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Friends 2 Mutual

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For Arts in LA:

THE TOXIC AVENGER MUSICAL at Sacred Fools

Reviewed by Travis Michael Holder

As a young couple (Danny Fetter and Wesley Tunison) gleefully begin their soon ill-fated date, planning to go see a stage musical adapted from a movie "people watched when they were stoned," THE TOXIC AVENGER MUSICAL's book writer Joe DiPietro makes the slyly amusing point that perhaps his musical's audiences might be thinking they're doing the same thing. Based on Troma Entertainment's 1984 deliciously campy cult classic feature film, which seemed to have been made on a budget of about \$14.58 and yet soared to the tippy-top of midnight cinema fame, getting high isn't a prerequisite to appreciating this musical, but the concept shouldn't be taken off the table altogether.

Whatever state you're in while watching the Good People Theater Company's Los Angeles debut of DiPietro and David Bryan's hilariously bare-boned 2009 work will do quite fine, as Toxie and his friends—played by a determinedly goofy ensemble of five spectacular performers—offer a truckload of laughs and some wonderfully tongue-firmly-in-cheek fun for anyone willing to groan through a nonstop succession of cleverly trendy double-entendres, many aimed directly at Chris Christie's mega-polluted Garden State.

Playing both our monstrously mutated hero Toxie and the desperately nerdy Melvin Ferd the Third from whom Toxie is horrifically transformed after Tromaville, N.J.'s, resident bullies dip him in a green-glowing vat of toxic waste—not only deforming him horribly but also making him "smell like Newark"—Jared Reed is a major asset to this production. He has the help of Zorro J. Susel, who designed the poor guy's colorfully dripping facial makeup complete with one dislodged eye residing somewhere on the hollow of his left cheek. Kim Dalton is a scream as Toxie/Melvin's love interest Sarah, the town's blind librarian with a penchant for almost walking off the front of the stage, pouring Drano into her guest's tea instead of sugar, and impressively belting her songs directly out onto Santa Monica Boulevard.

Shirley Anne Hatton is extraordinarily game to try anything, whether she's playing a traditionally clad foul-mouthed nun, Melvin's Mrs. Wolowitz-come-to-life of a mother, or Tromaville's villainously cackling and supremely evil Mayor Babs Belgoody. Still, in a breakneck series of multiple roles tagged collectively as Black Dude and White Dude, Fetter and Tunison steal the show over and over again, whether entering as those dimwitted bullies Sluggo and Bozo, as the Supremes-esque cross-dressing Shinequa and Diane, or as uber-gay hairdressers Lorenzo and Lamas. Tunison is a particular knockout throughout with his impressive pipes, wide Joe E. Brown smile, and a body language that appears inspired by Roy Bolger's Scarecrow.

Musical director Corey Hirsch and his rocking onstage band ace the catchy score composed by Bon Jovi founder and keyboardist Bryan, who also co-wrote the sharply topical lyrics with the equally ingenious DiPietro. The ultimate star of the show, however, is director Janet Miller, whose wit and humor is everywhere. Miller puts her signature on all she touches, from moments when the "manageably handicapped" walking disaster that is Sarah returns her misplaced library books to a nonexistent shelf or cuddles her teddy bear upside-down so the toy's butt lingers right under her nose as she delivers a plaintive ballad declaring her love for Toxie.

This is especially true when black-clad assistant stage manager Rebecca Schroeder enters periodically to hold up signs telling us where each new scene is about to take place, something developed out of necessity, according to Miller, because the production could not afford to add them all into the program. Schroeder's hysterically irritated attitude, as she endlessly repeats the bit and the actors stop to stare at her as if she were yet another mutant, becomes a delightful part of the show, culminating when she tries to keep up with the others by attempting to join in on their 11th-hour tango.

Who could turn down a feel-good musical about nuclear waste, we're asked, and the answer is clear: anyone who is sick of the real world and could use a couple of hours to escape it—or perhaps daydream about just which current crop of politicians we'd love to see trumped... er, dumped into their own personal vat of smoldering toxic waste.

The critically-acclaimed limited run of THE TOXIC AVENGER MUSICAL, presented as part of the annual Hollywood Fringe Festival, has now ended but it ain't over until the fat lady mutates. The Good People are searching for a new venue to continue its successful sold-out run, so hopefully it will rise again, just like Melvin Ferd the Third did from the steaming mound of Governor Christie's waste—if you'll forgive that equally toxic image.

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