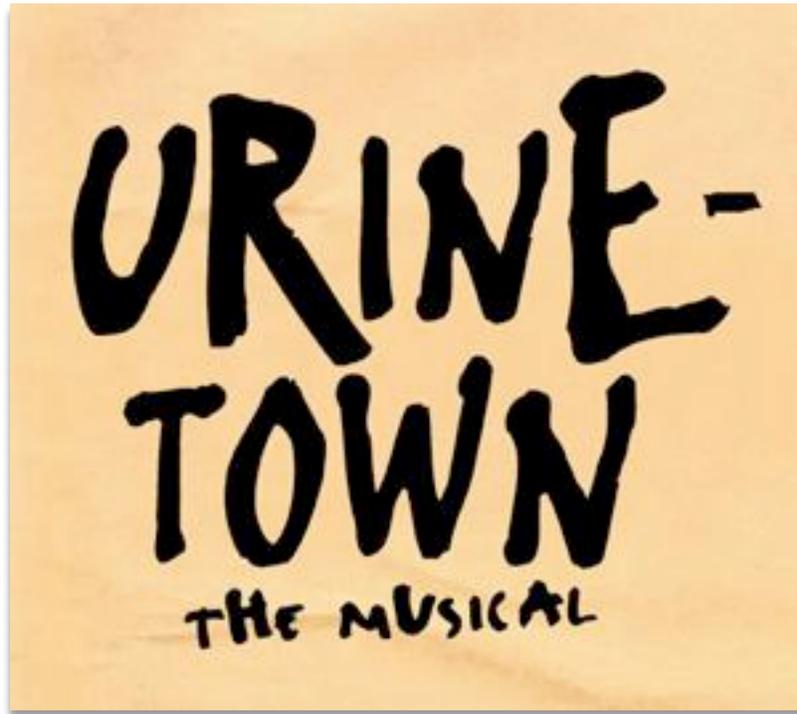


West Virginia University
College of Creative Arts
Divisions of Theatre & Dance and Music
present



STUDY GUIDE

Performances:
April 17-19, 21-26

Gladys G. Davis Theatre
Creative Arts Center

theatre.wvu.edu

Welcome to Urinetown!

BLOG: If you're into shows like *Family Guy* and movies like *This Is Spinal Tap* (and if you don't know it, grab it), then you probably already know that making fun of something can be the start of loads of fun. As far as musicals go, there's a lot there to make fun of, yeah, and ***Urinetown: The Musical*** is about as funny as it gets, but with a social message. Well, let's not dwell too much on "message." This is a show that lives up to its name!



Urinetown The Musical is a parody. A parody is a humorous or satirical imitation of a serious piece of literature, writing, or music: *his hilarious parody of Hello Dolly*. The tone of ***Urinetown*** shifts with every single scene, which means the entire cast of the production must be unified throughout these stylistic changes. ***Urinetown*** also parodies *Millennium* in the song "Don't Be The Bunny," and *Les Miserables* in the act one finale. Act II opens with *Fiddler on the Roof*—meets—*Sweet Charity*, then swings into the testosterone-filled world of the Jets from *West Side Story*, followed by a *Big River*-style revival meeting, and then we're into the throes of a 1940s cinema melodrama like *Mildred Pierce* (Don't worry if you don't know half of these shows . . . the styles you'll recognize!). The cast must be unified and knowledgeable of the productions that are being parodied while keeping the overall arc of the present play intact. ***Urinetown*** basically encompasses the mechanics of a typical musical in a parody.

[With help from <http://www.statesman.com/life/content/life/stories/other/01/16urinetown.html>]

A Word about Political Theatre

by a guy with a Ph.D.

All theatre is political . . . in fact, all art is political, in that it reflects the way people view their society, and by what is allowed to be presented as the culture of the time. Some theatre is overtly, openly political, and the patron saint of political theatre in the last century has to be Bertolt Brecht, a German communist and activist. He wrote plays designed to get people in the audience to leave the theatre ready to act against the ills of their society. Normally, when people go to the theatre, they want a “nice” story that they can lose themselves in for a couple of hours, then go out and have a bite to eat after.



