“Satore can be difficult to execute in the best circumstances. You have to have characters who are true to life. If you’re not being honest with your characters, the humor is trite.”

— Andrew Caglio, director

The cast of Cabirio Stage's "Urinetown" include, from left: Emily VanderYacht as Hope Cladwell, Max Bennett-Parker as Officer Lockstock, Donald Jakubowski as Bassir, B. Chadell, Nathaniel Rotrock as Bobby Strong, Eric Chavarria as Christy Pellow, and Caleb Hedges as Elders Wheeler.

“Urinetown”
Produced by: Cabrillo Stage
Directed by: Andrew Caglio
When: Opening Friday, running through Jan. 15
Where: Crocker Theatre, on the campus of Cabrillo College, Aptos
Tickets: Adults, $22 to $45; seniors, $22 to $45; children 6-12, $22 to $30
Details: www.cabrilostage.com

Sure its name is in bad taste, but there’s nothing about ‘Urinetown’ that’s nice or conventional

By Wallace Steine
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It is one of the more intriguing mysteries of our time: why did the musical play could survive, even thrive, with a name, a song, like this? “Urinetown.” A punk band from the 60s, OK. But a staged musical? Yes, “Urinetown” — Cabrillo Stage’s new version opens Friday — is anything but some shaggy dog play with a vulgar name. It ran on Broadway for three years and won three Tony Awards. It is among the mostivered musicals among actors and musicians, and it has been labeled for being a relevant political and social commentary about the world we live in today. You can’t say that for “Hello, Dolly.”

“Urinetown,” written by Robert & Mark Haim and Mark Holman, dates back to 2001 when it debuted at the New York International Fringe Festival. At the beginning of that year, it moved to the Broadway, running a total of 1,200 performances. It was written during the dot-com boom and then released just days after the dot-com bust, a period in history where both the economy and the internet were in trouble. The story is set in the future, in a time where water is a scarce commodity, and the only way to get access to it is through a water tax. The play follows the story of a group of rebels who decide to take matters into their own hands and create a underground water system to provide water to those who need it.

Sure its name is in bad taste, but there’s nothing about ‘Urinetown’ that’s nice or conventional. It is a socio-political satire set in a not-so-unfamiliar world brought to its knees by a 20-year drought. The drought has left the toilets and all citizens are required to do their own waste disposal in public toilets controlled by one giant corporate which only charges a fee for the use of the toilets, but ensures the government to make it a crime to use the bathroom anywhere else. Those found doing so are sent to a labor camp called “Urinetown.”

On top of that, the play is a clever send-up of various other musicals in the “musical theater genre,” as its creators call it, with a satirical eye to see how things have changed. The play’s creators, Mark and Robert Haim, wrote the music and lyrics of “Les Misérables” to “West Side Story.”

Joe Norgren, Cabrillo Stage’s musical director, was well aware that the play’s title would cause him problems in marketing. He said that it’s dealt with some disappointed patrons and that some local ranters refused to put the play’s posters in their front windows because of that title.

On the other hand, Norgren knew that “Urinetown” was wildly popular among those who know theater. He said he saw productions at 20-30 universities, including the San Francisco State University. “When we were in Liver- more that were parked. They had to go find extra chairs for people to sit,” he said of the Livermore produc- tion.

Norgren likes to use Cabrillo Stage’s winter production as an opportu- nity to produce unusual or non-mainstream material, which to past years has in- cluded the almost unknown musical “Lunch” and the musical comedy “A Night at the娜ter.” “‘Urinetown’ is the ideal match for that for us,” he said. The show’s director Andrew Caglio said that he has never been a big fan of “Urinetown” until he saw a production in San Francisco that turned him around on the play.

“People like it, but I just can’t get what we are appealing about,” said Caglio, directing his opening night show at Cabrillo Stage. Caglio and the San Francisco production, he said, took the characters seriously and didn’t make them into broad stock char- acters. That was the key to his vision of the play.

“Satore can be difficult to execute in the best circumstances,” he said. “There are no heroes and there are no villains. The people you who iden- tify as heroes make big mistakes and the ones you think of as villains are of- ten the ones who are right in their inten- tion.”

“Urinetown” is usually done in a stripped-down black-box style, but Cabrillo Stage brings the play into the huge Crocker Theater. The cast is a dozen, and Stage’s produc- tion star, “It is hilarious,” he said. “The play is just written so well. It has a real far- cal journey to it, and it has the shape and form of a farce.”

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