

Jonathan Baz Reviews...

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Avenue Q

Upstairs at The Gatehouse, London

FRIDAY, 24 MAY 2013

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Book by Jeff Whitty

Music & lyrics by Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx

Directed by John Plews

It's a brave off West End theatre company that seeks to restage a musical famed for its puppetry as much as for its singing and dancing. It thus speaks a lot for the credentials of the Ovation theatre company, that they secured the rights for this fringe production of Avenue Q, the sharp, witty pastiche on Sesame Street, last brought to London in 2005 by Cameron Mackintosh, for what was to be a 5 year run.

On walking in to the theatre its hard to believe that one is upstairs above a pub. The set, a beautifully detailed creation by Suzi Lombardelli is a street of four two-storey houses, with fully functioning doors and windows in all properties on both levels.

Good puppetry and animation begin with voice and sound and with barely an exception, this cast of fresh young unknowns get the delightfully sardonic tones of angst, humour and filth from the Avenue's residents spot on. Invidious to highlight individuals amongst such a funny and well drilled company, but Josh Willmott's porn-loving Trekkie, Will Jennings's preppy Princeton and Shin-Fei Chen's manic Christmas Eve are amongst the best of the evening's comedy.

It's different to the West End – that show was on a grand stage, this is close-up and in your face. Previously, as for example in War Horse, the puppeteers disappeared from ones conscience vision, and all one saw were the comic characters. Here, you see the actors full on. At times that's a tiny distraction, but the flip side is that the extent to which they throw themselves totally into their characters' creation can actually be a treat to watch. This is a fringe-show after all, and Simon Lipkin (London's original Trekkie/Nicky) has worked well as Associate Director to extract the well timed performances.

The show is refreshingly true to the original licence, with leading UK puppet consultant, Nigel Plaskitt (also the design brains from the original show) taking time out from filming the Muppets' latest movie to advise. Simon Burrow's band, stowed high above the stage are great, and in a show that has frenetic backstage responsibilities with frequent puppet changes, a nod too to Bessie Carter who evidently stage manages seamlessly.

Director Plews, does not disappoint in his show that displays a huge commitment to great production values. It's a short hop on the Northern Line to Highgate's Avenue Q, well polished fun, performed to a deliciously high standard.

Runs to June 30th