Bertolt Brecht



Brecht challenged his audiences to THINK and ANALYZE while watching his plays, so he tried to keep their intellects awake by alienating them from the action, what he called the *Verfremdungseffekt*—think of it as a critical distance. How did he achieve this? By reminding the audience at all times that they’re watching a performance: narrating, singing, holding up signs, showing the scene changes, and so forth. He wrote some plays, most of them with music, but all of them with a point of view. You may have heard of *The Threepenny Opera*, *Galileo*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and *Happy End*, to name just a few. Oftentimes his collaborator was the composer Kurt Weill. Jim Morrison and The Doors recorded a version of

“Alabama Song” from the Brecht/Weill show *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*.

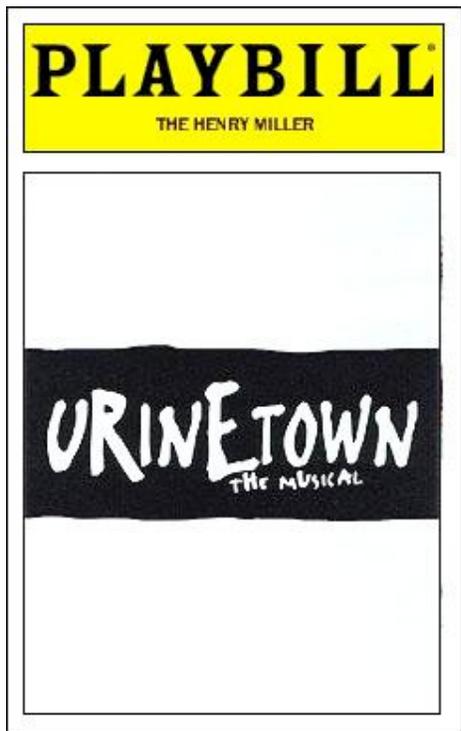
In the U.S., Brecht’s ideas have influenced a great deal of theatre over the past seventy-odd years. One American composer/writer, Marc Blitzstein, wrote a Depression-era musical called *The Cradle Will Rock*, with heavy Brechtian overtones. The show had such a controversial word-of-mouth that our government withdrew support and the show couldn’t open. The story of that show’s rocky history is told in the Tim Robbins film *Cradle Will Rock*, and that movie would serve as a great set-up to seeing ***Urinetown: The Musical***.

Blitzstein set his *Cradle* in “Steeltown” and there’s little doubt that the creators of our show based the title “Urinetown” squarely in that tradition, satirically or not. Blitzstein, though not a household name today, influenced many who came after him, such as *West Side Story*’s composer, Leonard Bernstein. In short, without Brecht, there probably wouldn’t be a “Urinetown.”

—Dr. Jay Malarcher

The Creators of *Urinetown: The Musical* (script, music, and lyrics)

Mark Hollman won a 2002 Tony Award and a 2001 Obie Award for his music and lyrics to *Urinetown*. He is a former ensemble member of the Cardiff-Giant Theatre Co. in Chicago. He played trombone for the Chicago art-rock



band Maestro Subgum and the Whole, and also played piano for the Second City national touring company and Chicago City Limits. He attended the musical theatre writing workshop at Theatre Building Chicago and the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop in New York. Member of the Dramatists Guild and ASCAP.

Greg Kotis (book, *Urinetown*) is a veteran of the Neo-Futurists, creators of the long-running ongoing attempt to perform 30 plays in 60 minutes *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind*. *Jobey and Katherine*, his play of fish, toast, and a love stronger and grimmer than death enjoyed runs in New York and Chicago in 1997. As a member of Cardiff-Giant, he appeared in countless anarchic improvisations and co-authored 6 plays including *LBJFKKK*, *Love Me*, and *Aftertaste! (the Musical)*. He holds

a BA in Political Science from the University of Chicago.

