

AMERICAN IDIOT



Tony Award-winner John Gallagher, Jr. stars in the world premiere of Green Day's *American Idiot*, staged by Tony-winning director Michael Mayer at Berkeley Rep. Photo courtesy of kevinberne.com

Took in the premier of Green Day's "rock opera" based on its Grammy award-winning CD opus "American Idiot", which sold more than 12 million copies worldwide. It was clear that within hours, if not minutes, this premier got the lion's share of reviews from all the usual sources, even though the *LA Times* had sat on reviews for weeks as it observed rehearsal after rehearsal. We noted that Jim Harrington submitted his own offering within 45 minutes of the show on the 23rd. Nearly all of the reviews, both positive and negative seemed to miss the point of the work. All of the reviews were obtuse and confused. Some said it was horrible and dreck. Some said it was okay but flawed. Some said it was regrettable and

best forgotten. Some said it was our local boy's in the spotlight, and yay yay yay for them.

Whatever.

Okay then. This is what Island-life saw and heard 09-23-09 at the Berkeley Rep. We saw a visual and audibly stunning presentation that garnered shouts of joy and three -- not less than three -- curtain calls with standing ovations from a very enthusiastic crowd.



The world premiere of Green Day's American Idiot, staged by Tony-winning director Michael Mayer at Berkeley Rep.

Photo courtesy of mellopix.com

So Jim Harrington's dour opinion beside, we see that the audience clearly loved the production and the audiences are lining up at the door sufficiently

around here to delay the anticipated Broadway rollout for this, so what is really the complaint about what is eminently a successful production?

We tend to pick on Harrington because in his typically sour and disapproving mode, he resembles a mohawked punk with a bad attitude more than the rest and so we tend to listen to his angry and vindictive diatribes.

Then again, American Idiot certainly garnered quite a few of those Grammy Thingies. So shouldn't we take a bit of that into account?

Anyrate, the Berkeley Rep production of Green Day's music must stand on its own. Tom Hulce, of the obnoxious Mozart fame, produced the thing and so brought in the best and the brightest of NYC's Broadway to perform, which may be the beginning of the end of the criticism here. Everytime we think of that asshole shouting "Give them what they want. They want Spectacle!" some of us here want to beat on the brat with a baseball bat.

Okay, calm down.

The production is chock full of the usual Broadway ensemble coordinated dancing and misty-eyed formulaic tear-jerking crap that so turned off Harrington for good reason. Its also got some astounding stage work and at least one show stopping aerial ballet that had a number of the audience gasping for breath. One thing about Hulce -- he was able to bring in the best and brightest performers and technicians from NYC working today. Just about everybody in the ensemble, dripping with talent, also has performed with star-billing bands, including Tony Vincent who puts in a scenery-smashing performance as the glam rocker/junk

dealer St. Jimmy. Vincent fronted the band Queen for its performance before Queen Elizabeth on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee.

Our job here at Island Life is to talk about what works and highlight the stuff that does good so people go see and hear stuff they would not otherwise see and hear. The primary goal of the "critic" is to shunt people aside from dreck and warn artists that self indulgence will not be tolerated.

There are ideas buried in AI, and on occasion they are overtly expressed. Really, the significance of the idea that we all spend our lives becoming who we are is rooted in the milieu that produced the work. These really are not typical middle class suburban kids, and none of the makers of the work or music come from that milieu. Neither Billy Joe nor any of the members of Green Day, and certainly not Tom Hulce, ever came from or lived in the mythical suburbia of America in American Idiot -- all of them grew up and lived in densely urban environments quite at odds with the suburbs, so there is no meeting place here.

The "Jesus of Suburbia" is a creative concept about an imagined world that somehow must exist if only because imagining the real world where one lives is far too painful. So of course, this imagined myth is destined to fail because it never was based on reality in the first place. Billy Joe would say that the myth fails because of deterministic functions that say we really cannot be anything other than what we already are. Revolution is a lie and nothing will ever change. He looks for something called "home" as the rescue point even though legions of the lost have no such reference point to return to. Its a shallow and arid solution not available to most who have seen the fire burn behind them.

That's why the play does not really end with the "return home" but a reflection upon whatever happened to "whatshername". Everybody else is left permanently damaged.

The good thing about Green Day is that they accept and exhalt the rage that ensues from the necessary The good thing about Green Day is that they accept and exhalt the rage that ensues from the necessary frustration that ensues. The bad thing about Broadway is the way that it channels rage into silly choreography and "anthemic moments", Which turn out to be meaningless. Kind of what Green Day has been about, really. Or Rock 'n Roll. Silly stupid anthemic moments, which turn out to be all that we got in the end anyway, since its all f---ed up to begin with.

Among the critics, we noticed that the more traditional sorts turned up their noses, while the more edgy and world-experienced folks seemed to like the work more. Has a lot to do with the difference between people who have looked seriously at the cans of dog food in the aisle and the hamburger helper to decide which is going to be cheeper for dinner. When it comes to that kind of division, your social divide begins to really mean something. When it comes down to critics, it becomes a division between levels of experience. Either you have been there or you have not.

