Rousing fanfare

Natasha Wong finds something more than a mere school concert in The Music Man

Many school concerts are small affairs — with rickety sets and costumes that are hastily thrown together. But that’s not the style of Y.M.C.A of Hong Kong Christian College, which thinks big, especially when it comes to staging elaborate performances.

The Direct Subsidy Scheme secondary school staged a large-scale show of Meredith Willson’s The Music Man on April 8 to 10. It had a cast of more than 120 and a crew of 50.

The producer, Evans Mendesca, is a parent of one of the students. And the performance, which was seven months in the making, attracted an audience of more than 1,000 in total.

The Music Man is no lightweight show either. Winner of six Tony awards, the Broadway musical is set in 1922 in Iowa and follows traveling salesman and conman Harold Hill, played by Joseph Gagnon, as he schemes to outdo the citizens of the town.

Without intending to deliver on his promise, Hill claims he is forming a brass band for the townsfolk and needs capital for uniforms and instruments. But he falls in love with the locally upright town librarian and piano teacher, Marian Paroo.

Paroo was played by 17-year-old student Tirion Jenkins. “Since December, we rehearsed almost every day,” she said.

Jenkins was a natural for the part. Despite her youth, she was able to convincingly portray a woman in her prime. She said she owed it all to the cast. “We are in the same school and know each other so well. That’s an advantage because we could be natural during rehearsals.”

But the smooth execution of the role required a whole lot of imagination.

“To play the character you have to imagine, under certain circumstances, what she would reckon, and how she would act and behave,” she added.

The promising teenager, who is studying under the international curriculum at the school, is specializing in theater.

Paroo’s other half in Gagnon — who in real life is an English teacher at the school.

Said show director Maureen Coulter: “Gagnon teaches English at our school and has had experience as an amateur in musical theater. I feel very positive about his performance so far.”

The musical could be an inspiration in dismissing some components of the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students, which could be an obstacle that stands in the way of learning, she added.

Gagnon, who is in community theater group Hong Kong Singers, said: “In musical theaters it is always about the audience. So we need to be aware of the full expression of stage languages.

“Take the first scene, for example. Careful thought was given to the lighting so that the audience get visual clues to figure out each one’s role.”

He said acting in the musical helped him bond with his students.

“Cast members had to put aside our regular roles as teachers and students. Back to normal school days, I am happy that students have no problem showing respect to me as teacher, regardless how much they enjoy my role as a con-traveling salesman.”

Principal Nick Miller said of the musical’s lead actress, Tirion Jenkins: “A week on, I still have students smiling at me or congratulating me on the show.”

Miller, who teaches drama and English literature, added: “This is a joyful musical. The town people finally get to know who Hill truly is, and fall in love with him as an ex-con. The play reinforces the values of community spirit and not judging anyone or anything prematurely.”

In the finale, Hill is forgiven as the town begins to march through the aisle, past the audience and back on stage. As the lights went out after the show, happy crowds began to form downstairs, including student performers who refused to just go home.

It was a sight to gladden the heart of their principal, Nick Miller.

“Humans are more than just brains, arms, legs,” he said. “They are also about souls and hearts. If you’re not going to teach the reports and day-to-day soft skills such as creativity, you are not giving them an education for tomorrow’s world.”

“This is a culture that our school is building — a success culture. Once our students experience success in one area, such as having a great experience in drama, they will be able to translate and transfer that to other areas, including their academic worlds,” said Natasha Wong at the Standard International at the Hong Kong Christian College.