

BWW Review: SCHOOL OF ROCK at The Orpheum

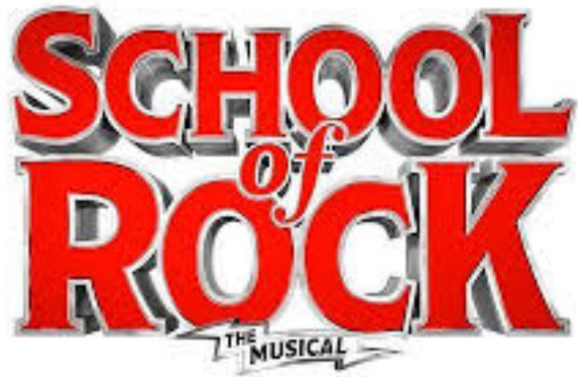
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There is a moment during the closing scene of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *School of Rock* when the show transforms from a mere crowd pleasing musical, to a pure and unadulterated celebration. Having witnessed the young students of Horace Green Preparatory School fully evolve from disenfranchised, rule-following and generally unhappy children, to confident rock stars willing to "stick it to the man," the audience cannot help but leap to its feet and join the party at the top of Mount Rock. More than a local battle of the bands, it is a celebration of the importance of arts education, the power of inspiring teachers, the joys of finding one's voice, and of the mind-blowing capacity for so much talent to exist in such small bodies and at such an early age. Judging by the standing ovation that began before and continued throughout the curtain call, it is clear that the Orpheum audience was fully invested in these young characters, and that *School of Rock* had therefore done its job. Indeed, this culminating scene is the ultimate payoff that makes the two and a half hours that precede it entirely worth the investment. The only disappointment was that there was no after party on Beale Street. Armed with their instruments and boundless talent, something tells me that the students of Horace Green Preparatory School could most certainly have brought down the house.



Adapted from the 2003 film of the same name, which starred Jack Black and Joan Cusack, the story of *School of Rock* centers around Dewey Finn (Merritt David Janes), an initially not so lovable loser with a Peter Pan complex, who clings to adolescent dreams of rock and roll superstardom as a means of avoiding the inconveniences of adult responsibility. The show's opening scenes find Dewey kicked out of his band "No Vacancy" and freeloading off of his childhood friend Ned (Layne Roate), a substitute teacher who is looking to move onto the next phase of life with his overbearing and type capital A girlfriend Patty (Madison Micucci). When Patty insists that Ned kick Dewey to the curb if he fails to come up with the rent, Dewey - out of money and devoid of marketable skills - hijacks Ned's substitute teaching opportunity at nearby Horace Green Preparatory School. So focused on the need to keep the parents and

alumni base of Horace Green content, and on paving the way for students' eventual admission to Harvard and (at least) Cornell, the school's administrator Rosalie (Lexie Dorsett Sharp) falls for Dewey's guise and assigns him a class of young upstarts.

Dewey is, of course, in it for the paycheck and initially has little interest in his students or providing any modicum of education. That all changes, however, when Dewey realizes his students are actually pretty talented musicians and he decides - unbeknownst to Rosalie, fellow faculty members or the students' parents - to turn his class into a rock and roll act with sights set on winning a local battle of the bands. To say the students, and even Dewey and Rosalie, transform during this process, is an understatement.

With so much of the energy and excitement of the show hinging upon its young performers, *School of Rock*'s adult cast members have the challenge of driving the broader narrative, particularly in scenes where the young performers are not present. The steepest of these challenges no doubt falls upon Mr. Janes who, as Dewey, steps into a role so closely linked to Jack Black's portrayal in the film. Much like his character, Mr. Janes' performance too evolves and undoubtedly improves as the show progresses. His opening number, "When I Climb to the Top of Mount Rock," is loud, obnoxious, unfocused and at times unintelligible. But he feeds off of his young cast mates, and they ultimately make him better, more endearing, and increasingly charismatic. He capably pulls off two of the highlight production numbers: "You're in the Band," where Dewey divvies up instrumental and technical assignments to his fledgling student ensemble, and "Stick It to the Man," in which Dewey encourages his students to rage against the adult-driven machine.

