



A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Trade

ACE stages world premier of *Changing Minds*

A driven, ambitious young woman wishes with her entire heart that the hottest guy/biggest slacker in school could see what a waste he's made of his life. A chill, charming young gent pleads that the uptight, Future First Citizen of Fussypants open her eyes to the fact that she needs to get a life.

They do.

Mind you, if this anti-couple hadn't been standing before an enchanted wishing well cursed centuries earlier by doomed lovers, there's no way their minds could have transported magically into one another's bodies. Obviously. But this is musical theater.

David Howard and Bret Simmons set out to write a musical that will appeal to middle and high school performers. Scraping off the Disney patina that coats the genre, Howard and Simmons have written *Changing Minds*, a rock musical that addresses high school politics, human connections and gender roles, all while maintaining the family-friendly atmosphere.

In many ways, this is a perfect school musical. It requires no orchestra, only a small rock band easily culled from a nearby garage. The cast is large, and there are several very interesting roles. Among my favorites of the secondary characters are Freddy (Eric Blanchard) and Shelly (Tracey Pacana), two bespectacled dweebs on the cusp of romance singing "Download My Love" to the doo-wops of the computer lab geeks. Goth-boy Garrett (Mark Van Beaver) sees a conspiracy in everything and launches into a *Thriller*-like song and dance with "Supernatural." All in all, there are 13 real roles that get to sing — aspiring young actors across America, say hallelujah!

The two lead roles are delightfully challenging. Imagine the fun Sophie Mitchell has playing Natalie as she presents her "conspicuously ambitious" book report about rebel women from the past who "stick it to the man." Then think about how much more fun it gets after a paranormal brain switch finds her employing the walk

and facial expressions of an 18-year-old skater dude used to getting what he wants.

Trevor Eichorn is funny as Kyle, a slacker who's made an art of managing to get out of everything. But he's downright soulful in a man's body overtaken by a woman's mind, singing a beautiful song, "Being Me," about being smart and driven in an attempt to be popular and find a boyfriend at the cost of her own identity.

Of course, all of this brain switching opens questions about gender roles, along with some age-appropriate lessons about being one's self, accepting help from others and doing the right thing.

There are times in *Changing Minds* where Simmons and Howard totally nail teen angst, like the opening scene of Natalie awaiting a scholarship letter that will decide her fate: future U.S. Senator or shoe sales clerk. Then there are a few parts that are just too cheeseball. And if I'm rolling my eyes, how will those lines strike your world-weary tween?

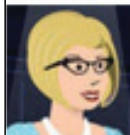
I, and perhaps many students, would prefer more of an edge to the story and a little less required suspension of disbelief. At the script's most authentic moments, you can feel the energy shift, and the kids on stage just go for it. When it pigeonholes them into stereotypes, they play to expectations.

Ultimately, Howard and Simmons have worked to create a play that will appeal to students and the brave souls who step forth to direct them. They've done their research, listening to the needs of directors and the advice of their own teenage children.

Changing Minds is being staged at ACE to work out the kinks before a final copy is handed over to the publisher. What's needed now is an audience of kids to judge that work. I had a great time watching the talented young people of the cast belt out fun, new songs and work the kooky plot to a resolution. Will kids? Grab a ticket for your favorite human between the ages of 10 and 20 and find out. **EW**

Changing Minds runs at Actors Cabaret of Eugene June 24-July 23; tickets and info at www.actorscabaret.org

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