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'High School Musical' is a loud Nirvana for Tweens

THEATER REVIEW

Within its tight but free-spending tween demographic, Disney's "High School Musical" is an eye-popping phenomenon. How big? At Wednesday night's chaotic official national opening of the Disney stage-musical version in Chicago, Michelle Obama could be seen, kids in tow, standing unnoticed at the back of a long line of fans trying to meet Monique Coleman, a young cast member from the original cable-TV movie, who'd been flown in for the occasion and found herself almost crushed by diminutive autograph hunters prowling the orchestra of the LaSalle Bank Theatre.

None of the original cast from the movie are in this new touring stage version (they've been propelled into solo careers and movie sequels and the like). Thank God. The absence of young stars with personal needs clearly helped the director Jeff Calhoun deliver a pumped-up, good-time dance party of a kid-friendly, Broadway-style show that delivers enough excitement and spectacle to give people a reason to drop the big downtown bucks and yet does not soup-up the original material out of all high-school recognition. For my money, this stage-musical version is a whole lot better than the movie and it surely exceeds all reasonable expectations, when you consider the source material.

Remarkably, Calhoun delivers sass and sizzle without killing the essential innocence of what's really not much more than a team-written, better-than-average After School Special. That might not sound like a massive theatrical achievement, but trust me, there were a million ways to screw this up and Calhoun deftly avoided them all and created a show that's both enjoyable antic and quite sweet in places. And loud. And relentlessly affirmative. Deservedly, Disney will have a hit.

Does this thing cross over to a legitimate adult audience? Not exactly—the Sondheim-loving kind of theatergoer will think he's died and gone to hell for his many sins, just as soon as he hears the little amplified musical buttons that punctuate each scene around the lockers, cable-movie style. But American Girl doesn't cross over either, and those dolls ain't crying.

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If—like a highly experienced cast that's considerably older than most of them play—you're of drinking age, you may need to be told that "High School Musical" is the romantic tale of sensitive jock Troy (John Jeffrey Martin) and brainy, insecure Gabriella (Arielle Jacobs) who fight off cliques and the evil ministrations of mean-girl Sharpay (Chandra Lee Schwartz) to find a chaste form of puppy love while trying out for the titular musicale. in their place of learning.

Laughably, the piece has been compared with "Grease." In fact, it's the total opposite. "Grease" is a (formatively superior) show that looks back on high school from an adult perspective, deliberately and inaccurately ascribing post-facto adult motivations—wholesale cynicism and sexual maturity, for example—to high-school kids. "High School Musical" is aimed squarely at young people who've yet to stalk a high school's potentially painful halls. As such, it's aspirational rather than nostalgic. And it's necessarily idealistic. No one does the worst they can do here. Parents would be up in arms. God knows those painful realities arrive soon enough without Disney being the beast of burden.

All that said, this surely is a great time for the target audience. Jacobs—a sweet and guileless performer—is quite delightful. And as a foil to her innocence, there's a killer camp performance from Bobby List as Ryan (evil Sharpay's sidekick). He almost dances away with the entire show. Amongst an almost wholly boffo cast, the only performance with serious issues is Martin's overly glib work in (unfortunately) the lead. He could use more heart and vulnerability and fewer easy tricks. You found yourself worrying for Gabrielle rather than delighting in her choice of boyfriend.

Granted, this is a derivative evening—Kenneth Foy's design recalls David Rockwell's work; "Hairspray" is evoked; "Fame" is in the building. But the overall look of the show is cool and contemporary and the cast truly busts a collective gut trying to imbue this stuff with more post-facto subtext than the Disney Channel typically accommodates. This ain't an especially witty book—although the retooled character of drama teacher Ms. Darbus works nicely in the skilled hands of Ellen Harvey. Coach Bolton (Ron Bohmer) was once a distinguished Phantom. Such a brutal profession, but Bohmer is terrific, even if he barely gets to open his mouth until the inevitable "HSM Megamix" at the end.

Really, the success flows from Calhoun's savvy staging—and choreographer Lisa Stevens' laudable willingness to restrict herself to a high-school vocabulary offering veracity along with flash. The very best moment of the night is the ballad "When There Was Me And You," which Calhoun imagines as an innocent adolescent love song, with cool kids in the halls casually singing back-up harmony.

If high school were really like that, we'd all have fewer scars.

"High School Musical"

When: Through September 2

Where: LaSalle Bank Theatre, 18 W. Monroe St.

Running Time: 2 hours. 15 mins.

Tickets: 20-78 at 312-902-1400.

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