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# The Naïve Ingénue, The Plucky Everyman's Hero, and the Ingénue Gone Awry: The Satirical Deconstruction of Theatrical Character Tropes in Urinetown: The Musical

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**THE NAÏVE INGÉNUÉ, THE PLUCKY EVERYMAN’S HERO, AND THE INGÉNUÉ  
GONE AWRY: THE SATIRICAL DECONSTRUCTION OF THEATRICAL  
CHARACTER TROPES IN *URINETOWN: THE MUSICAL***

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS  
IN THEATRE**

**PROFESSOR GIOVANNI ORTEGA  
PROFESSOR RONNIE BROSTERMAN  
PROFESSOR ART HOROWITZ  
PROFESSOR THOMAS LEABHART**

*“Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society.  
Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it.”*

–Augusto Boal

**APRIL 22, 2016**

*This thesis looks to explore Urinetown: The Musical through a critical and theoretical framework, analyzing the show's presentation and deconstruction of theatrical character tropes through musical satire. Using the theories of theatre theorists such as Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook, and Augusto Boal, this thesis discusses the use of theatre as a device for political and social commentary. Additionally, this thesis focuses more specifically on the show's character of Penelope Pennywise as a new kind of character in the theatre: an "ingénue gone awry," within the context of approaching a performance of the character in a performance of the musical.*

*Key words: theatre, Urinetown, musical satire, social commentary, character tropes, Brecht, Brook, Boal, musical theatre, musicals, dramaturgy, character analysis*

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## Introduction

*Urinetown*. The title sounds like the brainchild of someone's younger sibling in that particular age range where they thoroughly enjoy toilet humor. It is also, however, the title of the Tony Award-winning Broadway musical that somehow worked its way up from the 1999 New York Fringe Festival to the stage of Radio City Music Hall as a Best Musical Tony Award Nominee. *Urinetown*'s rise to success was just as much of a surprise to its creators as it was to the general public. And yet, fifteen years after its Broadway opening, the show is constantly being staged in schools, community theatres, and regional theatre companies across the country and across the world. My first experience with the show, in fact, was in 2010, when my high school, an American international school in Hong Kong, did its own production. Why and how is this show still around? What has kept it relevant?

Within *Urinetown*, playwright Greg Kotis and composer Mark Hollmann crafted a story through musical comedy and satire of love, revolution, poverty, and drought. This thesis intends to analyze the presentation and subsequent deconstruction of what were once considered to be 'traditional' or 'conventional' character tropes in the main characters of *Urinetown*. This deconstruction is done through musical and comedic satire, and this thesis will examine exactly how that deconstruction is executed. More specifically, this thesis will be focusing on the role of Penelope Pennywise, my role, and how it takes the theatrical trope of the stereotypical ingénue and twists it to become the role of the 'ingénue gone awry'. The character of Penelope Pennywise is a perfect example of how *Urinetown* presents stereotypical theatrical character tropes and

subsequently deconstructs those tropes, and I intend to analyze this through a historical and theoretical framework, as well as through my own performance of the role in the April 2016 Pomona College production of *Urinetown*.

Through my analysis of the show and its principle characters, it is necessary to first understand the historical background of the show's conception and production, as well as the show's basic plot and the show's foundation in theatre theory and analysis. Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook, and Augusto Boal all have very clear influences on the nature of Kotis' script and characterizations, and their theories help better contextualize the character and script analyses. In order to provide proper context and background for this discussion, it is essential to first discuss the background of Kotis' inspiration and *Urinetown*'s journey to Broadway.

### ***Urinetown's* Story: Humble Beginnings**

*Urinetown: the Musical*, written by Greg Kotis with music by Mark Hollmann, is a piece of theatre worthy of some substantial discussion, particularly in regards to the precedent set by Brecht, Brook and Boal. Inspired by pay-per-use public toilets on a trip to Europe in the 1990s, Kotis came up with the notion of a city with public toilets controlled by one corrupt corporation. As Kotis himself wrote about the show's original conception in his article '*Urinetown Confidential: The Untold Story*', "And yet, at its core, it would also be a grand, ridiculous reflection of the world as we know it to be, complete with rich and poor, the powerful and powerless, a government controlled by industry and an industry that exists apart from and above us all" (18). Soon after returning to the United States, Kotis pitched the idea to an old composer friend, Mark Hollmann. After Kotis explained the general plot, Hollmann came back a few weeks later with a song called "A Privilege to Pee".

Regardless of Kotis' individual stance on environmentalism (he disclaims anything close to the status of an environmentalist or social activist), he explains that *Urinetown* serves as the manifestation of what he and Hollmann perceived as society's collective fears of our inevitable future. "[I]t would present a world long past the point where good intentions could do any good, a future we both fear and anticipate in this world, silently for the most part" (20). After a few years of development and a few dozen rejections from theatres, agents, and producers, the show got its break at the New York International Fringe Festival in 1999. To everyone's surprise, the show oversold every single performance at the festival and garnered critical acclaim.



Following their success at the Fringe, Kotis and Hollmann were approached by a small producing company called the Araca Group about bringing the show to Off-Broadway. The Araca Group saw the show's potential and wanted to bring it to bigger people with bigger resources. *Urinetown: the Musical* opened off-Broadway in May of 2001, in a small theatre above a courtroom and police precinct. In the tradition of theatre in New York, the fate of the show rested heavily on the verdict from *The New York Times*. As Kotis explains in his reflections, "In the world of New York theatre every accolade is precious, but the *Times*, as tradition goes, gives life or takes it away. In our case, we had been given life—a lot of life" (75). In fact, *The New York Times*' original review of *Urinetown*'s Off-Broadway production was a rave; Bruce Weber wrote of the show's stunning originality and meta-theatrical wit that deemed the show a hit. Not only was it funny and political, it was also fresh and original. In the most poignant passage from Weber's review, he writes,

"What feels fresh about 'Urinetown' is its attitude toward show business. It isn't nostalgic; its sentimentality is all satire. It doesn't lionize the travails of the performing life or shake its fist at an unappreciative world. It doesn't romanticize the enterprise of putting on a show or, except with an arched eyebrow, aggrandize the role of theater in the larger business of society.

Instead 'Urinetown' makes a laughing, grandiose case for its own lack of grandiosity; not only does it poke fun at itself, but it also pokes fun at poking fun at itself. It's a satisfied smirk of a show. No matter how satiric, referential and

allegorical the story suggests itself to be, it is fundamentally an extended bathroom joke.”

Soon after *The New York Times* rave, *Urinetown* had a sold-out run and countless awards to account for—all before the news from their producers came that they were moving to Broadway. Their Broadway opening struggled through the challenges of the September 11 attacks, and survived what was seen as an incredibly difficult Broadway season. By the time awards season rolled around, *Urinetown* found itself with ten Tony Award nominations, winning three for Best Book of a Musical, Best Original Score, and Best Direction of a Musical.

The story of *Urinetown*'s conception and ultimate success is one of an underdog, much like the story of its characters. In the world of New York theatre, with more and more shows being commercialized and produced by corporate entities, *Urinetown* came out of the woodwork from two humble New York artists/self-described do-it-yourself creators, with an stunning success at the Fringe Festival. Kotis and Hollmann originally wrote the show to be ‘unproducible’, never even dreaming of finding commercial success, and reveling in their bold and unconventional choices. These choices, it turns out, are what set *Urinetown* apart and allowed it to find such success.

### **Background Knowledge: What Happens in *Urinetown*?**

In order to fully understand the character analysis and discussion surrounding particular character tropes and their subsequent deconstructions, it is important to contextualize our discussion with the details of the plot of *Urinetown*. The show begins with an introduction from a policeman named Officer Lockstock and a young homeless girl named Little Sally. The two of them explain the history of the drought over the past twenty years; a drought that resulted in mass ecological devastation, and the elimination of private restrooms. Officer Lockstock and Little Sally explain that the only toilets that are available for legal use are privately owned by a corrupt corporation called Urine Good Company. The corporation charges fees for toilet use in order to regulate water usage, widening the gap between the rich and the poor. In the poorest area in town, Penelope Pennywise and Bobby Strong run Public Amenity #9, dealing with the poorest of the poor trying to scrape together enough funds to use the toilet every day. Bobby's father, Old Man Strong, begs Pennywise to let him use the facilities for free because he can't afford to pay.

OLD MAN STRONG: I haven't got it!

PENNY: Then go get it!

OLD MAN STRONG: C'mon, Penny, I'm good for it.

PENNY: That's what you said last week and I still haven't seen penny one. And it's Miss Pennywise to you.

