


# BWW Review: Music City Falls in Love With Lloyd-Webber's SCHOOL OF ROCK

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by [Jeffrey Ellis](#) Sep. 12, 2018

Make no mistake about it: *School of Rock* isn't your mum's - nor your nan's - [Andrew Lloyd Webber](#) musical extravaganza. There are no massive chandeliers to come crashing into the orchestra, no fascist dictators to fear, no silent screen divas yearning for a comeback, nor are there any human-sized felines staring at you across the footlights. Nope, Sir Andrew (as he's known across the pond) has crafted an energetic rock musical that's based on a movie that starred [Jack Black](#) and it will rock your freakin' socks off!

Director Laurence Connor's stellar cast brings the characters right off the page of [Julian Fellowes](#)' (yep, the same guy who brought the myriad soapy stories of *Downton Abbey* to our television screens for six years has written the book for this equally entertaining and engrossing musical comedy) script to breathe energy into them and to share the story of a ne'er-do-well, aspiring rock star who perpetrates massive fraud (more about that later) to settle his unpaid debts. In the process of "playing" a substitute teacher at a tony private school in Manhattan, Dewey Finn (played with limitless charm and incredible stage presence by [Rob Colletti](#)) learns a whole hell of a lot about life, in general, and about himself, in particular.

Sure, it's a convoluted tale, but one that's completely relatable, and Tennessee Performing Arts Center audiences will be dancing in their seats, if not in the streets, as they cheer on the musical theater antics with full-throttle enthusiasm for the next seven performances, if the response of the opening night crowd gave any indication of what's to come this week.

Not to be outdone by Colletti and his co-star [Lexie Dorsett Sharp](#) (who is perfectly cast as uptight and priggish principal Rosalie Mullins - you just *know* right from the start that her straitlaced demeanor masks a closeted rocker) the high-spirited and joyful *School of Rock* also features an ensemble of immensely talented young actors who play Dewey Finn's students at New York's upscale and tony Horace Green Preparatory School. The younger members of Connor's ensemble deliver the goods with so much energy and commitment that they will leave you breathless - and, as good as Colletti and Dorsett Sharp are in their roles (and they are exceptional), the kids are even more extraordinary.

Chances are, you might leave TPAC's [Andrew Jackson](#) Hall, where the national touring company of *School of Rock* is encamped for an eight-performance run through Sunday, September 16, pondering how a cast of such talented young actors could so effortlessly bowl over an audience filled with eager musical theater fans, much less incredibly ~~old and hard to please~~, experienced and skeptical theater critics. Cutting out all the requisite and wordy theater criticism crap: They are phenomenal. Pure and simple.

The young artists onstage play their own instruments - Cameron Trueblood on drums, Mystic Inscho on guitar, Leanne Parks on bass and Theo Mitchell-Penner on keyboards - and they prove almost shockingly adept, perhaps even more so when you consider the courage and bravery required to rock out in Music City, where we know a thing or two about music (ohh, so that's why Nashville is called that!). "You're in the Band" and "Stick it to the Man" are spectacular, thanks to Lloyd Webber's music and Joanne M. Hunter's electrically charged choreography that keeps them moving at breakneck speed.

The story of *School of Rock* covers familiar territory, if you're a fan of the 2003 Jack Black film, but that's not a prerequisite for becoming a devoted, I daresay rabid, fan of the musical. Thanks to Fellowes' script, Lloyd Webber's music (he composes traditional showtunes and hard-rocking anthems with equal dexterity) and the lyrics by Glenn Slater (known also for his lyrics for *Love Never Dies*, the follow-up to Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*, and the stage adaptations of *Sister Act* and *The Little Mermaid*), the tale of hapless slacker Dewey and how he is transformed by his students is wonderfully engaging.

As Colletti's Dewey instills in the kids a love for rock music - even while he bristles at their initial reluctance to deviate from the classroom norms of Horace Green Prep - it's easy to be caught up in the production's theatricality, but as the story evolves and you learn more about the students, their teachers and their parents, you are transfixed by the heartwarming and genuinely heartfelt nature of *School of Rock*. Leave your preconceptions and expectations at home - and maybe even everything you *think* you know about Andrew Lloyd Webber's staggering canon of musicals - and you'll become a die-hard fan, eager to "stick it to the man" in whatever way deemed necessary *and* possible.

