

HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL

NETG Review

INTRODUCTION:

This is probably not the very best musical on the planet, but it scores by testing the talents and energy of a youthful company.

The roles are well defined and offer strong opportunities.

The music is mainly up-beat with the exception of the harmonious love duet.

Above all, the show gives food for thought about putting people into pigeonholes, as if drama and sport can never find common ground.

Director Rhianna Howard and her team had clearly put a considerable amount of effort and detail into the unfolding storyline and all the show's component parts.

FRONT OF HOUSE

The large, glossy and clever programme (with make-believe teacher's marks and comments!) was clear and informative, with interesting comments from the cast. Designed in the style of the school's Yearbook, it was very well done.

Although the entrance foyer becomes a bit of a log jam, we were extricated, united with our tickets and led courteously to our favourite seats in Row O - raised seating with a really good view. The bar always looks so inviting, but I'm usually driving, and the zero percent beer was a welcome refresher for me...thank you.

The interval raffle, very brief in itself, was stretched out for an uncomfortable length of time. Fair enough to plug the next show, but this was rather extreme unless you're in with the in-crowd.

SET:

Deceptively simple, making imaginative use of the bleacher-style steps.

The lockers, and Sharpay's show-off wardrobe, looked very good and the cast could move them without too much effort. The basketball court really did seem to evolve from the lockers early on in the performance.

At the start of Act Two, pots of flowers now graced the steps for the rooftop scene. All-in-all, a flexible setting which coped with the 20 scenes.

COSTUMES:

The make-up was good and complemented the clothing. Sharpay's model-girl looks were a perfect example - and her costume was suitably OTT.

All costumes were well selected and character-driven, from the sporty gear to the dramatic green, gold and purple of the drama teacher. We loved the eye-popping palette of bright sherbet colours used for tops and jackets. The gentler character of Gabrielle Montez was dressed slightly more "sweetly" to contrast with the more extrovert girls.

SOUND AND LIGHT:

Spots were well used, including for picking out the school announcer, Jack Scott, in his studio booth. The lighting for the romantic rooftop duet was just right, as was the general lighting plot for everything from gym to rehearsal room to school theatre. The light really picked out the colours and fabrics of the costumes.

The sound could be a little bit distorted at times, which is not unusual with personal mics.

MUSIC:

The living legend that is Phil Toms led an excellent band in the pit. Slightly louder than the singers at times but a brilliant part of the production.

The songs and routines were delivered with enthusiasm and empathy. *Get Your Head In The Game* is always a showstopper, even without the bouncing of actual basketballs, and the equally popular *We're All In This Together* was powerfully performed, and encapsulated the spirit of the show.

The high spot for me is always the roof garden love duet, *I Can't Take My Eyes Off Of You*, and we were certainly not disappointed. Kieran and Poppy handled the mood and the harmonies extremely well.

CHOREOGRAPHY:

I'm including the acrobatic cheerleaders in this. They got the show off to a high-energy start that was jaw-dropping. Throughout the show, the choreography by Shelley Fenn and assistant Sophie Hill was full of energy and very well-drilled. Well done to them and to all the dancers/cheerleaders.

Sharpay and her brother Ryan's featured dance (and its rehearsal) was very entertaining and well performed. Skilled, yet comical.

PERFORMANCE:

With such a big cast, it's sadly not possible to mention all the performers by name, especially without a script to consult for accuracy, but everyone showed focus and enthusiasm for their role, large or modest. From cheerleaders to jocks, from skaters to supporting characters to Brainacs, it wouldn't have been such an explosion of vitality without you.

TROY BOLTON: Kieran Wingrove played the athletic and skilful star of the school basketball team.

Under the thumb of his father/coach, Troy has a tough time, but softens when he falls for the art of singing and for newbie, Gabriella. Kieran reflected these moods, even though I didn't totally believe there was chemistry in the romance. But he proved he could sing, which made him a doubly good fit for this leading role.

Get Your Head In The Game was confidentially sung and reprised, with Troy at the helm.

GABRIELLA MONTEZ: Poppy Taylor made the character of Brainiac Gabriella a clear contrast to many of the other girls - slightly shy and sweet-natured. Poppy's lovely singing voice was a delight, and the duet with Kieran was, as mentioned, a high spot.

SHARPAY EVANS: Queen Bee and drama star of the school, Sharpay is a real show-off. Rhianna Gregory strutted her stuff with loads of confidence and all the right poses, smiles and pouts. Just occasionally we found her voice a bit shrill. Her practice dance and eventual performance with her brother was fantastic.

RYAN EVANS : Well done to Fionn Crickett for bringing the reluctant Ryan to life so realistically on stage. Fionn was always watchable and often funny - but still proved she could dance the routine with exhaustive flair.

CHAD DANFORTH: one of the "Jocks" and a good friend to Troy. James was a very supportive mate and created a likeable character.

TAYLOR McKESSIE: Madison Austin brought us a girl who was nice - but not boring. Taylor had become a good friend to Gabriella, and Madison fleshed this out into a pleasing personality. Good voice too.

ZEKE BAYLOR: Amusingly lovelorn when it came to the dazzling angel that is Sharpay Evans, poor Zeke built up to his big moment of presenting her with a cake. Lewis Andrews never overplayed his character's setbacks, and by the time it came to the cake, his blundering was done so neatly, it could almost have been missed!

JACK SCOTT: The school's announcer. Jack McConnell delivered all his observations very clearly and moved and and out of his spotlight with faultless speed. Rather cute in a nerdy way!

KELSI NIELSON: The creative musician of her year, well played by Cleo Gunn, who was studious and likeable.

MS DARBUS: The OTT, impassioned and flamboyant drama teacher, encapsulated delightfully in Hattie Phillips' performance.

COACH BOLTON: I know he was a bit of a bully towards Troy, but I did enjoy Jamie March's straight-down-the line adult portrayal of the earnest and determined man behind the basketball team. It came over as a good character-study and I found him watchable.

DIRECTION:

Rhianna Howard's long expertise in the Witham drama world showed clearly throughout and she had woven the component parts of acting, dancing and athleticism together skilfully with the other leading creators. The sheer energy and physical skills stood out for us. However, I found it a little difficult to differentiate between brainiacs and non-brainiacs most of the time.

SUMMARY:

The entire ensemble can feel proud, collectively, of the energy and enthusiasm of this production. The audience was equally enthusiastic, so well done.

Thanks for an exhaustingly entertaining evening.