

Academy's Imaginary Explores the Wonder of Childhood



If you've never heard of the Academy Players' latest production, *Imaginary*, you're not alone. A venture commissioned and produced by National Youth Music Theatre, the musical first made its debut in London in 2017. Its history is not a long one — short enough that posters still declare it “a new musical” — and it is mostly confined to school productions and youth theater groups; it's certainly never had its day on Broadway. With no warning of what to expect save for a synopsis describing it as “an exciting, funny and inspiring musical about the wonder of childhood, the power of the imagination and what it means to grow up,” I feared I was in for something hokey and campy.

To my pleasant surprise, *Imaginary* thoroughly charmed me.

As you might expect of a show about childhood, a good portion of the cast are children, including the two main characters, Sam and Milo. The two are best friends who go on all kinds of adventures together. As Sam starts school, his mother (Hailey Deltano) worries that Milo is a bad influence on him, keeping his head in the clouds when he needs to start becoming more grounded. It's no easy feat for a child to carry a show, but Olivia Dufresne manages it beautifully. Both she and Mia Daley as Milo deliver some impressive vocals, and the two have fantastic chemistry. Daley in particular has some impressively sophisticated acting chops, bringing to life Milo's free-spirited and fun-loving nature, but not at the expense of his more somber moments.

When Sam gets to school, it turns out his adventures are not over. It turns out the school is run by the evil Headmaster, who employs mind control to turn students into imagination-less test-taking robots (I think I went to this school). He is aided in his efforts by a staff of equally evil teachers, including a seductive I.T. teacher, a punishment-happy mathematics teacher, a German business teacher and a P.E. teacher who speaks exclusively in grunts (I definitely went to this school). As in any children's story, the antagonists are villainous to an absurd degree, but also goofily quirky. They have a bit of a Lemony Snicket vibe to them. Michael Carnevale is deliciously evil as the Headmaster, as are Alex Rothstein, Allii Fontaine, Hailey Deltano and Marc Cesana Jr. as teachers-turned-henchpeople. They are particularly hilarious in the number “Those Were the Days” in which they reminisce about the days of corporal punishment.

To face these horrors, Sam makes a new friend, Alice (Megan Pinto). Alice knows the truth about the Headmaster's evil deeds, as her older sister, Jess (Avieana Rivera) has already fallen victim. They sing a lovely duet as Alice longs for their relationship pre-mind control in "She Played Guitar." Together, Alice and Sam scheme to restore the imaginations of their peers without meeting the same fate.

Another standout includes Makenna Beaudoin, as Big Brenda, whose looks are as wild as her presence is commanding (think Matron Mama Morton from *Chicago* in her experimental makeup phase). She rules over Imaginary Land, a sort of Island of Misfit Toys where imaginary friends go once their imaginer has grown up. Imaginary Land is any costumer's dream; there's room to really go wild with all manners of sparkly, colorful garb (I wasn't surprised to learn many of the costumes came from dancers' closets). Another resident of Imaginary Land is the endearing Oogie (Orlando Montalvo), who waits in vain by the phone for his human friend to summon him back.

The music (Stuart Matthew Price) is whimsical and runs the gamut from sweet and sentimental ("She Played Guitar" and "All the Fun You Had") to soulful ("It's Your Time") to big energetic dance numbers ("Imaginary Land" and "Oogie Woogie Boogie") with standard-fare choreography by Brianna Geyer. One standout number is "The Best," a montage of various parents getting their kids ready for their first day of school. In addition to being funny, it also highlights the fantastic supporting cast and ensemble. Musical and vocal directors (E. Justin Simone and Lauren Vine, respectively) did a brilliant job coaching this talented cast of kids and adults alike. The book and lyrics by children's author Timothy Knapman are charming and filled with emotional ups and downs and even a few plot twists, though the resolution felt a bit rushed.

Alexander Sprague's lighting design particularly stands out toward the end as it's used to represent kids' imaginations. As is often my complaint with *Academy*, there were sound issues, including balance problems between lead vocals, backup vocals and the band. There were also issues with some mics going in and out, which lead to some important lines being lost in the fray.

Imaginary

is Pixar-like in that it is clearly made with young audiences in mind, but it also has something for adult audiences, too. It fuels the child in us all and reminds us that growing up does not mean leaving imagination behind.

New, original musicals often have an uphill battle: case in point, my own reservations coming into this show. Audiences like shows they have some familiarity with — why do you think Broadway is currently filled with movies-turned-musicals? But lest such shows take over the theater world, it's worth taking a chance on new, unknown shows. Every so often, there will be a gem like this one.

Academy

Players' Imaginary runs at the James and Gloria Maron Cultural Arts Center through Sept 29. For tickets, visit brownpapertickets.com/event/4283216