

Theater

URINETOWN THE MUSICAL MERCURY THEATER

Pee Show

Urinetown returns in a local production, but some of the original's flow is lost.

By Justin Hayford

The 2001 Broadway hit *Urinetown* provides welcome relief from the forced sentiment, facile plotting, simplistic characterization, and strong-arm optimism of many other popular musicals. Written by Chicago's Greg Kotis and Mark Hollmann—who plied their brainy craft here more than a decade ago as part of Cardiff Giant—it pointedly ridicules every hoary convention of musical theater while demonstrating how wit and intelligence can transform those conventions into thrilling theater.

Urinetown's most obvious target is the sort of Depression-era social commentary epitomized by Marc Blitzstein's 1937 "proletarian opera" *The Cradle Will Rock*, which is full of prouction song-and-dance numbers that drive home its self-righteous lefty message. Contemporary director and critic Harold Clurman dismissed that show as "boyishly sentimental and comically theatrical," and

WHEN Open run:
Wed-Thu 7:30 PM,
Fri 8 PM, Sat 5 and
8:30 PM, Sun 5 PM
WHERE Mercury
Theater, 3745
N. Southport
PRICE \$45-\$48.50
INFO 773-325-1700

those are the shortcomings Kotis and Hollmann mine in this parody, the story of a populist uprising against capitalist greed. In an unnamed city, ruthless businessman Caldwell B. Cladwell has taken advantage of severe water shortages, caused by

a 20-year drought, to make everyone pay for the privilege of peeing: all public toilets are run by his monopolistic Urine Good Company. When Cladwell's idealistic daughter, Hope, falls in love with Bobby Strong, an idealistic bathroom attendant, the two of them lead an ill-fated revolution against Malthusian economics.

In this delightfully overwrought tale Kotis and Hollmann not only lampoon multiple musical-comedy staples—patter songs, hot jazz numbers, bluesy anthems—but squeeze in extended quotes from *West Side Story*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *Les Miserables*. Their most ingenious

In Tom Mullen's staging the show seems disjointed, jumping from one absurdity to the next.

satire, however, comes from the lips of Little Sally, a street urchin perpetually puzzled by the horrors around her—not the horrors of capitalism run amok but the horrors of a script riddled with holes. That's just life in a musical, she's told by street-tough Officer Lockstock, the show's narrator.

Since the most unconvincing elements of unconvincing musicals are the actors bent on showing how much they mean everything, a *Urinetown* cast is presented with a unique opportunity to

play in a giddy realm of sardonic fantasy. In this realm a finely crafted, sharply staged production number like the ridiculous gospel tribute to cowardice "Run, Freedom, Run" can be completely satisfying. The schematic love affair between generic hero Bobby and cardboard ingenue Hope—conveyed by a single romantic ballad on a rolling-stair unit, because that's how it's done in musicals—can be ludicrous yet bring a genuine lump to the throat.

That's how things should be in *Urinetown*, and that's how they were in the original Broadway production (which won three Tony awards) and, to a lesser extent, the



Urinetown the Musical

MICHAEL BROSILOW

Agudas Achim North Shore Congregation Proudly invites you to join us at the PASSOVER ACROSS AMERICA SEDER

Dear Friends,

Imagine attending a Seder that you will actually enjoy and where you will learn everything you ever wanted to know about the customs, rituals and songs associated with Passover!

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Stop imagining! Visit the synagogue website at www.aansc.org to register immediately for our Passover Across America Seder to be held on April 12th at 7:20 PM.

Join us as we prepare to re-enact our ancestors' transformation into free men and women this Passover.

The program requires no prior knowledge or particular experience and is designed to make everyone feel welcome, regardless of background. I look forward to personally greeting you.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Philip Lefkowitz

Agudas Achim North Shore Congregation Passover Across America Seder Details

April 12, 2006 7:20 PM 5029 North Kenmore \$25 per person
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989 Sixth Ave, 10th Fl
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800-44-HEBRE(W)
www.njop.org



Ink Well

by Ben Tausig

Dupes

ACROSS

- Tony Soprano, et al
- Dishonest
- Acapulco article
- Texas hold 'em cousin
- Navel variety
- Addict's end
- Curse word?
- Range moniker
- One dressed as Vulcan ambassador Sarek, probably
- Carpenters, at times
- N.C. city
- ___ Shady
- Rich dessert
- What's more
- Auction actions
- First name in film and salsa
- Whence tofu
- Mistake indicators
- Site of many a video premiere
- Secret little dogs?
- Nest egg choice
- Half a Hawaiian fish

