

St. Ambrose University's "Urinetown": So Funny I Almost...

Written by Mike Schulz

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Since St. Ambrose University's production of *Urinetown* at the Galvin Fine Arts Center has already closed, there's probably not much point in a review. So consider this a thank-you note instead. I had more fun at the school's production of this 2001 musical comedy than I have at nearly any other entertainment I've been to over the past few months. The show was terrifically staged and, almost across the board, vibrantly performed, but most inspiring of all, the audience was truly *alive* to it; *Urinetown* smashes the understood conventions of musical theatre to smithereens, and the Friday night crowd appeared positively delighted that it did. The show was a risk, and one that paid off big time.

In many ways, *Urinetown* – with its book by Greg Kotis, music by Mark Hollman, and lyrics by both – is a conventional American musical, with an easy-to-grasp plot, young romantic leads, an assemblage of colorful characters in the supporting cast, and joyous song-and-dance routines. But within the first five minutes, you're well aware that the show's narrative will be anything but traditional, as its occasional narrator, Officer Lockstock (Sean Pankuch), welcomes us to "Urinetown. The musical." All throughout the production, Lockstock – often conversing with Little Sally (Jenny Stodd), a waif with a rag doll and more common sense than the rest of the show's characters combined – explains how events ordinarily transpire in musicals and then tells us how they're going to transpire *here*. You want a happy ending? Not gonna get one. You want a thoroughly worked-out plot? This one, he says, will be a little sketchy on the details. You want subject matter that's, you know, *tasteful* ? Don't make him laugh.

Yet even though its narrative veers from the norm, *Urinetown* is as high-spirited, fearless, and absolutely hysterical a musical as you could possibly hope for. The storyline may be dark – it concerns a revolution that occurs in the not-so-distant future, where our water supply becomes rationed, resulting in the citizenry having to pay to use public facilities for their private business – but the tone is light and it clips along at a swift pace, and under Michael Kennedy's assured direction, St. Ambrose's production lent the material exactly the blend of sincerity and

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insouciance

Urinetown merits.

Kennedy's compositions appeared meticulously worked out yet felt perfectly natural, which is quite a trick when choreographing stage business for more than two dozen characters; the authority that Kennedy is known for as an actor – he was a fantastically strong Willy Loman in St. Ambrose's

Death of a Salesman

last autumn – was apparent in his helming here, too, and his cast was expertly chosen.

In fact, if the performers that director Kennedy assembled for *Urinetown* are any indication, not only is St. Ambrose's theatre department in good shape for the rest of the season, but for the next

several seasons.

(Only six of the show's 22 student cast members are Seniors.) Jack Kloppenborg played Bobby Strong with proper, built-in irony – his every pose suggests that Bobby is Leading Man in a Musical and

knows

it – and revealed a gorgeous, pop-rock voice. Kloppenborg's line readings are, thus far, more expressive than his physicality, but this sophomore is already wonderfully polished, and he has *great*

diction; not a word or lyric was lost. He was very nicely matched by Emily Kurash as Bobby's love interest, Hope; it takes a smart actress to play someone so unapologetically dumb, and Hope's ingénue ditsiness was always given extra comedic oomph by Kurash. Together, they were a truly bright pair of dim bulbs.

Two women in the supporting cast, however, just about pilfered *Urinetown* from the rest of the ensemble. As tough old broad Ms. Pennywise, Marianna Caldwell was a roaringly funny caricature, and she spit out her punchlines with vinegary zest; the performance brought to mind a prison warden as enacted by Eve Arden. Her demanding Act I solo, "It's a Privilege to Pee," brought the house down early, and Caldwell grew even more brash and confident as the evening progressed. And as Little Sally, the most hysterical figure in the show, Jenny Stodd performed with such ebullient, razor-sharp wit that even though the role is a substantial one, she was never around quite as often as you hoped. Little Sally knows her musicals and sees that

Urinetown itself

has all the makings of a

terrible

one, and Stodd's incredulous readings – delivered in hilariously petulant fashion – were the comic highlights of the show.

Among a first-rate ensemble, special mention must also be made of Sean Pankuch's Lockstock and Scott Peake's Barrel, who enacted *Urinetown's* two-man police force. Pankuch was required to deliver much of the show's fall-down-funny exposition and earned a bunch of huge laughs, and Peake was a sweetheart of a foil for him; their "Cop Song," joyously choreographed by Shellee Frazee, was the kind of second-banana show-stopper that second bananas were created

for.

This production's only major failing was, unfortunately, a rather noticeable one, as the sound on several of the principals' body microphones frequently wavered, resulting in some halting

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rhythms. (This was particularly problematic with Pankuch's mic, and a lot of the exposition that Lockstock is required to deliver was lost.) But even though the mics occasionally malfunctioned, the actors' projection was strong; there were no whisperers in this cast.

And despite those sound glitches, the technical aspects of the show were topnotch, with particular praise going to Chris Konrady for his superb lighting – the Act I finale was quite stunning – and Corinne Johnson for the exquisitely ratty costumes. Those at St. Ambrose deserve kudos for debuting this brilliantly enjoyable musical in the Quad Cities, and I'm only disappointed that the show didn't get to run longer – certainly, the cast members looked like they would have been happy to tour it forever. *Urinetown*, as a stage piece, is good enough to make you feel confident in the future of American musicals. St. Ambrose's

Urinetown

was good enough to make you feel confident in the future of American musical performers

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