

True, blue 'Q' sets us laughing, thinking



LAWRENCE TOPPMAN

Conspiracy theorists had a ball when “Avenue Q” took the top three Tony Awards – best musical, book and score – away from the highly favored “Wicked” in 2004.

Maybe voters wanted to spread the wealth after two recent sweeps (“The Producers” in 2001, “Hairspray” in 2003). Maybe they were voting for a New York-centric show, rather than a splashy spectacle meant to lure the tourist trade.

But now that I've seen both in the last four months, I have a different take: “Avenue Q” is more satisfying. It has nowhere near as much dazzlement but just as much heart and a lot more – er, things I can't mention in a family paper (but which are sung about onstage).

The final message of a musical is usually something as inspiring as “love conquers all” or “follow your dreams.” The last song of “Avenue Q” reminds us life is transitory: Things that cheer us must be embraced, while things that make us want to find a rope and a lamppost will pass. “Q” is a lot more real than most tuners – a strange word to use for a show full of puppets – and the touring cast at the Belk Theatre this week sells every line with honesty, skill and unflagging energy.

The title refers to the run-down neighborhood presided over by former child TV star Gary Coleman (irrepressible Danielle Thomas). Two of the tenants are human, failed comedian Brian (sweetly glum Cole Porter) and his rough/tender sweetheart, a Japanese therapist named Christmas Eve (delightfully bossy Angela Ai).

The other tenants are cloth and wood: porn-addicted Trekkie Monster, optimistic teacher's aide Kate Monster, closeted gay Republican Rod, his clueless roommate Nicky and unfocused Princeton. They share their loves, lusts, depression and suppressed anger quite frankly, and anyone who doesn't want to see puppets doing the horizontal bop (with many a variation and exclamation) had better stay away. (Composer/lyricists Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx and book writer Jeff Whitty allegedly conceived “Q” as a TV pilot. Even on pay-cable, that's not easy to envision.)

Maybe the creators chose to use puppets because we can watch them do things without the embarrassment we'd feel if they were human. Maybe each figure represents the id of a person carrying it around. Either way, director Jason Moore and his cast of four gifted onstage puppeteers (plus a few unseen) make us believe in their feelings.

And what feelings those are: acknowledgement that each of us is a wee bit racist (and could move past that problem if we admitted it), awareness that humankind takes an inevitable if shameful pleasure in the miseries of others, knowledge that we're frail and foolish where sex is concerned.

Human actors look at and respond to puppets onstage; their faces and bodies mirror the puppets', so you may find yourself watching the non-humans for emotional cues. (They're also easier to follow from farther away.)

Superb Anika Larsen and Robert McClure do much of the heavy lifting, so to speak: She plays gentle Kate and sultry Lucy the Slut, while he finds perplexed sweetness in Princeton and adenoidal anxiety in Rod. David Benoit and Maggie Lakis are just as valuable in smaller roles, including an infantile, insidiously cheerful pair of Bad Idea Bears.

Folks who need special effects in musicals will get a few when Princeton contemplates marriage, as he's confronted by creatures Maurice Sendak would have been proud to encounter in his nightmares. But the most special effect of all is the ability to make us laugh at ourselves and feel better about being so fallible and conflicted. That's worth a Tony in any year.