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## 'School of Rock' at Playhouse Square: The kids are more than alright (review)

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Merritt David Janes and the cast of the national touring company of "School of Rock," on stage at Playhouse Square through March 24. (Evan Zimmerman-Murphy)

By [Laura DeMarco, The Plain Dealer](#)

Cleveland, Ohio - Rock 'n' roll. It's the ultimate modern rebellion art form, taking from the past, shredding it up and creating something altogether new and alive and in your face.

Or, as substitute teacher/rock god-wannabe Dewey Finn says in "School of Rock": It's about sticking it to the man — even when that man is a woman, such as your grade school principal.

The rebellious, joyous spirit of rock 'n' roll informs every minute in the touring production that opened in Cleveland at the Connor Palace Wednesday and runs through Sunday, March 24. Based on the unlikely 2003 hit movie by Richard Linklater that helped make Jack Black a star, the musical was written by Julian Fellowes ("Downton Abbey"), with lyrics by Glenn Slater and 14 new songs by Broadway god Andrew Lloyd Webber.

That's quite a pedigree for a quirky, family-oriented story about a down-and-out, schlubby man-child who cons a tony private prep school into hiring him as a teacher, and then proceeds to transform his fifth-grade class into his backing band for a rock-off. You wouldn't necessarily think of Fellowes and Webber as the most rock 'n' roll guys on the scene these days, either.

But it turns out that Lloyd Webber, who perfected the rock opera with "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," was an excellent choice to create the music for "School of Rock," which is decidedly more rock than opera. Fellowes, known for more highbrow fare, has crafted a fun, fast-paced story filled with zingy dialogue. He keeps the script close to the 2003 movie, updating it with contemporary references to Taylor Swift and smartphones.

In a neat touch, the show begins and concludes as if the Connor Palace stage is the stage of a rock club, with a "real band" playing to the audience — we become the rock fans. It's something I haven't seen outside of "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" off-Broadway, and it succeeded in really getting the crowd into the rock vibe.

We see Dewey, the fantastic Gary Trainor, get kicked out of cheesy hair-metal band No Vacancy in real time. Trainor is so good in the role — funny, genuinely concerned about the kids, selfish and yet still a dreamer at his age — that you soon stop comparing him with Jack Black. (Merritt David Janes, who was in the Broadway cast, is expected to play the Dewey role some nights later in the run. Understudies Liam Fennecken and Jonathon Timpanelli will also have a turn at lead.)

The play, which opened on Broadway in 2015 and ran through this January, sticks very close to the movie. After getting kicked out of his band, Dewey is also about to be kicked out of his apartment by his roommate's bossy girlfriend (a shrill Madison Micucci). When he intercepts a call meant for roommate Ned Schneebly (Layne Roate) to sub at Horace Green, he talks his way into the job. Rock 'n' roll ensues.

Though it takes a bit to win over these tightly wound kids, it turns out a bit of rock is just what these Type-A fifth-graders need. It's the kids who are the real stars of the show. An audio recording from Andrew Lloyd Webber begins the night, assuring us that yes, they really are playing their instruments. And, wow, can these 10- and 11-year-olds rock. Especially Leanne Parks as pouty, pint-sized bass player Katie; Julian Brescia as nerdy keyboardist Lawrence, who is overjoyed to finally get a chance to be one of the cool kids;

and Camille de la Cruz as powerhouse singer Tomika. Sami Bray is also stellar as bossy teacher's-pet Summer, who takes charges as manager. All the kids deserved an A+ — and standing ovation — on opening night.

The simple set also impressed, not too overdone and keeping in the DIY rock spirit (as much as possible for a Broadway show). Two towering stacks of Marshall amps and huge drum kit first greet visitors, as No Vacancy gears up to play. We are later taken to the Tudor-style halls of Horace Green; Ned's grungy bedroom that looks like a dorm though he's in his 30s; and the bright, cheery classroom. An Act 1 scene that cuts between the various students' homes is one of the most touching, as we see how they're pushed and misunderstood by their own type-A parents as they jointly sing the melancholic "If Only You Would Listen."

Listen they do in Act 2, as do we. Rock 'n' roll is all about getting the world to take notice. It's impossible not to on songs like the grooving "You're in the Band" and the fist-pumping, punk-informed agit-rocker "Stick It to the Man." But it's the crunchy, glittery title song, the power pop meets '70s rock "School of Rock" that really stands out. This is no "Broadway rock." This really rocks. No wonder it's the song Dewey leads with at the finale Battle of the Bands.

If only you could still flick your lighter at a show. These kids are more than alright.

## **REVIEW**

### **School of Rock**

**What:** Musical based on the hit film, with book by Julian Fellowes, lyrics by Glenn Slater and 14 new songs from Andrew Lloyd Webber.

**When:** Through March 24.

**Where:** Playhouse Square's Connor Palace Theatre

**Tickets:** \$10 - \$110. Available at the box office, [tickets.playhousesquare.org](https://tickets.playhousesquare.org) and by calling 216-241-6000.