

Review: Talented kids carry the show in School of Rock musical



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School of Rock: The Musical

Presented by Broadway Across Canada

Southam Hall, National Arts Centre, to Sunday

Reviewed Tuesday

Tickets and times: nac-cna.ca and ticketmaster.ca

If you're familiar with the 2003 Jack Black comedy, *School of Rock*, you'll know what to expect from the musical version that's now playing at the National Arts Centre until Sunday.

The first production in this season's popular Broadway Across Canada series is a feel-good, family-friendly tale about the power of music, its narrative arc mirroring the film. Predictable, yes, except for the level of talent demonstrated by the youthful performers.

In a recorded message that precedes the show, Andrew Lloyd Webber himself tells us the kids are actually playing their instruments, evidently a subject of some debate among past audiences. (There's also a small orchestra of professionals in the pit.)

You can't blame anyone for wondering. The kids are better than alright; they carry the show. They sing, dance, act and play classical instruments before their hapless substitute teacher decides to transform them into a rock band, recruiting four of the most musically inclined students for the main instruments and assigning the rest to supporting roles in the entourage, including backup singers, roadies, technician and manager. The goal is to win a battle of the bands.

Lo and behold, the core four are masters of their new instruments. There's nerdy Lawrence (Theo Mitchell-Penner) on keyboards, an uncool kid who turns into a prog-rock wiz; enthusiastic cymbal basher Freddy (Cameron Trueblood) owning the drum kit; the unassuming Zack (Mystic Inscho) who shows he's a rock-guitar virtuoso; and my favourite, Katie (Leanne Parks), the tiny cellist who becomes a monster bassist, complete with an instrument bigger than her and an intensely serious pouty bass face. She nearly steals the show with her larger-than-life stage presence.

Much of the humour comes from substitute teacher, Dewey, an unqualified slacker who got the teaching gig by posing as his roommate Ned Schneebly. Played by Rob Colletti, who bears a strong physical resemblance to Jack Black, the tubby character generates a lot of laughs as the epitome of a bad male role model, especially when he shows up to the posh private school late, hungover and looking like a slob. Colletti has fun with the part, although one might conclude that he's studied the Jack Black portrayal a little too closely.

The other adults are caricatures, too. Bespectacled roommate Ned (John Campione) is afraid of disapproving his dominating partner, Patty (Emily Borromeo) who yells a lot about it being time to grow up. School principal Rosalie (Lexie Dorsett Sharp), who's always impeccably turned out in pumps, a pencil skirt and trim jacket, comes across as strict and unyielding until Dewey takes her out for a beer, where she laments the lost dreams of her youth and gives in to his field-trip request.

The parents of the children are a diverse bunch, including same-sex and biracial couples, but they're all too busy and important to notice their children unless they don't seem to be doing enough homework. One of the most poignant moments of the show features a series of vignettes in the kids' homes, set to the cry-for-help ballad, If Only You Would Listen. Another is when shy Tomika (Grier Burke) finally musters up the courage to sing, and turns heads with a piece from church, Amazing Grace.

Still, for a show about the power of music to build confidence and transform lives, it's a bit disappointing that most of the songs are not terribly inspiring. Rousing moments came during renditions of You're In The Band, Stick It To The Man and School of Rock, and it's impressive to see the young performers rock their hearts out, but overall the songs are rather bland, puffed up by the theatrical setting and a heavy hand on the volume knob. Bring earplugs if you're sensitive to loudness.

The set design is clever, with sliding walls that define the school, apartment and bar, while the choreography is lively and energetic, and involves a lot of bouncing around school desks. Also terrific are the costumes, particularly the kids' glam on-stage outfits based on their school uniforms.

The triumphant climax, delivered with rock-concert staging techniques, including over-the-top lighting and way more decibels than required, earned a standing ovation from Tuesday's opening-night audience. And deservedly so — fuelled by passion and rock 'n' roll, it's a romp the whole family will enjoy.

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