There are always those who just do not get it however. In a review published by the San Jose Mercury News, music critic Jim Harrington of the Oakland Tribune slammed the production by writing: "There will hopefully come a day when the stage adaptation of 'American Idiot' is seen as just a curious

misstep in Green Day's otherwise highly enjoyable career." He went on to say that the "music sounds processed and stale, handled with kid gloves by way too many players and sung by more than a dozen actors that have rehearsed the original fire right out of the songs.

Avila of the SFBG said producing the 2 Grammy album as a made-for-Broadway production was must have been something of a no-brainer. And sure enough, there are no brains in this show, just lots of songs and outfits and group dancing and mild thrashing and writhing around amid high-grade eye candy. It lasts 85 minutes, or an eternity, I'm not sure which came first."

There are a lot of assumptions regarding the way the world works that precede the listener well in advance of any interpretation, and it all relates to personal experience. The family is all fucked up. Several divorces are in the pipeline. All kinds of abuse are layered beneath the surface. The job situation is a laughing stock. Don't talk to me about politics; are you crazy? Take responsibility for my life? My life is wrapped in anomie and dreck and filth and that is just the starting point, dude.

Its true that the characters are not "fully fleshed out" and the storyline is thin, but the work does not present itself in any way as pretending to fourth-wall realism. Its an opera for chrissakes; you would no more expect character development from these iconic representations than you would from Thor in Wagner's *Ring Cycle* or any of the big-belted heroines in Verdi. Some things, like the medieval morality plays, do not demand Shavian nuance. Rock has never

been anything nuanced, or ever tried to be. Two minutes thirty seconds at 186bpm and its on to the next emotion.



Tony Vincent as St. Jimmy. Photo by LA Times

We just say, look at how the audience reacts to learn whether something works or not. Clearly the audience loved the work with fist pumping enthusiasm. The active set (designed by Christine Jones) with its rafter-high skyscrapers, projections, TV screens and mutating lattices that change from fire-escapes to city busses was stunning. The songs are all excellent, the nine piece band performed energetically, backdropping the action. The choreography by Steven Hoggett was flawless.

The end is summarized quite simply by Gallagher's Johnny: "This is a portrait of my town and my life and my rage."

Harrington, who we may add did not like the wildly successful Arabian Nights by Mary Zimmerman, is a god damned f---d up punk at heart himself. Avila and he probably always sit together in dour expectation of tedium and failure. F--k both of you and god love you.

Who's Who

Green Day, Music

lyrics by billie joe armstrong
book by billie joe armstrong and
michael mayer
Michael Mayer, Book / Director
Steven Hoggett, Choreographer
Tom Kitt, Orchestrations / Arrangements / Musical Supervision
Christine Jones, Scenic Design
Andrea Lauer, Costume Design
Kevin Adams, Lighting Design
Brian Ronan, Sound Design
Darrel Maloney, Video and Projection Design
Carmel Dean, Musical Director
James Harker, Stage Manager
Michael Suenkel, Assistant Stage Manager
Jim Carnahan, Casting
Carrie Gardner, Casting
Lorin Latarro, Associate Choreographer
Austin Regan, Assistant Director
Kara Harmon, Assistant Costume Designer / New York
Janice Lopez, Assistant Costume Designer
Stephanie Buchner, Assistant Lighting Designer
Barbara Samuels, Assistant Lighting Designer
Aaron Sporer, Assistant Lighting Designer
Mike Farfalla, Assistant Sound Designer
Austin Switser, Assistant Video and Projection Designer
Patricia Commer, Physical Therapist
Liz Caplan, Vocal Coach

Cast (in order of appearance)

John Gallagher, Jr., Johnny
Michael Esper, Will
Matt Caplan, Tunny
Mary Faber, Heather
Rebecca Naomi Jones, Whatsername
Tony Vincent, St. Jimmy
Christina Sajous, The Extraordinary Girl
Declan Bennett, Ensemble
Andrew Call, Ensemble
Gerard Canonico, Ensemble
Miguel Cervantes, Ensemble
Joshua Henry, Ensemble
Brian Charles Johnson, Ensemble
Chase Peacock, Ensemble
Theo Stockman, Ensemble
Ben Thompson, Ensemble
Alysha Umphress, Ensemble
Morgan Weed, Ensemble
Libby Winters, Ensemble
Lorin Latarro, Swing
Omar Lopez-Cepero, Swing

Band

Carmel Dean, Conductor / Keyboard / Accordion
Trey Files, Drums / Percussion
Alec Berlin, Guitar 1
William Evankovich, Guitar 2
K. Joseph Shaughnessy, Bass
Kathy Marshall, Violin
Erin Benim, Viola
Rachel Turner Houk, Cello
Matt Hohensee, Associate Conductor
Michael Keller, Music Coordinator
Colleen Darnall, Music Copyist

Update January 2010 – According to Berkeley Rep publicist Terence Keane, the show is scheduled for mainstage Broadway production in the Spring of 2010.