



YOUNG STAR

'Avenue Q': Hilarious quips and joyful songs

By Mirava M. Yuson (The Philippine Star) Updated March 26, 2010 12:00 AM



Rachel Alejandro as Kate Monster and Joel Trinidad and Thea Tadiar (partly hidden) as Trekkie Monster

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MANILA, Philippines - Almost two years ago, my best friend and I put our savings together for two tickets to a musical we'd been hearing nothing but good things about. At the time, all we could afford was the loge section, and we had to contend with being seated at the very end of the balcony. Despite the distance between us and a stage hosting two-foot-tall puppets, that night we went home with a new favorite musical in our heads.

I am very happy to report that, right after watching a restaging of the play last Saturday, the exact same feeling has been rekindled, lyric for lyric. I also arrived at the same conclusion I've been spouting for years to everyone who'll listen: that if there's any production I'd recommend to anyone, musical fan or not, it's Avenue Q.

It's a difficult undertaking having to explain what exactly makes the show work so well, especially here. The play takes place in a tri-colored streak of buildings that make up imaginary Avenue Q in modern-day New York City, and naturally it's filled to the brim with jokes about middle- to low-class lives in the US.

Gary Coleman is a main character. There is full puppet nudity. Most of all, the entire thing is a twisted parody of Sesame Street. Undoubtedly, narrating that synopsis to anyone would merit a "Huh?" and a puzzled shake of the head. "Now, how is that funny?" So maybe a different approach is needed.

To get as technical as I can possibly get, the script itself is funny. The quips are hilarious, as shown by the laughter so constant it was hard to hear what the characters were saying sometimes. The clever back-and-forth jabs are aided by the flawless comedic timing of each actor, which certainly deserves acknowledgement. They bare the heart and soul of the typical New Yorker with such conviction that you find yourself laughing hysterically at their situations.

Maybe it's because you've been there in their places in some particular time. Maybe it really just is — as they sing at some point in the play — "schadenfreude," or happiness at these puppets' misfortune. But if the "ha-ha"s alternating with sympathetic "aww"s are anything to go by, the play is not just a compilation of subversive Sesame Street jokes; it has heart and soul, completing the package.

A guffaw-provoking song that's purely about the anti-political correctness of racism quickly leads to catchy love ditties sung in squeaky but perfect pitch, and suddenly the musical becomes that much easier to relate to.

Avenue Q deals with themes such as homosexuality, unrequited love and finding your purpose in life. These are summarized through joyful and exclamatory songs that you'll find yourself humming for the rest of your life. Indeed, the songs — universal in nature (after all, who hasn't thought "it sucks to be me" every once in a while?) — are part of why the play has been such a hit.

They were certainly good enough to nab a Tony Award for Best Musical in 2003, and Manila's "We're Back!" production is helping prove its worthiness at being labeled a "timeless comedy."

Last Saturday, songs like everyone's favorite If You Were Gay, The Internet is for Porn and the literal head-bobber,

Everyone's a Little Bit Racist, received raucous, wild laughter from the audience. At intermission, first-time watchers were already humming the songs on their way to the restrooms, while others were apparently already familiar with every set of lyrics. (I see you, fellow fans!)

Although fresh-faced college graduate Princeton (Felix Rivera) is the main character, many prefer to think of the play as an ensemble piece, and with good reason. It's easy to cheer him on in his quest to find his purpose in life (and not knowing what to do with his BA in English), but falling for the lovesick Kate Monster (Rachel Alejandro) or totally-just-best-friends Rod (also Rivera) and Nicky (Joel Trinidad) is just as effortless.

Each of the characters' individual dilemmas in life are touched on, even those of Gary Coleman (returning actress Aiza Seguerra, who's undoubtedly meant to play that role forever), who periodically laments being a has-been child star.

The cast is completed by Brian (Calvin Millado, who fills the character's Hawaiian shirt quite well), Christmas Eve ("prayed to perfection" by Frenchie Dy), Lucy the Slut (again Alejandro, who is remarkable at having conversations with herself on stage), The Bad Idea Bears (Thea Tadiar and Joel Trinidad) and Trekkie Monster (Trinidad, Trinidad, Trinidad).

Almost all the actors are dressed in low-key gray and black outfits so as to let audiences know that the puppets (and monsters) are the true stars. Some even have to manage two or three puppets at once, but the wild gestures and exaggerated mouth-moving in true Sesame Street fashion are effective, making you want to adopt a puppet of your own.

Two hours of pure puppet madness are a great way to unwind after a stressful week. As long as you have your sense of humor properly intact, no doubt your weekend will be made. Whatever it is they're selling, they sell it well. And on the off-chance that they pass around a hat (it's for a good cause!), you might actually just feel like putting some spare change in it.

The play is superbly directed by Bobby Garcia (The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee, Cinderella, Avenue Q) and Chari Arespachaga (Spring Awakening, High School Musical, Altar Boyz). It runs at the Carlos P. Romulo Theater in RCBC Plaza until March 27, with shows on Wednesday to Saturday at 8 p.m. and a Saturday matinee at 2 p.m.

For ticket reservations and other details, call Atlantis Productions at 892-7078 or 840-1187.

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