“Green Day’s American Idiot”

By Green Day, Billie Joe Armstrong and Michael Mayer
At the Hippodrome Theatre through May 12

By Andrea Cain

DONT LET TEMPTATION ROCK YOU...

The Hippodrome Theatre has introduced a musical filled with loud, crazy, not-a-care-in-the-world people who just love to rock on. Going into "American Idiot," some may wonder how the show will turn out, but when they walk out, they will most likely be not so much disappointed as uncomfortable because the show is mainly about drugs, alcohol, sex and rock’n’roll.

The show starts out so strong and powerful, but midway through it turns into this tell-all about drugs and sex. The raw, explicit talk about hardcore drugs makes one’s skin crawl. The show just becomes so immature that many audience members can be expected to leave.

"American Idiot" is based on three main men, Johnny (Alex Nee), Will (Casey O’Farrell) and Tunny (Thomas Hettrick) who want to live life to the fullest. But throughout the play, temptations from heroin, alcohol and sex clash with their dreams of wanting to be more than worthless. In their mid-20s, each man has a problem that later in the show he overcomes. All they do is drink, do drugs, and listen to hardcore rock’n’roll. Though these guys seem stupid and really have nothing going for them, later it all comes together.

The set resembles a trashy, worn-out city alley. Almost 100 TVs are placed all over the whole set, and throughout the play, as songs are performed, a certain video plays collages of images that suggest meaning for songs. Also, on the stage is a band that plays Green Day's songs.

Johnny, the main character, closely resembles Billie Joe Armstrong, Green Day’s lead singer. Johnny is very out there and really doesn't care about anything. The character is well played, but the scene of him taking a hit of heroin in his arm right on stage may be disturbing to many viewers. Eventually he realizes he's stupid for starting, considering he almost killed himself and his girlfriend, Whatsername (Alyssa DiPalma), his "dream girl."

Tunny, the laziest of the three, actually takes the initiative to get out of the poor, dirty house and join the army, but he returns from war with his left leg gone. In the hospital, he finds Extraordinary Girl (Jenna Rubaii), a fellow soldier who becomes his guardian angel. These scenes seem a bit jammed together considering that he and Extraordinary Girl become significant others so quickly.

Will also has a girl, but alcohol seems to be his love of his life. Heather (Kennedy Caughell), Will’s girlfriend, eventually gets fed up and leaves him, returning towards the end of the show with fancy clothes and a lot of shopping bags as if she now has good money. Realizing she's OK without him, Will knocks his brain back into place and becomes human again. Will has been a heavy drinker, but he stops to prove to Heather that he can change and becoming the father of
her child.

The musical might be interesting to those who love rock’n’roll. But it's a very rough play that hits you in the chest with the reality that people do live like this today. The music is depressing because it talks about people being worthless and not wanting to be part of life.

The music, singing and dancing are very strong and powerful because they tell multiple stories even though the lives of some characters aren't appealing. It is actually humorous that these characters thought they could live like the songs’ lyrics and not care about anything. It's good that the musical’s outcome is more positive as the characters realize there is more to life than drugs and alcohol.

Punk-rock in a musical may sound corny, but when you add background stories from true life experiences, it can take a show far from beyond anyone's expectations. It may be difficult to fit every song of a band in with the meaning of a show but this production did that very well. Green Day's songs are mainly about living life the way a person wants to. If you don't want to work, you shouldn't; if you want to do drugs, you can. But that isn't what life is about, and towards the end, the music grows slower and more mature as if the characters had moved away from negative thoughts and had realized there's more to life than being out of your own element.

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By James Cooper

WAKE ME UP WHEN THIS STORY (?) ENDS

Green Day is a sensational American rock band known for its iconic punk style. Many of their songs comment on the dilemmas in modern society, but due to their personal lyrics Green Day retains a strong fan base. Many Green Day fans have been spending a chunk of cash to see “American Idiot”—a musical using only Green Day songs to illustrate each band member’s life story—at the Hippodrome Theater in Baltimore. However, there are also those in the audience who have probably never heard a Green Day song and who leave their seats within the first 15 minutes.

There is an interesting divide between those who have never heard a Green Day song and those infatuated with the group. The idea behind a jukebox musical—one that incorporates previously composed songs rather than writing a new soundtrack—is to create a sense of balance between a theatrical world and an already established musical world to make one show. Those in the audience that leave may not have intended to hear such loud, punk music; they may take the theatrical aspect of the show much more seriously than those that stay, if only to hear their favorite songs. Whatever the motives of the audience, the show still lacks both a strong theatrical and musical presence.
The opening number “American Idiot” is a surge of energy with blaring speakers and flashing, bright lights—some even disguised as speakers. The set looks to be a dilapidated warehouse plastered with synchronized TV screens that show changing images throughout the many songs. During the opening song, an acrobat descends from the ceiling of the warehouse and commences to woo the audience. Because there is no opening dialogue or introduction, the number comes to both the Green Day fans and those who have never heard of the group as a shock—creating confusion.

One of the most important parts of any musical is the music. However, the music in “American Idiot” is the worst part of the show. Instead of a musical performance, “American Idiot” is a boxing ring showcasing two musical elements: the voices and the instruments, each in constant competition to see which element can be the loudest. There are rare moments that support the idea that the vocalists have great voices, but the pumping speakers and loud amps make it hard to believe. During the first 15 minutes of the show, some audience members are so uncomfortable with the screeching noise that they leave the theater. The music is so loud that even the audience members who stand their ground can’t understand the lyrics.