Urinetown @ WVU

Professor Lee Blair (Director)

Urinetown: The Musical is Professor Blair's third show as director for the division's main stage since his arrival in fall 2006. Most recently, he co-starred in the opening production of the West Virginia University Division of Theatre and Dance's 2008-2009 Season: Christopher Shinn's *Dying City*. His two previous mainstage directing projects here were Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations* (Fall 2006), and J. M. Barrie's *Mary Rose* (Fall 2008).

Lee Blair on Musical Theatre

When it comes to musical theatre, Professor Blair most enjoys the heightened element inherent in the genre, and has created an approach to direction of it which takes great pains to preserve the integrity of the material at hand; “Certain elements of musical theatre must hold to any performance or production,” he says, “the audience expects to see certain things.” While the play must operate contextually within the language of the genre, it is the “heightened element” that supports the story—and if successfully treated by those onstage (and off)—will support the characters. “Musical theatre isn’t just about singing and dancing,” says Professor Blair. “The element of music exists because the character can no longer express his or her thoughts in words.” He notes it is of the greatest importance for actors to “live in the need of the song” or, rather to play the truth of the lyric, character, and the scene. This is, according to Blair, what distinguishes a good or great musical theatre experience. “The acting aspect of musical performance doesn’t stop when a song begins, but continues through it.”

When working with designers and choreographers, flexibility and trust are of utmost importance. “By nature, we are all problem solvers.” To this point, the director says it is the responsibility of practitioners of theatre to know something about all disciplines within the art. In part due to his great ability to multitask, but also because he espouses these sentiments, we can be sure *Urinetown* will no doubt be successful for audiences and the production team alike.

Upcoming projects for Professor Blair include a summer stint with the Tennessee State Governor’s School for the Arts, where he will direct several shows including Stephen Sondheim’s *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, and hopes to remain with WVU full-time starting this fall.

Interview with Professor Robert Klingelhofer (Set Designer)

Where did you get your start?

I started volunteering at a professional regional theatre in Richmond, VA, while in high school. I had always drawn and been into history, and as soon as I discovered there was such a job as a Set Designer, I knew that's what I wanted to be. I went to college at VCU in Richmond because some of the theatre's staff I had been working with were on the faculty there.

What is an idea that the director pitched . . . ?

Lee and I talked first about whether the design should be harsh, and rough to provide a "serious" world for the silliness of other elements of the show to contrast or be colorful and "musical comedy" looking to support those elements. We decided it should be harsh and industrial and "real" in a way. How design choices effect audience perceptions of the play is probably the most interesting and important part of designing.

How did you develop the idea for the set?

I did research, both of public urinals and of textures like rust and tile. I began to plan how the theatre's space could be used by defining the space and adding levels. These two elements, the assembling of research images and practical planning of space, are the key components of any design.

What process do you use when designing?

The research begins to develop into sketches, usually in Photoshop, at the same time drafting explores the practical side of what goes where. When I've turned all that into something I like, and think works well, and the director is happy with, I build a model, which often affects the design somewhat as I see it in 3D.



What's your favorite thing about Urinetown?

The mixture of Brechtian elements and some serious ideas with the absolute fun of a silly musical. Brecht has had a huge effect on modern design, and is a

particularly favorite subject of study for me. And any time you can mix different styles and ideas in a theatre piece and have fun with it, I'm happy.

Interview with Hannah Wold (Costume Designer)

Where did you get your start?

I started designing costumes when I was a teenager for my high school's theatre productions. But I always loved costumes, clothing, and dressing up

even before I knew that it was possible to make a living out of costume design. Once I went to college, I enrolled as a theatre major (after a brief stint as a fashion design major) emphasizing costume design. I took every costuming class I could, and worked on every production in the costume shop, and assistant designed on a couple shows before I designed my first show in undergraduate, which was *Romeo and Juliet* at Southern Oregon University.

What is an idea that the director gave you that helped your design concept?

