

Sesame Streaking

Potty-mouthed puppets ponder life's questions in *Avenue Q*

"It sucks to be me!" warble the brightly clad puppets and people in cheerful, *Sesame Street* style. These grown-up puppets can't quite grasp the fact that they haven't yet saved the world or become famous, or even found gainful employment. Plus, they're mostly single and probably penniless.

The Tony Award-winning *Avenue Q*, currently running at Lord Leebrick Theatre, follows the travails of 24-year-old Princeton (the charming Trevor Eichhorn and puppet), a recent college grad searching to find his purpose. As in *Sesame Street*, the issues Princeton deals with are everyday real, though instead of a quick moral lesson from Maria or Big Bird stepping in with a self-esteem-boosting song, questions are answered with more questions and *Schadenfreude* is the word of the day.

Characters far too familiar are the Bad Idea Bears (Ben Goodman and Mindy A. Linder), who are often on hand to convince Princeton of the economic advantage of buying a case of beer instead of a six-pack, or who are happy to show up with a rope just as he's feeling life's not worth it anymore.

What makes the work of Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx (concept, music and lyrics) and Jeff Whitty (book) brilliant is that *Sesame Street* hits most of us deep within our psyche. We watched it in our earliest homes, and the long-running PBS kid's program is familiar in the true sense of the word. After a particularly stressful week, try pulling out a disc of the original season of *Sesame Street* and chill while contemplating the contributions of the letter C. No joke. It's powerful.

Q has us laughing at ourselves, and treats us in the end with the existentially comforting finale "Only for Now," which proves that everything from a kiss to our hair to the Tea Party is with us for but a moment in time.

Yet as most of us are roaring with laughter and groaning with identification, a number of audience members will shrink in their seats. This show is not for everyone. To call *Avenue Q* politically incorrect is a gross understatement. Lord Leebrick is an intimate space, and when two puppets start going at it — having gold-medal-worthy sex not 20 yards away from you — well, it's kinda dirty. If you are easily offended, you won't find this funny.

Love or hate the script, everyone can appreciate how much work went into director Craig Willis' production. The snuggable puppets were designed by David Mort and constructed by volunteers. A set very similar to the one that took up the entire Soreng stage at the Hult when the touring production passed through Eugene last winter has been fitted to the little Leebrick.

Thus, a big show is replicated in a small space, rather than re-imagined for it. The implications of this choice aren't huge, but it led audience members around me to compare this show with the touring production, which is unfair. Granted, there were some acoustic problems. With a show like *Avenue Q*, audiences want the voices to fill the very corners of the theater. Although the space-to-vocal-strength ratio wasn't spot on, microphones would have been overkill.

Every puppet has so mastered its actor that the people fade behind their Muppet-like appendages. Particularly adept at crossing the line between human flesh and colored felt was Shannon AJ Coltrane (Kate Monster); there was one moment where her puppet was turned away from the audience and I found myself growing angry, as I wanted to see the expression on that little wad of fabric's face. Only then did I recollect that its expression wasn't going to change, because its forehead is probably reinforced with cardboard.

Colin Gray, his arms deep in fur with internet porn pervert Trekkie Monster as well as Nicky-the-unkempt-roommate, makes a triumphant debut at Lord Leebrick. Tatianna Young is solidly Gary Colemanesque, James Tabor delights as uptight Rod, Sarah Ruggles is appropriately vampy as Lucy The Slut, and Alina Ishizaki creates a Mrs. Thistlewat worthy of her name. The appealing cast is thoughtfully rounded out by actual human beings Jay Hash (Brian) and Jaine Huenergard (Christmas Eve).

Avenue Q is a play to be proud of, and proud they were. Willis beamed as he opened the show, praising his cast as the best talent in town and confidently stating Leebrick plans to extend the run, as tickets are flying out of the box office. Where else are you going to embrace the not-so-A-okay? Time to take a walk on the seedy side of *Sesame Street*. **EW**

Avenue Q plays at the Lord Leebrick Theatre Sept. 16-Oct. 16.



**We don't
SUCK
any
longer**

New food
New entertainment
New owner
New Cozmic

EAT LOCAL AND THRIVE

8th & Charnelton • 541-338-9333
cozmicpizza.com

WILLAMALANE PRESENTS
FRED CRAFTS' RADIO REDUX
2011-2012 SEASON

Live radio classics:

- 'Treasure Island' Oct. 14-16
- 'It's a Wonderful Life' Dec. 16-18
- 'The Philadelphia Story' Feb. 10-12
- 'Fred Crafts' Radio Daze' April 13-15

Tickets available at any Willamalane facility, or call 541-736-4544.

Act fast to save with a season pass! Available through Oct. 16.

Wildish Community Theater
 630 Main St., Springfield
 wildishtheater.com

willamalane
 Park and Recreation District

**a pint
is just right!**

Dari Mart proudly introduces Lochmead ice cream in a convenient snack-sized pint.

Count on Dari Mart for the freshest milk and ice cream.

All natural Lochmead ice cream, now in pints!

DARI MART
 Our family's best.