

Art in Times of War (Preface to *Hairspray* Review)

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

It seems silly to write my usual fluff at such a moment in our history. As the known alignment of power is shifting, as forces are being unleashed that will forever alter the world, how can I write anything that will have meaning or merit? The plight of a gay man – not an ignoble topic – seems somehow irrelevant in our current state of affairs.

Does a magazine like this have a place in the world at such a time? Does any art form - serious or frivolous - carry significance during a war? I believe it does. As Terrence McNally wrote of the artist's role, "The world can and will go on without us but I have to think that we have made this world a better place. That we have left it richer, wiser than had we not chosen the way of art. The older I get, the less I know, but I am certain that what we do matters."

This might seem like a glossy throw-away rag that makes no difference in the world, but there is stuff of worth here. The beauty of the male or female form fleshed out in a photograph, the desire of erotic lust painstakingly portrayed in a chosen cadence of words, the ability to enlighten and educate and share information ~ these are works of art, however raw or unpolished. To entertain, to inspire, to challenge, to charm, to escape ~ these are the reasons for the arts. And as we stumble and grope our way through our art, we can share what we have learned. There is hope in that, and healing too. We will need that healing soon.

I'd like to think that no matter how "embedded" we are in this war, that no matter how many explosions or missiles we watch each day, we still have the ability to feel and hurt for our fellow human beings, that they are not reduced to numbers or nameless figures. Whenever I begin to feel numb, I turn to the arts – whether it's a book, a movie, a song – each has in its own way the power to merge the heart and the mind. That is what art does. It makes us *feel*. During

times of war that sometimes seems to be the first thing to go. And though there isn't a simple solution for our current situation, there is comfort in knowing that we are in it together ~ as artists, as Americans, and as human beings.

Review of the musical *Hairspray* by Alan Bennett Ilagan

“Their hair was perfect. But the world was a mess” – John Waters

Far too often we are conditioned to look down on those mainstream artistic endeavors whose only goal is to make us feel good. Most critics seem to believe that the only decent art is that which makes people suffer or think. If it's not cutting-edge or controversial, where is the artistic value? That which is popular is often critically frowned-upon, simply because of its popularity. Given this, the recent success of the new musical *Hairspray* is a happy, much-welcome surprise. A musical need not be ground-breaking or set out to change the world ~ it's a musical for God's sake, and a supreme form of escapist entertainment. It is designed to bring about a smile, to stir the heart, and, hopefully, to bring an audience to its feet. Today no show is doing it better than *Hairspray*.

A poppy pastiche of the 50's doo-wop and 60's girl-group sound, with flourishes of R&B and Gospel, this musical hybrid is based on John Waters' 1988 film of the same name. Though it retains Mr. Waters stamp of approval, the musical is an entirely different affair than the film ~ different enough to stand on its own, but not quite to avoid comparison between the two.

Featuring music by Marc Shaiman and lyrics by Mr. Shaiman and Scott Wittman, *Hairspray* tells the story of Tracy Turnblad ~ the zaftig heroine whose main goal is dancing stardom, and who manages to snag the cute boy and stop segregation along the way. It could easily have veered into hokey cliches and caricatures, but the earnestness of the actors – and the production itself – keeps it from such a fate.

The heart of *Hairspray* lies within central character Tracy Turnblad. Winingly portrayed by Marissa Jaret Winokur (of *American Beauty* “You are so busted” fame), Tracy carries the emotional (and physical) heft of the show, and does so beautifully. Her star-making turn here virtually guarantees a Tony nod for Ms. Winokur, and her belief in herself, though sometimes shaken, is a powerful example for everyone who has ever felt like an outcast.

Harvey Fierstein is initially almost unrecognizable as Tracy’s mother, Edna, with nary a peek of facial hair, until we hear him speak. That unmistakably gravelly-gorgeous voice lends an endearing quality to the world-weary housewife, and, to his credit, Mr. Fierstein brings this woman to life without falling into the easy pit of camp.

Despite these two impeccable leads, *Hairspray* is not without faults. One gets the feeling that the cast is trying too hard to whip the audience into a frenzy for the first half of the show. Though sugary excess is the hallmark of this production, it would have been better served with some contrast. Much of the deeper emotional impact of a musical is found in its quieter moments ~ those in-between times in which characters are fleshed out and the audience is allowed to reflect. Most of the first-act numbers are over-run with “show-stopping” bombast, threatening to overwhelm in their relentless barrage.

The second act calms down a bit and makes for more affecting musical theater. The gentle ‘Good Morning Baltimore’ reprise by Tracy is one such gem, as is the gorgeously-sweet duet between Edna and Wilbur, ‘Timeless to Me’, in which Fierstein convincingly transforms into a lovable wife and Dick Latessa embraces her note-for-poignant-note. ‘Without Love’ is another beam of melodic beauty, though it too turns into a full-on attack on the audience. At times like this the show would have done better to show a little restraint, though subtlety is hardly the point of this production.

Tracy's relentless cheer and chirp, not to mention the upbeat, idealistic stance of most of the characters (these people sing and dance after being locked in a jail cell) can either be wearying or convincing depending on one's mindset going into the show. Of course, it is hard to criticize the warm and fuzzy feeling left by such good intentions. In fact, by the last rousing number, one can't help but be won-over by the cast's feel-good explosive energy.

While not as cerebral as Sondheim or original as *Rent*, *Hairspray* more than holds its own among the big-budget hoofers currently treading the boards of Broadway. If it marks a return to traditional, feel-good musical theater, is that such a bad thing? In today's world we could all use a little more *Hairspray*.

Hairspray is currently playing at the Neil Simon Theatre at 250 West 52nd Street, New York, NY.