OLD MAN STRONG: Bobby! Bobby, reason with the woman. I'm a little short this morning.

TINY TOM: No shorter than yesterday. Unless I've grown.

BOBBY: He's my pa, Miss Pennywise. Can't he come in for free? Just this once?

PENNY: Get your head out of the clouds, Bobby Strong. No one gets in for free.

OLD MAN STRONG: Now, Miss Pennywise, we've all had to make special... arrangements with people in high places over the years. Why not let this one be ours?

SOUPY SUE: If Old Man Strong gets in for free, then so do I!

TINY TOM: And I!

LITTLE BECKY TWO-SHOES: And I! (p. 6-7)

After Pennywise refuses, Old Man Strong gives up and urinates on the street, leading to his immediate arrest and exile to the ominous 'Urinetown' Bobby then meets Hope, a sweet and caring young woman. After discovering that they both want society to change and improve in the same ways, they fall in love. Bobby is unaware, however, of the fact that Hope is the daughter of Caldwell B. Cladwell, the CEO of the company that owns the public amenities, Urine Good Company.

When Urine Good Company announces fee hikes for all urinals across town, Bobby decides to start a rebellion against Urine Good Company, allowing all the poor to pee for free. Cladwell and the rest of the rich show up at Amenity #9 to squash the protest, where Bobby learns of Hope's familial connection. As the first act closes, Bobby and the poor kidnap Hope in order to provoke a compromise with Cladwell.

As the second act begins, we see Cladwell and the police searching for Hope while the rebels contemplate killing her out of revenge. Pennywise appears and informs Bobby that Cladwell wants to discuss things. When Bobby arrives at UGC, he is exiled to 'Urinetown,' which turns out to mean police officers throwing him off the roof of UGC's headquarters. After the rebels learn about Bobby's murder, they prepare to kill Hope

before Pennywise offers herself up instead, revealing that she's actually Hope's mother. With Hope and Pennywise now leading the charge and the rebels on their side, they return to UGC and murder the rich, leaving Cladwell for last for his own exile to 'Urinetown'.

After Hope and the poor take over UGC, the water supplies run out quickly, leading many people to die from thirst and sickness. Although they fought for freedom and fair treatment for all, they discover that the rules enforced by Cladwell and UGC kept their society from using up their limited water supply. The show ends with most of the characters dead or dying, as Officer Lockstock and Little Sally explain the repercussions of their actions.

## Setting the Scene: Brecht, Brook and Boal

Within the world of theatre, history has seen countless artists, auteurs, and theorists preaching their own unique take on the art form. Of these countless individuals, certain figures bring about ideas that change the nature of the art form, leading to new and exciting work. Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook, and Augusto Boal were some of the most respected and prolific artists in the theatre; they brought ideas and perspectives to the field that were revolutionary and different.

Looking first at the work of Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), theatre historians describe Brecht's primary goal as creating art that provokes political action and commentary. Additionally, Brecht's work focused on the exploration of the spectator/actor relationship, leading to the popularized term 'Brechtian theatre,' which is now used to describe any type of theatre that breaks the fourth wall and subverts the traditional actor/audience relationship. In David Barnett's book, *Brecht in Practice* (2015), Barnett argues that this term reduces Brecht's work to one single concept, when there is so much more to his ideology.

Brecht was committed to creating a new kind of theatre, called 'epic theatre'. He wanted to make the theatre into a forum for political commentary and discussion; it wasn't going to be about emotion, but instead about reflection and introspection. Brecht saw the theatre as an opportunity to think critically and create new and important discourses. As Barnett writes, "If the Brechtian method is to have any meaning, it has to be understood as enabling a radical insight into the way society and its citizens work with a view to changing both of them" (3). As later discussion and analysis will show, the

fundamental mission and purpose of Brecht and his ideology ties in directly with the purpose and intent of Greg Kotis' musical satire comedy, *Urinetown*. In addition to these principles, most people know Brecht as an advocate for the importance in theatre to acknowledge that it was a representation of reality, as opposed to actual reality.<sup>1</sup>

It is essential to use Brecht's explorations and ideology in framing an analysis of *Urinetown*. In analyzing the meta-theatrical and self-aware nature of the book, Brecht's influence is undeniable. Additionally, the show's political and social commentary told through satirical comedy provides a new avenue for Brechtian theatre in today's day and age. Additionally, in the nature of Brecht and 'Brechtian' theatre, *Urinetown* consistently has characters addressing the audience directly and acknowledging their current status of performing a musical. For example, as the first act comes to a close, the narrator Officer Lockstock turns to the audience, saying, "Well, that's it for Act One [...] Enjoy intermission, and see you—shortly!" (60).

Augusto Boal (1931-2009) created a school of thought within theatre theory called Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal was a very enthusiastic advocate, following Brecht, for theatre as a political weapon. Essentially, Boal dsif that theatre was created for the people and by the people, as a device of free expression to celebrate artistry; but with the emergence of the aristocracy in society, theatre became a high society art form with a clear division between actor and spectator. In order to get back to what Boal sees as the heart of theatre, he argues that those barriers must be broken down once more, allowing audiences more agency and a more active role. Boal coined the term 'spect-actor,' in his

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<sup>1</sup> Barnett, David. *Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance*. N.p.: n.p., n.d.

Print.

pursuit to bridge the gap between the two distinctions and create a more cohesive, collaborative spirit in theatre. By bringing theatre back to the masses, Boal intended to change theatre so that it would be able to function as a social and political weapon to create change and give voices to the oppressed. In Boal's 1974 book, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (originally published in Spanish as *Teatro de Oprimido*), Boal writes of the power of theatre,

“All theater is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theater is one of them [...] The theater is a weapon. A very efficient weapon. For this reason one must fight for it. For this reason the ruling classes strive to take permanent hold of the theater and utilize it as a tool for domination. In so doing, they change the very concept of what ‘theater’ is. But the theater can also be a weapon for liberation. For that, it is necessary to create appropriate theatrical forms. Change is imperative” (ix).

Following this ideology, it is essential to take advantage of theatre as an avenue for social change and political discourse, because theatre is inherently political in its nature and conception. Considering this context, *Urinetown* exists as a Boal-esque theatrical vehicle for political and social change; the show manages to use musical comedy and satire to bring about discussion surrounding municipal politics, big businesses and bureaucracy, climate change, class dynamics, police brutality, and more. In fact, it would not be unreasonable to say that *Urinetown* is, in many ways, the epitome of what Boal described as the purpose of theatre.



Additionally, *Urinetown* is written as a wholly ensemble musical; although there are principal characters, the story and the climax of the show are fueled by the poor rebels. Bobby Strong is certainly the instigator and leader of the movement, but the story certainly would not hold the same power and impact without its ensemble characters. Kotis knew the power and impact of theatre told by the masses, for the masses. Furthermore, the nature of *Urinetown* as a musical about musicals, where the show both satirizes and pays tribute to the musicals that came before, aligns with Boal's push for theatre that celebrates artistry.

Peter Brook (1925-) is another theatre theorist with some undeniable fingerprints on Kotis' work in *Urinetown*. In 1968, Brook published a book called *The Empty Space*, outlining what he considered to be the four main modes of theatre. Deadly Theatre, Brook explains, is the most common type of theatre, but also one that can most easily be classified as 'boring'. Deadly Theatre decides that there is a standard way to execute the 'classics' in theatre, creating a norm that is not supposed to be questioned or changed. As Brook writes in *The Empty Space*, "[T]he Deadly Theatre approaches the classics from the viewpoint that somewhere, someone has found out and defined how the play should be done" (14). With this assertion, Brook's concern is that The Deadly Theatre leaves no room for creative interpretation or individual style. Brook argues that theatre is meant to be a living, breathing art, ever changing with humanity and contemporary society. Once a standard or rule is set in theatre, "something invisible is beginning to die" (14).

Conversely, Brook explains his concept of 'Holy Theatre': with the evolution of theatre, we have lost the value and sanctity of the practices and traditions that make theatre what it is. What with the evolution of performance spaces, artistic interpretations,

and more, Brook argues that the reverence for particular theatrical traditions has been lost. For Brook, the most defining trait of ‘Holy Theatre’ is that it’s a visceral, spiritual experience transcending the text. Brook writes of this: “A Holy Theatre in which the blazing centre speaks through those forms closest to it. A theatre working like the plague, by intoxication, by infection, by analogy, by magic; a theatre in which the play, the event itself, stands in place of a text” (49). The Holy Theatre is the core of what makes theatre a special and indescribable art form—it is the bearing of heart and soul onstage, and the artistry crafted in every creative piece of a show. Brook argues that too often, the Holy Theatre is cast aside and sometimes disregarded completely.

