

'School of Rock' tears down the house

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REVIEW

WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 19 — The deafening roars at the end of Wharton Center's opening show of "School of Rock" were equal to the noises heard at major rock concerts. But instead of established and seasoned musicians, rookie kids were rockin' the stage.

The touring company at the Wharton Center's Great Cobb Hall features kids and teens that were hired primarily for their instrumental skills.

As Zack, Mystic Inscho wails on lead guitar. Theo Mitchell-Penner, as Lawrence, masterfully plays keyboards. Leanne Parks, in the role of Katie, thumps bass like a pro. Cameron Trueblood as Freddy, commands a drum kit. And they all pose and strut like real rock superstars.

Rob Colletti, as Dewey Finn — the role Jack Black made famous in the original film — has plenty of guitar chops of his own. He also manages to mirror many of Black's mannerisms, animation and high shrieks. Colletti makes his role as a chance substitute teacher who recruits his students to play a battle of the bands more and more appealing as the musical unfolds. He is the perfect fellow for the part.

Besides original songs from the original movie like "Teacher's Pet," "School of Rock" features 14 likeable Andrew Lloyd Webber songs. The same composer known for Broadway hits like "Jesus Christ Superstar," "Phantom of the Opera" and "Cats," bought the rights to the 2003 hit film. Lloyd Webber's play version — with a script by "Downtown Abbey's" Jullian Fellowes and lyrics by Glenn Slater — premiered on Broadway in 2015.

Lloyd Webber's plays usually open in London's West End before coming to America. But with a cast of a dozen actors between the ages of 9-12 required for each performance, the less strict child labor laws in stateside made a Manhattan show easier to develop.

One of the differences between the film and the musical is Finn's developing romance with

headmistress Rosalie, who is played compellingly by Lexi Dorsett Sharp. The relationship doesn't become romantic until the second act of the two-hours-15 minutes-with-intermission show. That's when we get to hear more evidence of what a mighty singer Dorsett Sharp is.

The musical also offers deeper insight to the class of fifth graders and their parents. The portrait of the modern moms and dads is a harsh reminder of how kids can be neglected and pushed in directions they don't want to go. "School of Rock" also paints a grim picture of an elitist school, while revealing how empowering playing music can be.

Everyone in the cast, which is refreshingly diverse, manifests powerful performances. Layne Roate, as Ned, is a potent and multi-layered best friend. Even more minor characters like Ms. Sheinkopf, portrayed exquisitely by Deidre Long, are formidable.

A stirring seven-piece orchestra directed by Martyn Axe features three guitarists, two keyboards, bass and drums. They augment stage players and help give the Lloyd Webber music the grandness his shows are known for.

As the pre-show recording by Lloyd Webber announces, all the kids do play their instruments. It's the authentic musical talent of the cast that gives "School of Rock" its principal charm. When Inscho shreds his guitar, or Trueblood pounds the drums, the thrill is real. When Grier Burke as Tomika hits her closing notes of "Amazing Grace" during her "audition," the chills she causes are tangible. Even non-instrument players like Sami Bray as Summer deliver acting that tickles the heart.

W.C. Fields famously remarked, "Never work with animals or children," because they were scene-stealers. The adult cast of "School of Rock" seem to have no qualms about being upstaged by kids — especially since they often get their chances to shine. Audiences will mostly remember they got to see talented kids steal the show and hearts as they rocked the house.