



'Avenue Q': Perv puppets, timely themes

By ROWENA JOY A. SANCHEZ
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It's not very often that one would get to see, in the cottony flesh, puppets making love on stage.

But that's not all there is in the fifth staging of "Avenue Q" in Manila. Aside from the aforementioned hilarious visual "feast," it boasts of a powerful ensemble of thespians, a relevant message delivered with hilarity and profundity,

and hook-laden brilliant songs that are just awesome to bits. And some puppet bromance, too.

It's no wonder Filipinos fell in love and would want to fall in love all over again with this award-winning stage play that beat the grandiose "Wicked" for a Tony for "Best Musical."

"Avenue Q" is more than a parody of popular children's show "Sesame Street." The show carries with it pertinent and timely themes that resonate the micro and macro levels of human existence—whether that may be about pornography, homosexuality, racism, surviving the economic crisis, getting a job, finding someone special, and, on the largest of scales, finding one's purpose.

To begin with, "Avenue Q," set in the Outer-Outer Borough in New York City, is about a BA English college grad named Princeton (Felix Herrera, "Spelling Bee"), who is looking for a place to stay that would fit his meager budget. Only Avenue Q seems to fit his criteria, and there he meets his wacky neighbors while he himself embarks on contemplations of what his mission in life really is.

He joins the neighborhood composed of Kate Monster (Rachel Alejandro), a kindergarten teacher, fiancées Brian (Calvin Millado), a struggling comedian, and Christmas Eve (Frenchie Dy), a Japanese therapist; Trekkie Monster (Joel Trinidad), the pervert version of Cookie Monster; and the hopefully more than roommates, Nicky (Joel) and Rod (Felix)—well at least in Rod's end. Oh, and there are the emo-looking "Care Bears," the Big Idea Bears (Thea Tadiar and Joel), who are just too cute to resist.

Puppet shows usually carry the mystery of having anonymous puppeteers, but it's refreshing and more illuminating at the same time to actually see the puppeteers' facial expressions and gestures, as they add insight to the true emotion intended to be conveyed in every scene. Notably exceptional are Rachel (also playing Lucy the Slut), Felix, Joel, as well as Thea, who all have dual roles but are able to shift from one character to the next with such effortless ease, deep character internalization, and focused coordination.

Frenchie shows that she is not only a power belter—she didn't win "Star in a Million" for nothing—but also an actress. In her first musical, she is amusing to watch as she pronounces all I's as r's, and gives too truthful an advice to her clients that they can't help but not return to her.

Another refreshing sight is Aiza, playing the building superintendent and former child star-gone-the-downward-spiral-Gary-Coleman way, whom we more often than not see singing than acting. It's been a long time that she did both simultaneously on one stage. Likewise returning to the theater stage is Calvin, who has last been seen in his critically-acclaimed portrayal of Roger in "Rent."

The set by Mio Infante, meanwhile, is also consistent with the children's show from which the play is inspired. The cartoonish-looking houses are like kiddie drawings colored with Crayola. Over the left, down stage, a television is placed where illustrations of the inside of the houses are shown. It provides the "educational" aspect of the show ala "Sesame Street" in its presentation of "explanations" on purpose, commitment, one-night stands, and "schadenfreude" (a German word meaning "happiness at the misfortune of others").

Truth hurts and reality bites, indeed, but even if they are both piercing, they were delivered with a warm, comic cushion. The audience at the Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium chuckled, giggled, and guffawed their hearts out as the characters throw one funny line after the other. This musical is definitely good for the heart as it is for the soul.

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But the story is in the music, created by songwriters Jeff Marx and Robert Lopez. The lyrics are simple and clear, yet they carry thoughtful messages that will surely strike a chord. They are enhanced with melodies that have great recall.

Some of the most LSS-inducing numbers are "The Internet Is For Porn," "It Sucks To Be Me," "There's A Fine, Fine Line," and "For Now." Recent (and not-so recent) graduates will surely be able to relate to "I Wish I Could Go Back To College."

The music also plays a very important role in setting the tone and progression of the whole story: "Avenue Q" begins with the sarcastically sad "It Sucks To Be Me," but ends in a very hopeful "For Now."

Yes, "everyone's a little bit unsatisfied," but "Avenue Q" is a reminder to be optimistic about our reality. Our reality can change, because, as their last line went, "everything in life is only for now."

Under the direction of Bobby Garcia and Chari Arespacochaga, "Avenue Q" runs from March 12 to 27, 2010 at the Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium at RCBC Plaza, Makati. Call Atlantis Productions at 892-7078 or 840-1187 for details.



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