

Review: Avenue Q brings humans, puppets into wickedly sharp co-existence



MICHAEL D. REID / TIMES COLONIST

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Dutchess Cayetano as Christmas Eve has a conversation with Rod the Republican in Avenue Q. Photograph By Canadian Heritage Arts Society
What: Avenue Q

Where: Canadian College of Performing Arts, 1701 Elgin Rd.

When: June 3, 8, 9, 10 and 11

Tickets, info: ccpacanada.com, 250-595-9970

Rating: Four stars

Ten minutes into the Canadian College of Performing Arts alumni company's irresistible spring musical at its Elgin Road theatre you'll be blissfully aware you're not on Oak Bay Avenue any more.

Chances are you'll have found yourself helplessly seduced by the subversive shenanigans on Avenue Q, and the last thing you'll be thinking for the next two hours is that it sucks to be you.

It Sucks To be Me is just one of several tunes as catchy as they're cheeky in this Tony Award-winning musical featuring both humans and puppets that evoke memories of Sesame Street.

Make no mistake, however: As oddly endearing as these colourful fuzzy characters are, their antics and dialogue they deliver while learning life lessons won't be confused with those of Ernie & Bert, Cookie Monster and other characters from the PBS kids show that inspired it. Expect an ironic, cheerfully irreverent and grownup take, complete with wicked parodies of Sesame Street's instructive animated shorts.

It takes a few minutes to grow accustomed to the co-existence of actors and the puppets the ensemble cast so deftly animate. Thanks to director and designer RJ Peters' imaginative staging on his suitably grotty, Crayola-coloured Avenue Q streetscape, Sarah Murphy's amusingly inspired choreography -- notably during Everyone's A Little Bit Racist -- and the cast's professionalism any early concerns are soon assuaged.

Avenue Q can be hilariously raunchy, notably during a side-splittingly funny Muppets sex scene that had the opening night audience in stitches. The show's playful naughtiness is augmented by a lot of heart, however, as we join

Princeton, a fresh-faced English major, during his search for purpose after moving into a shabby apartment in an outer New York borough.

In its own loopy, at times blush-inducing way, the show promotes acceptance while deliciously lampooning racial and sexual stereotypes as its eclectic cast of millennials try to cope with post-college angst.

While there isn't a weak link in this show's dynamic cast, some appearing like conjoined twins while jointly manipulating a puppet, there are standouts.

Blessed with an amazingly pure voice and confidence to spare, Alison MacDonald expertly infuses Kate Monster, the upbeat kindergarten teacher and proud "person of fur," with pluck and humanity. It's in sharp contrast to her enjoyably hysterical portrayal of Lucy the Slut, the buxom blonde Miss Piggy/Mae West hybrid who wears too much lipstick, a pink feather boa and declares: "Yeah, they're real."

MacDonald's highlights include Kate's moving rendition of the ballad There's a Fine, Fine Line, and when she headlines the comical show-stopper The Internet Is For Porn with Trekkie Monster. Ryan Reid, also the show's puppet director, does a terrific job animating and voicing the furry porn-addicted monster. Reid also ably brings Nicky, a slacker who unwittingly creates domestic havoc, to life.

Reid also provides comic relief as one of the high-pitched Bad Idea Bears who intermittently egg Princeton on with really bad advice in tandem with Murphy, who's also a hoot as grumpy old schoolteacher.

Brad L'Ecuyer, given ample opportunity to showcase his built-for-Broadway voice, also impresses as Brian, the aspiring Jewish standup comic engaged to Japanese-American spitfire Christmas Eve.

Dutchess Cayetano is outrageously entertaining as this bossy therapist in scenes that push the boundaries of good taste while gleefully skewering the "Oriental" stereotype.

As both Princeton and Rod, a nerdy, closeted Republican investment banker, Lucas Blaney capably contrasts their divergent personalities.

Another big plus is Lindsay Robinson's robust voice and presence as a wisecracking Gary Coleman, the former child star-turned-apartment superintendent.

Other highlights in this fun-filled diversion include Ainsley Harrington's colourful costumes, and music director Heather Burns's solid musical ensemble.

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