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Edit:Undo Is Student Done

Cappies Premiere Original Musical at Kennedy Center

by Janet Rems

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As far back as he can remember, as early as first and second grade, Robinson Secondary School graduate Robert Rome, 18, has been “passionate” about writing.

Marshall High School graduate Austin Powell, also 18, feels the same way about music, especially composing and performing it.

“There was always music around my home,” said Powell, a baritone who dates composing his own music back to middle school.

Powell, who recently studied Music Technology at the Fairfax Academy, added the talents of guitarist in 8th grade and pianist in 10th grade.

Rome and Powell, both avid participants in high school theater, are part of the nine-student team-- three composers, three lyricists, and three book writers from seven high schools in Virginia and Maryland--who created an original musical for the Cappies International Theater.

Advised by Cappies co-founder William Strauss and Brant Challacombe, musical director of the Baltimore Cappies, the student team created “Edit:Undo,” which tells a tale of “teenage life, love, and technology at the dawn of the 21st century ... ‘Grease’ for a new generation.”

The musical, whose score includes 16 original songs, is the first work commissioned by the Cappies (Critics and Awards Program for High School Theater) for its summer program at the Kennedy Center.

Its cast includes 39 high school thespians from throughout the United States and Canada, who earned lead Cappie Awards this year in school plays and musicals in their various cities.

“Edit:Undo” previews Sunday, Aug. 6, at W.T. Woodson High School in Fairfax, followed by its “world premiere” Monday and Tuesday, Aug. 7 and 8, at the Theater Lab of the Kennedy Center.

According to a summary provided by the Cappies, the new musical's title was inspired by the computer function in which you fix a mistake by clicking "edit" and then "undo." The musical's characters learn that life is not so simple.

"People aren't pixels; the future doesn't have a drop-down menu or an escape button, and digital game playing can get in the way of real relationships," the summary explains.

Relationships—in the book and music of the show and in the actual creative process—was the essence of their collaborative experience, which started last October, said Powell, a member of the composing team, and Rome, one of the three book writers.

Both said until this experience, they mostly created alone.

Powell, who is headed to the College of William and Mary in the fall, perhaps to study mathematics, discovered he thoroughly enjoyed brainstorming and then, with fellow team members, plus actors and directors, "having to go back again and again ... making stuff that didn't work even better."

A fan of classic rock by artists such as Pink Floyd, Bob Seeger and Billy Joel, Powell, who was responsible for about a half dozen songs, said he especially liked composing ballads. "Faster songs tend to have one melody," he explained. "Ballads force you to take the music elsewhere. ... They are the ones that helped me grow [musically]."

Rome, who will be a freshman at Stanford University in the fall, said working in such a collaborative way was not only "entirely unique" but "probably the best learning I've ever experienced ... unbelievable, a dream for a just graduated high school student."

Rome—who has written short stories, several as yet unfinished novels and a play presented at Robinson this year—said among the important skills he honed was learning to be more selfless, compromising and articulate about his own writing.

The experience, which "pushed far beyond the level recognized as high school quality," also gave him the opportunity to "explore the human condition" and to create funny and idiosyncratic characters, "dynamically different from one another."

The results, he added, should be "enlightening for all generations."

Powell said he was introduced to the project by Cappies co-founder Judy Bowns, a longtime family friend.

Rome, who decided to participate after hearing about the project while working as a Cappies critic, has theater in his DNA. Rome's father, Douglas "Chip" Rome, has been the theater director at Robinson for 25 years. His maternal grandmother, Viola Harris, is a busy professional stage, film and television actor as was his late grandfather, who met his grandmother while working on Broadway. His sister, too, has done some professional stage management work. Only his mother, who heads the social work department at George Mason University, doesn't tread the boards.

After working so long and hard on "Edit:Undo," Rome and Powell are both super excited to see their work performed, especially at a top venue as the Kennedy Center.

"A play is not complete until it is performed. ... That will be the most fulfilling part," Rome said.