Perhaps one of the most personally resonant aspects of Brook’s work is his concept of the Rough Theatre. Brook writes,

“It is always the popular theatre that saves the day. Through the ages it has taken many forms, and there is only one factor that they all have in common – a roughness. Salt, sweat, noise, smell: the theatre that’s not in a theatre, the theatre on cargos, on wagons, on trestles, audiences standing, drinking, sitting round tables, audiences joining in, answering back: theatre in back rooms, upstairs rooms, barns: the one-night stands, the torn sheet pinned up across the hall, the battered screen to conceal the quick changes – that one generic term, *theatre*, covers all this and the sparkling chandeliers too.” (65)

This passage encapsulates perfectly what Brook conceptualizes as The Rough Theatre; Brook gives this previously non-existent and unacknowledged genre of theatre

well-deserved credit and appreciation. Emphasizing the value of found spaces, Brook describes the indescribable magic of witnessing the creation of art before your own eyes, in contrast with the more high-class theatre, where every aspect is taken care of to the highest quality. There is, however, something special about the makeshift, do-it-yourself, underdog's artistry, where the passion, blood, sweat, and tears, can be felt with every sound and every word. As Brook writes, “[I]n a rough theatre a bucket will be banged for a battle, flour used to show faces white with fear. The arsenal is limitless” (66). Within The Rough Theatre, stories can be told from a new perspective, to new audiences and from new artists.

As the name of Brook's final theatrical conception indicates, the Immediate Theatre describes the true immediacy of a theatrical experience. Brook writes,

“Those are the moments of achievement which do occur, suddenly, anywhere: the performances, the occasions when collectively a total experience, a total theatre of play and spectator makes nonsense of any divisions like Deadly, Rough and Holy. At these rare moments, the theatre of joy, of catharsis, of celebration, the theatre of exploration, the theatre of shared meaning, the living theatre are one. But once gone, the moment is gone and it cannot be recaptured slavishly by imitation – the deadly creeps back, the search begins again.” (135)

Brook describes the Immediate Theatre as the type of theatre that he most adamantly advocates for, as it is the type of theatre that he has experienced most deeply and most frequently. The Immediate Theatre acknowledges the fleeting nature of the art,

as well as the visceral reaction it provokes as an art form. Unlike film, which generally tells stories in retrospect and from a distance simply because of the medium, theatre is in your face and happening *now*, which is part of what makes theatre so powerful.

With these explanations in mind, there are clear connections to be made between Brook's Rough and Immediate Theatre, and perhaps even to Brook's Holy Theatre to *Urinetown*. Because of the nature of Kotis' *Urinetown*, as a story of revolution that focuses on the plights of the poor and downtrodden, Brook's Rough Theatre very much speaks to the nature of thrown together, do-it-yourself art. Additionally, the story of *Urinetown*'s conception and rise to success on Broadway perfectly aligns with the Rough Theatre's very nature: makeshift art made to be performed in any available space, focusing on the story and the artistry, where the passion is an undeniable force. Similarly, the story of *Urinetown*, regardless of its satiric nature, holds an air of urgency and immediacy characteristic of Brook's Immediate Theatre; Little Sally and Officer Lockstock need to share this story with the audience, and they need to share it *now*. Kotis, as well as his characters, are very much aware of the fleeting nature of theatre and storytelling, and they acknowledge it consistently throughout the show. When the show is over, Little Sally asks if she and Officer Lockstock can do a happy musical "next time," to which Officer Lockstock responds, "If there is a next time, I'm sure we can. Well, that's our story." Their story has been told, and it is over. And in an interesting take on Brook's Holy Theatre, *Urinetown* takes what would be considered certain 'holy' theatrical conventions, in this case conventional theatre character tropes and stereotypes, and presents them partially in homage, and partially in satire. Through Kotis and Hollmann's storytelling, these tropes are presented and twisted in musical satire.

With all of this in mind, it is fascinating to consider how Kotis and Hollmann used the historical and theoretical frameworks of artists such as Brecht, Brooks and Boal to craft the revolutionary show that was and is *Urinetown* more than fifteen years ago. Looking more closely at the text, and at specific characters, we can further understand how Kotis and Hollmann worked to craft complex characters with specific intentions to both perpetuate and subvert specific theatrical conventions. Thinking back to Bruce Weber's *New York Times* review, consider his assertion that the show's satirical nature made it nothing more than an "extended bathroom joke." I would like to argue, however, that although Weber is right about the satirical nature of the show, that this show is written to be exactly the opposite of Weber's interpretation: *so much more* than just an extended bathroom joke, but instead a piece of theatre that brings up important questions about how we function as a society.

## Understanding and Subverting Character Tropes in Theatre Through Case Studies: Hope Cladwell & Bobby Strong

Bobby Strong, Hope Cladwell, and Penelope Pennywise are all presented to the audience as examples of different stereotypical theatre character tropes seen in countless musicals of the past. Before looking into this more, however, it is essential to understand exactly what a character trope in theatre is and what it means. Literally defined, a trope is a recurring or significant theme or motif. In the context of theatre, a character trope is a type of character that fulfills a certain stereotype that is somewhat clichéd or perceived as overused.

A perfect example of this is the character of Hope Cladwell in *Urinetown*. Introduced as a sweet, caring, gullible and naïve young woman, Kotis takes the trope of the naïve ingénue, seen in countless musicals throughout history, and makes her into a caricature of her past incarnations. Like Johanna in *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, Maria in *West Side Story*, or Christine in *The Phantom of the Opera*, Hope comes into her world with very little experience of the real world and a lot of willingness to trust strangers. For example, Hope comes into her new job at UGC, her father's company, fresh from university and with a very sheltered understanding of humanity. In one scene in Act One, Hope runs into two policemen and expresses her unwavering trust in all people in the world:

LOCKSTOCK: I'd take care on these streets late at night, Ms. Cladwell. There's no telling what some people wouldn't do for a few coins.

BARREL: Especially these days, what with the new fee hikes and all.

HOPE: Oh, I'm not afraid of people, Officers.

LOCKSTOCK: Oh, no?

HOPE: Not really. Everyone has a heart, you see. As long as you know that you need never fear a soul.

LOCKSTOCK: Everyone?

HOPE: Everyone.

BARREL: Even criminals?

HOPE: Even criminals. (p. 27-28)

Hope spends a majority of the first act poking fun at her own character's mindless job as a "fax and copy girl" at her father's company, and expressing a very sheltered and naïve view of the world. Kotis' characterization is new and different because it takes the very well known trope of the naïve ingénue and uses it to create an absurdly sweet and naïve young woman with a new sense of meta self-awareness.

For example, when the staff of the UGC (Urine Good Company) sings an ode to Hope's father in the song "Mr. Cladwell," outlining Cladwell's malicious methods in profiting from maintaining the town water supply, Hope doesn't comment on what her father did to become rich. Instead, in the middle of the song, she says, "Gosh, I never realized large, monopolizing corporations should be such a force for good in the world" (24). While this line could easily come off as mindless, somewhat idiotic statement from Hope, the wording of the line presents Hope's previously described self-awareness, as well as the tongue-in-cheek rhetoric ingrained in *Urinetown*. Marveling at the supposed positive influence of big corporations, Hope exhibits the typical ignorant and gullible nature of a musical ingénue, with an open mind and open heart ready to learn from the world around her. However, by prefacing her statement by calling corporations "large,

monopolizing” entities, Kotis inserts a level of tongue-in-cheek awareness to Hope’s characterization. Hope seems to have some level of awareness of the monopolizing nature of corporations such as the UGC, and this line allows her to point that out to the audience in a subtle, satiric manner, in the midst of a grand musical number celebrating the corporate wonder that is her father.

Similarly, at the end of the song, Hope has a brief conversation with her father that further illustrates Kotis’ characterization of her as an unconventional ingénue.

HOPE: Gosh, Daddy, they certainly do seem to adore you. So why do I feel so conflicted?

CLADWELL: Nonsense. Did I send you to the Most Expensive University in the World to teach you how to feel conflicted, or to learn how to manipulate great masses of people?

