

Robert Nott | The New Mexican

Crying wee wee wee all the way home

To pee or not to pee; that is the question.

With a quote like that, clearly we're not talking *Hamlet*; we're talking *Urinetown: The Musical*, which opens at 8 p.m. Friday, April 21, at the College of Santa Fe for a two-week run.

Yes, it's *Urinetown*, the satire that took Broadway by storm despite its off-putting title and offbeat plotting. Set in the future during a time of severe drought, the musical offers a seemingly dark scenario: water use is so restricted that people have to pay for the right to relieve themselves. Their admission fee to public stalls is supposedly financing the search for a long-term solution.

The tunes include "Too Much Exposition," in which it's suggested that audiences can't handle more than one basic theme in a musical; the cautionary tale "Don't Be the Bunny," which warns against being cute and cuddly — and then getting shot for it; and "It's a Privilege to Pee," which is self-explanatory.

Urinetown was written by Mark Hollmann and Greg Kotis and opened at the New York International Fringe Festival in 1999. It made it off-Broadway about a year and a half later and premiered on Broadway at the Henry Miller Theater on Sept. 20, 2001. A commercial success, it ran through mid-January 2004. *Urinetown* also garnered 10 Tony nominations and netted three Tonys for best direction of a musical (John Rando), best original musical score, and best book of a musical.

The CSF production features Peter Zapp directing and Campbell Martin choreographing the 35-member ensemble. Tom Maguire conducts the five-piece pit band, music direction is by Gail Springer, and A. Clark Duncan designed the industrial waterworks set.

In an interview during a recent rehearsal break, Martin said his first response to hearing the musical's title was, "What? You're in *Town*?" Then he listened to the soundtrack album. "I think it's done brilliantly," he said. "It's handed to the audience on a paper plate rather than a silver platter with shinola."

Zapp agrees. "Clearly it's an inventive, clever, catchy, tune-filled, bright new piece of material. It not only makes fun of itself and the corporacacy infiltrating the new world, but it does so in a light-hearted, clownish fashion. The writers were smart enough to bury the message — the medicine — in a sweet-tasting biscuit."

Zapp said the message of the piece is clear: we are overconsuming in a world with limited resources. He realizes the show will have added resonance in Santa Fe, where a long-term drought limits our ability to water lawns, wash cars, and bathe the family pets.

Fortunately, things haven't gotten quite as bad around here as they are in *Urinetown* — though, Zapp notes, you just never know. "The play is set up like it's about corporate greed," the director said. "But it's not just corporate greed. All of us have a hand in this. Everyone pretends it's not happening, but it is."

Zapp said he hopes the title and/or subject matter won't put off theater patrons. Martin said he wants the word out that there's more to the piece than just its name — like its underlying sociopolitical message about a community's responsibility in the face of dwindling resources and corporate dominance.

"Hopefully somebody won't say, 'What's playing at the college? *Urinetown*!' Because then they'll just stay home to watch *Survivor*." ◀

details

- ▼ *Urinetown: The Musical*
- ▼ Opens 8 p.m. Friday, April 21; runs through April
- ▼ Greer Garson Theatre, College of Santa Fe campus, 1600 St. Michael's Drive
- ▼ \$14-\$20, 473-6511



Relieve it or not: Kathryn Holtkamp and Kevin Williams in *Urinetown: The Musical*

But the actual beneficiaries of the pee fees are corporate villains led by Caldwell B. Cladwell (played by CSF alumnus Robin Bowles). The bad guys are not really looking for an antidote to the drought; they're just getting rich off the poor. And if any of the bladder-challenged populace pee in an inappropriate place — behind a bush or against a tree — they get arrested and banished to the horrific *Urinetown*.

The play's narrator, Officer Lockstock (Colin Cooper), welcomes the audience to the show while finding time to throw out a screaming stumblebum griping about the play's title or theme or something. Lockstock then explains that *Urinetown* is "filled with symbolism and stuff like that."

The musical's hero is Bobby Strong (Kevin Williams), whose dad got hauled off to *Urinetown* for committing a bodily function against a tree. The heroine is Hope Cladwell (Kathryn Holtkamp), Caldwell's true-blue daughter who believes everyone has a heart — and should follow it. Her sense of innocent idealism is infectious, based on how Bobby reacts by fomenting a no-pay-for-pee rebellion, which leads to a lot of singing and dancing.

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