



(<http://www.edinburgh-festivals.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/avenue-q.jpg>)

"Is this the West End cast they've brought up for the Fringe?" a fellow punter asked as we left Avenue Q.

It isn't, but it's easy to see why someone might wonder such a thing. The set is a little smaller in scale than the London and Broadway versions, but the production quality is way up there. And the cast – students from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland – could slip into any professional line-up tomorrow.

A decidedly grown-up take on the world of Sesame Street, Avenue Q demands not just players who can act, sing and dance but ones who can operate Muppet-style characters. And whereas when we watch The Muppets, the camera crops out the operators, here they are in full view, handling their charges with brio. They share the emotions – laughing, crying and so on, and transfer the feeling to their character.

It can't be easy, but the cast nails it, bringing their alter-egos to charming, hilarious life. From preppy Princeton to Lucy the Slut, through ambitious Kate Monster and the newly Scottish Trekkie Monster, these are characters you want to spend time with – funny, fascinating and decidedly human. And they're gifted with Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx's instantly catchy, Tony-award winning tunes, among them Everyone's a Little Bit Racist, It Sucks to be Me and The Internet is for Porn, accompanied by James Simpson's sparkling band.

But it's not all puppets, with fully human characters reflecting how Sesame Street has regular people interact with the furry folk. They have the same problems, though – finding love, paying the bills, gaining self-knowledge, identifying a purpose in life... and resisting the insidious whispers of the Bad Idea Bears.

Taye Lily dazzles with a spot of gender-bending, playing building superintendent Gary Coleman, the famed late star of Diff'rent Strokes, tempering the original's sass with bittersweet self-knowledge. Conor Scully is adorably puppyish as Princeton, Rebecca Hardcastle heartbreaking as lonely Kate Monster and Jimin Suh perfect as feisty Christmas Eve. David Alves and Tom Mackley are a hoot as possibly gay roommates Rod and Nicky... there's no weak link in director/choreographer Andrew Panton's 17-strong ensemble.

Hilarious, tuneful, insightful, excellently staged and brilliantly performed, Avenue Q is somewhere I'd happily live for the whole Fringe.

MORE INFO: Avenue Q (<http://www.edinburgh-festivals.com/event/avenue-q/assembly-hall/>) is at Assembly Hall
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