



Theatre & Opera

Picture: ROBERT DAY

GRIPPING: Julia Atherton and Simon Bailey in *Once Upon a Time at the Adelphi*

A clichéd

IN THE same week that the West End-born feel-good musical hit *Mamma Mia!* is making a triumphant leap to the big screen, a little made-for-satellite-TV movie is making its own big London stage debut. And just as adult cinema audiences are now dancing in the aisles of their local multiplexes, the vast but decrepit Hammersmith Apollo is now witness to the deafening roars of the mostly tweenage audiences that are packing in to see **High School Musical** there, while a simultaneous UK tour is going around the country.

Resistance is ultimately futile: from the moment the curtain goes up and the screaming begins – both on stage in the screeching over-amplification of its generic pop score, and off stage thanks to those fans – any adults who have come along for the ride may just have to surrender and go with the flow.

It certainly occurred to me that I was roughly 30 to 35 years above the age of the intended target audience of 10- to 15-year-olds.

It's as if panto has arrived early – and they're even selling those

STAGE

By Mark Shenton



flashing light sticks and bunny ears in the lobby to prove it. But then this has now become more of a merchandise opportunity than a show; I'm only sorry that Disney weren't keen to spend as much money on this property as they evidently plan on making from it.

Unlike their still-sensational screen-to-stage translation of *The Lion King* – which uses the magic of live theatre to give amazing 3D life to an animated feature – Jeff Calhoun's scrappy, unadventurous live staging of *High School Musical* seems to want to redraw it into a show of thin, cartoon-strip characterisations that are both flatter and fatter on stage than they were on film.

The actors are constantly encouraged to push too hard and play too big – Letitia Dean, in particular, is a bundle of comic clichés as the drama teacher

Mrs Darbus – while Mark Evans and Claire-Marie Hall have to cloyingly chart the chaste romance between Troy, the jock, and Gabrielle, the swot, as they also try to fulfil their dreams of starring in their own class musical.

The story may be *Grease-lite*; but the anodyne way it plays out makes *Grease* seem like *Trainspotting*.

There's more art, heart and above all charm in **Once Upon A Time At The Adelphi**, a brand-new musical that is rare for being both indigenous and ingenious as it receives its premiere as part of the European Capital of Culture celebrations in Liverpool.

As ghosts of the past collide with the present through a story set in the eponymous Liverpool hotel, writer/director Phil Wilmott's vividly characterised, poignantly told and appealingly tuneful show is original and the best new musical to hail from this city since *Blood Brothers*.

Noel Coward once set a show, *Semi-Monde*, in a hotel, too, but Wilmott does far better to anchor the impressionistic flow of life and incident in one here.

Nobody, however, ever bettered Coward when it came to portraits of theatrical monsters, and Manchester's new production of **Hay Fever**, his scintillatingly funny, devastatingly cruel portrait of a family who simply can't stop acting, and can't help themselves behaving badly as they do so, couldn't be bettered, either.

The artful artificiality of Coward's characters is usually put at a distance by a conventional proscenium staging but, put in the round, as it is here, it is drawn into more shaming close-up that gains both more depth and surprise, with Belinda Lang presiding over her dysfunctional family with a regal grace that is properly disgraceful.

1 Disney's HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL ★★☆☆☆

Hammersmith Apollo, London W6
(Tickets: 0844 847 2397; £10-£45)

2 ONCE UPON A TIME AT THE ADELPHI

★★★★☆
Liverpool Playhouse
(Tickets: 0151 709 4776; £10-£22)

3 HAY FEVER ★★★★★

Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester
(Tickets: 0161 833 9833; £8.50-£28)