

REVIEW: Urinetown

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It's a musical for people who love musicals, yet it's also a musical for people who hate musicals. It works, this "Urinetown," on so many levels that it's about as clear, across-the-board unreservedly and wholeheartedly full an entertainment I've seen in some time. Good for everyone, assuming they're not very young kids (although kids would get a lot of the jokes, too) or easily offended.

Since its debut in 2001, "Urinetown" has out-produced "The Producers" and out-spammed "Spamalot" via affectionate yet prickly parodying of musicals. Making use of Brecht's "critical distance" — forcing audiences to remember they're watching a show — "Urinetown" breaks all the walls, then throws up everything to see what shticks.

Because it's not been done in Tuscaloosa before, it's hit-or-guess as to how much director-choreographer Stacy Alley grafted on to cues from songs and scenes. Some of the jabs are blatant, such as the flag-waving, banner-toting, awkward march-in-place-stepping from "Les Miserables" for the act one finale, to the stomp-dancing of "Fiddler on the Roof" morphed into "What Is Urinetown?," to the jazz-feet finger-snapping of "West Side Story" transplanted into "Snuff That Girl."

Then there's a gospel-tinged "Run Freedom Run," probably from "Guys and Dolls' " "Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat" and smaller nods to "Big River," possibly "Godspell," "Rent," "Chicago," "Mame"/"Hello Dolly" and so on.

But the larger point is, it doesn't matter what specific movements or moments recall, as much that anyone who's seen a musical or three will recognize a lot of tropes, musical and textual, even if just in some lizard part of the brain.

This "Urinetown" draws laughs all over the theater, from those dance bits to the pseudo-serious socio-political commentary, to the repeated gag with the dead hero's dad and the guy who mocks the dead hero's dad, to "Whaaaaa?" takes, to deadpan, dead-on deliveries, and back again to a wonderfully fleet-footed, nimble cast. Some shows can read funny,

just via dialogue, before action, costumes, sets and so on are added; this one would be hilarious for choreography alone. And so a big hand not only to Alley, who makes us crave more dance shows, but to the ensemble, multitasking in comedy, dance, quick changes and odd character bits: Corey Rives, Adam Vanek, Kelly Barberito, Miranda Rivas, Rex Glover, Loui Clagett and Christian Timothy; an exhilarating bunch.

Chris Bellinger's Officer Lockstock, our not-so-kindly narrator, carries the weight of the show with an easy gloss of bellicosity and warmth, and his counterpart Mary Catherine Waltman, as Little Sally, similarly mixes mild mockery of childlike naivete seasoned with worldliness.

Little Sally ponders who'll go see this show about unsustainable practices. Lockstock informs her this is one of those dark musicals. "But the music's so happy!" she protests. "Yes, Little Sally," Lockstock replies grimly. "Yes, it is."

Anthony Haselbauer, as the only other policeman in town — amazing how two cops can intimidate a mob — hits high points well. William Rowland huffs and puffs and sneers the house down as Urine Good Co. CEO Caldwell B. Cladwell, a song-and-dance man with a nightmare for a dream. As his chief toady, Benjamin Haupt makes a keen dupe, backed with various members of the ensemble as rictus-grinning employees.

Kaylee McKnight bounces along sweetly as innocent daughter Hope, who of course learns a thing or two as the blinders drop away, and Will Erwin is stalwart as the cocky hero, a bit of a rogue, a bit of a rebel ... a bit of an idiot. Samuel Hardy oozes a steady stream of sleaze as Sen. Fripp, and Brittany Steelhammer is a showstealer as snakelike Penelope Pennywise, bizarre and unpredictable as if channeling the best times of Carol Burnett, topped with Steelhammer's own ingenuity.

It's a good-looking show, for a given value of good, being as "Urinetown" is intended to be rather grimy and dystopian ... in a musical-theater way, anyway. Kathryn Cook's set works as the superstructure for a lot of hijinks, not unlike 2012's "Chicago" set, and costumer Alex Kosbab and his team did some funny work differentiating between haves and have-nots, not to mention the craft of working out bits that could be dressed on and off briskly for all those quick changes.

Raphael Crystal's smallish orchestra — just a five-piece of keyboards, drums, woodwinds and trombone — crafted a full sound throughout a wide range of styles, everything from Brecht/Weill to the above-mentioned sounds, to hip-hop and a kind of cliched soaring, Stephen Schwartz-iness. There were a few mix/blend problems between band and mikes opening night, so the occasional line fell through, but that was caught and corrected. At other times, the stage was so cluttered you can feel you're missing something. Chances are that you are, but chances are, there'll be more to see.

What else is there to say? It looks good, it sounds good, it feels great throughout. You'll laugh a lot, in recognition, in surprise and in retrospect. I'd pay to go back and see it again.