject than the stage version, directed to eight Tony Awards by the Old Globe Theatre's Jack O'Brien.

What's really on the movie's mind, though, is a broader idea of acceptance, and the vessel for that message is a bubbly tugboat of a teen, Tracy Turnblad (Nikki Blonsky).

Unlike Mom, who has exiled herself inside the family home since before Ike's first inauguration, Tracy refuses to feel shame about her weight. In her film debut, Blonsky radiates a sense of ease that makes the headstrong Tracy feel sweetly genuine and look surprisingly light on her feet.

Tracy's life mission is to be anointed a dancer on the Corny Collins Show, a cheerfully bigoted TV dance program run by the frosty ex-beauty queen Velma Von Tussle (Michelle Pfeiffer, filmed deliciously in Vamp-O-Rama).

The show's cast members, as Corny croons, are "Nice white kids who like to lead the way / But once a month

we have our Negro Day."

Tracy, though, is all about integration, and when she gets sent to detention and hooks up with the black kids warehoused there (talented Elijah Kelley as Seaweed J. Stubbs among them), their dance moves become her catalyst to blow the Corny show wide open.

With four new tunes, "Hairspray" feels as though it carries a few extra pounds itself. One of the funnier stage numbers, "Timeless to Me," also suffers in translation, turning from gentle innuendo to something more overtly spoofy.

Director: Adam Shankman. Writers: Leslie Dixon, John Waters, Mark O'Donnell. Composer: Marc Shaiman. Cast: Nikki Blonsky, John Travolta, Christopher Walken, Amanda Bynes, Zac Efron, Elijah Kelley, Queen Latifah, Michelle Pfeiffer, James Marsden. Running time: 1 hour, 57 minutes. Rated PG. 3 stars.

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