

Do Re MySpace

Something Clicks in the Experimental Teen Musical 'Edit: Undo'

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Offstage, there's been the usual high school drama, and onstage there's been more of the same.

It's all part of the creation of "Edit: Undo," an experimental musical that debuts tonight in a two-day run at the Kennedy Center's Theater Lab.

Last week in the auditorium at Fairfax's W.T. Woodson High School, 39 high school actors from around the country had the surreal experience of learning how to play high school students using a script and score conceived, written and composed by high school students.

The props and costumes were from high school, too. The chairs onstage were carried from the cafeteria down the hall. The graduation robes were donated by a neighboring school. The "Dance Dance Revolution" video game came from the prop master's basement. The iPods, backpacks, cellphones, hair clips, binders, sneakers and laptops were all the actors' own.

And that half-eaten pizza sitting backstage -- "Is that for the next scene?" a techie asked. No, that was lunch.

Onstage, slouching on a couch playing a video game, the football-playing female protagonist complains after getting a one-day suspension: "There goes law school."

"Edit: Undo" is not the time-worn story of high school crushes and clique wars, although there is some of that. What's most unusual about the musical is also what's most unusual about this generation of high-schoolers: the digital boom. When the characters onstage chat about being "Me-myself-and-I-space" friends, it's with a snicker. Offstage, online, the actors are part of the Myspace.com group Edit: Undo.

The two-act, 16-song musical centers on female jock Rory and her love interest, a wannabe video game designer who leads the tech-savvy students of fictional Wiley High ("Wi-Hi") into a strike against the town's adults. The kids say they're through helping with iPods, cellphones and TV on Demand. The teens sing such songs as "Ring Our Phones," which turns the ubiquitous buzz of a cellphone ringtone into high art, and snap along to "O-M-G, L-O-L," a doo-wop number sung by the school's reigning three cheerleaders, who speak in chat room shorthand. But although the kids are having a great time, Wiley's adults devolve into a bunch of doddering fools in high-rise khakis and bad hairdos. It's a comedy about the strife between parents and children and the difficulties of the 21st century, as seen through the eyes of teens.

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(Photos By Jessica Tefft For The Washington Post)

The teen savvy that is suggested onstage is evident offstage, too: Kids are just fine without adult supervision. (A few adults, however, do have some involvement.)

Over the past five years, the Critics and Awards Program for High School Theater has asked student critics in high schools all over the country to help pick the year's best student actors. The top vote-getters are invited to Washington in mid-July to form the all-star cast of the summer "Cappies" production. Talented 14- to 18-year-olds have come from as far off as California and South Florida and stay with host families when they're not at grueling 12-hour rehearsals.

This is the first year that the show has also been written by high-schoolers. All the students who worked on the script live in the D.C. area. Since October, the team has met every Sunday at the McLean home of Cappies volunteer Bill Strauss, cofounder of the Capitol Steps troupe.

"People say teens today aren't interested in real theater, that they don't read, they don't write," Strauss said. "But here you have teens who are not only interested in theater -- they wrote their own show."

At a table in the school's empty cafeteria last week sat 18-year-old writer Robert Rome of Fairfax's Robinson High, who has written several plays and performed in Scotland. "There are musicals that appeal to teens, and there are musicals about teens that appeal to adults," Rome said. "There are no teen musicals about teens, for teens. This is it."

What Rome and his co-authors came up with is confidently advertised as a "new musical comedy for the digital age . . . not your typical standard conventional formulaic high school musical." The students who wrote "Edit: Undo" have no use for Disney's adult-written "High School Musical," and studied the conventions of "Mean Girls," "Heathers" and "Grease" in order to destroy them.

"We hated the character of a jock bully," said K.K. Bracken, 16, of Fairfax, who fleshed out Rory's character in the script -- she's a girl who is great at sports, gets straight A's and still is not that popular. The writers populated Wiley High with what they saw in their own high schools: kids who could be confident in one situation but insecure in another. Girlie-girls could feel threatened by tomboys, jocks could feel unsure in a roomful of computer geeks. In "Edit: Undo," dorks tease jocks with such lines as "I don't even think she has a screen name."

Another high school stereotype, the naturally brilliant pothead, is turned goofy in the musical, mouthing tired platitudes. ("The only thing necessary for, like, the triumph of evil is for good people to, like, do nothing.") And adults aren't reduced to the stereotype of Charlie Brown's blithering voice boxes; they often make their own children seem absurd, mocking them in PTA meetings for "roaming the malls, where they buy \$200 pre-ripped, pre-faded jeans that don't even fit properly over their bottoms."

The young composers tried to write songs that spoke of high school's universal realities--the hard crush (thus, "Falling in Like") and great tragedies, such as having to wake up far too early (the catchy "Seven A.M.," sung by students half-dozing at their desks). Other numbers were more experimental. One song puts dancers in the costumes of instant-messenger emoticons.

"It's all an exaggeration of the everyday high school experience," said Dallas Sweezy of Chantilly, who plays a loner Goth kid with kohl-ringed eyes, "but it's closer to it than most."

At a dress rehearsal, Jess Speck, a teacher at Montgomery County's Churchill High School and the adult called in to direct, assumed the whole cast was listening to her notes. In reality, Sweezy and two friends were playing "The Legend of Zelda" on a laptop computer, held just below the level of the seat in front, while down the row an actor played a high-speed car chase game on a cellphone. Speck, 30, called out props she noted were missing -- where were those pencils to outfit the villainous Mr. Langston, owner of the Abacus Pencil Co.? Did no one bring a single pencil?

No one brought a flashlight, either. To follow the script in the darkened wings, these 21st-century teens use illuminated cellphone screens. They also use their phones as lights in the play, onstage. A self-described "stoner kid," leaning nonchalantly against the grubby high school tile, 17-year-old Cincinnati actor Kyle Smith effused the "too-cool" attitude of a 21st-century James Dean. He claimed he was "typecast" for the role of "stoner kid" Kyle Thompson. "When I come in to rehearsal late, they're like, 'Whoa, this is perfect, he's in character!'"

"But I'm, like, not acting," Smith said. "I am Kyle."

Either everything offstage had become material for the production onstage, or what was onstage was a good mirror for life off of it. When the character of Maxwell compares the video-game formula that tempts players "up-a-level" to the pressures of SATs, AP courses and college that loom over high school students, he says, "Art imitates life imitates art."...