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'High School Musical': Young cast has a blast

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They're all in this together.

The Rose Theater's production of "High School Musical," which opened Friday night, flies highest in big, old-fashioned production numbers when a young cast of 39 fills the cavernous stage with sharp singing and dancing.

Half this troupe is high school kids, many of whom knew the score of the Disney Channel hit by heart before auditions. So, when they cut loose, the energy level hits you like a wall.

Either they're really good actors, or those kids are having a blast up there.

From "Start of Something New" to the closing medley of the show's best-known songs, choreographer Sue Gillespie Booton and musical director Kevin Smith have rehearsed both chorus and leads to a glossy shine. Show stoppers included "Get'cha Head in the Game" and "We're All in This Together."

Just as important, director Rob Urbinati has carefully shaped the onstage action so that eyes are directed to the focal point of every scene - not a simple trick with such a large cast and playing area. With the exception of a couple of minor timing issues, the show moved crisply at a Thursday night preview, playing at just a shade over two hours, including intermission...

Austin Learned, as basketball star Troy, and Katie Breen, as brainiac Gabriella, blended in fine harmony on duets like "What I've Been Looking For" and "Breaking Free." The two shake up the school when they defy their cliques to audition together for the school musical.

That doesn't sit well with drama queen Sharpay and her brother Ryan, who are used to getting lead roles every year. Stephanie Kidd, as Sharpay, turned in some fine character acting as the show's villainess, while Anthony Abdallah, as Ryan, exaggerated his dance moves to humorous effect.

Standouts in supporting roles: Wendy Eaton as drama teacher Ms. Darbus, Nick Yaksich and Brandon Bennett as Troy's best-pal teammates, Ona Ramsey as a brainiac who likes to break-dance, and Robert Williams as the school deejay.

Urbinati did a masterful job of moving the masses in and out without breaking tempo, thanks in part to large revolving panels in Mark Parrott's scenery.

Costume designer Carole Zacek's schoolkid clothes gave the show a contemporary look, and Wildcat spirit came through in red, white and black...

But the real star of this show is that foot-stomping, arm-snapping, all-out belting chorus. Kids in the audience could be heard singing along to nearly every song, while adults tapped toes and clapped along.

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