

Heathers – The Musical, review

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By Paul Wozniak for the *Lansing City Pulse*

Fatally funny

Peppermint Creek's 'Heathers' delivers laughs with dark humor



Let's get one thing out of the way. "Heathers: The Musical" is a dark — more like black — satire. If you haven't seen the '80s cult film on which it's based, you've now been warned. That said, if you loved "Heathers" the movie, or if you just love dark humor, you will love "Heathers: The Musical." Peppermint Creek Theatre Company's current production is wicked fun.

Like its source material, "Heathers: The Musical" is a bleak, politically incorrect, snarkfest set in an upscale Ohio high school. At the top of the student caste system are the infamous Heathers (played by Emma Kron-Deacon, Kylie Densmore and Taylor Rupp), a trio of beautiful but malicious seniors who act as judge and jury over anyone they deem unworthy — which is basically everyone else. After Veronica Sawyer (Ellie Weise) is exiled from the Heathers after brief membership in the clique, she seeks justice with the help of her new friend, J.D. (Adam Woolsey). Veronica slowly discovers that J.D. has a more deadly plan for fixing the school's bullying problems.

"Heathers" is definitely a period piece, and the production elements work best when planted in that decade. Thankfully, the script is not a carbon copy of the film. The music, lyrics and book by Laurence O'Keefe and Kevin Murphy allow space for songs while still retaining most of the film's best lines, like "Bulimia is so '87". The eye-popping costumes, designed by Morgan and Shannon Bowen, perfectly captured the color and style of the decade while clearly denoting the characters and their place in the social pecking order. And the best songs — sharply directed by John Dale Smith and choreographed by Karyn Perry — sound like pop music from the '80s. Like any good period piece, the decade appropriate nods help the story and characters feel authentic without seeming dated. Other production elements, including the set and lighting design by Nick Eaton, are simple yet effective.

The cast, directed with "low budget" innovation and professional polish by Blake Bowen, is superb, with finely tuned character details that make the audience love even the most despicable villains. Kron-Deacon, Densmore and Rupp are deliciously daft and malicious as the Heathers. Zach Riley and Brian Farnham, as Ram Sweeney and Kurt Kelly, respectively, are the funniest jocks/bullies/miscreants you will ever see on stage. With a level of gleeful stupidity that is downright infectious, this "Beavis and Butthead"-style pair make every scene their own. "Blue," their song about relieving their sexual tension, is a first act highlight, as is their slow motion fight with J.D. (choreographed by Curran Jacobs). Fortunately, the script allows the characters life even after their physical deaths, providing some of the best moments for Riley, Farnham and Kron-Deacon.

Weise is strongest as an actress, powered by Wynona Ryder-level spunk. Her chemistry with J.D. lights the stage. Woolsey might not pass as a high-schooler as easily as Weise, but his strong face and dark eyebrows are the perfect tools to convey J.D.'s nihilistic "fight fire with fire" attitude. Weise is not as experienced a singer as Woolsey, and she consistently struggled with her high notes, but her character is pitch perfect.

Featured actors Teriah Flemming as Martha "Dump Truck" Dunnstock, Laura Croff as Mrs. Flemming and Joe Quick as Ram's father each get solo songs and do not disappoint. Croff delivers her Act II showstopper, "Shine a Light," resplendent in a sparkly vest, and Quick shines in his musical eulogy, "My Dead Gay Son". But Flemming's melancholy "Kindergarten Boyfriend" beautifully sums up the show's theme: Some people get really mean when they grow up. Fortunately for audiences, watching that meanness is a joy.