



'Heavenly' high school musical

Gunn choir to perform annual 'musical extravaganza' next week

BY DIANA SAMUELS

Daily News Staff Writer

During second period at Gunn High School one recent morning, about 50 freshman and sophomore girls stood in position, waiting for the piano.

"Lollipop, lollipop / Oh lolli lolli lolli" the treble choir began, their Ugg boots and Converse sneakers shuffling on the classroom's hard floor. They twirled around, holding imaginary candy in their hands.

"Smile!" choir teacher Bill Liberatore called out. "Flirt with him! It's a song about a boy— he's very cute!"

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the Uggs and jeans will be replaced by saddle shoes and poodle skirts, as Gunn's choir students stage their annual February musical extravaganza. The students, along with 50 Gunn staff members and choirs from JLS and Terman middle schools, will perform "Heavenly Bandstand," which they describe as a '50s musical valentine."

The show, written by playwright Nancy Hersage, tells the story of a high school student who falls asleep in class and dreams that she's visited by a celestial musician named Johnny Angel, who is desperate to return to Earth. To do so, he has to compete on an "American Bandstand"-style competition featuring '50s music.

"It's been a hard year at Gunn, and I think this show needed to be just fun,

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Sam Putney, 18, center, rocks out with fellow angels during a preview performance of "Heavenly Bandstand" at JLS Middle School in Palo Alto on Friday. Gunn High School's student choir, along with students from JLS and Terman middle schools, and 50 Gunn staff members, are putting on the 1950s-inspired musical about a high school senior who falls asleep in English class and is visited in her dreams by Johnny Angel, a musician who wants to make it back to Earth. To get there, he has to compete on "Heavenly Bandstand." The musical will take place at Gunn's Spangenberg Theatre on Tuesday and Wednesday.



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laughs and silly," Liberatore said.

The treble choir girls last week ran through "Rock Around the Clock" and "Tutti Frutti," preparing for a preview performance at the middle schools. "I love the idea of showing little kids the fun side of high school," Liberatore told the students.

"All they're hearing right now is what math lane are you in."

Gunn's choir was cool long before the TVshow "Glee" hit the airwaves. Liberatore has been teaching the popular classes for 20 years, and this year has about 135 students enrolled.

In addition to more formal choral performances earlier in the year, and the musical in February, the choir students each year have the opportunity to go on a trip. Last year, the students went to Vienna and Prague, and this May will go to New York, where they'll sing in a choral festival and see Broadway shows. Tickets sales from next week's performance will help pay for students who can't afford the trip.

Liberatore says his students are "all kinds of different kids ... athletes, drama kids. We become sort of our own community."

The diversity of the group is representative of Gunn, Liberatore said, where students are encouraged to try everything.

"It's totally fine if a kid is a football player and a choir singer," Liberatore said. "It's totally cool if a kid is on robotics and in the play. ... We don't make kids choose at Gunn."

Some students said they never really sang before. Malik Gill, a 15-year-old sophomore, said he and his friends decided to join after seeing last year's musical.

"At first we were singing a lot of old music, and it was kind of boring, but this show is fun," Malik said.

On the other end of the spectrum, Shivani Rustagi, a 16-year-old junior, had been in her middle school's choir and joined Gunn's as a freshman. She said she likes meeting students with "completely different interests, but they're all together for this one thing."

Most said it's simply fun.

"It's just like getting together in a huge group, being together with your friends," 14-year-old freshman Emi Kong said, "and just like laughing and talking and dancing and singing,"

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Gunn High School's "Heavenly Bandstand"

WHEN: Feb. 9 and Feb. 10 at 8 p.m.

WHERE: Spangenberg Theatre, 780 Arastradero Road, Palo Alto

HOW MUCH: Tickets are \$15 for adults and \$10 for students, and can be purchased online at www.gunnchoir.org or at the Gunn Student Activities Center



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Gunn High School's student choir, dressed in 1950s attire, including poodle skirts, dances to "Rock Around the Clock" during a preview performance of "Heavenly Bandstand" at JLS Middle School in Palo Alto on Friday.



Ami Pienknagura, 15, right, sings to a middle school student during a preview performance of "Heavenly Bandstand" at JLS Middle School in Palo Alto on Friday.

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