



[Avenue Q](#)

by **University of Manchester Musical Theatre Society (UMMTS)**

Reviewed by [Matthew Dougall](#) November 2017

The University of Manchester Musical Theatre Society (UMMTS) have done it again, and managed to produce an astounding piece of Musical Theatre out of very little. Their young ages (they are all students at Manchester University), their lack of budget, the confines and restrictions of their performance space, and possibly also the amount of quality rehearsal time, all conspire against them, and yet have, to date, always produced a Musical of raw energy and talent, and it has always been thrilling and exciting, and I have always thoroughly enjoyed my evenings in their company. Tonight was no exception.

Written by **Robert Lopez** and **Jeff Marx** (music and lyrics), and **Jeff Whitty** (book), this is a

semi-autobiographical account about the realisation that adulthood isn't the bed of roses it was promised to be by children's TV programmes and parents. To this end, the authors have shamelessly ripped off what is undoubtedly America's most famous and enduring of all Children's programmes, Sesame Street, and created a show in which the audience are required to suspend their disbelief a little more than usual, as humans act and interact with puppets with very visual and obvious puppet-masters. This is a very X-rated Sesame Street however, as within the course of this Musical, we tackle the tricky subjects of love (euw!), sex (with gratuitous graphics provided by the puppets), racism, homosexuality, schadenfreude, and the search for a purpose!

Most of the humour hits home, but I did feel that because this is a very American concept, there are perhaps too many US references and in-jokes in there for us to truly understand. The most obvious of these is having one of the characters in the show called Gary Coleman. Coleman was a black actor and comedian, more famous in the USA than here, and during the 70s and 80s was possibly America's most famous child star best known for his role in the sitcom, Different Strokes. The butt of a few of the show's jokes surround this knowledge and therefore the casting of a female for this role I found most strange - although I do know that this has also been a casting choice for large scale professional productions too, which still doesn't make sense to me.

Using a simplistic flat backdrop of a row of terraced houses, some in a better state of repair than others, the stage is set and Avenue Q is born. Behind the set was a live 6-piece band under the direction of **Billy McCreith** and **Tom Pieczora**, they sounded in good form this evening, just a little too loud in places sadly, overpowering the soloists and ripping out my eardrums in the first few bars of the overture!

Once again, the casting for this show was excellent. Considering their remit that only current students of Manchester University are eligible, then all I can say is that the university is

coaching some very multi-talented young adults. Ancient History student **Tom Carswell** took the lead role of Princeton, a young man straight out of college with a degree and nowhere to go, and finds himself at the bottom of the heap with the losers and schmoozers of Avenue Q. A hugely likeable performance, intelligently and empathetically portrayed. Playing opposite him in the role of Kate Monster was

Becca Hatch

. An excellently measured and assured performance, and an absolute delight to watch. Kate Monster, or Hatch is you prefer, gets to sing the Act 1 closing song,

A Fine Fine Line

, which has become a firm favourite of mine. It is wasted on the monster character and works much better as a concert solo, but Hatch proved that it can also have great depth and meaning in context too. Lovely.

All the cast gave up-beat high energy performances, and the choral singing, especially the final song, sounded wonderful. However I will give a special mention to Avenue Q's own version of Bert And Ernie, Nicky and Rod (**Nick Rew** and **Roman Armstrong**). The uptight intellectual closet homosexual versus the slobby free-thinking-and-doing ordinary Joe, was played out excellently and I did feel genuine sympathy for both of their plights.

With a couple of in-university jokes thrown in for good measure, **Charlie White** (director) has steered his ship with a firm and knowledgeable hand. He brought out the best of each performer and created an uplifting, very funny, and under the circumstances (puppets notwithstanding), an also very believable evening's entertainment.

Endnote. It is customary that for each performance of Avenue Q, during a song in Act 2, a bucket is passed around the audience and the money donated to a charity of the producer's choosing. For this show, the money will go to Mustard Tree, a charity helping to combat poverty and homelessness in Greater Manchester. More details about this charity can be found at

<http://www.mustardtree.org.uk>.