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'THEATER CAMP' ★★1/2

Results of largely improvised comedy pretty entertaining

By Michael Phillips
 Chicago Tribune

One of the many bright lights in Season 2 of "The Bear," Molly Gordon is all over the amiable new comedy "Theater Camp" as co-director, co-writer and co-star.

This one's a largely improvised "Best in Show"/"Waiting for Guffman"-style ensemble project, set at a summer drama program in the Adirondacks on the brink of bankruptcy. Gordon and Nick Lieberman directed. Real-life couple Ben Platt and Noah Galvin, both "Dear Evan Hansen" alums (Platt originated the role and won the Tony), also star and, along with Lieberman, are co-writers.

A lot of the movie's better jokes ended up in the trailer. "Theater Camp,"

expanded from an earlier short film and other iterations of the same premise, stretches itself a little thin, for reasons more to do with wit than plot. But it's pretty funny. And moviegoers feeling roughed up by "No Hard Feelings" and "Joy Ride" this summer now have a PG-13 comedy option.

With this one it helps, certainly, to have been a theater geek yourself—that twitchy adolescent combination of dreamer and "A Chorus Line," "On the Twentieth Century" and "Hazel Flagg" original Broadway cast album collector. Generation to generation, the show titles change but the obsession remains constant. Though anyone into "Cats" or "Miss Saigon" or the lesser of the two "Wild Party" scores deserves a little extra care



Ben Platt and Molly Gordon star as counselors in "Theater Camp." SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

and empathy.

Platt plays faculty hard-liner Amos, who has a deftly undermining way of working out his thwarted-actor frustrations on his new campers every summer. Gordon is Rebecca-Diane, equally subtly undermining ("This will crush you," she says to one student in rehearsal).

With camp founder Joan (Amy Sedaris) sidelined by a stroke, her would-be tech-bro entrepreneur son Troy (Jimmy Tatro) takes over the business end of the operation.

He's not a former theater kid, but he's about to learn what they're like, on a serious deadline. On the verge of foreclosure, the staff and

faculty of AdirondACTS (excellent name) have a scant few weeks to put on the season that must somehow save them. As always, the season culminates in Amos and Rebecca-Diane's annual original musical, this year's edition celebrating their founder. "Joan, Still," the show, gives "Theater Camp" its natural finale, and it's a genuinely pleasing one. It worked for Mickey and Judy; it works here, though Mickey and Judy never put on a show with a cocaine production number set at Studio 54.

The humor's a little sharp, more often sweet, with some performers more centrally located to the story than others. Ayo Edebiri of "The Bear" tips around the edges as a first-time counselor bluffing her way through stage combat and mask work (she knows

nothing about either), but she's underutilized. "Theater Camp" errs on the side of too much narrative folderol involving the rival private camp across the lake, and the fractious, push/pull friendship between Rebecca-Diane and Amos. The movie doesn't need higher stakes, really, or more conflict; what's there is fine, but the flights of deadpan insanity only fly so high.

The kids are delightful, natch. Seeing preteens give "Les Miserables" a go is automatically amusing. ("I do believe her as a French prostitute," Amos says of one 10-year-old girl belting her heart out.)

MPA rating: PG-13 (for some strong language and some suggestive/drug references)
Running time: 1:33
How to watch: In theaters

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