THEATER REVIEW

Cabrillo Stage finds the fun in ‘Urinetown’

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“Urinetown, The Musical,” now spilling over on the Crocker Theater stage at Cabrillo College, clearly won’t be everyone’s cup of tea. That’s because this play is so full of references to urine, it likely will have many audience members running to the restrooms at intermission.

And there’s even more to wade through in Act 2.

Yet the musical, which ran on Broadway for almost 22 years and won three Tony Awards in 2002, is without its charms, and director Andrew Ceglio playfully capitalizes on those to keep this production afloat.

What “Urinetown” has in abundance is a potfull of good actors, inventive (if drippy) song lyrics by Greg Kotis and Mark Hollman, and inventive, splashy choreography by Ashley Rae Little.

But enough waterlogged metaphors. The story is actually about a drought that has resulted in the Urine Good Company (UGC) taking over all restroom facilities and charging people for every use. One of UGC’s custodians is Penelope Pennywise (a forceful portrayal by Nancy Williams), who warns the people of the “city not unlike your own” that there no longer are any private bathrooms and everyone must pay to use the public restrooms because, she sings, “It’s a Privilege to Pee.”

Those who can’t afford to pay are roughed up by the police and sent to Urinetown - a mysterious place no one really knows anything about (whether it really even exists). The humor is broad (and low-brow). For example, the two primary cops are a rather subdued, droll Max Bennett-Parker as the play’s narrator, Officer Lockstock, and Kevin Johnson as Officer Barrel. (Get it? Lockstock and Barrel.)

Other character names are just as descriptive. The story’s hero is Bobby Strong (a sure-voiced, earnest Nathaniel Rothrock). Get it? Strong. And the heroine, played by sweet, rubber-faced Melissa Reinfurtner, is, prophetically, Hope.

Two standouts in the cast are Versal Knight as Little Sally, whose performance is anything but little. Knight finagles her way into and out of all sorts of scenes, sometimes acting as a foil to Officer Lockstock and often even questioning the logic of the play itself. It’s impossible not to follow her whenever she’s on stage - which, happily, is quite often.

As the very pregnant, yet surprisingly lithe Little Becky Two Shoes, Sadie Rose Neillblum-Lamkin is also terrific. Though it might be better if she didn’t scowl all the time, Neillblum-Lamkin is exciting to watch - and perhaps the perpetual scowl is because pregnancy usually means frequent trips to the bathroom.

Ronald Johnson Jr. also deserves mention because he is always true to his character and never boring as the nefarious head of UGC, Caldwell B. Caldwell.

It’s a nice touch at the start of the show to have the police march in some rather grungy-looking vagrants who are actually the small band (lead by musical director Michael J. McGushin who is also the pianist, with Cabrillo Stage artistic director Jon Nordgren on woodwinds). While the overture sounds a tad tinny, the music improves considerably as the musical progresses.

And, though there aren’t any memorable songs from the score, Rothrock and Reinertson are appealing in the satirically sentimen lending “Follow Your Heart” and Johnson is entertaining when he sings “Don’t Be the Bunny.”

It’s difficult, however, to appreciate a song - despite great dancing from Neillblum-Lamkin, Jomar Martinez (as Hot Blades Harry) and the rest of the cast members who play The Poor - when the song is called “Snuff That Girl” and includes lyrics like: “Well, boys, I’ve had enough Of each arrogant curl! Bing! Bang! Boom! Let’s get tough Playin’ rough - Snuff that girl!”

Maria Crush’s costumes are appropriately tattered for The Poor, and both Michael Meek’s sound and Kyle Grant’s lighting match Skip Epperson’s bare-bones setting.

Director Ceglio, in his program notes, says he hopes audience members will drop their guard - and their preconceived notions about the subject matter - and allow “Urinetown” to provoke thought about “the sustainability of our actions, our way of life and how we treat each other in society.”

All good ideas. And when “Urinetown, the Musical” throws in a nod to several legendary Broadway musicals like “Les Miserables,” “Fiddler on the Roof” and “West Side Story,” well, at times it’s infectious.

Ultimately, though, it’s an extended (but original) bathroom joke with political overtones, “Singing in the Rain” it ain’t.