HOPE: To learn how to manipulate great masses of people, Daddy. (p. 27)

This short scene is a perfect illustration of the nature of Kotis’ satire. With Hope questioning the actions of her father and of the UGC as a corporate entity, she serves as a sort of moral compass for the more ‘villainous’ characters in *Urinetown*, bringing up important moral questions. At the same time, however, she continues to fulfill her role of the somewhat clueless young ingénue, questioning people’s actions without properly understanding why certain things seem wrong. Meanwhile, Cladwell scolds Hope for disregarding the manipulative skills she learned at the Most Expensive University in the World, poking fun at the general belief that a college education at a nice school is all that is needed to be equipped in the real world, as well as at society’s obsession with prestige in college educations. Finally, with both Cladwell and Hope explicitly acknowledging the intention of manipulating great masses of people because it is what needs to be done in order to thrive in their society, Kotis uses the characters to satirize the intentions of the



‘rich,’ presenting their intentions to the audience in a blatant and comedic (and Brechtian) manner.

Furthermore, Kotis uses the scene where Hope and Bobby meet and get to know each other as a method to better establish the nature of Hope’s character.

HOPE: If [your heart] feels cold, then it must be there, don’t you think?

BOBBY: Unless there’s a vacuum where it used to be.

HOPE: A vacuum? In your chest? It sounds so implausible.

BOBBY: I did something wrong this morning is all I’m trying to say. I can’t seem to get it out of my head.

HOPE: The vacuum?

BOBBY: My action. I let someone down that I love dearly. I feel real bad about it.

HOPE: Well, maybe that’s nature’s way of telling you that now’s the time to lift someone up?

BOBBY: Really?

HOPE: Sure. Do you think you’d be feeling as bad as you did if you didn’t have a heart?

BOBBY: I don’t know. I suppose not.

HOPE: Of course you wouldn’t. Because then you’d be dead. (p. 35)

In this scene, Hope doesn’t seem to understand the nature of Bobby’s inner moral struggle with his actions, and instead takes all of his statements and questions literally.

When Bobby asks Hope if she really believes that he has a heart, even though he committed morally questionable things earlier in the play, she seems baffled by the question, answering that he would be dead if he truly did not have a heart. This demonstrates a seemingly fundamental misunderstanding of Bobby’s (perhaps

overdramatic) questioning of his own moral capabilities and abstract discussions surrounding ethics.

At a second glance, however, Kotis is using Hope's blatant misunderstanding and oversimplified view of the world as a form of satire. Like the ingénues that came before her, Hope's primary character traits are kindness and blind love and acceptance towards others. With Bobby, her father, and everyone else in the show, she is consistently searching for the good in people and the best situation to make everyone happy. Within this scene, Hope's naïve optimism functions to bring Bobby out of a moral crisis, and to also satirize conventions of musical theatre ingénues through Hope's cartoon-like oblivious and one-dimensional nature.

Similarly, the character of Bobby Strong in *Urinetown* is presented as a typical male musical hero: the plucky everyman who rises against his challenges to come out on top. J. Pierrepont Finch in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, Sky Masterson in *Guys and Dolls*, and even *Pippin's* titular character, were all presented as young men with particular goals and passions, as well as obstacles to overcome. Sometimes they had questionable moral compasses, but ultimately they were characters that audiences rooted for and sympathized with. Bobby Strong's character has all of these traits, and works as the spokesperson of the poor, fighting against the corrupt corporate entities controlling the classes, and showing all the bravery one would expect from the show's hero. Yet again, however, Kotis presents these character tropes along with the expected outcomes and completely subverts every expectation.

From the first scene, the audience sees Bobby fighting for his father's right to use the public amenity, regardless of payment. We see him as strong, moral young man that

we can get behind and root for. We expect to follow his journey throughout the course of the show, as he not only is a likable character similar to male musical heroes of the past, but he also seems to be the clear protagonist. In one of the first scenes of the show, Bobby tries to fight against the laws and fees of UGC so that his father can use the public amenity for free.

OLD MAN STRONG: Bobby! Bobby, reason with the woman. I'm a little short this morning.

TINY TOM: No shorter than yesterday. Unless I've grown.

BOBBY: He's my pa, Ms. Pennywise. Can't he come in for free? Just this once?

PENNY: Get your head out of the clouds, Bobby Strong. No one gets in for free. (p. 7)

In this excerpt from one of the first scenes of the show, the audience is not only shown the struggle of the poor in *Urinetown*, but is also presented with Bobby's character as someone who is fighting against the system, even in the smallest ways. He begins the show by fighting for the poor and the underdogs, immediately winning the sympathy of the audience. To further this sentiment, Penelope Pennywise's no-nonsense attitude serves as a villainous foil to Bobby's stance for justice and equality as she reiterates her stance that "no one gets in for free". At the end of this scene, Bobby's character evokes even more sympathy from the audience when his father is arrested and sent to Urinetown by the authorities. This is only the beginning of Bobby's journey as a character as he begins to question the laws and standard practices around him set by corporate entities like UGC.

If any audience member were to doubt Bobby's status as the hero and protagonist of the show, Kotis again brings out the satire to establish his intentions for each character.

At the end of Scene Three, after Bobby and Hope have had the chance to connect and fall for each other, the show's two narrators, Officer Lockstock and Little Sally, emerge to offer their comments.

LITTLE SALLY: She loves him, doesn't she, Officer Lockstock?

LOCKSTOCK: Sure, she does, Little Sally. He's the hero of the show, she has to love him.

LITTLE SALLY: Yeah. Everyone loves Bobby Strong. (p. 38)

With this scene, Kotis is primarily satirizing the trope of characters falling in love quickly and immediately in many musicals to further the plot, without any acknowledgment of any realistic time frame for the development of love and relationships. Like Sarah Brown and Sky Masterson in *Guys and Dolls*, Tony and Maria in *West Side Story*, The Prince and Cinderella in *Cinderella*, and countless others, Bobby and Hope meet and quickly fall in love after a conversation and a duet in "Follow Your Heart," a parody of the stereotypical Broadway duet between the romantic leads. The song begins as any love duet would, but the lyrics become more and more nonsensical as it goes on, including lyrics such as:

*Someday I'll meet someone  
Whose heart joins with mine  
Aortas and arteries all intertwined  
They'll beat so much stronger  
Than they could apart.  
Eight chambers of muscle to hustle  
The love in our heart (p. 33)*

This song, along with the following scene between Officer Lockstock and Little Sally, not only questions that convention, but it also pokes fun at it. Kotis acknowledges the ridiculous and idealistic nature of these musical whirlwind romances, and Little Sally and Officer Lockstock's conversation explains that Hope falling for Bobby is a given, not

only because it's what happens in musicals, but also because Bobby is the hero of the show, and musical theatre convention dictates that Hope should be in love with him. Not only is this an open and very Brechtian way for Kotis to poke fun at musical romance conventions, but it is also to acknowledge Bobby's status as a character within the context of the show. To drive this point further, Little Sally's assertion that "everyone loves Bobby Strong" informs the audience that even if you don't love him at this point in the story, everybody else does.

In setting Bobby up as not only a strong, likeable young man with a strong moral compass, but also as the clear hero of the show, Kotis makes him remarkably relatable and charismatic. Bobby is someone you want to follow, and someone you want to see succeeding, doing well, and winning battles. And with this intention, the death of Bobby in his 'exile' to Urinetown (he is pushed off a building by corrupt police officers) is both shocking and anti-climactic. Shocking, because the audience is set up to want nothing more than to see Bobby win the battle for the poor and speak up against corruption. On top of that, after spending an act and a half following Bobby's story, it is somewhat jarring and disappointing to see his story come to an end.

BOBBY: Look, there's Public Amenity Number Forty-seven! And the Legislature! And... and my boyhood home! Why, we're just standing on top of the UGC headquarters building. And this... this is our town!

LOCKSTOCK: Yes. Yes, it is.

BOBBY: How could it be that we're in our town and in Urinetown at the same time... unless... unless... dear God, no! You couldn't have!

BARREL: Over you go, then.

BOBBY: Wait a minute, you're just going to throw me off this roof and that's supposed to be Urinetown?! Death is Urinetown?!

LOCKSTOCK: That's one interpretation.

[...] (LOCKSTOCK and BARREL throw BOBBY off the edge [...]  
LOCKSTOCK and BARREL watch him fall. After a moment...)

LOCKSTOCK: A shovel and a mop, Mister Barrel. You know the drill. (p. 85-86)

After fighting passionately and relentlessly against the corporate corruption brought about by UGC in Urinetown's water consumption, and leading the revolution of the poor, Bobby reaches his end by being thrown off a tall building. His life is over quickly; he does not go out in a blaze of glory in some sort of spectacular fight or confrontation. His death is a dissatisfying end to a story that the audience wants to see end in triumph and justice.

This, I argue, is the exact root and genius of *Urinetown*'s satire. Kotis and Hollmann present a slew of hyperbolized theatrical character tropes commonly seen throughout theatre history, under the premise of a silly musical with toilet humor, before subsequently deconstructing said characters through unexpected twists and character development. The most compelling example of this in *Urinetown* is in the characterization of Penelope Pennywise.