The second most important element of a musical is the acting. A successful musical excels in both elements: the musicality of the show and the emotional linkage between characters and songs. “American Idiot” however, lacks this connection. Many of the dancers come across as exaggerations of how society sees teenagers: loud, obnoxious and profane. The choreography in some instances even seems barbaric—it looks like there are bunch of gorillas dancing in the background with fast, intense air punches and leg kicks.

The choreography, however, redeems itself later in the show when it becomes more synchronized with the music and therefore becomes more interesting to watch. Only in very rare instances are there soloists who give the audience a reason to stay in their seats by projecting their voices in an audible range. However, the lack of back-story—or front story for that matter—leaves one in a confused state. The “musical” seems to be more a showcase of Green Day songs rather than an actual theatrical narrative that incorporates the songs. Because of this lack of plot development, it is hard for one to even distinguish characters. The playbill seems irrelevant because the dialogue makes little reference to character names.

Another aspect of the show that confuses the audience is the set. The set very rarely changes from its dilapidated warehouse form—even though the songs seem to require a change of scenery. These elements: the loud and inaudible music, the lack of a story or plot development and the unchanging set leave the audience in a state of confusion throughout the show.

In the show’s defense, there are memorable instances where the set does change. At one point the characters leave to get on a bus. They then flip a scaffold to its side and commence to sit in and on top of it, making it look like a bus—one that even has working head and taillights. The scene then uses projections of moving trees to illustrate a journey. Again, when one character enters the city, there are projections of skyscrapers that eventually move—illustrating an emotional scene. However, these rare moments that leave the audience wanting more only to be crushed by the show’s distracting obscenities.
Overall the show seems as if it’s just showing off how loud it can be and how well it can execute choreography synchronized with the music. The latter is one of the few aspects that keep the audience interested. At one point during “Wake Me Up When September Ends,” the dancers move in a very fast-paced way, slowly sink to the ground on their knees and lean onto their backs—illustrating great muscular ability. Another example of the synchronized choreography is when two characters take their shirts off, paint hearts on their chests and then commence to bump their chests at the beat of the drums—illustrating a heartbeat.

After the final curtain touches the stage there is a surprising uproar of applause from the audience, making it seem as if the majority already knows the lyrics to the songs and doesn’t care about the story within the show. However, I can’t wait to leave the theater but I’m caught in my tracks at the sighting of a rising curtain. The entire cast re-enters the stage to do another number not mentioned in the playbill—which is probably the best number in the show because of its clarity. However, the overpowering confusion based on the story, the inaudibility of the majority of songs and the ringing in my ears due to the blaring speakers causes me to disregard the very last number and leave the theater.

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By Cassidy Graham

MUSICAL ANGST

As the show starts, you are greeted by the lively sound of dozens of different news stations, immediately setting the chaotic mood of 2004. Then you realize that the dozens of flashing lights are TVs in the wall of the garage where “Green Day’s American Idiot” takes place. With head-banging, many surprises and music from Green Day’s most popular album, this Hippodrome show accurately depicts the struggle that many suburban youths went through after 9/11.

The three men in the story take very different roads to deal with their frustration, but all three are common paths that young men end up taking—especially in 2004. With the war going on and all of the propaganda flying around, many young people felt as though they were surrounded by hypocrisy and reacted by trying to get away. The songs protest against many of these things, and the dancing and acting display their anger and frustration. This musical depicts these struggles better than other modes because people who felt the frustration wrote the songs, and there is nothing to censor or cover up what they did or how they really acted and felt.

“American Idiot” functions as a jukebox musical, but this does not mean that the show doesn’t have any story. It shows what happens to three guys when they try to leave their hated suburban homes and go to the city. It may be a simple story, basically told through the music with the exception of a few diary entries read by the character Johnny (Alex Nee), but it is filled with emotion and it sends an angst-filled message about growing up and accepting where you come from. The three men each had to go through a life-changing experience in order to finally
mature, as often happens in real life.

The show is extremely energetic, in part because of the loud Green Day music blaring but also because of the actors and the amazing set. Alex Nee perfectly represents Billie Joe Armstrong as the lead character with the same tousled hair, eyeliner and whiny voice. The rest of the cast members dance and sing while playing instruments and head-banging and flying through the air and even doing pull-ups at one point.

The flipping TV screens help put the time-period into perspective, and the garage setting perfectly sets the mood while also being very functional. It is transformed from a basement of a suburban home to a hospital to the streets of New York City in a matter of minutes. The simplicity of one set functioning for many things does not matter because colorful projections of New York City and flying office paper do the rest.

The jerky dancing is perfectly in sync with the music’s angst-filled mood and rhythm, and the storyline fits perfectly into every song. Right after the song “When It’s Time,” when Johnny tells the sleeping girl Whatsername (Alyssa DiPalma) that he loves her, the song “Know Your Enemy,” suddenly comes on and a man who represents drugs hovers over the addicted Johnny as he struggles to shoot up. There is a fight and a struggle on a mattress in the middle of the stage and when Whatsername tries to get Johnny under control he pushes her aside and pulls a knife on her. She runs away and the crazed look on Johnny’s face is almost scary.

There is very strong acting in this scene, and the juxtaposition between the two songs catches the audience by surprise, adding to the effect. These sudden changes from song to song may seem a little bit disjointed at some times, but at other times they really help to heighten the energy and emotion. There are many times when the audience is caught off guard by a sudden blast of a guitar riff, and the audience knows that an energetic head-banging-filled dance number is about to start.

One of the first lines that Johnny says is “Is this my life?” after the characters taunts him about his dad’s girlfriend and other things that are wrong with his life. But over the course of the show Johnny is put in many difficult situations while trying to make a living in New York. At the end when he comes home and sees how changed he and his friends all are, he is more accepting of his situation.

