

Vermont Queers On Broadway Bennett Law On *Hairspray* and *Zanna, Don't!*

God still makes chorus boys, and the cutest angel to land on Broadway in decades is dancing up a storm in *Hairspray*. His name is Todd Michel Smith, and I couldn't take my eyes off him all night. *Hairspray* is his Broadway debut, and if he plays his chorus boy's cards right he'll never have to work again!

The show is about this overwhelmingly adorable chorus boy who dances on the Corny Collins Show — you can think of it as American Bandstand-white — I mean lite — in Baltimore in 1962. His character's name is "IQ," which I thought was charming, because I didn't even care if this boy could speak, let alone read or write. Todd Michel is energy incarnate! He was all over the stage, kicking, springing, and dazzling with a smile that quickens the pulse and makes mere mortal men sweat.

Because Todd Michel's character was so unbelievably cute everyone, including a big-boned girl named Tracy Turnblad and her African-American friends, wanted to dance with him. I knew how they felt: I wanted to dance with Todd Michel, too, but that might be against the law, or at least my civil union vows, so I'll just have to dance with Todd Michel in my dreams. In my dreams I'm a great dancer.

Thank you, God, for making chorus boys like Todd Michel!

Tom and I went to see

Hairspray in celebration of the first anniversary of our civil union. Your first anniversary is the "paper" anniversary, so I figured tickets to a Broadway show would count as paper. (Any ideas on what I can do next year for our cotton anniversary? I've only got a year to plan! I think I'll be all set for anniversary number three: leather. Is there a rubber anniversary?)

Tom liked *Hairspray*, too, noting during the prolonged standing ovation that Harvey Fierstein is a national treasure. Harvey played the big-boned girl's mother, Edna Turnblad, but he didn't dance with Todd Michel. Even Harvey Fierstein doesn't live my dreams.

The next day I left Tom lounging in a king size bed on the 36th floor while I, a devoted spouse, stood in line for an hour in a fierce, freezing wind in Duffy Square for half-priced tickets to a Sunday matinee. Tickets to *Mama Mia!* were not available, so confronted with the choice between lousy tickets to *La Boheme* and great tickets to *Zanna Don't*, I opted for the all-new all-gay off-Broadway musical.

Zanna, Don't!, with book, music, and lyrics by Tim Acito, is a totally engaging, bouncy little musical about the pursuit of love at Heartsville High. It's set in the world you've always pined for, where homosexuality is the norm and heterosexuality is the love that dare not speak its name. This setup alone is worth the price of admission, but the show tran-

scends this joke and proves to be a fabulous — in every sense of the word — musical comedy/love story.

A winning cast serves up a wonderful score composed of a never-ending parade of catchy pop numbers, jam-packed with hummable songs. It hits a high early on with a western line-dance number celebrating lesbian love (called "Ride 'Em") that you think can't be topped, but within five minutes they have bested it with "Be a Man." From there on, there's no looking back.

The high school students are all looking for love, and Zanna — the coolest fairy in this flock — is the resident Cupid. He uses his magic wand (it's a gay fairy tale, see?) to match Kate, who has managed to keep herself too busy for love, with the determined Roberta, who has her moving van idling out front, and Steve, the football quarterback and new kid in town, with Heartsville High's sexy chess champion, Mike. When asked if he's going to be in the school musical, Steve asks, "What kind of high school would this be if the captain of the football team wasn't in the school musical?"

And what a school musical! The kids decide to write their own, provocative show because, they reason, "If you can't make a political statement in musical comedy, where can you?" Called "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," their effort examines the plight of heterosexuals in the military. Its centerpiece is the number

"Be a Man," which in all of its Village People-like gloriousness reminded me, at least, that there's something about a man in uniform. Its cleverest number, though, is "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," a duet in which Steve asks Kate if she loves him (her response: "Don't ask") and declares his love for her ("Don't tell!"). The audience was howling, but the cast played it straight — literally, in this scene.

Problems ensue, though, when Steve and Kate's portrayal of straight lovers in the school musical arouses an awareness of their own repressed longings, and they come to confess that they truly are — horrifyingly — in love with each other. The show deepens as the score becomes more sophisticated, moving from top-40ish pop tunes to Sondheim-esque tongue-twisters and quartets of lost love.

I was totally enjoying this fun, fizzy little musical when out of nowhere Mike, the sweetheart Steve abandons for Kate, sings the ballad "I Could Write Books." Suddenly I cared that these boys were breaking up. A confused and despondent Steve later sings as part of the splendid quartet "Do You Know What It's Like": "Do you know what its like not to be in love with you, not to have my heart obey what my mind wants to be true?" I was dangerously close to weeping in row G. The only part of me moved by *Hairspray* lies below my belt, but with *Zanna, Don't!* I was completely engaged.

And don't think it was just the boys that got to me. The show-stopper in this cast was Anika Larsen playing Roberta. She set the place on fire with a rousing "Whatcha Got?" and then dampened every eye at her bewilderment that

her love was never returned.

In the end this frothy musical transcends its promise with a thoughtful, and strangely affirming ending. In an effort to open the hearts and minds of all of Heartsville to an acceptance of heterosexuality, Zanna overextends his magic, and ultimately strands the characters — and us — in the world we live in today. Suddenly heterosexuality is the norm, and the audience was stunned into heartbreak when the cast realigned itself into boy-girl pairings, leaving just Zanna without love. No longer are Steve and Kate shunned, but Zanna is the misfit, misunderstood and mistrusted.

In this transformation the writer had not only found a resolution to his story but provided the audience with an opportunity to contemplate our personal loss at finding ourselves stranded in this convoluted world. He welcomed us to Xanadu (get it?) and then reminded us that it was just a fairy tale.

Zanna, Don't! is, ironically, the perfect high school musical: eight evenly balanced roles, a singable score, and achievable choreography. It might take Zanna's magic and more to ever see it performed in an American high school, but the cast recording (available at HeartsvilleHigh@aol.com) is destined to become a cult classic. Sure, run to New York to see Todd Michel Smith (chorus boys don't hold up forever, as we all know too well), but stay for *Zanna*, do. ▼

Bennett Law lives with his partner Tom in Bethel, Vermont, and last wrote about their post-civil union honeymoon in Italy.

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