

High School Musical: Charming Chaos

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Trinity College's *High School Musical* is a blockbuster production. With more than twelve musical numbers and a main cast of fifteen, plus a substantial chorus, there's barely a moment to catch your breath, let alone feel bored. It might be due to this grand scale that so much of the show feels chaotic, but it's also this energy that draws the audience in.

The cast is full of strong singers, though Beatrice Hart as Gabriella and Brydie Weston as Sharpay definitely stand out. When it comes to comedy Jade Page as Mrs Darbus, Harry von Bibra as the lovable baker Zeke, and Chris Richards as the irrepressible Ryan Evans were particular highlights. Page especially is delightful as the passionate drama teacher, and while the breathy speed with which she delivers her lines leaves the audience racing to keep up, she inhabits her character in a way few of the other actors do.

In general lines seem to be an issue for the cast, with a few being forgotten or jumbled, and most being lost between poor diction and microphone troubles. Thankfully *High School Musical* is a play without a particularly nuanced plot, and the audience's general familiarity with the original film helps to ease any potential confusion. On opening night the microphone troubles were at their worst for Joseph Baldwin, playing Troy Bolton. Unfortunately this meant that many of the show's key moments, and Baldwin's show stopping numbers, fell flat as we struggled to hear. Baldwin did seem to be a strong singer, and there were moments where he carried on effectively, even without amplification. However it was sometimes a struggle to hear characters with functional microphones over the live band, so most of Baldwin's vocals went unheard.

The dance numbers, though generally lacking finesse, are boisterous and fun to watch, with a few talented dancers providing order in the chaos. On the other hand, the more intimate duet or solo numbers fall somewhat flat, as the actors seem uncomfortable with these more emotional ballads.

The blocking, particularly in the first act, is strangely distancing for the audience, with intimate moments of dialogue taking place far upstage, and the key moment of Troy and Gabriella's reunion happening as they sit in class with their backs to the audience. The transitions also pull the audience out of the action, particularly in the second act when the set changes are particularly slow and tedious. It would have been much neater if instead of giving the radio announcement vignettes their own awkward-to-move set-piece, Jonathan Glenning's bulletins happened while the next scene was being set up.

For the most part this production seems to revel in its own silliness. While themes of parental expectation and peer pressure may be very real, *High School Musical* is not a hard-hitting exploration of those themes, and Trinity's production exploits that. 'Get Your Head in The Game' quickly becomes a farcical number that laughs at itself even as Troy struggles; and a saxophonist coming out of the band to stand onstage during 'I Can't Take My Eyes Off of You' adds a faint sense of ridiculousness to an otherwise emotional and sincere number. But this all-pervading sense of silliness didn't detract from the story, and didn't stop me becoming emotionally invested. While the happy ending is never in doubt, I was surprised by my own horror when things start to go wrong for the central couple, a testament to the warmth at the heart of Beatrice Hart's portrayal of Gabriella.

Sitting in the audience you can tell this is a college production – the sense of enthusiasm and support was constant, and thanks to the familiarity of the source material, the anticipation of many of the show's biggest moments gave even more gravity to those scenes. Weston and Richards are strong in 'Bop to the Top', but without the audience's almost tangible excitement for that number, it would have been hard for the duet to have the same impact.

If you're keen for some early-2000s nostalgia and some large-scale fun, this is the show for you, just don't expect too much finesse.

Bella Mackey

Trinity College Music Theatre Society's production of High School Musical runs from April 27th – 29th at the Union House Theatre.