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## Regional Reviews: Los Angeles

### ***The Toxic Avenger*** Good People Theatre Company

Review by [Sharon Perlmutter](#)

Good People Theater Company has a history of doing musicals at the Hollywood Fringe Festival—and they're not always standard Fringe fare. This year, they bring us a musical that should fit Fringe well: *The Toxic Avenger*. It's quick, witty, campy, self-aware, slightly-naughty, winking-at-the-audience fun. *The Toxic Avenger* was a success Off-Broadway, and it revels in its low-budget pedigree. With a cast of five playing upwards of fifteen roles, it's all about quickly drawn characters and lots of laughs. A slick, over-produced version would take all the fun out of it.

And there's no danger of that here. Good People's production looks Fringe cheap; but it's also impressively executed.

For the uninitiated, the show follows the story of mild-mannered nerd Melvin Ferd the Third, who cares about the environment and is too afraid to tell the local librarian how much he adores her. After an unfortunate run-in with the town thugs (we're in New Jersey, so they're wearing track suits), Ferd is thrown into a drum of toxic waste, and comes out as a superhero—the toxic waste deformed his face beyond recognition, but gave him some serious abs (green ones). Played by Jared Reed, Ferd is nebbishy; but when he turns into "Toxie," Ferd finds his self-confidence and Reed lets his voice drop so he can rock out.



**Kim Dalton and Jared Reed**

*Photo by Rich Clark*

The object of Ferd's affection is buxom, blonde, and blind Sarah. Kim Dalton plays the librarian (a job for which Sarah is particularly ill-suited) with winning charm. Sarah is not that bright, but she's super-perky. Dalton also nails a lot of the blind-girl physical comedy. If I tell you she gets laughs by facing the wrong way or walking into things, it doesn't sound particularly funny; but Dalton plays Sarah with such earnestness, it works every time.

Where this production really scores is in its three supporting actors who play multiple roles. Shirley Anne Hatton has a terrific dual role as the city's evil toxic-waste-dumping mayor and Ferd's smart-ass mother. Wesley Tunison and Danny Fetter (identified in the program as "White Dude" and "Black Dude" respectively) play everyone else—from the town bullies to Sarah's best girlfriends to a folk singer and the town scientist—with glee. Tunison's bio says he is "amped to be doing one of his dream roles," and he *is*. Tunison is having so much fun on stage, it's infectious.

The score by David Bryan and Joe DiPietro is generally funny, but would be funnier if you didn't see the jokes in advance by the use of predictable rhymes. (When they sing, "We're drowning in the muck," it doesn't take a genius to figure out how the next line is going to end.) The real laughs come from DiPietro's book, and Janet Miller's direction, which doesn't miss a trick. At one point, while trying desperately to impress Sarah, Toxie blurts out the wrong thing. Miller draws out the moment, letting Toxie's mistake hang there, and my hand involuntarily went to my mouth in shock, waiting to see how DiPietro was possibly going to write Toxie out of the mess he'd written him into. It's a perfect combination of writing, directing, and performing—and when it resolves a few beats later, we laugh both at the line and in relief.



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And that's about as much analysis as *The Toxic Avenger* can bear. About half the show's laughs come not from its text but from the way in which the team of five actors pulls it off. This is a show that ends its first act with a conflict between two characters played by the same performer—and the escalation of the staging, rather than the conflict, is where the real fun is. Don't deconstruct it; just go and enjoy it.

Good People Theater Company in conjunction with Alejandro Patiño present *The Toxic Avenger* at the Sacred Fools Theater as part of the Hollywood Fringe Festival through June 26, 2016. For tickets and information, visit [www.goodpeopletheaterco.org](http://www.goodpeopletheaterco.org).

Music and Lyrics by David Bryan; Book and Lyrics by Joe DiPietro. Based on Lloyd Kaufman's film *The Toxic Avenger*. Make-Up Design and Scenic Art: Zorro J. Susel; Costumes: Mary Reilly; Lighting/Stage Manager: Katherine Barrett; Sound: Robert Schroeder; Casting: Michael P. Wallot; Marketing: Kimberly Fox. Music Director: Corey Hirsch; Director: Janet Miller. Orchestrations and Arrangements: David Bryan and Christopher Jahnke.

Cast:

White Dude: Wesley Tunison

Black Dude: Danny Fetter

Mayor Babs Belgoody/Ma Ferd/Nun: Shirley Anne Hatton

Melvin Ferd the Third/The Toxic Avenger: Jared Reed

Sarah: Kim Dalton