

Urinetown @ New Line Theatre

Music and Lyrics by Mark Hollmann

Lyrics and Book by Greg Kotis

Running June 2 – 25, 2022 @ The Marcelle Theater

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So, I've been obsessed with *Urinetown* for a little over a decade now. And I know for a fact that I'm not alone. Scott Miller – the director of the production of *Urinetown* that is concluding New Line Theatre's 30th anniversary season – not only saw the original Off-Broadway production in 1999, but also saw its Broadway transfer in 2001, directed the show for New Line in 2007, and even pinpointed the exact year the show is set by reading the fine print on a stage prop in the very first productions. As far as hyperfixation goes, Miller and I would make fine bedfellows.

To be fair, though, *Urinetown* is a musical that is ripe for New Line: it's a piece of dystopian fiction that serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of irresponsibility, all told in the form of a meta-musical that not only breaks the fourth wall constantly, it obliterates every molecule and atom of that wall. Scott Miller writes in his director's notes for the show program, "*Urinetown* broke the musical comedy. In a good way."

I discovered *Urinetown* when I was a freshman in high school. As a kid who only knew shows like *Cats*, *Rent*, *Wicked*, and the Rodgers and Hammerstein classics, this show absolutely blew my mind. It was the first musical I ever encountered that had such pointed satire, such a blatant disregard for its audience, and such a minimalist, guerilla theatrical style and aesthetic. And I loved every second of it. Not to mention, it opened up the doors for my love of off-the-wall, obscure musicals. But I never saw *Urinetown* live until now, and I am so happy that my first time was with New Line, a company that I hold so much respect for as a musical theatre fan, because this production gave the material the gravity it deserves.

This production sets the show in the year 2027, and I pray to all that is right in the universe that the world doesn't end up like this in such a short amount of time. But given the way things are heading now, I'm being way too optimistic. *Urinetown* tells the story of a dystopian future where climate change has resulted in a decades-long, planet-wide drought that is leading Earth to a water shortage. However, instead of pouring all of their resources into hydraulic research, the world's politicians resorted to legislating measures to save water; one of those measures being the banning of home toilets. Now, people must use pay toilets, known here as "public amenities," which are all controlled by a monopolistic corporation – the Urine Good Company (UGC). To keep people paying, UGC began bribing politicians to criminalize relieving yourself outside of a public amenity, putting more money in the Rich Folks' slimy hands. If you violate this law, you get carted off to the dreaded and mysterious "Urinetown," where you are never seen or heard from again.

Too much exposition? Well, those are the exact words of Little Sally, a precocious child (I think?) who serves to poke holes in the story's themes and messaging, which are all told to us in the first ten minutes by the show's narrator, the deadpan Officer Lockstock. Throughout the show, these two characters have Platonic discussions that both deconstruct the plot and question the very existence of the show. Try to imagine *Our Town* if it was written by Samuel Beckett, then you'll have a pretty good idea of how these talks play out.

The hero of our story (in the loosest form of the word "hero") is Bobby Strong, the bookkeeper for Public Amenity #9, the poorest, dirtiest restroom in our setting. The amenity is managed by the brassy custodian Penelope Pennywise, a stickler for following the law and pays no mind that the people who use it can barely pay the unreasonably high fee. The plot begins when Bobby allows his own father to be taken away to Urinetown after he relieves himself against a wall, a result of Old Man Strong not being able to pay. Disgraced by his inaction, Bobby wanders the city streets where he has a chance encounter with a woman named Hope, who tells Bobby to buck up and "follow his heart." Inspired by her words, Bobby overthrows Pennywise and starts a revolution to lead the people to urinary freedom. The heads of UGC promptly arrive at Amenity #9 to snuff out the uprising; one of them just so happens to be Hope, who Bobby discovers is the daughter of UGC's corrupt President and CEO, Caldwell B. Cladwell. The rebels then kidnap Hope, thinking they can use her as leverage to persuade Cladwell to make the amenities free. I won't go any further into spoiler territory, but it's sufficient to say that from here, hijinks ensue.

