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Review The laughter is contagious at Hollywood Fringe Festival's 'Toxic Avenger'



Melvin Ferd the Third (Jared Reed), in need of a good dermatologist, and blind librarian Sarah (Kim Dalton) in "The Toxic Avenger." (Rich Clark)

By **David C. Nichols**

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Radioactive laughter courses through Good People Theater Company's "The Toxic Avenger," wreaking sublimely silly havoc at the Hollywood Fringe Festival.

In its Los Angeles premiere, Joe DiPietro and David Bryan's 2008 musical send-up of Lloyd Kaufman's 1984 cult film proves inspired. Using the skeleton of Kaufman's screenplay, "Toxic" still follows ultra-nerd Melvin Ferd the Third (Jared Reed), whose crusade to clean up critically polluted Tromaville, N.J., gets him tossed into a vat of toxic waste.

Quicker than you can say Lou Ferrigno, the titular creature emerges, his burgeoning romance with blind librarian Sarah (Kim Dalton) running parallel to Toxie's escalating mayhem, amid such bluntly self-descriptive songs as "Get the Geek," "Hot Toxic Love," "Choose Me, Oprah" and "All Men Are Freaks."

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Director Janet Miller and her talented Good People understand that with material as purposely un-PC and ham-fisted as this, it's best to embrace the garage-theater lunacy. That is precisely what they do, from the school-pageant wit of designer Zorro J. Susel's rolling panels and make-up to the grab-bag flair of Mary Reilly's costumes.

Under music director Corey Hirsch's ace stewardship, Bon Jovi member Bryan's serviceable, eclectic music pulses forward, and the wonderful cast follows suit.

Reed insidiously morphs from nasal dweeb to resonant behemoth, hysterically mismatched with diminutive Dalton, whose plangent soprano and comic élan wouldn't shame Kristin Chenoweth.

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Shirley Anne Hatton devours corrupt Mayor Babs Belgoody and nattering Ma Ferd. Her Act 1 duet with herself is a Ludlamesque tour-de-force. Danny Fetter (as Black Dude) and scene-stealing

Wesley Tunison (as White Dude) suggest an entire comedy troupe, and assistant stage manager Rebecca Schroeder's hand-dog involvement pays off in knee-slapping spades.

"The Toxic Avenger" is hardly a great musical, awash in false rhymes and schlock, the musical theater tropes seldom rising above pastiche as in, say, "Urinetown." Yet its ingenious execution transcends the sum of its scattered body parts, and the results are seat-of-its-pants uproarious. Big-theater honchos, take note.

"The Toxic Avenger," Sacred Fools Theater, 1076 Lillian Way, Hollywood. Check the [Hollywood Fringe Festival schedule](#) for times and dates. Ends June 26. \$20. [Goodpeopletheaterco.org](#) or [HFF16.org/3539](#). Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes.