

## Regional Reviews: San Francisco/North Bay

### *Hairspray*

#### Bay Area Musicals

Review by [Patrick Thomas](#) | [Season Schedule](#)

Also see Patrick's reviews of [Cabaret](#) and [Measure for Measure](#)

Every once in while (far too often sadly), you will see a classic car driving down the road in less than pristine condition. A dent or two, faded paint, a little smoke from the tailpipe, perhaps some duct tape covering a broken taillight. The car itself—whether it's a sleek Mercedes convertible, a vintage Datsun 240Z, a 1950s-era Chevy sedan, or any other auction worthy vehicle—still has undeniable appeal, but with a little work it could be so much more.

The Bay Area Musicals production of *Hairspray*, with music by Marc Shaiman, lyrics by Shaiman and Scott Wittman, and a book by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan (based on the 1988 film of the same name by John Waters), which opened Saturday night at San Francisco's Victoria Theatre (which itself could use some renovation), suffers from similar neglect. The show itself, while not quite a classic (it opened on Broadway in 2002) is a delightful one, filled with some great songs—"Good Morning Baltimore," "Welcome to the '60s," "Run and Tell That," "I Know Where I've Been," "You Can't Stop the Beat" (though only the last two really work outside the confines of the show)—a snappy book with lots of laughs, and a wonderful message about inclusion and the stupidity of racism.



**Melissa Momboisse**

*Photo by Ben Krantz Studio*

Likewise, this production has some terrific elements, including an energetic cast, some wonderful choreography by Artistic Director Matthew McCoy, who also directs, and a handful of breakout performances, all of which keep it movin' on down the road. But it suffers from flaws that prevent it from being the head-turning sweet ride it could have been.

The cast is clearly fully committed to their roles, and their energy and infectious joy nearly overcome the production's weaknesses. As Tracy Turnblad, the Baltimore high schooler whose dream is to dance on local TV's "Corny Collins Show" and integrate it, Cassie Grilley shines. She has a brassy (if slightly unpolished brass) voice that exudes a sense of both teen angst and teen optimism, and a bouncy persona that makes her easy to love. Dave Abrams plays Seaweed J. Stubbs, one of the African-American kids Tracy meets while sentenced to detention, with a powerful voice and even more powerful dance moves. As show producer (and borderline white supremacist) Velma von Tussle, Sarah Sloan's brittle snootiness make her character a villain we have no trouble hating. Her daughter Amber, the "star" of Corny Collins's troupe of teen dancers, follows closely in her mother's racist footsteps, and Lauren Meyer plays her with an appropriate "just following orders" energy. Scott DiLorenzo plays Tracy's mother Edna with a love as big as his character, and shows wonderful chemistry with Paul Plain, who is specifically geeky as her husband Wilbur.

But it is Melissa Momboisse, who plays Tracy's bestie Penny Pingleton, who shines brightest in this cast, even in her relatively minor role. Momboisse has a marvelous array of facial expressions that garnered strong laughs in every scene she played at the performance I attended. Her taut, sometimes distorted reactions to her scene partners are hysterical. Penny isn't the fastest chip on the motherboard, and Momboisse has a dozen different takes on blank looks of incomprehension that make her a joy to watch.

Most of the problems with the show are technical. The set by Lynn Grant has a certain off-kilter charm, with its representations of cockeyed row houses, but its craftsmanship feels a little slapdash. I could almost hear the echoes of "it's not great, but it'll have to do." The costumes, though period appropriate, also feel a little less than finished, and sometimes ill fitting. (The wigs by Jackie Dennis, however, are wonderful, and almost architectural in their ambition.) And the band, led by Jon Gallo, isn't nearly as tight as it needs to be. But it is Eric Johnson's lighting design that calls attention to itself in all the wrong ways, often failing to do its number one job: light the performers so we can see them clearly, and guide our attention where the director wants us to be looking. There are scenes in which Tracy is singing a solo and she's trapped in odd, dark, shadowed illuminations. How director McCoy allowed his work to be so unattractively and ineffectively lit is baffling.

Still, even a slightly beat-up classic car can be fun to drive, and underneath the dents, peeling paint, and misfiring engine, there's a wonderful musical in here somewhere. If you can look past the faults, a good ride is still to be had with *Hairspray* at the Victoria Theatre.

*Hairspray*, through August 11, 2019, at Bay Area Musicals, Victoria Theatre, 2961 16th Street, San Francisco CA. Shows are Thursdays at 7:30pm, Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00pm and Saturdays and Sundays at 2:00pm. Tickets range from \$35-\$100, and are available by calling 415-340-2207 or visiting [www.bamsf.org](http://www.bamsf.org).

SHARE:



**COPYRIGHT 1997 - 2019 TALKIN' BROADWAY**  
**FAQ & TERMS OF SERVICE**  
**CONTACT: WEBMASTER@TALKINBROADWAY.COM**  
**DESIGNED BY 3A.PL**

