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Theater review | Dark humor amplifies the dangerous emotions in 'Heathers'

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Musicals about high school usually operate at a nostalgic remove, keeping the pain and confusion of adolescence safely contained.

Ohio State University's bravura production of "Heathers," directed impeccably by Mandy Fox, does just the opposite, immersing the viewer in operatically oversized emotions, amplified rather than held in check by dark humor.

The musical, based on the cult film, plays with its images, dialogue and plot, but in this production at least, what was originally cool is transformed into the heat of a fever dream.

The action is seen through the shell-shocked eyes of high school senior Veronica (Shelby Martell), a high school nerd determined to earn at least one year of social status.

To do so, she must serve the three "Heathers" (Hannah Halischak, revealing sharp comic timing and inflection; a feisty Jasmine Michelle Smith; and a secretly vulnerable Abigail Marie Johnson), and put up with their less brainy male counterparts (Leo de Andrade and Dane Morey, forming a classic comic team.)

That is, until she falls in with troubled but fascinating new kid J.D. (Albert Coyne), whose ideas about cleaning up the school take revenge to an extreme.

Martell, with a strong voice and touching bravado, provides a heart for the show. If Coyne is not her vocal equal, his acting, which makes J.D. both dangerous and attractive, compensates for that relative weakness.

Brad Steinmetz's eerie, seemingly dust-covered and constantly shifting set and Kristine Kearney's disturbingly bright, clashing costumes add to the sense of shadowy terror created by Joshua Poston's alternately bleak and stark lighting.

This isn't a musical for the squeamish. Offensive language, raunchy behavior, and violence may put off some viewers.

If these are played for laughs, however — and they often are — those aren't cheap laughs. The humor, like the drama, has something real to say about the dangerous, sometimes even fatal, process of trying to grow up.

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