

The "Fame" monster

Capital Kids get an E for Effort

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The Volcano; Published May 11, 2011

When Capital Playhouse "parted ways" with its spiritual leader last year, they also bagged *Kiss of the Spider Woman* in favor of *Fame*. I reported that it was a good idea, and from a commercial standpoint, it still is. Nothing I say here will change that. Also, if you're related to a member of its largely adolescent cast, I understand why you gave it a standing ovation on opening night. There are plenty of talented young people in the cast who deserve credit for their work on the show. They'll get it here.

Unfortunately, what doesn't deserve credit, or even an Incomplete, is the play itself. It's just awful, for lots of the same reasons *Glee* annoys and for plenty of others besides.

So let's start with the performers. Sierra Campbell-Unsoeld is well-cast as feisty Latina (more on that in a minute) Carmen Diaz. Anton? a Darlene, who you may well remember from her show-stopping "Let It Be" in last summer's *Sixties Kicks*, throws her astonishing voice into Mabel and top-notch choral work. Emily Brine and Gordon Shaughnessy are entirely naturalistic as members of a garage band. Carolyn Willems Van Dijk reveals unexpected balletic ability, including a solo on point. These are merely the best in a generally earnest and capable cast. It's the music and book that earn failing grades.

Not long into "Can't Keep It Down," an engorged tribute to engorgement, I thought, *This might be the worst song I've ever heard in a musical*. (Only "Reproduction" in *Grease 2* gives it a run for its money.) Then the contest was settled in Act II, which rewards a teacher for striking a student, not by summarily firing her, but by letting her sob through the insufferable "These Are My Children." It wasn't anything Holly Harmon did wrong. Bernadette Peters couldn't redeem that number. The only good song is the main theme, the one the composer didn't write. As for the dancing, it's enthusiastic but sloppy throughout.

One gets the sense that the writers have never been anywhere near a school for the performing arts. Harrison Fry is stranded in the role of the worst acting teacher alive. (Acting is not psychotherapy, no matter what expensive shysters in LA insist.) And then there are those ethnic clichés, which were embarrassing in 1984 and intolerable now. Of *course* the black kid is an illiterate braggart named Tyrone. Of *course* the girl "of size" is named Mabel and eats all the

time. Of *course* the Jewish student is a bookish "old soul" named Schlomo. And of *course*, there's a gay kid; except not really, of course, because then the students couldn't make fun of gay kids. And of course the Latina's feisty, and of *course* this leads to an *Afterschool Special* demise. I mean, seriously.

I recently had the experience of watching half a dozen short plays written by Olympia High School students. Hands down, their dialogue was better.