

Rent Boy Ave: A Fairy's Tale confronts realities of urban life, '90s-style

By Chloe Veltman

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Jackie (Danelle Forcier-Madeiras) was once class valedictorian. Now this jerk is touching her boob.

Where:

Boxcar Theatre, 505 Natoma (at Fourth St.), S.F.

Details:

Music by Michael Mohammed.

Through Aug. 9.

\$18-\$34; 776-1747

or www.boxcartheatre.org.

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In recent years, any young musical-theater–impassioned composers or lyricists with aspirations for a Tony Award are obligated to try their hand at writing a hard-hitting urban rock opera — or, as has been increasingly the case lately, a parody of one. In particular, the enormous success of Jonathan Larson's 1996 demimonde-depicting musical *Rent* spawned a new generation of works, including *Spring Awakening* and *In the Heights*. Turning their backs on the flamboyant escapism of stage spectacles by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Elton John, the creators of these gritty new shows aimed to portray the seamy side of life with unflinching cynicism and dark humor. Meanwhile, the likes of *Avenue Q* and *Bat Boy* have given the fashion for in-*yer-face* musical fare an otherworldly twist with their madcap depictions of wild Muppet sex and cave-dwelling half-bat, half-boy beings.

Given the state of the genre lately, what might audiences expect from a musical whose very title evokes three blockbuster contemporary musicals? Author and lyricist Nick Olivero (who is also the co-founder and artistic director of Boxcar Theatre) may not consciously have clumped *Rent*, *Bat Boy*, and *Avenue Q* into the headline of his latest world premiere. But by naming it *Rent Boy Ave.: A Fairy's Tale*, he cannot help but draw attention to recent theater trends. With a title like that, we might hope for a daring satire on the clichés of the 21st-century American musical. But instead we get a solidly staged though entirely derivative rehash of *Rent* and its ilk.

Set on the grimy backstreets of a blighted U.S. city, *Rent Boy Ave.* (which I saw in preview) tells a contemporary tale about young people trying to survive in an economically harsh system with little

hope for the future. The plot centers on three young hustlers who are doomed to peddle drugs and sex to pay off a pimp, get their next fix, or stop themselves from starving to death. When smalltown boy David is thrown out of his parents' house for being gay, he makes his way to the big city and soon finds himself destitute. Mark, a veteran of the streets at the age of 17, befriends him. The two, with drug-addicted prostitute Jackie (who was once class valedictorian but whose life was derailed following pregnancy and an abortion), continue to scratch out an existence. Dreaming of escape by day, they spend their nights fending off the threats of a menacing pimp, visiting a local shelter run by a streetwise nun for soup, and turning tricks.

Olivero and his main collaborators, composer Michael Mohammed and director Wolfgang

Wachalovsky, join with designers Don Cate (set), Sarah Beth Parks (costumes), and Dan Weiermann (lights) to depict this urban fairytale in a competent albeit cliché-riddled manner. The design elements — torn stockings, stadium concert-style lighting, and graffitied walls — seem to have come from the *Idiot's Guide to Staging a Rock Opera*. Yet despite the less-than-fresh concepts, the execution is impressive. Bold, colorful tagging covers every vertical surface in the theater; a chain-link fence sections off the four-piece rock band's playing area from the main action; scaffolding platforms and ladders, which move freely around the performance area on wheels, highlight Boxcar's high-ceilinged theater-in-the-round space. Wachalovsky's blocking makes the most of the landscape, creating contrasts among scenes and characters by staging some moments high above the stage atop scaffolds and others closer to the floor. During the dramatic "Nightmare," Bobby Bryce's David even performs inside one of the cage-like structures, an inspired bit of staging which emphasizes the character's sense of entrapment at that point in the story.

As formulaic as they might be, Mohammed's songs are similarly well-crafted and performed. The mixture of tuneful rock anthems and soulful ballads, though not particularly memorable, eloquently conveys the characters' emotions and the story. In the punchy "Punk Rock Slut," for instance, Danelle Forcier-Madeiros conveys Jackie's pain and strength with a focus and confidence that would make Christina Aguilera or Pink proud. Meanwhile, a rose-tinted "Home Sweet Home" sung by David, Jackie, and Mark (Bradly Mena) at the top of Act Two succeeds in capturing the childlike fantasies of the three misbegotten youths.

If only Olivero could have taken a step back from his creative endeavors to see beyond the obviousness of setting a musical in "a piece of shit street in some city otherwise known as the world's trashcan." One or two of his characterizations demonstrate a stroke of originality. I fell particularly strongly for Sister Mercy, a no-nonsense nun played by Michelle Ianiro who marches around in Black Panther–like garb dispensing soup and sermons with hard-arsed aplomb. But in general, the themes, language, and characters feel like yesterday's news, a problem exacerbated by the fact that Olivero insists on spelling everything out. Beyond the fact that such devices have been used onstage many times before, simulated blow jobs, shooting up heroin, and lines like "Shut your cunt mouth" just don't leave enough to the imagination. Ultimately, it's hard to take *Rent Boy Ave.* seriously; it comes across as a parody of a musical rather than "a tale of innocence, a tale of scared children," as the writer earnestly describes it in the program notes.

Although the production gives off an air of having been conceived in a cultural vacuum, there might be a strong sense of box-office savvy underneath the apparent naïveté. A well-staged musical doesn't have to be the most original work to gain popularity. I know people who've seen *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables* five times, which demonstrates the extent to which musicals, perhaps more than any other performance genre, trade in the familiar. *Rent Boy Ave.* is unlikely to win any Tony Awards. But it might well help Boxcar Theatre cover the rent.