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Capital Pee

Urinetown, an extended pee-pee joke, really is funny.

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By Ryan Masters



Flush With Character: Sid Cato (as Caldwell B. Cladwell) and Laura Akard (as Ms. Pennywise) fill their twisted roles with aplomb.

In *Urinetown* (the Musical), it's a privilege to pee and you better not forget it or the cops will drag you off to Urinetown (the gulag). The city's poor scrounge pennies and huddle in long lines outside the public restrooms with dangerously swollen bladders, waiting for their turn to pee. And then they break into song and dance to tell us about it.

So it goes in the genuinely funny, wonderfully wrought production running now on the Morgan Stock Stage at Monterey Peninsula College. Director Gary Bolen has scored a major coup delivering the Central Coast premiere of this unlikely Broadway hit. Thankfully, he's managed to produce it with a strong cast, a fantastic set and spot-on musical direction from Barney Hulse. Don't let the odd name put you off, this is classic musical theater.

Set in a dystopian future where two decades of drought have ended the masses' ability to freely relieve themselves, *Urinetown* the Musical pits a young headstrong revolutionary named Bobby Strong against a corporate overlord called the Urine Good Company, which owns all of the city's public amenities. Over the many years of drought, the UGC has bought off all the police and politicians while callously hiking up the pee rates.

The play opens on Public Amenity #9, one of the worst public facilities in the city. It's morning and the crowd has to pee in the worst way. Standing in their way is Ms. Pennywise, a Dickensian grotesque played beautifully by Laura Akard, who demands her fare before they can go inside and utilize the reeking facilities. When an old man can't come up with enough coin and asks for a break, she laughs cruelly and refuses, despite the protests of her right hand man, young Bobby Strong, for leniency. She stands firm and the old man revolts. He rushes out of line and relieves himself with a glorious sigh against D. Thomas Beck's corrugated tin set, which is truly a magnificent piece of graffiti art.

Before long two cops sniff out the offender and drag him off to Urinetown. Only then do we discover the old man, played with a comic strip flare by Michael Robbins, is Bobby Strong's father. It is a flashpoint for young Bobby and the first of two catalysts for his revolution. Jared Hussey is terrific as Strong. With an excellent voice and a smidgen of irony with his earnestness, he makes it work.

But the play more or less belongs to Chris Beem who, with a wonderful, stentorian bass voice, plays Officer Lockstock, the evil cop who drags the poor off to Urinetown with malevolent glee. But there's more to Lockstock than just villainy. He's also the narrator and in a clever, meta-fictional twist he comments on the very nature of musicals, often as part of funny aside conversations with an inquisitive poor child named Little Sally, who's played with the ironic precociousness by Ashley Beem.

After Officer Lockstock lectures Little Sally on how too much exposition can kill a good musical, she asks, "How about a

bad title? That could kill a show pretty good.” It’s a hilarious moment and a tribute to the creative skill of *Urinetown*’s creators (Mark Hollman, music and lyrics; Greg Kotis, book and lyrics).

In another classic moment, Little Sally asks what Urinetown is and Lockstock explains that she’s just going to have to wait until Act II. He tells her it would kill the dramatic tension to just blurt out, “There is no Urinetown! We just kill people!” It’s a great bit of writing because, yes, we’re all assuming that’s the case anyway, but as an audience we’re still not sure.

Other standouts include Aimee Ehrenpreis as Hope Cladwell, the baby doll daughter of Caldwell B. Cladwell, the UGC president. When Bobby Strong and Cladwell meet by chance and fall in love, she tells him to follow his heart and gives him the second impetus to rise up against her father, who is portrayed in top hat and tails with a slimy emcee-from-Cabaret-wink by Sid Cato.

Thankfully, in addition to a great story and characters, this play has great songs. Highlights include the creepy “Cop Song” with Lockstock and his police and the odd, catchy and lyrically-rich warning “Don’t Be The Bunny” sung by Cladwell and his UGC staff. Other good ones include “Snuff That Girl,” “We’re Not Sorry” and the closer “I See A River.” As usual, Barney Hulse and his five-piece orchestra nail the music. But it’s a complete package. Constance Gamiere’s costume design, Susan Cable choreography and Beck’s lighting and set design all serve the story.

All in all, *Urinetown* is a parody of musicals with too much love and respect for musicals to be cruel. Instead it’s just weird and fun and good-natured piss on the manicured hedge of musical theater.

URINETOWN plays Thursday at 7pm; 8pm on Friday and Saturday; and 2pm on Sunday on the Morgan Stock Stage at Monterey Peninsula College, 980 Fremont St., Monterey. \$25/adults; \$20/seniors; \$15/students; \$10/children 12 and under. 646-4213 or TicketGuys.com.

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