

THEATER REVIEW | URINETOWN

Skilled young actors fit musical to a P(ee)

By Margaret Quamme
FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

"This is not a happy musical," Officer Lockstock — the smarmy, avuncular narrator of *Urinetown* — warns his constant companion, grubby Little Sally. "But the music is so happy!" she replies.

That's the central contradiction of Otterbein College's polished, unsettling production of the musical, which won two Tony awards in 2002. *Urinetown* plucks the audience's heartstrings and tickles its funny bones while making sure no brains are checked at the door.

The two-act musical by Greg Kotis and Mark Hollmann is set in a dystopian future in which a drought has caused the government to take draconian measures. Water is rationed, and, as one of the songs succinctly puts it, everyone has to "pay to pee."

When his father is carted off to the mysterious "Urinetown" for relieving himself outside when he can't afford to enter "the poorest, filthiest urinal in town," upright young Bobby Strong (Matt Johnson) decides to foment a rebellion against the chief executive officer of the Urine Good Company, nasty Caldwell B. Cladwell (David Caamano). But Bobby's quest is compromised when he falls for Cladwell's naive daughter, Hope (Tina Scariano).

Under the direction of David Caldwell,



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Tina Scariano and Matt Johnson

the smoothly meshed cast melds slapstick with tragedy and pathos with cynicism. Otterbein has considerable depth in theater, music and dance, and all talents are on display here, where even the sappiest lyrics get full vocal treatment. Support is ably provided by a six-piece orchestra.

Johnson's Bobby is touching even in his most lunkheaded moments, and Scariano's defiantly dense Hope has

► Otterbein College will present *Urinetown* at 8 tonight, 2 p.m. Sunday and 8 p.m. Thursday through next Saturday in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$20. Call 614-823-1109 or visit www.otterbein.edu/theatre.

a steely center that hints that she might be her father's daughter after all.

Caamano's Cladwell pays tribute to Groucho. Kari Ringer, as the pivotal character Penelope Pennywise, has energy to spare. Claire Longest saves determined, inquisitive Little Sally from any hint of sentimentality. Steve Czarnecki makes Officer Lockstock both appealing and appalling.

Stella Hiatt Kane's choreography pays tribute to the musical's obvious targets of satire, which range from *West Side Story* to *Les Miserables*, but she doesn't allow the audience the relief of obvious parodies. This *Urinetown* has a jerky rhythm all its own. Movement throughout the play is stylized, giving even the most ordinary scenes a jumpy pulse.

Rob Johnson's forbidding set — all dark towers and dangerous catwalks — adds to the musical's ominous tone, as does Dana White's lighting, in which ambiguously yellow tones alternate with eerie bright whites that produce sharp shadows and turn faces ghoulish.

In the end, *Urinetown* is as disturbing as it is entertaining.