### **The Tough, Jaded Warden of Public Amenity #9: Who is Penelope Pennywise?**

In the history of productions of *Urinetown*, there is not much information on the role of Penelope Pennywise, or the history of actors that have played the role. In the Off-Broadway and Broadway production, Nancy Opel is the most noted actress to play the role (September 2001-January 2004). On the West End, Jenna Russell played the role in the 2014 production. While those are the main two actors recorded in playing the role of Penelope Pennywise, it is much more telling of the role to look at character descriptions and breakdowns on various casting and acting websites. In a character breakdown from a middle school in New Zealand, a character description reads, “Can be younger in real age but will be made up to look older. The proprietor of Public Amenity Number #9, the poorest urinal in town. A Black sheep. She betters her public standing by leaching onto Cladwell. She is always searching to find a quick buck and is ruthless in her attack. Harbors a secret! A gutsy female character.”<sup>2</sup>

Although this character description is clearly simplified for middle school students to understand, and certainly one individual interpretation of a character, it shows how Pennywise’s character comes across to many audiences at first glance. Pennywise is cold, ruthless, and motivated solely by money.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.st-peters.school.nz/getmedia/9afe9fed-6d3a-4ea9-83fb-05b3ec93b2af/Character-Outline.pdf.aspx>

Another analysis reads, “Tough, jaded warden of the poorest, filthiest urinal in town, a shrewd, penny-scrounging cheapskate, a figure of authority who lives to maintain order at the public bathrooms.”<sup>3</sup>

Initially, Pennywise can easily be seen as a one-dimensional character; nothing more than a money-driven, jaded old woman with no compassion. She can be written off as just another villain with her own agenda, similar to the Stepmother in *Cinderella*, Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd* or The Witch in *Into the Woods*: a bitter old woman serving as a kind of foil to the sweet, young, and innocent female lead. Just like Hope and Bobby, however, there is more to Pennywise than originally perceived. Throughout the first act, we see small nuances that bring a new complexity to her character. She shows a soft spot for Bobby, seeing him as a friend and perhaps even as a son. Regardless of her demeanor and her desire to enforce the law relentlessly, she shows a willingness to bend the rules for someone she cares about. With this, Pennywise is already a very different character from her predecessors. There is, in fact, more to her than her simplified character description. Additionally, the initial perception of Pennywise as a materialistic, money-obsessed is in fact very misguided; Pennywise herself explains that she is a stickler for the rules and for money because she has learned that it is the only way to survive and get by in society.

PENNY: Quiet back there! No one's getting' anywhere for free! Don't you think I have bills of my own to pay?! Don't you think I have taxes and tariffs and payoffs to meet, too?! Well, I do! And I don't pay them with promises, see. I pay them with cash! Cold hard cash. Every morning you all come here. And every morning some of you got reasons why ya ain't gonna pay. And I'm here to tell ya, ya is gonna pay! (p. 7)

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<http://www.actorsingers.org/data/sites/1/media/shows/urinetown/urinetowncharacters.pdf>



With this beginning monologue preceding Pennywise's show-stopping solo "It's a Privilege to Pee," she simultaneously establishes herself as an authority figure unwilling to bend the rules for sympathetic reasons and as just another person trying to get by in a difficult situation. As shown later on in her song, Pennywise describes her struggles through the last twenty years in the drought, and everything she has done to survive in deciding to work for a large toilet-controlling corporation and making a profit. While some audiences would look to interpret Pennywise's character as callous and unsympathetic, Kotis makes a clear distinction from this initial monologue that Pennywise is simply a woman who chose not to be a victim of circumstance. She decided instead to make the most of her situation and fight for her own freedom.

In Pennywise's strict adherence to the law as a method of self-preservation, she doesn't seem to know how to cope with Bobby's initial ideas for a revolution. In response to the fee hikes invoked by the UGC, Bobby begins to question the law, to Pennywise's confusion.

BOBBY: But what if the law is wrong?

*(Pause.)*

PENNY: What did you say?

BOBBY: I said, what if the law is wrong, Ms. Pennywise?! What if all this is wrong?!

PENNY: Wrong?! You've got a sweet-lookin' head, Bobby, a sweet-lookin' head! But you keep it up there in the clouds day after day after day, and it's gotta come down from there. You hear me?! Get that head out of the clouds, Bobby Strong! You get it out of the clouds!

This scene demonstrates much of the reasoning behind Pennywise's actions and motivations. Despite her own personal opinions of class equality and corporate

corruption, she has chosen instead to learn how to work the system and follow the rules for her own benefit. Over the past twenty years in the drought, Pennywise has learned to accept that the law is not worth questioning. Thus, Bobby's questions are disconcerting, and cause her to worry for his safety. As she seems to have learned in her own personal history, questioning the law has dangerous consequences, and her affection and protective tendencies towards Bobby cause her to try to keep him from revolting.

As the show goes on, Pennywise continues to subvert expectations and stereotypes. She shows a tendency towards protectiveness over Hope, and a want for law-abiding citizens for the greater good of society. And although the exact details of Pennywise's backstory before the drought is not made completely clear, there is enough content to draw conclusions. The drought evidently changed the world Pennywise was living in, forcing her to change and adapt as well. Pennywise is not a hardened, malevolent authoritarian like she seems – instead, she has chosen to adapt to her environment. She refuses to be a product of her circumstances.

In the beginning of the second act, Pennywise shows up at the rebels' secret hideout as a spokesperson for the UGC and Cladwell, summoning Bobby to UGC headquarters to talk about the issue. In this way, Pennywise continues to follow the rules of the rich and powerful, with her actions still primarily motivated by tendencies of self-preservation. At the same time, however, Pennywise tries her best to be a source of comfort and security for Hope, who is the victim of kidnapping as part of the revolution. After Bobby is killed, Pennywise realizes her mistakes in her complicity with Cladwell and UGC's corrupt actions, deciding instead to join the revolution and reclaim her agency once and for all. When the rebels are informed of Bobby's murder, they resolve to kill

Hope in retaliation. Pennywise appears at the rebels' secret hideout, offering herself up as a sacrifice in Hope's place.

HOT BLADES HARRY: I'll tell you what we do! We do to her what they did to him!

SOUPY SUE: That's right! Do to her what they did to him!

PENNY: Or you could take me instead.

ALL: What—?!

LITTLE SALLY: Ms. Pennywise!

LITTLE BECKY TWO-SHOES: Seize her!

(THE POOR *seize* PENNY.)

PENNY: Yes, do whatever you feel you need to, but please, spare the child.

HOT BLADES HARRY: Old woman, you've been grasping and conniving all your days. Why so giving now?

PENNY: Because... Hope is my daughter.

ALL: [*Gasp?!!*]

PENNY: And I am her mother.

ALL: [*GASP?!!!!*]

PENNY: Yes, Hope, it's true. I am your mother, the onetime lover of Caldwell B. Cladwell.

TINY TOM: Strumpet!

LITTLE BECKY TWO-SHOES: Slattern!

PENNY: Call me what you will, but it was during the Stink Years, you see. No one thought they had much time then, so many of us did... questionable things. There was the looting, of course, and the hoarding. But there were also the fond farewells and the late-night trysts. Life was an explosion filled with riots, cheap cabarets, dancing girls—

LITTLE SALLY: And love?

PENNY: Oh yes, and love. There was love like no tomorrow, for there was no tomorrow, but there is always a tomorrow of some kind or another. After you were born, Caldwell made me promise never to reveal my identity to you, for I was something of a strumpet in my day.

It is clear that this scene signifies a crucial turning point in Kotis' characterization of Pennywise. In fact, this scene is the closest we get as some sort of backstory for Pennywise, and it functions as a kind of explanation for her actions and motivations. Firstly, Pennywise reveals to Hope, the rebels, and the audience that she is Hope's mother, which explains her protective tendencies towards Hope. This scene is also the first scene in the show, well into the second act, where Pennywise shows any kind of vulnerability. Pennywise tells her story without shame or embarrassment, however; she and Cladwell found each other in a hard and confusing time, and it seems that her only regret is not being able to raise Hope. This furthers Pennywise's refusal to be a victim of her circumstance, instead embracing her decisions and experiences.

