



Program Note for Emerson Stage production of Urinetown

An Absurdly Serious Show.

What if the world's environmental irresponsibility led to uncontrollable ecological disaster? Disaster that further highlighted the divide between the rich and powerful and the poor and powerless? What if a corporate entity greedily seized the opportunity to create a monopoly on one of humanity's most basic needs? And what if this monopolizing corporation maintained its control by paying off corrupt politicians, practicing nepotism, and sanctioning police brutality?

This was the line of questioning that book writer and lyricist, Greg Kotis, followed when he conceived *Urinetown's* "famously absurd premise" over 20 years ago. Yet, in exploring the themes of *Urinetown* for this production, it was striking how much less "absurd" the premise seems in the context of 2018 than when it was conceived, or even when it debuted on Broadway in 2001.

Exhibit A: As we began rehearsals, Cape Town, South Africa, was in the news, on track to become the first major city to run out of water. Residents—those who can't afford to buy bottled water or spend up to \$15,000 to have their own "bore holes" drilled into the water supply underneath the city—now have to go to one of 200 tap stations around the city, which are patrolled by armed guards. Their daily allowance is 50 liters (about 13.2 gallons). "Day Zero," which was originally predicted for the weekend of these performances, has been moved back thanks to the efforts of people in Cape Town to conserve. Still, the crisis is far from over.



Not only have we moved closer to the dystopian world of *Urinetown*, but, as Greg himself reminded us, we have actually seen this world before. In the ongoing dialogue we were fortunate to have with him, he impressed upon us that, in order to achieve the right tone for the show, the characters would have to take the world of the play very seriously.

“The world of *Urinetown* is a world of fear. Everybody is terrified, fighting for their lives, clinging to what they can. That’s the psychic place the show comes from. These are people under fantastic distress.”

--Greg Kotis

When he discussed his references for this world—the Warsaw Ghetto, Communist-occupied Romania, Gangland Chicago during the Great Depression—and compared the world to modern-day Syria and North Korea, the point was hammered home for us. It also gave new meaning to Little Sally’s lyric at the beginning of Act II:

What is Urinetown?
Urinetown is here!
It's the "town" wherever
People learn to live in fear

We were also able to Skype with original Broadway cast members, and Jeff McCarthy (Lockstock) and Nancy Opel (Penny) who echoed that this is “life or death” for these characters and that, in terms of acting, “dead serious is almost always the way to go.” Since then, I don’t think a rehearsal has gone by without Diane reminding the cast: “Dead serious! Life or death!”

You may now be asking yourself: What have I gotten myself into? I thought this was a musical! An absurd, comic musical!

Never fear: You *may* be able to escape into the entertainment value of the wonderful singing and dancing and the production value of the amazing set and costumes. And, yes, you will laugh (we hope) *because* of the dead seriousness of the characters within this “absurd” world, for this is how the brilliantly satirical humor of the show works. However, do be warned: you may also laugh because you are uncomfortable with how much you identify with the fear and desperation of the characters, the seriousness of the issues, and the eerie familiarity the world of the play evokes.

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