



## Puppets, Punchlines, and Purpose: A Night on Avenue at the Barn Playhouse

Review by Laura T. Clattenburg

AVENUE Q isn't just a musical. It's a puppet-powered therapy session wrapped in catchy tunes and adult humor. From the first beat to the final bow, this production bursts with irreverent charm, unexpected depth, and enough belly laughs to make your cheeks hurt.

Imagine that Sesame Street grew up, got a job (sort of), and started drinking wine out of a box—and you've got the vibe. The show follows Princeton, a recent college grad with a “useless” English degree, as he stumbles through the messiness of adulthood. Along the way, we meet a lovable band of misfits: Kate Monster, a sweet kindergarten assistant with big dreams; Rod and Nicky, the Odd Couple with a closeted twist; Lucy the Slut, seductive and chaotic; and even a very sassy incarnation of Gary Coleman.

On Avenue Q at the Barn Playhouse, the cast is electric. The puppeteers manage tricky staging and bring each character to life with surprising depth. Their voices, movements, and total commitment to the silliness keep the audience laughing, while still making room for touching moments.

Kate Monster (Maddi Sloan) and Princeton (Stephen McDonnell) lead the way with good, emotionally grounded performances. Kate's sweetness and sincerity shine through, particularly in her touching solo “There's a Fine, Fine Line,” while Princeton's wide-eyed optimism and comedic uncertainty keep the story moving with charm. Their connection feels authentic, making their relationship relatable.

The ensemble is equally strong. Rod (Justin Lamphere) and Nicky (Rob Frankel with Puppet Assistant Emily Murphy) are a standout comedic duo, blending classic roommate antics with deeper moments of self-discovery. Lucy the Slut (Christine Galeone) commands the stage with her bold, brazen flair. Gary Coleman (Akayla Butler) adds sass and street smarts, Christmas Eve (Jennifer Hsiao) brings sharp humor and unexpected insight, and Brian (Alan Ellinger) is the easygoing guy next door. Trekkie Monster (Jim Fryer) steals the show with his crazy energy. With his gruff voice, shaggy fur, and booming delivery, Trekkie is the loudest, yet one of the most lovable, residents on the block. Every twitch, growl, and side-eye is perfectly timed. His physical comedy is top-notch and delivered with precision. The Bad Idea Bears' appearances (Brian Beloff/Jules Reanna) are brief, adding a shot of chaotic energy and devilish humor every time they bounce onstage. Though her stage time is short, Carol Ribner's Mrs. Thistlewat makes an impression as Kate Monster's crotchety, no-nonsense boss. She delivers her lines with dryness and just the right amount of theatrical exaggeration.

The puppetry work is impressive. The cast seamlessly blends voice, movement, and character work in a way that makes you forget you're watching felt and foam. Every puppet is treated with the same emotional care and physical nuance as a live actor. The synchronization between puppeteers and their characters is tight, expressive, and essential to the show.

Under Steve Arcidiacono's direction, the show never lingers or loses its rhythm. He finds a balance between zany comedy and real emotional stakes, letting the outrageous moments pop while ensuring the story still resonates. The choreography (Jenn Smith) is fun and fluid, cleverly adapted for both puppets and people.

Musical direction by Blue Colacchio ensures every number lands with energy. The cast's vocals are strong, the harmonies well-blended, and the live accompaniment adds warmth and momentum to the score's playful tone.

The scenic design (Phoebe Myers/Sue Alba) is charming, turning AVENUE Q into a lived-in space full of character and surprises. It's the perfect backdrop.

Backed by producer Michael Riggs, his behind-the-scenes leadership ensures that every element, from casting to costumes to curtain call, runs smoothly. His commitment to quality and detail is evident in the show's polish and overall continuity, creating a space where performers can shine and audiences can escape into the quirky world of AVENUE Q. This is a production he can be proud of.

Altogether, this production is a testament to the magic that happens when talent, teamwork, and puppetry collide. It's funny, moving, and delightfully inappropriate—in all the right ways. I personally predict a sell out as word gets out so hurry and grab your seats!

Note: ⚠️ Despite featuring puppets, AVENUE Q is R-rated, featuring adult situations and language.

AVENUE Q ⚡ The Barn Playhouse ⚡ June 6-21, 2025 ⚡ [barnplayhouse.org/avenueq](https://barnplayhouse.org/avenueq)

Photo credit: Steve DiNenno