Furthermore, the reveal of Pennywise's backstory and her connection to Hope reinforces Pennywise's status as an ingénue gone awry. Kotis takes her initial introduction as a cranky, unsympathetic old woman to create a character with depth, a complicated backstory, and he makes her instead into a profoundly misunderstood and complex character, almost another underdog. Her backstory brings up countless questions about what could have been, and who she was before the drought and 'the Stink Years'. When Pennywise met Cladwell, she most likely was not unlike Hope: young, impressionable, and open to the world. It is also likely that Pennywise and Cladwell, coming from very different backgrounds, were 'star-crossed lovers,' in a way, similar to Hope and Bobby.

To further this point, Pennywise and Cladwell sing a short duet together towards the end of the show, a reprise of “I’m Not Sorry,” where Pennywise sings, “Remember when our nights were starry?” Regardless of all of Cladwell’s despicable and corrupt actions over the past twenty years, he and Pennywise take a moment before his ‘exile’ to Urinetown to lament over everything that could have been, in their relationship and their potential family with Hope. Just like every other piece of Pennywise’s backstory that comes out throughout the show, her connection to Hope and her history with Cladwell subvert audience’s initial expectations and interpretations of her character, and they explain why she had to become callous and tough.

Following this turning point, Pennywise decides to abandon all her previous principles and choices, instead joining the rebel cause to fight against Cladwell and the UGC. She no longer represents a ‘villainous’ character who functions as a foil for the protagonists fighting for justice; instead, she is inspired by her daughter Hope and the rebel movement, and chooses instead to disregard her instincts of self-preservation to fight for what is right. At this point, Pennywise shifts from being some kind of villain to joining the sympathetic side, fighting alongside the ‘heroes’ of the show.

From this analysis, it is fascinating to consider the implications: who would Pennywise be had the circumstances been different? If the drought had never happened, or if her fling with Caldwell B. Cladwell had become a real relationship and a real family with Hope as their daughter? In many ways, Pennywise represents everything that could have been. Considering where Pennywise would have been at the beginning of the drought twenty years prior, she could have very well been another bright-eyed young ingénue ready for her happy ending. In *Urinetown*, however, that’s not how things

panned out. Things change, and things go awry. Regardless of everything that went wrong in the next twenty years, Pennywise never let herself be a victim.

In the brief window we do get into Pennywise's backstory, it is clear that through her circumstances, she chose a specific path. She chose to work for Cladwell B. Cladwell in order to stay out of the battles between the rich and the poor. When she had Hope and Cladwell forced her to stay away, she didn't sit around and sulk or beg him to change his mind. She got to work and focused on staying on Cladwell's good side. She was aware of who had the power, and did whatever she could to use that knowledge to her advantage. She manages the poorest public amenity in town, and enforces the rules strictly – not because she hates the poor, but because she wants to follow the rules and prove to Cladwell that she's a trustworthy ally. She isn't a victim, but a warrior.

### **Fifteen Years Later: How is This Still So Relevant?**

Kotis' trip to Europe, the trip that inspired it all, was in the early spring of 1995. He saw certain fears in society regarding the environment, big business, capitalism, and more, and decided to incorporate and satirize those themes in the form of a musical. As previously stated, Kotis was careful to explain that he never considered himself a so-called social activist or environmentalist, but instead wrote about what he saw in society. He felt the fears of the people around him regarding certain issues; fears of big businesses monopolizing resources, climate change and the deterioration of the environment, depletion of resources, corrupt power in local bureaucracy, and more.

Kotis wrote *Urinetown* as a piece of theatre built to discuss and question important social and political issues through music and comedic satire. This is part of what makes *Urinetown* so deeply Brechtian; as Barnett writes, "By pointing to instability and impermanence, Brecht wanted to show that the world *could* be changed. As such, Brecht's is a fundamentally political theatre because it asks audiences not to accept the status quo, but to appreciate that oppressive structures can be changed if the will for that exists" (3). Looking at Brecht's own work, *Mother Courage* (1939) is the perfect example; considered by many to be one of the greatest plays of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Brecht's play includes themes that stay relevant with every production, including anti-war sentiment, the struggles of motherhood, and mortality. Regardless of the setting and when the play was written, its themes stay relevant, and the work itself causes audiences to think about the story within the context of their own lives and the society they live in.

Similarly to Brecht, Kotis went about writing *Urinetown* as a story to point out things like oppressive structures, social imbalances, and unacknowledged environmental threats. Kotis and Hollmann create a discourse for these topics through their musical satire, and use that satire to ask audiences what they can do better to change these issues.

What is interesting to consider, however, is the show's historical context in relation to today's world. Kotis noticed these fears and tensions in the mid to late-1990s, and created a show that was socially relevant and important at the time. However, adapting *Urinetown* as a show in today's society in 2015 begs for a more contemporary analysis. Why is this show so often adapted in today's day and age, when the ingrained issues were so connected with the time of the show's conception?

In looking to stage a production this April in 2016, we can consider the main themes highlighted by Kotis in *Urinetown* in the context of contemporary society. Interestingly enough, Kotis' themes are still incredibly relevant to our society, fifteen years after its Broadway opening. For example, the topic of climate change is more prevalent than ever in society's collective consciousness. Our presidential candidates discuss the possible negative ramifications of ignoring climate change as leaders and government officials; college campuses across the country gather to demand their administrations to divest from stocks related to fossil fuels. It is becoming more and more difficult for conservatives to ignore the consequences of climate change, and it is an incredibly prominent topic in our social and political worlds.

On top of that, California is in its fourth year of a record-breaking drought; thus, the storyline of *Urinetown* and the premise of a town twenty years into a drought where water is scarce and private toilets don't exist because of water scarcity is not only



incredibly relevant, but also somewhat of an ominous warning (albeit through musical comedy and satire). The implementation of drought-resistant plants across the Claremont Colleges, as well as the constant warnings to take shorter showers and water plants sparingly don't seem as trivial in the context of the show. The story of *Urinetown* could easily be told in 2016 Southern California, which is very telling of the show's contemporary relevance, as well as exactly why Kotis' story has survived and thrived as a piece of theatre since its Fringe Festival debut in 1999.

One of the more recent occurrences in today's society that brings the themes and sentiments of *Urinetown* into our contemporary social consciousness is the use of college campuses as home bases for civil rights activism and protests. On the Claremont Colleges campuses specifically, students of color from Claremont McKenna College started protesting and rallying for support from other students and faculty of color and allies across the Claremont Colleges and across the country, demanding better and safer resources for marginalized students. On November 11, hundreds of students gathered at The Hub on CMC campus to show their support for CMCers of Color and their demands. The following week was filled with protests, marches, and students of color sharing personal stories of marginalization and fighting to be recognized and supported. Looking at these protests at CMC, as well as protests and racial tensions across the country at Yale University, University of Missouri, Ithaca College, and more, the spirit of revolution and the fight for equal rights in *Urinetown* all the more powerful and meaningful.

These events on campus were not far from our minds when considering the themes and messages of *Urinetown*. In preparing to tackle a show with so many relevant themes, I believe that Giovanni, as well as the four seniors including myself working on

the show for our senior thesis projects, wanted to share these messages with our peers in the best way possible. It was important not to take these themes lightly, but to see them for the reality that they represented. Although, as Brecht dictated, theatre serves as a representation of reality instead of actual reality, I was aware that it would be incredibly difficult to ignore just how relevant these themes of police brutality, fighting for equal rights, and government corruption were in our world today, more than a decade after the show opened on Broadway.

In approaching the beginning of rehearsals, I will most definitely have these events and these students in mind; these events make *Urinetown* even more powerful and relevant than originally thought. Within the context of these events, *Urinetown* as a vehicle for theatre as social and political change is more apparent than ever: theatre as Brecht originally intended.

### Confused and Nervous: Casting and Initial Reservations

After countless months of planning, listening to the cast recording, critical analysis, discussions, as well as anticipation and excitement, I was not quite sure what to expect from the rehearsal process. After Giovanni, our director, cast the four of us in September, I certainly had my reservations about approaching my character. As someone with limited acting experience outside of my high school drama club and college acting classes, I was baffled with the challenge of taking on a character so different from myself.

As I grew up and developed a love for theatre, I always found myself gravitating towards one particular type of role in every show: the ingénue. I tended to identify the most with the young, sweet, sometimes naïve female lead that went through some kind of journey throughout the show; Cinderella in *Into the Woods*, Sarah Brown in *Guys and Dolls*, and Wendla in *Spring Awakening* just made sense to me. So when *Urinetown* became my plan for my senior thesis project, my brain immediately went to Hope. She was one on my long list of dream roles, along with countless other classic musical theatre ingénue roles, for a number of reasons. Her sweet soprano solos were always my favorites on the cast recording, and her character seemed sweet, funny, and genuine.

