



Sunday, February 19, 2012

## ‘Urinetown’ opens Wednesday at Wagner College

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA

What’s in a name? Catch “Urinetown” and find out.

The title is, well, pretty unappetizing — but it didn’t hurt sales. In 2000, “Urinetown: The Musical” a wildly inventive comedy/satire, was an Off-Broadway critics’ darling that moved to Broadway and turned into a Tony-winning, 1000-show smash.

Wagner College Theater Department’s upcoming “Urinetown” (opening Wednesday) is being directed by a member of the original “U-town” team, choreographer John Carrafa.

He thinks the show might even be more topical today than it was in 2000. He could be right about that: Just last week, a front page news story revealed that municipal wastewater in parched San Diego flows, literally, from toilet to drinking glass.

Truth is, “Urinetown” isn’t really about water use or conservation, it’s about human foibles and the musical theater (it pokes serious fun at pious moneymakers like “Les Misérables”).

The show, with music by Mark Hollmann and book by Greg Kotis, takes audiences to a small town that’s so dry and so mean that residents’ most private habits are policed and controlled. Break the rules and you get sent to Urinetown.

Last week, Carrafa, who grew up in Waterbury, Conn., and started out as a dancer in Twyla Tharp’s company, talked about the show, his history and how satisfying it is directing students while juggling TV gigs.

**Q:** You were pre-med as an undergrad at Bates College. What was it that pulled you out of organic chemistry and onto the stage?

**A:** I was always interested in biology and chemistry and I was also fascinated by dance and theater. I didn’t know anyone who had made a career in the arts and to do so seemed as practical as going to the moon. So, I pursued the pre-med degree. As time went on, and I did various things in dance and theater, I began to see that I could actually make a career in the arts. At the same time, working in a hospital in Connecticut, I saw that it wasn’t the life I was meant to lead.

**Q:** It’s terrific that you’re directing Wagner’s “Urinetown,” but given your resume, it seems surprising that you have the time...?

**A:** I try to do one of these a year, directing at a college. It’s valuable for me to work with young actors. And Wagner and the head of the department, Felicia Ruff, have been flexible with schedule so I can fit in other work. I’ve done two TV shows since I started rehearsals for “Urinetown” — “Blue Bloods” and “The Big C.” It helps that rehearsals are at night.

**Q:** Are you resetting the original production — numbers, blocking, choreo — on the college cast, or doing something different?

**A:** I’m using some of the original choreography, but I’m doing different things with the set and costumes than the original director did on Broadway.

**Q:** Age notwithstanding, how is working with the undergrad cast different than working with grown-up pros?

**A:** The difference between pro actors and the students is the amount they change in the rehearsal process. The student actors completely transform and are like sponges, soaking up new skills as we work on the show.

**Q:** If one of the kids requests your advice about getting into The Business (i.e. NYC pro theater), what will you tell him or her?

**A:** I do speak to the students about the business and occasionally refer them to an agent or casting director, when I think it's a good match. They have a million questions, from the practical to the creative, and the discussion about such things continues as we're rehearsing the show.

**Q:** What do you wish someone had told you while you were in college?

**A:** To buy stock in Apple.

**Q:** People think of "The Book of Mormon" as a romp without precedent, but didn't shows like "Urinetown" and "Bat Boy" and even "Little Shop of Horrors" lay the groundwork for musicals with crazy outlandish premises?

**A:** Aren't all musicals just a little bit crazy and outlandish?

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**'Urinetown: The Musical'**

*Wagner College Theater Department tackles the Tony-winning satire about a mega-corporation regulating the most basic aspect of everyday life: water.*

**Where:** The Music Hall, on the grounds of Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden, 1000 Richmond Terrace, Livingston (Snug-Harbor.org)

**When:** Feb. 22-25, 29-March 3, 8 p.m.; Feb. 25 and March 3-4, 2 p.m.

**How much:** \$23, adults; \$22, seniors; \$18, children 13-18; \$16, kids 12 and under.

Fridays, Saturdays and matinees: \$27, adults; \$25, seniors; student prices remain the same.

**More information:** Call the box office from noon-4 p.m. Monday-Friday at 718-390-3259.