The characters say, “This is my rage, this is my love, this is my city, this is my country, this is my life,” and these statements perfectly sum up the meaning of the show, to show the struggle that many young people went through with accepting their lives amidst the hypocrisy, but to also show the change from rebellion to maturity that the three men went through with accepting their situation.

At the end, it has the feeling of a small story, but during the show there is so much energy that it feels like it is much more than just a story about three people from a suburban town. The songs, the ensemble dancing, the emotion, the great acting and the fact that many of us know about the atmosphere of 2004 makes the show much bigger than the story. It is a perfect blend between theater and Green Day’s music, and it is definitely a show to see, even if you aren’t familiar with
the music at all.

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By Meredith Grossman

“BOULEVARD OF GROWING PAINS”

The lights suddenly fade out and the curtains open to a stage filled with at least a dozen TVs blaring. An electric guitar assaults the ears and the company storms the stage ready to rock for the next hour and a half. Given this introduction, “American idiot,” now at the Hippodrome Theater, would seem better suited to a punk-rock concert than to a musical theater stage but somehow the transition works.

“American Idiot” succeeded by ensuring smooth plot transitions as well as stunning and sometimes shocking visuals and dancing. The rock element at a concert was present here, but it didn’t overshadow the story. The writers had to create new characters and a set design that stays true to its source, the Green Day album of the same title. The company does a good job of expressing themselves through dance and singing because, apart from the main character, they don’t have dialogue.

The show centers on the politics of 2004, the Iraq War in particular. The TVs screens project scenes of violence, news coverage of the war and former President George Bush. The lead character Johnny (Alex Nee), also known as the “Jesus of Suburbia,” is dissatisfied with his life and his country. What’s so great about “American Idiot” is that everyone can relate to Johnny’s struggle. Everyone can relate to the feeling of “walking alone” or the feeling that “no one really seems to care.” Everyone has a little of Johnny in them; we all want to change the world in some crazy way (hence the name “Jesus of Suburbia”).

“Are we going to waste our lives, or are we going to get the f*** out of here?” Johnny shouts to his best friends Will and Tunny in the beginning of the show. All three main characters will embark on their own journeys of self-discovery. Will must stay home with his pregnant girlfriend (“Tales of Another Broken Home”); Tunny will be enticed into joining the military (“We are the Waiting”), and Johnny will head down a destructive path of drugs (“St. Jimmy”) as well as finding love.

Nee brings the same fervor Green Day frontman Billie Joel Armstrong would bring to any concert. For the finale of “Whatsername” Nee headbangs for a full 20 seconds and then sings without any indication that he’s out of breath. Nee walks, talks and looks so much like Armstrong that it's almost as if the Green Day singer is really up on stage. Since the show feels like it is inspired largely by Armstrong’s life, the better an actor can channel Armstrong, the more the audience can connect to the main character.
Flawless song transitions give the show a smooth flow and trippy feel. The show grabs your full attention from the minute the bright-red strobe lights flash on until the whole company each comes out with an acoustic guitar to sing an emotional version of “Good Riddance” for an encore.

While it’s not unusual for there to be little talking in a rock opera, it would’ve been nice had there been more dialogue than just the oral diary entries given by Nee between songs. Maybe he could’ve had a conversation or two. Not everyone is a huge Green Day fan, and it’s possible that the band’s message is lost to much of the audience.

All of the songs from the “American Idiot” album are in the show, as well as some songs from the album, “21st Century Breakdown.” It’s amazing how easily the songs are able to transcend a punk-rock concert. “We are the Waiting” fits into Tunny leaving for the military to try to improve the world, and “Too Much, Too Soon” reflects Will’s inability to be a good father at this stage in his life. Armstrong has said that he and the band “always thought there should be some sort of stage version, because that’s what we [Green Day] were thinking in our heads.” Armstrong’s dream is realized in this hectic, moving show.

The songs are well incorporated into the storyline, but sound designer Brian Ronan should’ve taken into account the fact that punk-rock is an extremely loud genre of music. Since “American Idiot” is an opera, the story is told through songs. While the volume of the music enhances the intensity of the story, the audience should still be able to hear the lyrics. At times the songs were hard to understand, so the message was lost to the audience.

America is the rebel of nations, always pushing towards change. Johnny, Will and Tunny all strive for meaning and purpose in a time when America is going in a direction that they don’t like. They think all their problems are in some way connected to the government, but they try to avoid their own responsibility for their problems, such as Johnny’s drug problem and Will’s girlfriend’s pregnancy. It can’t possibly be their fault, right? For a while they think they’ve got it all figured out, but they don’t know the half of it.

“American Idiot” is the perfect musical for a youthful audience, since they will be able to connect to the music and the story. Johnny is fed up with his country and his place in life; he wants to change the world. But he learns the fact that everyone must face; you can only change the world so much; after a certain point you have to accept that some things, such as the war your country is fighting, are beyond your power to change. You just have to live your life to the fullest.

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By Jada Mosley

LAST OF THE AMERICAN REBELS
“American Idiot,” the stage musical adaptation of the album of the same name, is a story of social unrest and mayhem in the chaos of the war-torn, post-9/11 world. The curtain at the Hippodrome Theatre rises to news reports of North Korean bomb threats and partisan political views immersing the audience in the chaos of true life. It quickly becomes apparent that this story of love, addiction, paralysis and politics is not all that different from today’s world.