Ironically, it is in Dewey's more restrained moments that Mr. Janes is actually most effective. One of the production's best scenes takes place halfway through Act II. Having heard that the buttoned up Rosalie worships Stevie Nicks (I mean, who wouldn't?), he surmises that she may just be a closet rock chick. He invites her to a dive bar, and the resultant "rock exorcism" of sorts, pulled off by Ms. Sharp, is comic gold. As Rosalie, Ms. Sharp gives her character unexpected nuance. She is, of course, the archetypal schoolmarm, but the layers of the onion are slowly peeled. Her performance of the production's one true ballad, "Where Did the Rock Go?", the score's most classically pleasing musical number in which Rosalie metaphorically contemplates whether she has lost a part of her former self, is simply beautiful and evokes an emotion with which all adults in the audience have at times identified. She and Mr. Janes enjoy sweet, entirely authentic chemistry.

But we really must talk about the kids. Simply put, they are incredible, and possess the kind of talent that admittedly made this reviewer feel pretty inadequate in comparison. As an Andrew Lloyd Webber voiceover reminds audiences at the beginning of the show, they play all their own rock instruments live during the performance. Far beyond their individual talents (more on that later), however, what resonated most about the kids was how fine-tuned they were as an ensemble - clearly the result of well-developed teamwork on the road. Group vocal numbers, including the "Horace Green Alma Mater" and "If Only You Would Listen" did not sound like the typical shrill "Kidz Bop" fare, but featured well-executed harmonies and blends. There is nothing remotely annoyingly precocious about the kids in this show. Their

talent deserves far more notice than that.

While they are strongest as a group, it is also nice that each student is given an opportunity to shine individually. Good writing imbues each student with a distinct personality or musical talent, and by the end of the show, those traits are sufficiently developed for the audience to know who is who. As lead guitarist Zack, [Mystic Inscho](#) evokes a young Hendrix, while as bass guitarist Katie, [Leanne Parks](#)' puckered lips and furrowed brow are treasures to behold. As Tomika, a young girl whom Dewey truly helps find her voice, [Grier Burke](#) channels a young [Whitney Houston](#), while [Cameron Trueblood](#)'s Freddy drums his way into the audience's heart. Credit for particularly strong character work goes to the Memphis-connected [Sami Bray](#), who plays the gold star collecting Summer (let's face it, every classroom has a Summer); [Sammy Dell](#), who as the band's resident stylist Billy, has an eye for the fabulous; and [Theo Mitchell-Penner](#), who as awkward Lawrence discovers he is far cooler than he realizes behind a set of keys. It is hard to imagine an audience member not identifying with at least one of these wonderful characters.

There is not much to criticize with this solidly enjoyable production of *School of Rock*. The show clearly finds its strength when the young performers are featured, and as a result, certain adult-driven scenes can feel like needless, time-killing fluff in comparison. For example, the bookending performances of "I'm Too Hot for You" by resident house band "No Vacancy" are mildly amusing, but unoriginal and serve no meaningful purpose. The same goes for scenes in which Dewey and Ned play "Guitar Hero," or in which the Horace Green faculty kibbutz in the lounge.

Notwithstanding, the kids are electrifying and bring a bolt of excitement to the Orpheum stage. Run, don't walk to go see what they can do. Perhaps they will treat you to that Beale Street after party that was so lacking on opening night.

School of Rock features music by [Andrew Lloyd Webber](#), lyrics by [Glenn Slater](#) and a book by [Julian Fellowes](#). With direction by Laurence Connor and choreography by [JoAnn M. Hunter](#), the production runs at The Orpheum, 203 South Main Street, Memphis, Tennessee, through October 14, 2018.

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