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by Kyrie Long

The long road to 'Avenue Q' makes a stop at Salisbury Theatre

Generations of people remember the wisdom imparted upon them as children by programs like "Sesame Street," but those wanting a little more advice for the world of grown-ups may want to stop by "Avenue Q."

"Avenue Q," is a Tony award-winning musical comedy all about the blessings and blunders of adult life, tackling what it means to find purpose through puppets that might seem a little familiar.

"In our current climate with the United States, I feel like this show speaks to the issues we're dealing with on a daily basis," director Gwendolyn P. Brazier said. "Racism, social inequity, gender equality — all those subjects come up in the show."

The interesting part, she added, is that while people tend to spend a lot of time fighting about these things, "Avenue Q" addresses the issues, then reminds audiences that it's alright to let go of the anger and laugh.

The musical is also graphic in nature, aimed toward adults despite the nostalgic twist, with songs such as "The Internet is for Porn" and "Everyone's a Little Bit Racist." Brazier cautioned people to do their research before bringing children to the show.

According to Brazier, she tried to bring "Avenue Q" to Fairbanks for years, but was finally able to make it happen with her own company, Interior Independent Theater, when university scene shop manager and set designer Adam Gillette, reached out to the University of Alaska Fairbanks' theater department to form a partnership at the end of the last school semester.

Thus, the show about finding yourself and life after college ended up right at home on campus in the Salisbury Theatre, making the production a personal triumph for Brazier.

"Six years ago, when I first started working with theaters I was told "Oh this is not an appropriate show for Fairbanks. The Fairbanks audience won't appreciate it," she said. "I was like, 'I beg to differ.'"

With a small cast of nine people and a smaller orchestra of six, there have definitely been some struggles along the way, the main challenge being the ever-present puppets. The cast had to first find and reskin puppets for the show, then learn how to properly handle them.

However, Brazier says the production is further along than she has seen with other shows and she's impressed with her cast for taking on multiple roles, learning puppeteering and sticking it out through the hand cramps and changing rehearsal spaces.

"I was worried that that wouldn't happen," she said. "That they wouldn't be able to rise to the challenge and that we would have to limit what we were doing, but they have gone well above and beyond what I expected."

Bill Torgerson, who plays the main character, Princeton, first learned about "Avenue Q" when it came out while he was in high school, then saw it while he was living in Kentucky. This show will be his first with Interior Independent Theater.

"He's done four years and got a BA in English," he said of Princeton, "and as it is, he has no idea what to do."

He said that the story is about Princeton finding himself, which is difficult to do coming into the world with a degree, but without the structure college provided or the support they may have had previously.

Torgerson, who came to the show the only actor with previous puppeteering experience, is wearing a few hats (or puppets) this show, since he will also be playing Rod, a conservative investor with

some hidden insecurities.

"He keeps it mostly to himself; he lies about who he is in life, but still enjoys more or less the finer things and doesn't mind sharing that knowledge," Torgerson said. "Like he enjoys Broadway musicals of the 1940s and enjoying kind of the company of other people in a more fancy setting."

He added that the production has been amazing thus far and he is excited to be in the show with his wife, Amanda Torgerson, who is playing one of the Bad Idea Bears in addition to other roles. Coming into opening weekend, the finishing touches are being put into everyone's character and Torgerson says he loves working with everyone involved.

The production has a preview night tonight, asking people "pay what you can" for a sneak peek at the show. The real opening night comes Friday, when Brazier hopes audiences will be as moved by the show as she has been every time she's seen it.

"Being reached on a different level from this show is just inspiring and I hope that people who watch the show get that same feeling," she said. "The world is not as bad as it appears and whether we get something done today or later, remember that this is just now."



From left: Elsbeth Cheyne, Tana Fudge, Kellie Bernstein, David Martinson, Amanda Torgerson, William "Bill" Torgerson and Paul Adasiak. Kade Mendelowitz photo