By bringing in such real-world themes, the play becomes a story that the audience can connect to. Each audience member can possibly relate to these concepts through personal or vicarious experiences. The play succeeds because it draws out personal emotions in such a chaotic and crude manner while maintaining the integrity of its social themes.

Through song and minimal spoken word slowly the audience begins to piece together the show’s characters. “American Idiot” takes place in the recent past in Jingletown, USA. The three friends Johnny (Alex Nee), Will (Casey O’Farrell) and Tunny (Thomas Hettrick) begin to feel that they are wasting their life in suburbia, as they convey through the aptly named song “Jesus of Suburbia.” The three set out find their calling elsewhere until Heather (Kennedy Caughell) realizes that she is pregnant. Will reluctantly stays behind with Heather while Johnny and Tunny head out on their journey.

After some time on their own Johnny and Tunny begin to realize life outside the cul de sac isn’t as easy as they thought it would be. Tunny subsequently gives up on their rebellious and impulsive venture and enlists in the armed forces. This leaves Johnny on his own until he meets Whatsername (Alyssa DiPalma). Together they begin to venture down a treacherous path of sex, drugs and love. Johnny becomes addicted to heroin giving birth to his flamboyant “suicide commando” hallucination St. Jimmy (Trent Saunders), who becomes the source of Johnny’s problems.

Love is the most clearly stated theme that connects all of these characters through the play. The friendship between Johnny, Will and Tunny is a relationship based on this principle. If they did not love each other on some level Johnny would not miss Will when he stays behind or when Tunny leaves.

Will and Heather’s relationship is one of love as well yet it is strained by confounding factors such as Will’s immaturity and unwillingness to take responsibility for his actions. The final and most important relationship that is formed in the play is that of Johnny and Whatsername. Despite the fact that he is too afraid to confess it to her while she is conscious they remain together because of their mutual love for each other. Even though his addiction worsens, Whatsername still attempts to save him from himself.

Love is countered, however, by addiction, paralysis and dysfunctional politics. Johnny’s addiction is a defining moment because it begins to change the course of his life. He goes from trying to make something of himself to being even more of a failure. His drug habit derails his musical ambition and substitutes a disingenuous hallucination for a friend. Without his addiction, his story would begin and end with his need to escape the suburbs and being madly in love with Whatsername.
Johnny, Will and Tunny leave home because they feel trapped in the suburbs. They feel paralyzed as if there were no end in sight, as if their lives are wasting away while they sit at home. This sense of paralysis is what drives the three of them to set out on their differing courses into the world. Heather also experiences paralysis in the play. Will is more of a deadbeat than helpful parent when it comes to their child. She tolerates him for a while, but eventually she feels that she has to save herself and her child because their situation is not going to change unless she acts.

Songs like “American Idiot” and “Holiday” clearly state the socioeconomic situations and the belligerence of the American government. The characters feel as if the government has forgotten the middle class, leaving them to stagnate and eventually waste away into poverty. Similarly the decision to enlist and go into the war is not positively viewed. These extreme attitudes mirror the blatantly negative view that the government has towards people like them.

All of these themes are established early in the play, helping the audience understand the characters’ deep emotions. This makes the show more than just a crowd screaming on stage but a story that anyone could lose themselves in.

The relationship between St. Jimmy and Johnny is one of dependency mirroring Johnny’s addiction to heroin. Despite Whatsername’s best efforts to help Johnny, he becomes self-destructive and behaves erratically, unable to defy St. Jimmy’s control. When forced to choose between St. Jimmy and Whatsername, he comes at Whatsername and then himself with a knife. This outburst and the loss of Whatsername prompt him to kick his habit and get his life together.

His enraged and desperate outburst demonstrates how little control he has against the will of St. Jimmy and the influence of heroin. The actors clearly convey Johnny’s desperation and Whatsername’s fear by the way that they sing “21 Guns.” Their emotion is clear in both the tone of their voices and within the lyrics of the song. These qualities show that he has finally hit rock bottom and is choosing to throw away his life and everyone who cared about him for his hallucination and heroin.

Will’s problems are not quite as unhealthy as Johnny’s. He struggles to cope with Heather and their child. It is obvious that he wants as little to do with each of them as possible yet is still unable to completely disconnect. Eventually his inability to move beyond his petty egocentrism and show interest in his family causes Heather to take their child and leave him. Unlike Johnny, Will and Tunny, Heather alleviates her feeling of paralysis in a healthy way that does not put her or her child at risk. In the play when she begins packing up her things she seems fed up with Will and is happy to leave without a hint of hesitation to follow through with her decision to leave him.

When Tunny loses a leg in the Iraq war he lies in the hospital and begins to hallucinate about a Middle Eastern woman dancing above his bed who bears a striking resemblance to Princess Jasmine. This Extraordinary Girl (Jenna Rubaii) turns out to be a manifestation of his infatuation with his nurse.
The plot is largely told through physical action onstage and the few moments of spoken word between songs. Some audience members may find this difficult to cope with. The songs are ordered in a manner that best suits the underlying plot but many numbers offer minimal relevance to the plot itself. Some songs such as “American Idiot”, “St. Jimmy” and “When it’s Time” do add significant insight into the overall plot.

“St. Jimmy” introduces the audience to St. Jimmy, quickly conveying the influence and personality of Johnny’s hallucination. “When It’s Time” gives Johnny’s conscience a voice allowing the audience to gain insight into his feelings towards Whatsername where they would have otherwise needed to make assumptions.

