

# 'Hairspray' director taps into the movie and Broadway hit for Syracuse production



Mary Digangi will play Tracy Turnblad in the production of "Hairspray" at Syracuse Stage. It is a co-production of Stage and the Syracuse University Department of Drama. Digangi and fellow cast members performed a medley of songs recently at Destiny USA. (Photo courtesy of Brenna Merritt)

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SYRACUSE, N.Y. -- "Hairspray," the musical, packs a one-two punch of riotous singing and dancing and righteous exposure of segregation in the streets and on television in Baltimore in 1962. For the holidays, **Syracuse Stage** has selected this story about chubby teen Tracy Turnblad who surprisingly makes it onto a TV dance show and who comes with some unwelcome ideas about integrating the all-white party. The musical with a message opens Friday and continues through Jan. 4.

Director Bill Fennelly said he will give Syracuse audiences a "Hairspray" that is grounded in the original, the 1988 movie directed by **John Waters**, and respectful of the 2002 Broadway musical hit. With his cast of professional actors and students from Syracuse University's drama department, the director revisited Waters' intentions in the movie, "what he was working out in terms of his kind of playful subversiveness and celebrating otherness as a way to have a large American conversation."

This is very different from the Broadway "Hairspray" with its big, musical comedy expectations. Fennelly, who was given the freedom to put his stamp on the production, knows he must not disappoint. "You need to meet all those expectations," he said before a rehearsal last week.

Fennelly remains in awe of how well-crafted the musical is, from its book to lyrics and music. "You have to honor that. You have to land all the jokes. You have to explode all the choreography. You have to unleash the joy in it."

At the same time, Fennelly said the musical celebrates all human rights. Just as he revisited Waters' work, Fennelly looked back at the Baltimore of the 1960s. The musical's "The Corny Collins Show" is based on a real teen show in Baltimore at the time, "**The Buddy Deane Show**" (1957-1964). It was the most watched, local television dance show in the country, said Fennelly. The show was broadcast six days a week. Once a month, the show presented Negro Day, and it was the only time African-American teens were given the dance floor.

Fennelly said Deane wasn't resistant to integrating the show but he wanted to slowly introduce black and white teens together on the show. The show was cancelled before Deane had a chance to make the change. Some news reports suggest the Baltimore TV station cut the show rather than integrate. (Dick Clark's nationally televised "American Bandstand" in Philadelphia was integrated in 1962.)

Naturally, Fennelly is nothing short of enthusiastic about the entire production. He considers it to be as good as any Broadway musical, and he said he should know. He was resident director for the Broadway national tour of "The Lion King" and associate director for the premiere of "The Gershwins' Fascinating Rhythm." Fennelly also directed Syracuse Stage's production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" last March.

"At the end of the night, it is celebratory and there are a lot of big issues in this," said Fennelly, of "Hairspray."

"And I think what's wonderful about musicals, what is wonderfully subversive and fabulous about musicals is they open our hearts, they get us to laugh and they make us think."

## **THE DETAILS**

**What:** "Hairspray," book by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan, music by Marc Shaiman, lyrics by Scott Wittman and Marc Shaiman. Co-production of Syracuse Stage and Syracuse University Department of Drama.

**Where:** Syracuse Stage, 820 E. Genesee St., Syracuse.

**When:** Previews at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 7:30 p.m. Dec. 3 and 4. Opening night 8 p.m. Dec. 5. 3 and 8 p.m. Dec. 6, 13, 20, 27 and Jan. 3. 2 p.m. Dec. 7, 14, 21, 23, 28 and Jan. 4. 7:30 p.m. Dec. 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, 22, 29 and 30. 8 p.m. Dec. 6, 12, 19, 26 and Jan. 2. 7 p.m. Dec. 28. 4 p.m. Dec. 31.

**Tickets:** \$30 to \$56, adults; \$20, 18 years and younger; \$30 to \$39, 40 years and younger. To purchase, call the box office at 443-3275 or [go online](#).

**Family guide:** "Mildly suggestive dialogue."

**Also:** "Syracuse in the Early 60's," an exhibition presented by Onondaga Historical Association. Exhibit looks at Syracuse's teen music scene in the early 60's, especially popular bands, the first local radio stations to play rock 'n' roll, local shows like "Dance Party" on WHEN-TV and connections between "American Bandstand" host Dick Clark and Syracuse.