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THEATRE REVIEW

'Urinetown' Comedy, Futuristic 'Macbeth'

Sometimes a weekend of theatre can be a journey between the ridiculous and the sublime.

First, the ridiculous.

"Urinetown The Musical" is being presented by The Theatre Company of the University of Detroit Mercy. A show that's unafraid to address that most basic necessity of all things living, the need to pee. "Urinetown" is a hilarious comedy buttressed by more customary themes like corporate greed, corrupt politicians, and the nature of family and community.

Years ago, a crippling water shortage had made it necessary for the bathroom habits of the citizens of a Gotham-like city to become regulated. Up stepped Caldwell B. Cladwell (B.J. Love), who, with the help of the dishonest Senator Fipp (Angie Kane), made it mandatory for people to relieve themselves only in regulated amenities and then only for a fee.

Years of suppression have created a citizenry primed to let it all out (see how easy it is to create pee jokes). To the front steps Bobby Strong (David Kowalczyk), a custodian for the "Urine Good Company" who experiences a conversion after his father is ignominiously dispatched to Urinetown for peeing in the streets.

Urinetown is actually a deep, dark mystery, a place from which no one who is sent ever returns. Used as a threat to keep the people paying for the privy-lege, the reality of Urinetown is even more sinister than what can be imagined to the citizens. When Cladwell's daughter, Hope (Marissa Thorndyke), returns from college, love blossoms between her and Bobby, and the revolution to "Pee for Free" begins in earnest.

As ridiculous and offbeat as this all sounds, "Urinetown" is a show that delights and entertains on many fronts. First and foremost is the fact that it never takes itself very seriously. The musical numbers come in a variety of song styles, and their titles, like "It's a Privilege to Pee" "Cop Song" and "Snuff the Girl" are jocular indications that the show is as self-deprecating as it is ludicrous.

The show is a spoof of many styles and Broadway conventions, and one can find theatrical digs at blockbuster shows like "Les Miz" and "West Side Story." Intellectuals, too, who want more out of theatre than just a good time, will enjoy "Urinetown" as a derivative of Brechtian theatre and his ideal of Verfremdungseffekt, and revel in its allusions to the Core Principals of Malthus.

The rest of us can merely enjoy a good belly-laugh at the sight of a que of bladder-filled misfortunates, crossing their legs and cupping their crotches while they beg for pennies to allow them into the lavatories.

The Theatre Company's production features several exceptional performances. Courtney Burkett, featured as Penelope Pennywise, money-taker at one of the facilities, is outstanding in a supporting role that begs to be expanded upon.

Jennifer Altmore is engaging as Little Sally, the street urchin with a big heart, a small bladder, and enough philosophical lines to make her the conscience of the play. And Brian Thibault, baring a striking resemblance to a young Tom Cruise, adds a mischievous grin as Officer Lockstock. And yes, his partner on the beat is named Officer Barrell (Matthew Klug).

"Urinetown The Musical" (book and lyrics by Greg Kotis, music and lyrics by Mark Hollmann) is directed by Greg Trask. The production is being co-presented by the Marygrove College Fine Arts Department. Performances run through Sunday, April 1 at the Marygrove College Theatre, 8425 W. McNichols Rd. For tickets and information, call (313) 993-3270.

On to the sublime.

"Macbeth" is among a handful of Shakespeare's plays that have had widespread exposure both on the stage and in the classroom. All of those elements that went into making it popular with Elizabethan audiences continue to thrill contemporary audiences as well: swordplay, murder and mayhem, intrigue and spectacle, to say nothing of the blood, witches, ghosts and the occasional sprinkling of sex.

Though the play is the shortest of Shakespeare's great tragedies, it's not the least bit short on story.

Macbeth has exhibited great bravery on the battlefield while fighting the enemies of the king. For his efforts, King Duncan rewards him by elevating him to a position that makes him next in line to be king.

With the crown now so close, Macbeth contemplates killing the king. When Duncan makes an overnight stop at Macbeth's castle, the perfect opportunity presents itself.

Encouraged by his wife, Lady Macbeth, Macbeth murders the king and blames it on the king's guards, whom he has conveniently plied with alcohol. What follows are a great deal of political intrigue, more murders, Lady Macbeth's descent into madness, and a confrontation with the armies of the slain Duncan's son's.

Meadow Brook's Theatre Ensemble has put together a lively production that's sure to please both traditional and occasional Shakespeare fans. Director John Manfredi's adaptation remains true to the language, but places the setting in a futuristic post-apocalyptic world.

Brian Dambacher's set design puts Meadow Brook's ample stage to good use. Stone work dominates the wings while columns provide a backdrop and support a catwalk, giving the production another level of exposition. There's ample space for entrances and exits and good use is made of the trap doors.

Dispensing with the traditional costumes of 16th century England is not only kind on the costume budget, but also an opportunity for creativity. The predominant costume theme is black: black t-shirts, black pants, and something that could very well make Shakespeare fans of the goths, black knee-high buckled boots.

For those who head for a sports game at the mere mention of Shakespeare, there is much in this production to warrant a reconsideration. Foremost is the spectacle. Manfredi has crafted a remarkably visual production.

The witches twitter about like dustballs in the wind. Banquo's ghost is a bloody mess and fog intermittently spews onto the set. Lightning and thunder warn you that something's amiss while swords ring out in battle.