The show’s minimal information is not limited to the song choices. The stage set and dance ensembles are another source of confusion. The backdrop is a wall of TVs that presumably represents the nation controlled by the media. The few props include a sofa where most of Will’s story takes place, a bed that changes locations on a whim, and the band positioned to the back of the stage on both the left and right sides. This static setup makes the stage seem cluttered and makes scene transitions impossible to catch if one’s attention is elsewhere for a more than 10 seconds. This is complicated further by the concurrent plot events that occurred simultaneously on stage. All of this makes it difficult for the audience to clearly understand.

In addition it is almost as if the ensemble dancers have not practiced or are not accustomed to performing on a stage the size of the Hippodrome’s. Some dances are obstructed by the furniture causing the dance formations to deform. At times the dancing looks like a really long “Harlem Shake” video or a group seizure. The choreographer’s choices are inventive and creative yet at the same time it looks as though St. Jimmy had a close relationship with the choreographer at the time the dances were made.

The songs hardly ever call for a large group of voices. In general the songs rarely have more than a three-person harmony and have little relevance to the crowd of dancers who traipse across the stage. This makes it slightly unclear as to why the rest of the dancers are even there. This makes them more of a distraction than a useful addition to the plot or the song. In the song “21 Guns,” several ensemble dances take the stage when the song is about Johnny’s choices and Whatsername. They are completely irrelevant and offer nothing to enhance the scene.

The songs themselves are the biggest characters in the play. The transition from rock CDs to the stage is one that could be the play’s downfall. Thankfully the Green Day originals are beautifully converted. Billie Joe Armstrong true musical genius is captured by the orchestral transposition in songs like “American Idiot” and addition of harmonies that made once gritty songs such as “21 Guns.” come to life on the stage.

Distractions are a dime a dozen throughout this play. From the red girl hanging from the rafters nodding her head off beat in “American Idiot” and Johnny and Whatsername’s lovemaking session in the background of “Give me Novocain” to Will and a dancer’s spastic movements side-stage in “St. Jimmy” the events happening at the peripherals of the main actions on stage are very distracting. However these distractions play into the larger allegory that is “American Idiot.” The setting is realistic and the issues that plague these friends through the plot are
realistic. The level of distraction and randomness through this play highlight the craziness of the world.

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By Laura Penhallegon

NO STORY, NO GLORY

When it comes to flashing lights and loud music, “American Idiot” hits the nail on the head. On the other hand, when it comes to everything else that’s necessary in a good musical, it’s lacking. It’s safe to say that many Green Day fans would love this performance, because every song on one of their most popular albums is constantly playing, which makes the musical very similar to a concert.

The purpose of a concert is to entertain only by music, but a musical is supposed to entertain with a story. A musical should be presented as a play with music added, not music with a play added. If someone wants to see a concert, they expect to see a band on stage playing their own songs, but if they go to a musical, they expect a developed narrative and consistent, specific dialogue. This “musical” is not in that category.

The plot of “American Idiot” is not unlike many things we’ve heard before. Three young men are growing tired of life in suburbia and make a plan to leave for the city, but unfortunately they run into complications that break the trio apart. One of them, Will (Casey O’Farrell), has to stay home because his girlfriend becomes pregnant. The two others, Tunny (Thomas Hettrick) and Johnny (Alex Nee) leave for the city, but Tunny eventually enlists in the army and Johnny is left alone with nothing but a few bucks that his mother left him and an ambition to be a musician. He never seems to fulfill that goal, however, due to distractions such as drugs, a new girlfriend and worries about the safety of his friends. Most of the musical revolves around him.

It’s almost impossible to feel any sympathy for the characters because there is no introduction for the audience to get to know them. The writers need to add more character development to attract sympathy when needed. We would care more about Tunny getting his leg amputated or about Will being abandoned by his girlfriend Heather if we were given a reason to care about the two men in the first place. Without that development, significant events occur randomly and coincidentally, making the plot not flow as well as it could have.

It seems an intentional decision by the writers to have the ensemble of dancers appear in almost every scene to distract the audience from the fact that there is no character development. For instance, the first time Whatsername (Alyssa DiPalma), his girlfriend, ever appears is a scene where Johnny wakes up in a bed, not knowing where he is, with a girl he doesn’t know. All of a sudden, she happens to be in love with him. The ensemble then appears in most of the scenes
with them together, making it hard to feel a connection. As a result of this, whether or not Whatsername is really in love with Johnny is ambiguous.

The plot description suggests that Johnny’s dream to be a musician is a big part of the musical, but that dream is never shown. The fact that it’s a Green Day production makes the music necessary in the characters’ personalities, but the music is just thrown in, and the plot wouldn’t change much without it.

Most musicals have at least a bit of non-singing communication in them, but this performance has none except for Johnny’s occasional announcement of the current date, and one moment before he sings to Whatsername. If a musical is going to have such limited dialogue, it must directly show what’s going on in each scene, rather than implying missing words through the use of symbols. Otherwise, the audience will get lost in the story and not be able to comprehend what’s going on.

It takes a few seconds, for example, to understand what happens when Tunny gets shot, because all that’s presented is the sound of drums and bleeding from the leg. All that is implied, but it would’ve been better if someone had specifically said, “Tunny’s been shot.” Dialogue helps the plot become more understandable because the audience can see how the characters react in real-life situations. People don’t sing to each other normally, so psychologically it’s more helpful for the audience to see the emotions evoked from casual conversation.

However, singing is very entertaining for most people, which is why musicals exist in the first place. Those people don’t want only boring talking but loud singing and dancing too. It’s successful when the writers are able to balance that entertainment with the plot line by using the songs to relate to each according scene. The dialogue’s role is to realistically show each scenario, and the music’s is to interpret the mood of the earlier conversation in a different way. This is primarily to engage the audience into the story with a better understanding.