One idea we discussed was how the UGC executives and the poor needed to be very different in visual style, as they inhabit two very different worlds. The executives are privileged, so their look is very clean, slick, and corporate uniform. The other side is the poor, who come from many different backgrounds, and their clothing comes from many different places and time periods, and each member of the poor has their own style. They have a lot of texture, a lot of layers.

How did you develop the idea for the costume designs?

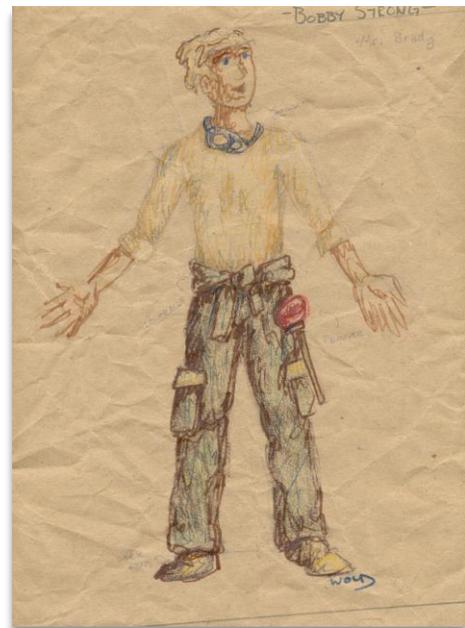
Through conversations with Lee about the separate groups of characters (poor, executives, cops) and the looks of individual characters, and through collecting and blending various visual elements.

What process do you use when designing?

First off I read the play, and, in this case, listen to the music, taking notes on the characters, such as how old they seem to be, what their attitude is like, where they live, etc. After I read the play a couple times, I start collecting images of clothing, colors, and textures, as well as anything else that I think will help express my design concept. For example, on *Urinetown*, I found some pictures of rusty pipes that had great color and texture that I referenced when designing. After I collected these images, I organized them on boards to show the director. After I present them and talk about them with the director, I go back and start doing rough sketches, based on the images and conversations with the director. I'll repeat these steps until the final design is reached.

What's your favorite thing about Urinetown?

The show is such a good time. It's tongue-in-cheek, it's sarcastic, and it's sweet and funny with great characters. I am very glad I got the chance to work on this show.

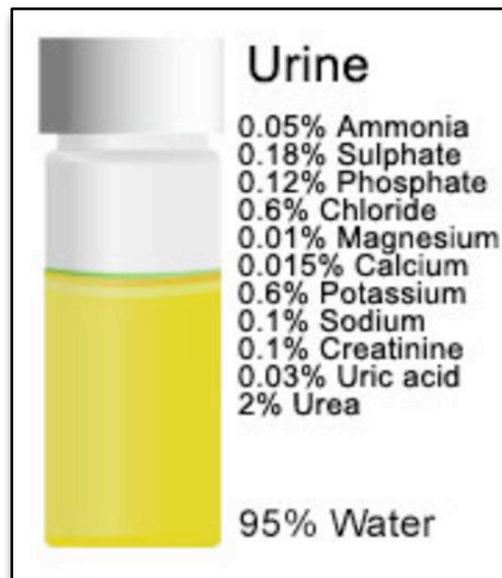


Questions for Discussion: Pre-Show

1. One of the things we take for granted in this country is having enough resources—like water—to live. What are some other areas of life in America you can think of that could have prompted a similar musical?
2. What happens when art becomes overtly political? Does a “message” necessarily interfere with our enjoyment?
3. What are some of the clichés of musical theatre situations? Why might a contemporary writing team create a musical that evokes older, “classic” shows?

Questions for Discussion: Post-show

1. How did the narration add to or detract from the show? What about it might make *Urinetown* unique?
2. What about the production rises to the level of “epic theatre”?
3. How did the set contribute to the overall experience? Costumes? Lighting? Sound design?
4. How did the music support or bring irony to moments in the show?
5. Why do you think the ending was written that way?
6. Why is it so bad to be the bunny?



Compiled by Cody Riggins and Aaron DeWitt
Edited by Dr. Jay Malarcher