



Trinity Academy Leeds: Hairspray – a big-hearted smash!

As an NSTA representative, I had the absolute pleasure of attending the Trinity Academy Leeds production of *Hairspray* on Friday 4th July 2025. Arriving at Trinity Academy, there was a real air of expectation. It was a sell-out performance, and you could tell from the student front-of-house team – smiles and torches at the ready – that this was a production in which everyone at the school took immense pride.

The quirky auditorium space at Trinity Academy Leeds had been superbly managed, with the live band beautifully prominent stage left. Four colourful high flats filled the space with retro vibrancy, while a toe-tapping pre-show playlist transported the audience back to the 1960s before the band – under the direction of Lucy Bisset – took us seamlessly into Shaiman and Wittman's award-winning score. The flats anchored the show's context and provided a colourful backdrop to the TV studios at the heart of the story, while simple retro set-pieces and props delineated other locations. These allowed for slick transitions and effective montages, with a disciplined ensemble maintaining faithfully held tableaux at key moments. This terrific use of space was echoed in the choreography by Katie Squirrell, which captured the spirit of 1960s dance crazes and immersed the entire cast in the retro styling.

Hairspray opened in Seattle in 2002 and moved to Broadway later that year, winning eight Tony Awards in 2003, including one for Best Musical. The show tells the inspiring tale of Tracy Turnblad, an all-American high schooler with big dreams, big hair, and an even bigger heart. Her personal aspirations – to dance on the Corny Collins Show and meet heartthrob Link Larkin – take her to the dance floor but also to the moral high ground. She spearheads a campaign on behalf of her favourite performers to break down discriminatory barriers and integrate them into the main programme. Tracy is a leading-lady role, but it's not one that should be overplayed – the audience must be swept along by the simplicity of her genuinely inclusive outlook on life. Daria managed this perfectly, playing Tracy with wide-eyed wonder. Stylistically in the groove, with fantastic diction to ensure the audience never lost the story, Daria burst onto the stage for 'Good Morning Baltimore' with infectious energy, placing Tracy's big heart front and centre.

While *Hairspray* is very much Tracy's show, Daria was buoyed by a wonderful supporting cast. Despite the catchy tunes and breathless optimism, there is a serious, sensitive storyline. The wilful prejudice exhibited by some characters needs skilful handling, and Violet Scantlebury directed the cast expertly. Leading man Cameron, playing Link, really knew how to play to the crowd, bringing a youthful pantomimic quality to the role. Caught between Velma and Amber's discriminatory scheming, Link's comedically self-interested double takes to the audience softened the sting of their machinations. This allowed Grace and Lola-Rose to play the acidic Von Tussle mother-and-daughter duo with exuberant, acerbic wit. Some of their spiteful one-liners made the audience gasp, but it was all skilfully handled so we never felt threatened or unsettled – rather, free to mock and ridicule these bigoted dinosaurs (and enjoy Grace and Lola-Rose's terrific vocals along the way).

The main story plays out on the Corny Collins TV Show – and what a show it was. Corny himself, played by the equally alliterative Billy B, was an absolute whirlwind. His station patter came at



you at a hundred miles an hour, punctuated by suitably cheesy hair flicks. He couldn't even be upstaged by his very loud jackets! Billy had the audience in the palm of his hand throughout.

Equally eye-catching, for very different reasons, was Rayann as Tracy's mum, Edna Turnblad. With a statuesque stage presence, Rayann had fantastic chemistry with her on-stage daughter. The comedic aspect of the role was well played, but it was the pathos and vulnerability she brought to Edna that was so heart-warming. Amidst the musical froth, it can be easy to forget the sub-plot of a woman with disappointed dreams who hasn't left her home in decades – unless the part is played with the sensitivity Rayann showed. Playing opposite her as Wilbur Turnblad, Jayden contributed to one of the shining moments of the night. The unconventional love duet 'You're Timeless to Me' was a delight – the final tableau of diminutive Wilbur on one knee before Edna, before they skipped off together hand in hand in glee, was utterly charming!

Jayden never missed a beat with his comic one-liners. In this, he was matched superbly by Julia as Tracy's best friend, Penny. Julia charted Penny's transformation from shy, innocent caterpillar to classy butterfly with real charm. Her double-act with Penny's love interest, Seaweed, was delightful. Andre oozed charisma in the role, with nimble dance moves and soulful vocals. Playing his little sister, Inez, Alisha nailed her comic timing, as well as an eye-poppingly well-executed flying lift as the piece reached its climax.

At the heart of the story is Motormouth Maybelle, the black matriarch with monumental talent and charisma who is kept from 'the front door' by society's prejudices. Ci'Maya brought the role to life with mature poignancy. Her strong characterisation commanded the stage, but it was in the musical numbers that she truly shone. Ci'Maya's powerhouse vocals were perfectly suited to this role, particularly in 'I Know Where I've Been'. Her achingly mellow alto got the ball rolling, head held high in soulful defiance. Her fabulous range carried every build and key change to a rousing, anthemic conclusion – one of the standout moments of the show.

This was an ensemble piece clearly forged in hard work and camaraderie. Every punchline landed, with clever touches allowing individuals to shine while still serving the production as a whole. Mesoma's Prison Warden was a notable example, with a well-timed final nod to the audience at the end of 'The Big Dollhouse' scene, as was the mad glint in the eye of Shante as Penny's unhinged, controlling mother, Prudy. It was Carmen, though, who drew the eye for all the right reasons – never upstaging, simply engaging with absolutely on-point stylistic pizzazz. The expressive range in her face was so communicative, and her dance skills led the line, subtle shoulder rolls and sassy shimmies perfectly evoking the 60s vibe. Her guest vocals popped and sparkled in several numbers, particularly in a clever reworking of 'Without Love'. Her talents, shining through from the ensemble, were testament to a well-crafted production, as big on heart as Tracy Turnblad herself.

This was school theatre at its very best – anchored in pride and hard work, with the most joyous and uplifting of outcomes.

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