For instance, a young girl falling in love for the first time might reveal through realistic conversation that she is shy and secluded from the boy. But, later in the scene when she sings she can present a reason for that behavior through the melody and tone of her voice. This could have been shown through direct dialogue, but it’s more entertaining in song form.

To be a good musical each scene must have at least a one-minute conversation followed by singing to enhance the mood to the highest potential. The majority of “American Idiot” songs don’t correlate well with the plot and/or mood, mostly because there is almost no talking to create such a linkage. And even if there were, it wouldn’t have been enough, because there weren’t enough slow songs appropriate to the show’s sadder, moodier moments like “September.” Each song has to evoke more emotion and/or empathy to the characters by relating to the scene, but most of the songs are hard punk-rock, which obviously doesn’t flow.

On the other hand, the music is by far the best quality of “American Idiot.” Despite girls singing parts that were originally sung by a man, the songs are quite accurate to the album. Each character has clearly had long experience with guitar playing and singing, because they never go off key and hit every note/chord. But, sadly the music is so good that it dominates the rest of the
assets of a good production, such as character development, the right amount of dialogue, and a consistent plot line that relates to each song.

“Green Day’s American Idiot”

By Green Day, Billie Joe Armstrong and Michael Mayer
At the Hippodrome Theatre through May 12

By Allyssa Pingul

AMERICAN IDIOT: MUSICAL OR CONCERT?

Have you ever thought so highly of something that all traces of doubt were banished? Imagine having all those expectations crushed by one disappointment after another. All Green Day fans should be warned that "American Idiot," now at the Hippodrome Theatre, may cause deep frustration. If you are planning on attending this "musical," be prepared for a concert.

Many factors can raise expectations for this show, whether it's reading reviews prior to the show or discussing the plot with friends. Just knowing that this musical incorporates Green Day songs into the narrative can make someone excited to see it. This band, already considered a legend, can have its songs stuck in your head for days. Having such an amazing band's songs involved in a musical leads one to believe that the show is incapable of disappointment.

 Wouldn't you think the combination of a great band's songs and an interesting narrative would be exciting? It's like nothing can go wrong... until you walk into the theater and immediately want to leave. You might think you would be able to watch a musical, not awkwardly sit at a concert.

A theater lover would be infuriated if concerts and musicals started to be considered the same thing. The difference between the two must be emphasized. A musical obtains a narrative while singing and dancing is an essential part. A concert is just singing and dancing. This show also fails as a concert because of the bad sound quality. The show turned music into noise. This is a case of bad entertainment because either way you label it, the show fails.

The plot consists of three boys: Johnny (Alex Nee), Tunny (Thomas Hettrick) and Will (Casey O'Farrell). Each has a problem. Johnny, with a growing addiction to drugs, feels like a failure, especially without the support of his mother and stepdad, Brad. Will's girlfriend is unexpectedly pregnant, causing his own life plans to change. Tunny enlists into the military and eventually gets injured while serving in Iraq. Meanwhile, Johnny runs off to the city where he meets a girl, "Whatsername." Will, on the other hand, is still very stressed out with his pregnant girlfriend.

Flashing lights are acceptable, but not when they are obnoxiously bright and blinking every two seconds. These lights take away from the dancing as well as everything else on stage. If someone fell from the ceiling, no one would know due to the blinding lights. In fact, some audience members would tell you that they had to close their eyes during the scenes that involved these lights.
Also, the abhorrent sound system may destroy your hearing. The musical opens up with unpleasantly loud music. The audience would guess that the music would get a little softer, but it's annoying to find out that it'll stay at that volume throughout the whole show. Along with the odious music is the horrible microphone quality. One would find it difficult to understand what the singers are articulating because of these microphone defects.

Do you like Green Day’s music? Do you like to sing along to their songs? If you do, you’ll have trouble singing along to this musical because you will not understand what is coming out of the singer’s mouth. This difficulty is very frustrating and can make someone want to leave the show. Honestly, if it hadn't been such a hassle to get out of my seat and walk through the people in my row, I would have left. Although the flashing lights had a good chance of blinding me while walking down the steps.

To add to the complaints about the visuals, the stage consists of the same set up throughout the whole show. It's most irritating when the people in charge think that by changing the shape of the lights on stage, they can deceive the audience into believing that the setting is different. The props are acceptable, but that is no excuse to think it is admissible to use lighting as the only set transformation.

The most dissatisfying thing about this musical is that it focuses too much on the music, neglecting the storyline. It is as if the producers tried to squeeze as many songs as possible into the show. It's hard to recall a moment in the musical where the main focus of the scene was the narrative. The fact that the music never stopped suggests a certain rush to get to the next song.

The quickness of the transitions from song to song really creates an overwhelming confusion. It goes from a boy getting drafted into the military to a boy and girl having sex while another boy talks about his life with all these songs in between. Confused? So is everyone else sitting in the audience. One is likely to think, “What are they even saying? Who is that? Where did he come from?” To improve the narrative, producer Michael Mayer, could have taken a complete break from the music and just focused on the dialogue. If Mayer paid some attention to the storyline, it truly would have been a fantastic show.

Wise advice before seeing the show would be to know the background and narrative of the musical first. This show presumes that it is the audience’s responsibility to acquire prior knowledge of the storyline themselves. If you do not know anything about the show before walking through the theater doors, prepare for some extreme confusion.

Additionally, do not get your hopes up for this musical, or else you’ll be in for an extreme letdown. Even the biggest of Green Day fans will be saddened by the obnoxiously loud, incomprehensible music. Though this show cannot be considered a musical, it can be called a concert. This show is not a musical because being it doesn't focus on the narrative, but it's also a disappointing concert, because the sound system is of such low quality. If the producer couldn't make it a good musical, he could have at least made it a decent concert.

