

## **Arts à la Mode**

**Review by Ann Marie Oliva**

### **AVENUE Q**

Music & Lyrics by Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx

Book by Jeff Whitty

Based on an original concept by Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx

Directed by Jason Moore

Choreography by Ken Roberson

Musical Director Andrew Graham

Puppets Conceived and Designed by Rick Lyon

Music Supervision, Arrangement, and Orchestrations by Stephen Oremus

Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, Belk Theatre

Stanford Broadway Lights Series

July 22 – 27, 2008

Imagine approaching a producer and saying you have a musical comedy play about twenty-something, self-mocking, X-rated puppets; would he/she like to take a chance? Today, producing plays in New York, or anywhere for that matter, is not for the timid. Going halfway with Avenue Q would have been disastrous, but Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx have created a clever, entertaining show that provides the audience with enough recognition of this generation's post-college plight that most will find it particularly hilarious, if sometimes achingly true.

How do you navigate your life after you (and your parents) have made a college degree the focus of years and years of your young existence, only to find out it's not the magic answer you thought it would be? What next? That's the question for the characters in this Sesame Street influenced show. How do you find a job/love/fulfillment once you've accomplished your educational goal? How do you deal with the let down?

You might think that actors in full sight holding puppets next to them would distract the audience, but it's easy to accept, especially because of the wonderful puppetry and performances by the cast. Princeton (Robert McClure) follows his dream by rushing to New York City where his first shock is trying to find an affordable place to live. After starting at Avenue A, he ends up at Avenue Q. Here he and the rest of those he meets try to deal with the angst of their times. "What do you do with a BA in English?"

The music provides a background of simple childlike melodies yet is shrewd in using lyrics in the syntax of those growing up with unlimited possibilities, meaning delightfully politically incorrect and/or confrontational, with a liberal use of curse words. Especially amusing are: "Everybody's a Little Bit Racist," "The Internet is for Porn," "Schadenfreude," "You Can Be as Loud as the Hell You Want." Because the words come from innocent-looking puppets it's outlandish rather than shocking. There are also humorous videos that "instruct" the audience and add to the humor. The utilitarian set design by Anna Louizos is a perfect complement to the action, as is the lighting by Howell Binkley.

The ensemble cast is excellent across the board, with those manipulating puppets not breaking character, but rather reflecting the emotions of their puppets. Robert McClure plays the new college grad, Princeton, with a believable, naïve hopefulness, as well as playing Rod without awkwardness in switching characters. Anika Larsen brings wonderful energy to Kate Monster, Lucy and others. Angela Ai gets big laughs by going against the stereotype of a shy, demure Asian woman who defers to her man. Danielle K. Thomas, as Gary Coleman (yes the actor), keeps the audience from getting tired of jokes at his expense because she brings such good humor to the part. Cole Porter plays a likeable thirty-two year old still looking for himself. David Benoit shows versatility with his mix of characters. Maggie Lakis and others in the ensemble add to the fun when called on.

While some of the jokes can be crude, and the full frontal nudity (even with puppets) is jarring, it's an evening that provides wit, originality, and imaginative soul-searching while making points about a generation told they could do anything, be anything they wanted, and that all are "special," which turns out to be a huge overstatement. Not everyone's dreams are going to come true, although the play ends on a high note.

It leads to some second thoughts like: if everyone's a star who's going to do the heavy lifting? Doesn't the world still need plumbers?