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ALT takes on plus-sized musical sensation 'Hairspray'

By David Steinberg / Journal Staff Writer on Fri, May 20, 2011



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Henry Avery is an experienced director, so he knows that a big turnout for auditions can translate into snagging the right person for the right role.

That was the case with the Albuquerque Little Theatre production of the musical comedy "Hairspray," which opens tonight for a four-week run.

Approximately 150 people auditioned for 35 parts in the show, which Avery is directing. With so many hopefuls turning out, "we were able to pick some good people," he said.

"In all the roles but one there was heavy competition. The people who got it earned it."

That was the case with Jessica Fisher, who portrays the lead character, Tracy Turnblad, an outsider who becomes a teen celebrity in a 1960s Baltimore teen dance TV program. She then launches a campaign to integrate the program. The part of Tracy calls for a plus-size person. Avery said that was one of the reasons he chose Fisher.

"Jessica is very talented. She's so well-prepared. She is always right there and ready to give her all. She's an inspiration for the rest of the cast," he said.

"And why pad somebody when there are so few major roles that are written for someone heavy? Usually (the heavy person) is the best friend or in a supporting role."

Fisher grew up watching Ricki Lake as Tracy in the 1988 John Waters movie "Hairspray."

"Then the (stage) musical came out just as I was graduating from high school (in 2002)," Fisher said.

Tracy Turnblad has been her dream role since attending St. Pius X High School, though she hasn't seen the show.

Fisher was planning to move back to New York City last fall, where she had attended the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, but put the move on hold.

"When I heard ALT was doing 'Hairspray,' I wanted to stick around to audition for the part of Tracy," she said.

Fisher joked with friends that she put herself through a self-imposed "Hairspray" boot camp: "I bought the libretto. I tried to take more dance classes with Jonathan Ragsdale. I started going to the gym more to get my endurance up for all the dancing. I made sure I memorized all of (Tracy's) music."

Another important part is Tracy's mother, Edna Turnblad, who has sequestered herself in the family apartment for years — until Tracy encourages her to be her agent.

It's usually a cross-dressing role. Robert Johnson was picked for the part in the ALT production.

"Why Robert? His comic timing and the fact that he has the confidence to play the part. A lot of people wouldn't do it with style and fun," Avery said. "Robert is just ideal. He's such an out-there character as a person. He's not shy on stage."

Larry Aguilar, the production's choreographer, said the show has 18 songs, most of which involve dance.

"Hairspray"

WHEN: 8 tonight and Saturday, May 21, and 2 p.m. Sunday, May 21. Repeats May 27-29, June 2-5 and June 10-12

WHERE: Albuquerque Little Theatre, 224 San Pasquale SW

HOW MUCH: \$24 general public, \$20 seniors, \$18 students, \$10 children.

Group discounts for 10 or more. Tickets are available in advance at the ALT box office, by calling 242-4750 or by visiting www.albuquerquelittletheatre.org

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"We have different styles," Aguilar said. "There's the white members of the cast who dance on 'The Corny Collins Show.' It's very proper dance. Then we have the black cast members. I call them the record shop kids. It's more soulful choreography for them."

The two styles are combined at a dance in the school gym. Then out of that fusion of styles comes a jazz dance, which he said is in a free style.

"It's when Edna becomes the dressed-up woman she learns to be with a big hairdo."

The dance ensemble is pretty much on stage for the whole show.

"This is probably the biggest show I've choreographed," he said.

Avery finds the decade of the 1960s brimming with fun and had seen the Tony Award-winning Broadway show. But it wasn't until he got involved with the ALT production that he began to realize the depth of some of the issues in the story.

"It looks like a lot of fluff, the dancing, but the relationships all the way through are true. ... Tracy and her mother, Penny (Pingleton) and her mother," Avery said.

The one role in the cast for which there was little competition was that of the young girl Little Inez. Avery picked 14-year-old Daniela Sanchez for the part.

"She really has this dynamite voice," he said.

-- Email the reporter at dsteinberg@abqjournal.com. Call the reporter at 505-823-3925

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