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By Valerie Stine

THREE DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS

The curtain rises to the sound of changing television stations with every performer frozen on stage. The striking of a guitar wakens the actors and shocks the audience with its hardcore sound. The energy blasts through the room during the opening, but does the excitement of the first number sustain the rest of the production? The answer is no. "American Idiot," now at the Hippodrome Theatre, has an interesting concept of characters pursuing dreams before being forced to let them go, but the show offers very little depth within its plot.

Based on the Green Day Album of the same title, the stage musical "American Idiot" is the story of three best friends with one common dream: moving out of the boring, run-of-the-mill suburbs and into the city. But things change when one stays home, another enlists in the army and the last gets hooked on drugs. The concept of three boys with the same dream and all having their dream shattered or changed is an interesting concept, but the execution falls short because the story lacks character development, especially for the female roles.

Green Day's punk-rock style, while fun and energetic, can also be touching and tragic. Make no mistake, however; their music is not for everyone. Their songs are extremely loud and have quite a bit of profanity in them, especially their more upbeat songs. The main issue is the lyrics are difficult to understand because the singers are being drowned out by the instruments. This makes it rather challenging to fully understand the plot of the show.

Johnny (Alex Nee) and his two best friends Tunny (Thomas Hettrick) and Will (Casey O'Farrell) plan on all going to the city together. Will is forced to stay behind after his girlfriend Heather (Kennedy Caughell) becomes pregnant. Tunny and Johnny leave Will and take a bus to the city during the fantastic number "Holiday," where they turned scaffolding into a bus. Once there Tunny realizes, after seeing an advertisement, that he wants to enlist in the army. Feeling betrayed by his friend, Johnny is consumed by a world of drugs where he meets his love interest, Whatsername (Alyssa DiPalma).

Because this production is sung all the way through with very little dialogue and because it is hard to understand much of the singing, the audience loses not only some of the minor plot but also much of the symbolism. One of the biggest symbols in the show is St. Jimmy (Trent Saunders), Johnny's alter ego. It isn't until the show's end that one realizes this character is only a figment of Johnny's imagination. This might be because the lyrics are hard to hear or simply just because it is never explained.

A few plot holes seem to reoccur throughout the show. Johnny has supposedly fallen for a young woman he calls Whatsername. The relationship fails to connect due to some odd shifts in the writing. One minute he is singing a beautiful love song to her while she is sleeping, and the next he is threatening her with a knife without any real explanation.
A major plot point is also missed when Will and girlfriend Heather who has just given birth to their child get into a large fight. Frustrated by Will's drinking, Heather attempts to leave but he tries to stop her. The fight isn't built up and it feels strange, almost as if it were just added at the last minute. These problems easily could have been fixed had they added a little more dialogue and made it a full-length production instead of just a one act.

Overall the performances are great. Each of the female leads has a fantastic and powerful voice that should have been used more often. Since the show is seen through the eyes of the three male leads the audience learns very little about the girls. It would be easier to sympathize with the male characters more if the audience could understand how the women affected them in more detail. Caughell's sweet and soulful sound brings great meaning to her rather flat character. Her voice carries a vulnerability that makes her easy to relate to. This is most notable in her performance of "Last Night on Earth" when she sings to her child and promises to protect it.

Jenna Rubaii, who plays the "Extraordinary Girl," is a beautiful dancer who flies through the air in a harness during a number in which she helps bring Tunny back to life. Before this scene the audience knows little about the war-stricken Tunny, but her character brings much more depth to him when she restores his lost hope after his injury.

DiPalma does a commendable job with her role as Whatsername. Along with the other two girls her voice is wonderful, but it is what's behind the voice that makes her such an interesting character. Although plot holes can sometimes make her relationship with Johnny unbelievable, DiPalma portrays her character with such strong emotion that it makes up for the poor story telling. After being threatened, Whatsername leaves Johnny by singing the song "letterbomb," an extremely heavy girl-power number that DiPalma delivers very well.

Along with the three girls, it seems as though O'Farrell also gets the short end of the stick. O'Farrell has the potential to have a really deep and interesting character but instead the director decided to sit him on the couch the entire production. Despite being kept in one place the entire show O'Farrell has great stage presence and one really does feel for him. His beautiful performance of "Nobody Likes You" gives an understanding of how lonely Will feels by the end of the production.

Surprisingly the weakest cast member in the cast is Nee. The entire production is about his downfall because of his drug use, but Nee never shows a difference between the suburban boy the audience saw at the beginning and the drug-addicted man they see in the rest of the production. He plays both versions of himself in the same monotone.

Despite the great music and lyrics by Green Day, "American Idiot" is disappointing overall. With such an interesting concept, the show had the potential to be fantastic, but the characters lacked the depth needed to be relatable and to make credible decisions. "American Idiot" will be entertaining to any Green Day fan if only for its music and great voices, but to anyone else it will be too difficult to follow.
BEFORE OR AFTER THE LOBOTOMY?

“American Idiot,” the new production at the Hippodrome Theatre, opens with the startling sound of George Bush speaking, reporters covering disasters and other sound bites as TV screens flash news bulletins. This frenetic quality is impressive at first, but it continues throughout the play, through the choreography of the actors and the musicians' frequently staccato choices, giving the show little variety and eventually wearing down the audience.

