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Schoolhouse Rock Live Too!



Learning the multiplication table has never been this fun. Even for adults.

Greenway Court theatre's new fast-paced production of "Schoolhouse Rock Live Too!" has its share of catchy melodies, brilliant dancing, and gimmicky (and neat) use of gadgetry. But for the most part, it's just a boatload of educational fun.

The show is a sequel of sorts to "Schoolhouse Rock Live!," a musical based on the 1970s television series that taught children the basics of history, English, science, and math. Unlike its prequel though, "Schoolhouse Rock Live Too!" encapsulates the songs in a story involving a hard-on-its-luck diner begging for some roadside business. Helped by a job-searcher, a teacher, an aspiring singer, the cook, and the waitress, the owner comes up with wacky ideas for how to make the café popular to bring in business. Of course, a lot of these ideas are either taken (Circus Circus, like the Las Vegas casino) or totally ridiculous (giant petting zoo diner), so the songs keep coming until an idea strikes.

One of the most popular songs from the Schoolhouse Rock franchise is "I'm Just a Bill," about how an animated roll of paper can go from a small town to Congress, and eventually to become a Law. This version, performed primarily by the chef Cookie (Michael Lopez), is more melodic and addictive than the one you saw on TV. Moreover, the arguing Congresswomen in the background and the giant Bill walking into the room add a comedic touch.

Lopez's comedic talents are also on display in the numerous songs about numbers, as in how to multiply one number by another. "I Got Six," "Naughty Number Nine," "Lucky Seven Sampson," and "Good Eleven" are just some examples. Most memorably, the café owner Nina (Lisa Tharps) does a spotlight solo in "Naughty Number Nine" while Cookie and the gang plays imaginary pool in the background. The setup is perfect for a dramatic 1940s Casablanca-like movie moment. Only she's singing about multiplying nine by six, or by nine, or how to use a shortcut instead.

Modern education often comes with modern technology. In "Schoolhouse Rock Live Too!" that technology is manifest as a camcorder connected to a flat-panel display above the stage seen by the audience, designed by director Rick Sparks and company. One way the impromptu videography creates humor is by focusing on details while the main action moves forward. In "I'm Just a Bill," for example, we see Julie (Jayme Lake) and Rebecca (Tricia Kelly) getting into it as a couple of Congressladies while Cookie sings his song. Another way the video creates magic is by allowing the audience to see themselves, as in "Interjections," when a love-sick Rebecca latches onto an audience member and plants both a flower and a kiss on him (all in the effort to teach the use of the exclamation mark). We would not have seen it without the big screen.

A musical based on educational films can't please everyone. The songs from the production seem to all run together, with not many breaks or slow stuff in between. Often it feels rushed trying to finish a one and a half hour production that maintains the kids in the audience until the very end. The connections between the songs are often contrived, as when Lucky (Harley Jay) catches on Nina's phrase "the eleventh hour" to suddenly start singing about heaven in "Good Eleven." But you've got to expect that once in a while in a musical.

The most hilarious song in the show belongs to the schoolteacher Tom (Brian Wesley Turner), as he sings about how to manage your finance in "Tax Man Max." In our particular production, Turner was facing some issues with the microphone, and we could tell he had to sing extra loud in order for all the little kids to hear. He dons a pink and yellow tux and dances around three ladies that embodied finance, capital, and banking, singing about how we should "keep our receipts." At the end, his slacks hilariously come off, revealing green underwear, and "entertaining us with tax."

So learning about how "many things tax deductible" and "April 15th" can be fun too, especially for adults.

Get your educational fix at Greenway Court theatre in the Fairfax area (www.schoolhouserockla.com), where "Schoolhouse Rock Live Too!" runs through July 26, 2009.

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