Urinetown is a musical that was way ahead of its time when it was written over 20 years ago. Back then, the absolute insanity of the show's premise and characters were nothing more than outrageous. But today, the satire is as serious as a heart attack and hits you worse than an aneurysm. With the recent ecological developments of the Yellowstone floods and the drying of the Hoover Dam, the sharp increase of sleazebag politicians like Matt Gaetz and Missouri's own Josh Hawley, the national attention given to injustices towards lower-class citizens, not to mention America's current inflation crisis – *Urinetown* is a musical that we need to see right now.

The creators of *Urinetown*, Greg Kotis and Illinois native Mark Hollmann, present this meta-musical in the style of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*, the granddad of agitprop ("agitational propaganda") musicals such as *West Side Story* and *Les Miserables* (all of which have direct references in *Urinetown*). The characters are the most exaggerated representations of dramatic archetypes, the scenic design by Todd Schaefer is delightfully dingy (including a rotating set-piece that reveals a cartoonish backdrop for the UGC offices), and the angry jazz score is orchestrated for a five-piece band: musical director Tim Clark on the piano, Tom Hanson on trombone, Kelly Austermann on the reeds, John Gerdes on the bass, and Clancy Newell on percussion.

The passion that co-directors Scott Miller and Chris Kernan (the latter of whom handles the fun, stylish choreography) have for *Urinetown* is contagious, as evidenced by the staging, which uses the entire Marcelle Theater as its playing area; they even stage a song with the characters standing in the middle of a row of seats, leading to a big reaction from the audience. Also on wonderful display here is New Line's first-rate cast, three of whom were understudies at the

performance I attended. Grace Langford understudies Melissa Felps's Hope, playing opposite Kevin Corpuz's Bobby; both actors play ingenues very well, making both Hope and Bobby's naivete and idealism feel real, while also being very, very funny. Chris Moore understudies Clayton Humburg's Mr. McQueen, the sycophantic personal assistant to Todd Schaefer's Cladwell; their Snidely Whiplash, mustache-twirling, tie the woman to the railroad tracks characters are played with amazing cartoonish energy. Jessica Winningham is the swing performer covering Langford's original role of Little Becky Two Shoes, Bobby's second-in-command of the rebels. The ensemble is played with Brechtian passive-aggressiveness by Winningham as well as Mara Bollini, Zachary Allen Farmer, Ian McCreary, and Christopher Strawhun.

Sarah Gene Dowling plays Pennywise as an old battleax with a no-nonsense attitude, exploiting the character's full comic potential. Colin Dowd plays the crooked Senator Fipp in a particularly lecherous portrayal that gets a bit too real in some moments. Kent Coffel and Jennelle Gilreath are hilarious as the narrators; Coffel gives Officer Lockstock a self-assuredness that plays well with Gilreath as Little Sally, who plays her like a child who is wise beyond her years, questioning everything and everyone with perfunctory charm. Coffel also has some fun moments with Marshall Jennings as Officer Barrel, a deceptively simple character whose depth Jennings plays elegantly.

Contributing to the guerilla aesthetic of the production, in addition to Todd Schaefer's versatile set, are Sarah Porter's costumes, Kenneth Zinkl's lights, Kimi Short's props, and Ryan Day's sound. The sound design is especially worth mentioning here: all of the performers are only amplified using overhead mics that hang from the rafters of the Marcelle. There were some moments where the band was louder than the singers, but the fact that the performers can project their voices without breaking character is a truly Herculean effort.

This was possibly the best production of *Urinetown* that I could have possibly seen for my first time seeing it live. New Line's *Urinetown* was originally going to be presented in 2020 before the Great Pandemic had to shut down those plans. After two years, the reality of our world is as close as ever to the reality of *Urinetown*; this is the right place and the right time for New Line to be performing this show, and for the people of St. Louis to see it. This is yet another holdover from 2020 that is well worth the two-year wait. Hail Malthus!