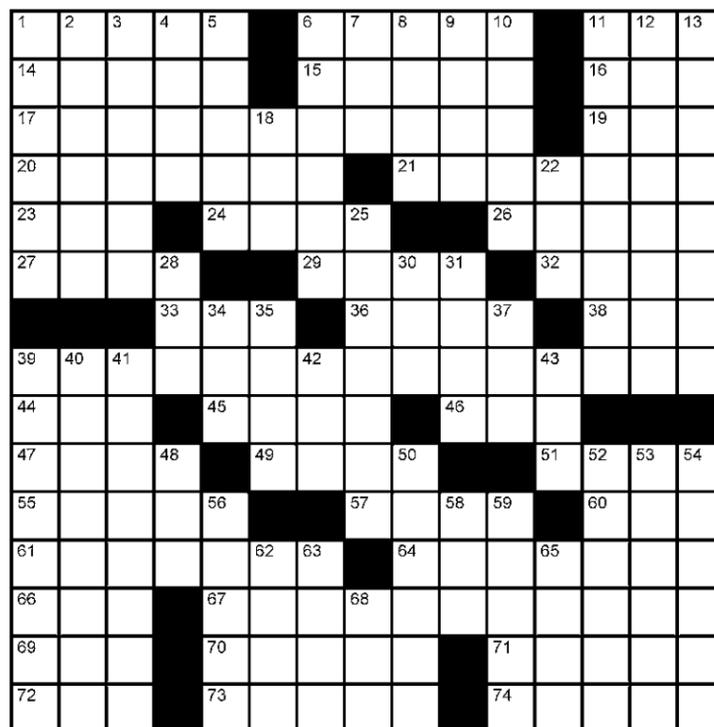
LAST WEEK: CHAIN LETTERS

T	U	R	F	T	G	I	B	U	S	H	S	R
A	R	I	A	O	H	S	O	F	N	O	T	E
B	B	B	K	N	E	E	S	B	O	A	T	E
E	A	S	E	U	P	T	V	A				
S	E	M	I	S	E	A	G	L	E	J	I	I
P	R	E	D	A	T	E	S	E	A	W	E	E
I	N	N	H	A	M	T	I	O				
C	O	U	N	T	E	R	C	L	O	C	K	Y
A	R	G	I	O	U	E	V	A				
S	U	R	R	E	A	L	S	T	A	B	L	E
C	H	I	C	K	P	P	P	S	A	L	S	A
R	A	D	S	O	R	D	I	D				
A	U	G	U	S	T	U	U	U	F	O	R	C
P	L	E	N	T	Y	T	I	E	F	I	D	E
E	S	S	A	Y	S	S	N	L	F	O	R	K

- Warhol subject
- Prides' rooms
- iPod type
- Prepare to duel
- Diminutive endings
- Work on, as a bone
- Gp. that supports buying rounds?
- Drops from the sky
- Sartorial extras
- Stick in the water
- Drum effect?
- First Burmese prime minister
- Glyphics prefix
- Iota preceder
- Pro ___ (for now)
- Frozen 61-Across
- Brings on board

DOWN

- Recipient of Reagan-era aid, notoriously
- Like Machiavellian politics
- Juries
- "All right, I get it now"
- Burlap containers
- Wok dish
- Music to a chef's ears
- Coast-to-coast hwy.
- Simone of song
- "Capiche?"
- Intelligentsia
- Theatrical opening
- Marketing adage
- Olive by-product
- Chop (off)
- Dancing in a pit
- ___Kosh B'Gosh
- Tango flourish
- Film on water
- Omega, to an electrician
- Chinese tender



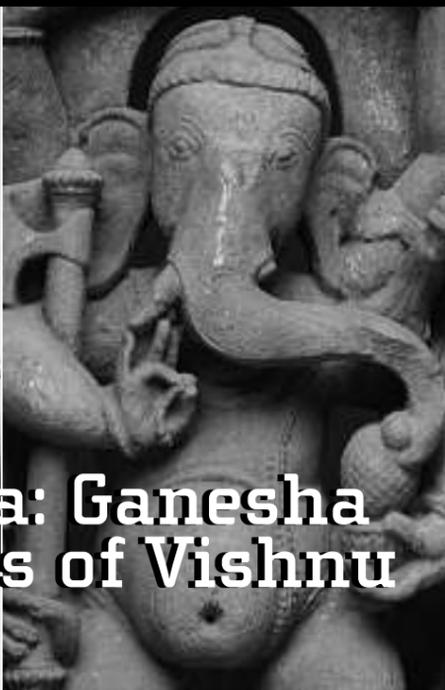
- Invigorating spot
- Lies low
- Foam compound
- "Savage Love" coinage
- Doo-wop syllable
- Mainstream
- Darn
- Walking
- One casting
- Make something
- History of Bowling 101, and the like
- Actor Green and clock-maker Thomas
- Blood-giving site
- Shoe figure
- Churn
- Peter Pan* henchman
- Grape soda brand
- Green Day's Cool

acter that Christine Sherrill plays for hammy laughs.

Still, a talented cast of local and Broadway performers makes this a largely entertaining evening. The satire may be limp, but much of the show's ample shtick is well played. As Hope and Bobby, Tamara Spiewak and Michael Buchanan deliver satisfyingly economical performances in pitch-perfect voices. Michael Sobie's musical direction is generally crisp, although often the lyrics are inaudible, perhaps because of the Mercury's acoustics. Brian Loeffler's choreography, which borrows liberally from John Carrafa's original Broadway version, exploits the idiosyncratic movements of the nondancer cast but often crowds too many people into a muddle, as if the dancing were intended for a stage three times this size.

An explosively appreciative audience at the final preview seemed to adore this production, and maybe most musical-theater lovers will too. But for those who love to hate musicals, this *Urinetown* is bound to disappoint: it fails to convey the snap and scope of its intelligent, lively book and songs. **A**

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Krithika Rajagopalan; photo: Ellen Ryan Photography. India, Uttar Pradesh. *Dancing Ganesha* (detail), 10th century. The James W. and Marilyn Alsdorf Collection. Performance programs are made possible by the Brinson Foundation, the Edith W. Wald Trust, and the Lester and Hope Abelson Fund, founding contributor to Voices. Premier sponsorship is provided by The Searle Funds of The Chicago Community Trust. Air transportation is generously provided by American Airlines. Hotel assistance is generously provided by Park Hyatt Chicago.

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