I spent the months leading up to the senior thesis pre-auditions trying to imagine myself as Little Sally or Penelope Pennywise, and I did not find much success. The roles seemed so foreign to me; so out of my comfort zone or anything I could feasibly see myself approaching successfully. I worried that as Little Sally, I would only be able to play her as a cartoonish little girl, without giving her the complexity and dimension I

knew she deserved. With Pennywise, on the other hand, I was at a complete loss. As someone who grew up introverted, fairly soft-spoken, and afraid of confrontation, how on earth could I fathom playing this angry, bitter woman? I was afraid I wouldn't be able to relate to her or understand her as a character, resulting in a hollow and unconvincing performance. I wanted to come out of this production proud of what I accomplished, and satisfied with what I brought to the stage, and when Giovanni presented me with this challenge, I did not have high expectations for myself.

After we were cast, I tried to put that challenge out of my mind, at least for the time being. I spent the next few months focusing on my excitement for the production itself: finding a family in the cast, getting back into rehearsals, and seeing everything come together with all of the magical elements of theatre. In those months, I read through the script, listened to the cast recording, and sought out the help of Brecht, Boal, and Brook to help me understand every aspect of the show before our first day of rehearsals. Given how I felt about the role, I wanted to come into that table read with as much preparation as possible.

Through my analysis of the book, I saw that all of the characters were parodies of themselves; caricatures, almost. None of them were the silly, inane, cartoon-like characters that they seemed to be, but instead extreme versions of every character like them that came before in past musicals. And even more than that, I discovered that underneath all of that satire, these characters were given real substance; substance that gave these characters depth and complexity. In fact, they were complete subversions of all of my expectations. Little Sally is not just a little girl who happens to be the narrator, with Officer Lockstock guiding her through the story. She is actually the only one who

truly understands and acknowledges the metaphysical nature of ‘Urinetown,’ which she shares with the audience. Mr. Cladwell is not simply a heartless, money-obsessed man who chose to profit off of the suffering of others. He is not only a representation of all corporate greed and corruption, either; he is a man who chose a specific path of profit and corruption when the world fell apart. Similarly to Penny, Mr. Cladwell could have easily been someone like Bobby, before the Stink Years. He could have had hopes and dreams of a better world, but unlike Bobby, he did not choose the path of hardship and fighting for equal rights. I discovered that these characters had so many more layers than I originally thought, and that made me excited to get to know Penny even better.

### **The Rehearsal Process: Picking Apart Penelope Pennywise**

Through my research, I started to feel like I understood Penny – or at least some of her motivations. Up until the first rehearsal, however, I still had no concrete idea of what I personally wanted to do with her. We went around the table before the table read and introduced ourselves along with our character names, and even then I was still unsure. It was not until we started reading the text aloud, the text that I had been reading countless times in my head and picking apart in my writing, that things started to click. Her words came out of my mouth and things started to make sense; I had been writing for months about her hidden complexities and motivations, but none of my own assertions and analyses made sense to me until then, when I started saying her lines and thinking about what they meant.

She was not heartless, or greedy, or a villain of any kind. She was someone who had been through hard times, seen a lot of suffering, and chose to do what it took to survive. There was not one moment that I saw in the script where she was a truly mean-spirited, cruel woman. With these thoughts, I flashed back to the character descriptions I found about her in my initial research of the role: “always searching to find a quick buck,” “ruthless in her attack,” “penny-scrounging cheapskate.” It then seemed very clear to me that anyone who interpreted Penny in this way could not have done anything more than skim the script.

As we went into our first week of rehearsals, I came in with a newfound confidence in myself. It seemed feasible, and even exciting, to take on Penny. The first few weeks of rehearsals, however, were focused on music. My mind immediately pushed

aside any thoughts about acting, and I snapped into music mode, where all that mattered was learning my notes and getting everything right. I didn't think about the words I was singing, or the overall meanings of any of the songs. Even after we finished learning music, the acting was never fully there during our blocking rehearsals for me. It wasn't until I was off-book that the acting came back gradually, when I could get out of my own head and push away my fears.

In one particular rehearsal when I got to work one-on-one with Marc Macalintal, our music director, he asked me to really think about the words of "It's a Privilege to Pee," my solo song, and what they meant. He encouraged me to bring out the true emotion and grit in the song. Up until that point, I had been so concerned with singing correctly and getting the lyrics right that I hadn't thought to sing the song as my character. It almost seemed as if I stopped acting when the music started, because I snapped into a different mentality instead of embracing the music as a part of the show's universe. But I learned that I couldn't just tune out whenever the music started again; this was not a role I could just coast through, after all. In order to do this role to the best of my ability, musically and dramatically, I learned that I needed to be completely engaged in every way.

There were times in rehearsal where I was so concerned with getting my lines right, staying on top of my cues, and singing the right notes, that I felt like my acting got lost. I've found that one of my biggest acting challenges in the past has been getting past a certain level of self-consciousness. It's difficult to immerse yourself fully in a character of the universe of a story if you doubt every acting choice as you make it or worrying about how you look in the back of your mind. In this role, I had to push away any doubts

or fears or questions and dive headfirst into *Urinetown*; I couldn't be thinking, "How am I doing? Do I sound angry enough? Is this coming across the way I want? How do I sound in this song? Am I warmed up enough? Are my movements natural enough to be convincing?" As much as each of those doubts plagued my mind during rehearsals for weeks, it came to a point where I knew I had to simply put those thoughts out of my mind, because I could never feel fully satisfied with my work otherwise.

It was through this internal struggle that I finally found the right place to be mentally, in order to figure out Penny once and for all. I let go of my insecurities, as best as I could, to focus on the work and the story we were working to tell. The messages of *Urinetown* were so much bigger than any of my hang-ups as an actor, and I knew that I would not be able to tell the story the way it deserved without pushing past these struggles.

Giovanni helped me so much with my journey with Pennywise. When I first expressed my initial reservations, he explained to me that he wanted to challenge me; he knew Hope was a character I felt more comfortable taking on, which was exactly why he didn't want me doing it. From the very beginning, he explained to me that I was going to take on Penny in a way that had never been done before, in so many ways. As an actor used to playing the ingénue, I worked with Giovanni to find out who Penny really was, and who she could have been. As a woman of color, and a Filipina woman, I was firstly in a role usually reserved for older white women. Secondly, Giovanni helped me to see Penny's struggles and difficult choices in a completely different context: in the life of an overseas Filipina worker, or OFW. In thinking about the countless Filipina women I had encountered in my life that had given up so much and worked so hard to survive in



difficult circumstances, Penny made sense to me. Every decision she made, every time she refused to bend the rules for others: those decisions were not because she was selfish, or greedy, or cruel, but because she had been through difficult times and saw the consequences of trying to do the right thing. Every one of Penny's words and actions were not only logical to me in that context, they were understandable and relatable. And with that revelation, I felt as prepared as I could be to jump into Penny's shoes.

### Stepping Into the Overalls: Penny's Costume

As the rehearsal process went on, the cast started to see other parts of the show come together slowly. As the scene shop started putting in pieces of the set, we shifted rehearsals to the Allen Theatre, and by the time we got back, we started seeing slats of wood covering the stage, and barrels lining the sides. With every new addition, we got more and more excited to see the world we had been working to create every day in rehearsals start to come to life. Every day there seemed to be more parts of the set, and all of us started to get excited for one of the final and most essential elements: the costumes. It always felt a little bit off to sing about running the poorest, filthiest urinal in town in my everyday street clothes, and I think all of us in the cast were more than ready to fully immerse ourselves in the show by getting into costume.

Penny's costume in particular was something that I was incredibly excited about, for many reasons. My main costume, designed by Sherry Linnell, was the perfect representation of Penny's personality and values. In a loose-fitting set of overalls, Penny seems like a no-nonsense kind of woman, not one to worry about looking beautiful or appealing, but more concerned with comfort and functionality. The overalls allow her to do her job without any fuss, where she can focus on the task at hand. Her hat serves a similar purpose; it keeps her hair out of her face, so she doesn't need to be distracted by having to style it every day. On the other hand, the gold patches all over her overalls allow her to put comfort and function first while also maintaining a certain level of

‘glamor’. This way, Penny is able to show off her status and the money that she has worked so hard for, without sacrificing the comfort and ease of her work uniform.



