

Rocked and rolled

Ambitious Rent Boy Ave. goes in and out of tune

By Robert Avila

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Musical theater separates the men from the boys, and the gritty urban musical is especially tough to pull off. Hardcore violence, seedy city underbellies, bare midribs, and a sprinkling of angel dust might make me or you want to burst into song, but it's still pretty jarring to witness. Nonetheless, the GUM as a subgenre is well established. Many would call Rent its quintessential expression. Others might go for Urinetown, if only to take the piss out of the Rent faction. But these are the ones that help sell the form, and they can make it look misleadingly easy.

Boxcar Theatre's new urban rock musical, Rent Boy Ave.: A "Fairy's" Tale, has some of the genre's virtues and many of its faults, with a title already evoking at least two of the aforementioned Broadway precedents (though how intentionally I can't say; thematically the play's emphasis falls more on the subtitle, with snaking references to Pinocchio et al.). You have to hand it to Boxcar; as other companies scale back and tighten belts, it steps forward and belts out scales. It's an ambitious capstone to the company's current season. It's also bursting with neighborhood spirit: Rent Boy Ave. is about sleazy back-alley prostitution and drug dealing among underage hustlers in the feral alleyways of SoMa, conveniently located right outside the door.



While there are actually relatively few people to be sighted, let alone tricks turned, in the street immediately adjacent to the theater, director Wolfgang Lancelot Wachalovsky does his best to play up any symmetry, having actors panhandle and proposition the audience as they take their seats, arrayed around chain-link and vibrant graffiti (courtesy of Lily Black and Mr. Fingers) in Don Cate's enveloping urban jungle décor. The cheekiness simultaneously erases the distinction between theater and street and calls knowing attention to it.

But ambition and local flavor notwithstanding, the musical is rather shaky. The story begins with the arrival of fresh-meat street urchin David (a nicely bold and comically dry, if musically uneven, Bobby Bryce), exiled from his Midwestern home (yes, he's from Kansas) for being gay. Accomplished hustler Mark (Bradly Mena), already long in the tooth at 17, takes him in hand, while insisting he's straight despite his male clientele. David is not prepared to prostitute himself, but likes Mark, who introduces him to the Pimp (a dramatically flat but resonantly voiced Anthony Rollins-Mullens), who gets him dealing drugs in the meantime. David befriends another of the Pimp's properties, junkie thrasher Jackie, whose opening number, "Punk Rock Slut," establishes actor Danelle Medeiros' conviction and vocal control in the role despite some less than compelling choreography. The streets are haunted, meanwhile, by a psychopathic Dirty Old Man (a bright, enjoyably nasty Donald Currie, with some of the better lyrics) and patrolled by a foul-mouthed soup-kitchen saint, Sister Mercy (an able Michelle Ianiro).

Performances here are mixed, the staging only fitfully compelling. More crucially, book and lyrics (by artistic director Nick A. Olivero) deliver a patchy plot and characters of thin or questionable merit. There's humor and punch in some songs, but too many lines are poetically strained to the point of hemorrhaging — especially in the generally egregious "rhyme"-busting of the Pimp: "I've got apples to pick /And fingers to lick /And money to kick." The rock score (by Michael Mohammed), at times effectively driving or wistful, can also be dully formulaic or ponderously proggy. Rent Boy Ave.'s moral has an unfortunate double edge to it: among this world's fleshy but spiritually empty transactions — "Life don't mean a thing /Living in a prostitution ring" — it's the soul that counts.

RENT BOY AVE.: A "FAIRY'S" TALE

Through Aug. 9

Wed–Sat, 8 p.m.; Sun, 2 p.m., \$18–\$34

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