Colletti takes command of the stage in the very first moments of *School of Rock* and he never relinquishes his grip, yet he very generously shares it with his co-stars in the two-and-a-half hours of nonstop action that defines *School of Rock*. Self-assured, even if that's just a cloak to shield the larger-than-life character's inner misgivings and daunting lack of achievement, Colletti invests Dewey with a sharp wit and unyielding devotion to the rock god that makes him who he is at his very core. Colletti lets his audience in on the joke central to the show's premise, but he never takes the easy way out (which would betray Dewey as an unlikable charlatan), instead he makes us (the people out there in the dark, in Norma Desmond parlance) complicit in everything he does. Obviously, we all want more, judging from the prolonged and thunderous ovation that greeted the cast during their curtain call.

Dorsett Sharp, who quite ably shows off a legit soprano that will literally make you sit up and take notice, displays an ease for comedy as she plays the straight woman to Dewey's over-the-top comedic personality. Holding her own in the process, Rosalie's own evolution ensures she is appealing and attractive even as she attempts to ride herd over the Horace Green Prep students and faculty (and all those pesky parents). Her "Where Did the Rock Go" is an emotional lament, one that rings true for anyone who's ever watched their dreams fade away - only to allow them to soar once more, once they realize ambition and aspiration have no expiration date imprinted on them.

With complete certainty, I can assure you that you will be gobsmacked by the performances of Sami Bray as the officious Summer Hathaway (the brilliant student who'd much rather be studying, but who takes her manager's responsibilities rather seriously - and who, Dewey claims, would make a great president of the United States, much to the delight of audiences eager to embrace a new chief executive); Grier Burke as the quiet and self-effacing Tomiko (whose soaring vocals on "Amazing Grace" will pin your ears back); Mystic Inscho as Zack (the guitarist tagged as the greatest the world has known since Jimi Hendrix); Theo Mitchell-Penner as Lawrence (the quintessential nebbish whose keyboard talents are stunning); Cameron Trueblood as Freddy (the energetic and forceful drummer who provides the percussive beat that drives the band and the action onstage); Leanne Parks as Katie (the dour-faced bassist who very nearly steals the show from the rest of the cast via one particularly noteworthy facial expression); Arianna Pereira and Alyssa Emily Marvin (as Shonelle and Marcy, the band's angel-voiced backup singers); Sammy Dell (the flamboyantly fey stylist for the band who rebels against his father's demands he become part of his family's football playing dynasty); and Julian Brescia, Jacob Moran and Gabriella Uhl who complete the *School of Rock* band of amazing talents.

As Dewey's best friend Ned Schneeby (it's his identity that Dewey essentially steals in his efforts to defraud the powers that be at Horace Green Prep in a completely "innocent" plan to raise the dough to pay off his debts), Layne Roate is delightfully square and definitely un-hip, only to reveal his inner rockstar during the play's climactic Battle of the Bands scene. And Emily Borromeo is ideal as the dastardly Patty (Ned's girlfriend, who's an assistant to the mayor of New York City), virtually twirling a pretend mustache as she upends Dewey's metaphorical apple cart, injecting some much-needed conflict into the proceedings. The success of the production is also due, in very large part, to the committed and focused performances of the rest of the show's adult ensemble, who become various characters throughout with seamless effort.

Hunter's terrific choreography, she's ably assisted by Patrick O'Neill (both Hunter and O'Neill are known to Nashville audiences for their work on *The Nutty Professor* musical and her stint at Opryland USA back in the day), coupled with Connor's direction, keeps the play's action moving along at a spirited pace, while the orchestra provides strong and essential musical support for the performers onstage. Kudos to Julie Homi (who conducted the opening night performance in Music City) and her players.

Anna Louizos' eye-popping scenic and costume design create the conflicting worlds of academe and rock concert with style and flair, while Natasha Katz's evocative lighting design perfectly illuminates the contrasting settings. Finally, Mick Potter's sound design is as good as any we've experienced at TPAC over the years to deftly create a rock concert intensity that pays off beautifully.

***School of Rock*. Based on the Paramount movie written by Mike White. Book by Julian Fellowes. Lyrics by Glenn Slater. New music by Andrew Lloyd Webber. Directed by Laurence Connor. Choreography by JoAnn M. Hunter. Musical direction by Martyn Axe. Presented at Tennessee Performing Arts Center's Andrew Jackson Hall. Through**

September 16. For further information, go to [www.TPAC.org](http://www.TPAC.org). For tickets, call (615) 782-4040. Running time: 2 hours, 32 minutes (with one 15-minute intermission).

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