

Metropolis' R-rated puppet musical 'Avenue Q' is a charming place to visit



Princeton (Alex Newkirk) and Kate Monster (Emilie Rose Danno) embark on a romance in Metropolis Performing Arts Centre's delightful revival of the puppet musical "Avenue Q." (Courtesy of Ellen Prather)



Barbara Vitello

Updated


6/1/2018 8:02 AM

"Avenue Q" -- ★ ★ ★ ½

"Avenue Q" imparts personal, professional and financial lessons to young adults the way "Sesame Street" communicates cognitive and educational fundamentals to children: kindly, patiently, and with a surfeit of sly wit and merry tunes.

But however affectionately the musical tips its hat to the long-running PBS series, this 2003 puppet tuner by composer/lyricists Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx and writer Jeff Whitty -- in a warmhearted revival at the Metropolis Performing Arts Centre -- is not for kids.

In addition to strong language, "Avenue Q" depicts puppets having sex and includes a racial stereotype. The former elicited belly laughs from Saturday night's near-capacity audience and the latter, while cringeworthy, served its satirical purpose. That said, there's much to like about this droll show, which sends up 20-something angst while cleverly paying homage to Broadway classics. And there is much to recommend director Lauren Rawitz's exuberant revival, which is well-sung and charmingly acted by singer/actor/puppeteers, most of whom are new to Metropolis.



Jordan DeBose, left, Emily Bailey, Emilie Rose Danno, Josh Kemper, Aaron Lockman and Joe Farrell star in Metropolis Performing Arts Centre's revival of "Avenue Q." - Courtesy of Ellen Prather

The coming-of-age tale unfolds on the titular street (a cheery borough designed by Robert Pinta) in an appealingly down-at-the-heels New York City neighborhood, home to both humans and puppets whose resemblance to certain Muppet characters is entirely intentional.

We first meet newcomer and recent college graduate Princeton (an understated Alex Newkirk) as the puppet is settling into Avenue Q.

Among his new puppet neighbors are Kindergarten aide Kate Monster (the endearing, sweetly expressive Emilie Rose Danno), whom Princeton begins to date, and Trekkie Monster, a grouch (played by William Marquez) who's obsessed with the internet -- and not for entirely educational reasons. Their neighbors include roommates Nicky (a likable slacker played by Aaron Lockman) and Rod (poignantly played by Josh Kemper), a closeted investment banker.

The puppets share the neighborhood with humans, such as wannabe standup comedian Brian (Jordan DeBose), his struggling social worker wife, Christmas Eve (Emily Bailey), and the apartment superintendent Gary Coleman from TV's "Diff'rent Strokes" (saucily played by the lissome Aziza Macklin).



Nicky (Joe Farrell, left, and Aaron Lockman) and his roommate Rod (Josh Kemper) recall a famous PBS duo in "Avenue Q," running through June 30 at the Metropolis Performing Arts Centre in Arlington Heights. - Courtesy of Ellen Prather

All of them wrestle with unsatisfying careers, nonexistent relationships and insufficient funds while Princeton struggles to uncover his life's purpose, as so many 22-year-olds do. Unfortunately he gets distracted first by the Bad Idea Bears (the deliciously roguish Joe Farrell and Emma Rathe), who typically tempt him with booze, and later by Lucy

(the terrific Michelle Tibble), a chanteuse who seduces the emotionally vulnerable Princeton.

The show could stand some trimming. The first act is especially long. But Rawitz maintains a lively pace and her energetic cast -- made up of solid singers whose character voices are first-rate -- deliver, especially on crowd-pleasing numbers such as "The Internet is for Porn" and the impressively candid, gleefully politically incorrect "Everyone's a Little Bit Racist."



Lucy (Michelle Tibble) seduces recent college grad Princeton (Alex Newkirk) in director Lauren Rawitz's production of "Avenue Q" at the Metropolis Performing Arts Centre. - Courtesy of Ellen Prather

While some performances occasionally border on shrill, that's a minor point in this cheery show, which concludes -- like its television counterpart -- on a hopeful note. It also reminds 20-something Q residents (and the rest of us) that the travails we face are usually temporary. And they're endurable so long as you have a few pals by your side.

• • •

Location: Metropolis Performing Arts Centre, 111 W. Campbell St., Arlington Heights, (847) 577-2121 or metropolisarts.com
(<http://metropolisarts.com>)

Showtimes: 7:30 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 3 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday; through June 30

Running time: About 2 hours, 20 minutes including intermission

Tickets: \$40

Parking: Nearby garage and street parking

Rating: For adults; includes mature themes, sexual situations and strong language

