



Toxie Gets His Revenge

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The terrific 'Toxic Avenger' has god, dirty fun with cult film

June 14, 2017 By Tad Malone



Toxie gets all the girls in San Jose Stage Company's production of 'The Toxic Avenger.'

San Jose Stage Company's newest summer musical is a campy, crude and surreal romance set in the concrete swamps of The Garden State.

Written by Joe DiPietro, *The Toxic Avenger*, is a musical adapted from the 1984 film of the same name. Originally released to a quiet response, the production's clever writing and obsessive fans helped propel this bloody B-movie into cult classic status, spawning a litany of adaptations.

Now taken on by San Jose Stage Company, *The Toxic Avenger* opens to a spare stage, punctuated by barrels overflowing with radioactive green waste

behind a large screen filled with a pixelated image of a trash heap—all the comfortable trappings of a toxic dump. The set shares the stage with a live band. The players sit to the side of the screen, which flashes images from the blighted town Tromaville, New Jersey.

Enter Melvin, a victimized nerd who is in love with the town's librarian Sarah—who just so happens to be blind. When Melvin isn't anxiously trying to capture Sarah's attention, he's being beaten up by the town bullies. In an effort to fully win Sarah's heart, Melvin steals the town records to find who owns the town's awful dump.

Turns out it's the equally awful mayor, who bribes Melvin before setting her goons on him. They try to kill him by dropping him into green slime—but instead of liquefying, he transforms into the bulbous, green Toxic Avenger (Sarah affectionately calls him Toxie), eager still to win the librarian's heart and to stop the evil in his town before it's too late.

The musical is as charming as it is crass; its themes are caustically brought to life by the ensemble cast's extraordinary performance. Will Springhorn Jr. as Melvin—and later as Toxie—is silly but endearing, and really comes into his own with the toxic transformation. Sarah, played by Courtney Hatcher, plays equal parts sweet and sexy, with a killer voice to boot.

Branden Noel Thomas and Joshua Marx (listed in the playbook as Black Man and White Man respectively) deserve big credit for keeping consistent humor in their constantly changing duos,

from bullies to scientists. However the standout performance goes to Stage Company regular Allison F. Rich who plays a hysterical nun, the devious town mayor and Melvin/Toxie's hilariously caustic mother with impressive skill. At one point, playing two characters simultaneously, Rich even sings a duet with herself. Working together in slapstick harmony, the cast keeps the audience on its toes.

What the Stage Company lacks in budget, it truly makes for in imagination. Instead of the movie's large ensemble of meatheads that square off against Sarah and The Toxic Avenger, the Stage Company distills the story down to a small number of characters all played by the five-person cast, who kick and kvetch their way through a New Jersey state of mind. This structure could easily over-stretch the small cast, but it's no obstacle for these actors.

If the music has a Bon Jovi-esque feel, then your spidey senses aren't far off. Informed mostly by blues-rock, the soundtrack is a bit one-note but ultimately is saved by samba and noir diversions, as well as utilizing '80's rock hits for mashup-like songs. That and the live band—complete with saxophone—really brings home the New Jersey-ness of the show.

This musical adaptation is arguably quite different from the original story, cutting out the focus on fitness and the gym to explore Toxie and Sarah's romantic relationship. Ludicrous blood and gore are minimized and a good number of villainous characters with a range of complexities are replaced with the mayor and her moronic goons. These changes are negligible, however, in the face of the cast's incredibly tight and hilarious performance.

And while the original story takes place in the '80s—as reinforced by the tropey character types—the Stage's adaptation throws in some jokes about the contemporary political climate. The script even throws shade on Silicon Valley. Often these jokes don't land on the same footing as the rest of the show, but a quick pace keeps these non-sequiturs from sticking out too much.

Beyond all other factors, what sells *The Toxic Avenger* is its comedic self-awareness and bawdy fun. Add San Jose Stage Company's characteristic imagination, and a witty, in-step cast, and you have a recipe for one of the most unique productions of the summer.

The Toxic Avenger
Thru Jul 16, \$40+
San Jose Stage Company

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