Costume Sketch #1



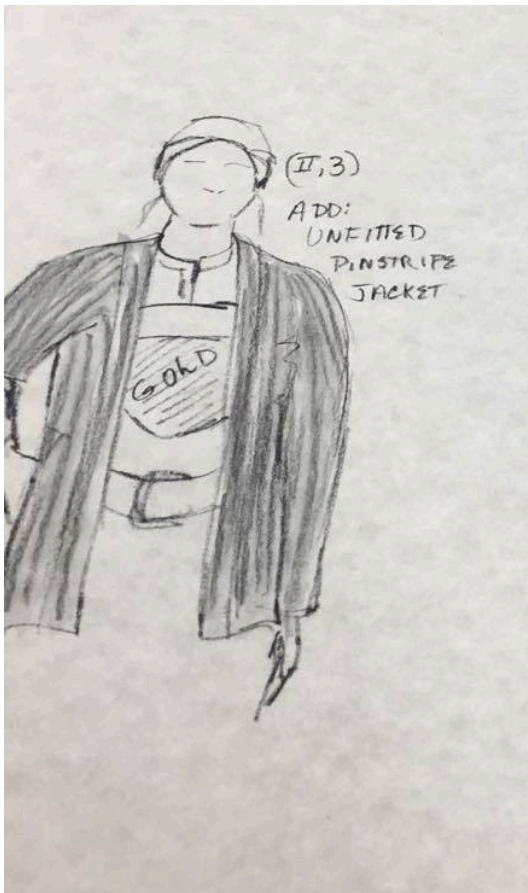
Photo by Janelle Asti

Every piece of Penny’s costume has a specific purpose, because that is exactly how she makes decisions in life. Every action has a purpose and intention; she is not one to be flighty or impulsive, or disregard the consequences.

Although Penny does not have any major complete costume changes throughout the show, there are a few shifts in her look as the show progresses. Once Penny leaves the “bad part of town”<sup>4</sup> and the amenity, she wears a long, brown pinstripe blazer with gold-trimmed lapels. At the amenity, Penny is in charge, and she demands respect and

<sup>4</sup> According to Bobby, on page 4 of the script.

compliance from everyone she interacts with. Once she leaves that bubble, however, and goes to UGC to report the uprising, she can't just stay in her grungy overalls and boots. She needs to prove to all of the snobby rich people of UGC that she's not 'one of them,' but an ally who deserves respect. The blazer shows that she means business, and she's not one to joke around or waste time. At the same time, the gold trim and piping in the blazer, similarly to her overall patches, are a way to subtly claim her status as one with the means to survive.



Costume Sketch #2

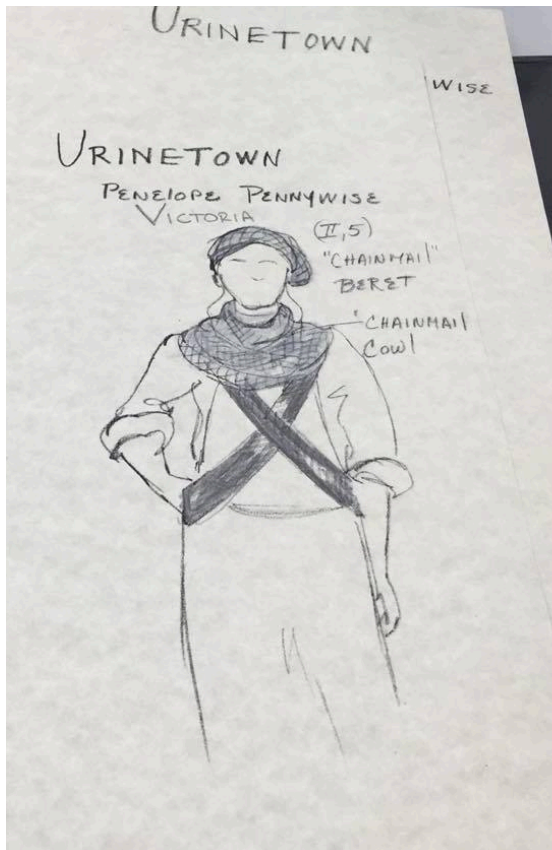


Photo by Janelle Asti

In this context, it's Penny's way of blending in, and convincing the rich that she is one of them. She is not the dirty, poor rebels that UGC despises, but someone who is on their side and does not need to be dealt with. Penny has worked for the past twenty years

of the drought to stay alive, and stay on the good side of UGC, and if all it takes is putting on a jacket and keeping her mouth shut, that's what she'll do.

Once Penny has her transformation, however, we see Penny in a new context. She witnesses Cladwell sending Bobby to Urinetown, and decides to join the rebels. With this decision to, for once in her life, disregard the consequences and fight for the right thing, Penny discards her blazer and everything that came with it, and she comes back to the stage with the intention of finally doing the right thing, and fixing all of the difficult decisions she has been forced to make in the past. The coin holder on her belt loop is gone, because she has no interest in collecting money or working for UGC. Now, she wears bandoliers full of bullets across her body, along with a 'chainmail' cowl and beret, ready for battle. With this change, Penny sheds the parts of her original costume that kept



Costume Sketch #3



Photo by Janelle Asti

her chained to UGC, and to her identity as the warden of Amenity #9. She keeps the overalls, as they have become an integral part of her personality and everything that she worked for to survive.

Additionally, even though Penny has ‘softened’ in her personality by the end of the show, the chainmail and bandoliers serve as a reminder that she is and always will be a warrior, with convictions and something to fight for. Even when she decides to give into her sympathies, she stays true to her nature, keeping her transformation and change of heart genuine and believable, instead of overdone and cartoonish.

Getting into costumes on the first dress rehearsal was exactly what I needed to feel like I was ready to immerse myself in Penny’s world. The fact that Penny’s costume was so far from anything I would ever wear myself only helped me even more; putting on her costume was the final element that I needed to step into her mind. I remember gathering with the cast that day, with everyone in costume for the first time, and feeling her character within me. As Marc, our music director, had been describing for so long, I finally felt that with every breath I took, I was breathing in as myself and breathing out Penelope Pennywise’s air. The costumes were the final piece of the puzzle that put me into a mindset to be ready to finally tackle this challenge, once and for all.

### Post-Show Blues: Reflections

During the run of the show, I was on an emotional high; there was an outpouring of love from everyone in my life who came to the show to support me, and I felt so proud of the show we were putting onstage every night. Our pre-show actor warm-up rituals as a cast always put me in the best mood, because I got to gather with my cast family and dance, shake out our nerves, and remind each other of the beauty and importance in our show. I went into each show feeling excited to create art with some of my dearest friends, and I finished each show proud of the story that we told.

After the show ended, I was hit with a myriad of emotions. The process and our final product filled me with pride, and I came out of the process with a new family full of loving, supportive, and talented people. I was so grateful for all of the connections I had made, but I was also devastated that it was over. I came into this show excited for the prospect of being in a musical, tackling a new character, and putting on a great show, but I did not expect to feel the way that I did every night, backstage with my fellow cast members. I think that for all of us, we wanted to stay within that cast and that show for as long as possible, telling an important story alongside friends and true artists.

Looking back now at the work that we did, I am truly grateful and overjoyed with what we accomplished. We brought out a story from the early 2000s, and presented our peers with universally relevant themes onstage, and we made them think about how their actions are influencing society today. On top of that, I am deeply proud of what I accomplished. With the help of Giovanni and the entire cast and crew, I challenged myself in a way that I never thought possible, and I ended up surprising myself. I had

placed certain expectations and limitations on myself as a performer and an actor, and I learned that I am much more than those expectations.

Most importantly, I learned the true value and power of theatre. Not only is it a beautiful form of art and storytelling, it is also a way to bring about important issues. It can be a forum, and a source of reflection and introspection, as Brecht originally intended. *Urinetown*, as a piece of theatre, provides audiences with questions about our own existence, and our influence on the world around us. It causes you to consider how we use the resources available to us, the way that we govern ourselves, what is right versus what is the smart thing to do, and so much more – and *Urinetown* does all of that through musical satire.

As an audience, we are presented with what seem like stereotypical musical theatre characters like Penny and Bobby, before we see them transform into fully subverted stereotypes: fleshed out characters with true complexity and dimension. Each person in *Urinetown* is simultaneously a parody and homage to every character like them that came before, and a multidimensional character with their own backstory. Penelope Pennywise, in particular, is the perfect example of a character presented in *Urinetown* who initially seems like nothing more than a typical jaded older woman in any musical. Through my analysis of the text, however, as well as my work on her character through the rehearsal and show process, it is undeniable that Penny is so much more than a “penny-scrounging cheapskate”.<sup>5</sup> She is a representation of everything that could have been, and someone who fought to make it through devastating circumstances. She is, in my opinion, the true hero of *Urinetown*.

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<http://www.actorsingers.org/data/sites/1/media/shows/urinetown/urinetowncharacters.pdf>



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