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MCC's 'Hairspray' has firm hold on quality theatre

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Cast of 'Hairspray!' onstage and backstage at the new Performing Arts Center on the Mesa Community College campus. November 2014

Allyson Van Patten

Mesa Community College (MCC) decided on the musical *Hairspray* to debut its spanking new [Performing Arts Center](#) last night. What a choice choice! *Examiner's* sneak peek tour last night of backstage dressing rooms while the cast and director got gussied up for opening night was a treat, followed by a performance that was even sweeter.

While gluing his eyelashes and tightening his girdle, director Jere Van Patten introduced members of his cast and creative team, explaining that the student-led production is joined by four Valley guest performers, himself included in the signature mother role that is traditionally

played by a male.

Amplified-sized *Tracy Turnblad* (Laynee Overall) and cast entered with an energetic bang in the show that's set in 1962 Baltimore, a racially tumultuous time in American history. As a teenager obsessed with the new rock and roll sound, *Tracy's* boldly unpopular (to white mainstream Maryland) wish that "everyday could be Negro Day" drives the show's theme of integration. Her weighty personal quest to fill an opening on a local American Bandstand-ish, dance-craze TV show generates a plot that addresses high school bullying and not fitting the impossible 'cool' physical standards set by society.

In a highly effective staging moment early in the evening, *Tracy* was way up stage and obscured by a plethora of truly sharp, engaging ensemble members. As choreographer, **Hale Centre Theatre** regular creative team member Cambrian James has leant crisp, era-reminiscent dance steps to the MCC cast's enthusiasm. Their spiffy vocal blend was nothing to be trifled with either.

But that moment when a hidden *Tracy* struck and sustained a solo note in the number? Even before the cast parted to reveal her, it was like she'd cracked wide a preceding vein of liquid gold that flooded into the house.

By the time 'Welcome to the 60s' rolled around, director Van Patten had hit his stride as *Edna Turnblad*. During that power surge number, *Edna* came alive with an impressively genuine personality makeover that only her character's new found self-confidence could fuel.

Just when we thought *Tracy* would deservedly walk away with the she-vocals award for the night, *Motormouth Maybelle* (Tierra Jones) opened her vocal chords to close the first act with 'Big, Blonde and Beautiful.' Holy wow. What a voice and presence. Had doubts lingered, her lead vocals richly supported by the ensemble created an inspiring rendition of 'I know Where I've Been' in the second act that won't be soon forgotten.

These singers and dancers, the supporting roles in particular, were beaming examples of what **musical theatre** is meant to be. Ariana Mai Lucius who played *Tracy's* bff *Penny Pingleton* was a sheer joy to watch, never overstated but consistently strong, especially in her comedic timing.

Stereotypic platinum blonde and beautiful *Amber* and *Velma VanTussle* (Kamie Tierce and



Jere Van Patten

Alaina Beuloye) were perfectly mean-spirited, conceited and prejudice, just as the John Waters film on which the musical is based demands. Familiar Valley performer Ted Glazebrook as TV host *Corny Collins* and Jesse Thomas Foster as *Tracy's* dad, *Wilbur Turnblad* exemplified characters whose surface seem plastic or predictably simple, but provide a production with buoyant depth.

While a couple ensemble members were still trying out their new theatre wings, as should happen in an academic theatre setting, the cast held an infectious energy throughout. Producer and longtime MCC faculty member SueAnne Lucius is no doubt bursting with pride. From acoustically-designed walls and generous orchestra pit right down to the nostalgic red velvet curtain, the cavernous MCC Performing Arts Center is state of the art beautiful.

If you've somehow missed seeing a live production of *Hairspray* until now, this is without question, your lucky break. Its short run continues through next weekend. For seasoned viewers, this show is nonetheless a grand pick. MCC's inaugural musical in their new Performing Arts Center is high entertainment in a pressurized can. *Hairspray's* beat is unstoppable.

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