The high volume levels and flashing lights combined with the flailing and thrashing of the performers make the show difficult to watch. This may be the effect the writers—Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong and director Michael Mayer—were going for, considering Armstrong’s history of controversial music and political statements. But this antagonistic quality is not something most people coming to see a musical are prepared for. Some audience members will find it a refreshing change of pace from classic book musicals, but others will find the show’s novelty too far out of the box. For those who are prepared for this rock opera, the show certainly packs in many well known songs but lacks in the plot department.

In fact, Heather is one of the show's most interesting characters, despite her limited time on stage. Unlike other characters, she has a more defined story line and Caughell always acts from a place of truth. She doesn't play a general emotion of angst, as many other cast members do; she puts telling the story first. She refuses to get swept up in the music and shout all of her lines or stop around the stage in anger. The choices she makes are grounded in the truth of the moment.

Unfortunately, once Tunny and Johnny leave, Will and Heather’s story is relegated to the sidelines, although it could have brought a more realistic side to the show had it been developed. Their story is one of teen pregnancy and living with the consequences. It's not as glamorous as
Johnny's new city life, but it would provide a sobering contrast to Johnny's living on the edge. The audience is conscious Will has been left behind through its peripheral vision: often he is seen making out with Heather or watching TV on a beat-up couch placed stage right.

The dialogue is minimal in “American Idiot.” Johnny serves as the narrator and Nee tends to speak in an odd, affected voice as if he were trying to imitate Armstrong, the original singer of the majority of the songs. The weak dialogue is not helped by Nee’s lack of comic timing—he waits too long on the punch lines so that the jokes fall flat. "But at least you were right, Mom," he says before having sex with Whatsername, "I did make a friend at camp." This aside gives his character a slimy quality, not a charming one. The songs blend seamlessly as teenagers run across the stage, mock fighting and flailing at each other, another example of the overall frenetic quality of "American Idiot."

The biggest problem with “American Idiot” is probably the ambiguity of the plot. Johnny says at one point, “I got plans, baby,” but just what those plans are, no one knows. “My riot. My love. My country.” How do the characters feel about these subjects? Once he gets to the big city he is just as angsty as he was in the suburbs, implying that the problem is not with Johnny's surroundings, but with him. He needs to grow up and take care of himself.

Tunny gives up on the city altogether and goes into the army in a dream-like number in which the cast, in only their underwear, walks in lock step and pantomimes using automatic weapons, while women in shimmery red, white and blue dresses dance seductively to convince Tunny to enlist. This a turning point for Tunny. He decides to choose responsibility and duty over Johnny's static life of drugs and bad decisions.

“No friends, no girl. I need both,” remarks Johnny, and these seem to be his only concerns until the character of St. Jimmy (Trent Saunders) is introduced. St. Jimmy is a violent drug lord with a distinctive mohawk who likes to throw glitter and stomp around the stage. He lures Johnny into a life filled with drugs. Once Johnny snags a girl they perform interpretative dance with an elastic band as they shoot up. He continues to spiral downward as St. Jimmy mentors him. The frenetic aspect of the show only increases as Johnny loses control of every aspect of his life and turns against those he loves.

For all this modern dance and urban intrigue, the suburban story of Will is still more interesting. His relationship with Heather is disintegrating. She angrily packs the diaper bag in “Too Much Too Soon.” Will holds her back and Heather begins to fight him as he picks up her and then hugs her. She quickly pulls away, but it’s one of the few poignant moments that work in the show. Songs that are supposed to be heartfelt like Johnny’s love song, “When It’s Time,” seem forced and unoriginal. This one is interrupted by St. Jimmy's appearance and by the song “Know Your Enemy” in which Johnny turns against his girlfriend in a drug-induced haze.

At times the production shows spurts of innovation in its staging and choreography. One creative piece of staging takes place during Johnny and Tunny’s departure from the suburbs. The ensemble throws the boys’ duffel bags and other props through the air in time with the music, which stirs up a sense of hope for the future and the unknown.
When Johnny and Tunny are traveling to the city, the cast turns a giant gray piece of scaffolding on its side to create the skeleton of a bus, while continuing to sing and dance. Once the illusion of the bus has been created the actors move simultaneously in slow motion, imitating the movement of bodies on a bus. Later, when the characters experiment with drugs they hold out their arms as if they are receiving a message from God and are then overcome by whatever they shoot up. Tunny’s army experience is simulated with soldiers lying on their stomachs and suddenly jumping into the air, as if they had crawled over a minefield.

Unfortunately, the women of “American Idiot” are given the least to do. Johnny’s love interest in the city hardly ever speaks and is mainly depicted having sex or shooting up with him. She is such an afterthought her name is “Whatsername” (Alyssa DiPalma). Tunny’s flame, “The Extraordinary Girl” (Jena Rubaii) is featured in an intricate scene in which she flies through the air in a harness. But she is dressed in a costume out of “I Dream of Jeannie,” a very shallow representation of the Middle East, where it is presumed Tunny is serving.

The one song that is supposed to stand in for female power, “letterbomb” lacks depth. It’s basically Whatsername yelling at Johnny for three minutes. A stronger presence by female characters could have helped to ground the show. The men lash out and scream about how miserable their lives are, leaving the women to act as caregivers. These women can't afford to give up and moan. To examine more closely how these women endure their mundane lives in Heather's case or dangerous lives in Whatsername's and what they must sacrifice to better someone else, would help the audience identify with the plight of these young people.

At the beginning of the play Johnny lies about stealing money for his journey to the city, when in fact his mother gave it to him. This feeling that Johnny can’t really hack it as an adult recurs throughout the play, so it’s hard for the audience to empathize with him. His rash behavior and selfishness do not do him any favors. By the end of the show, the audience pities him.

The soundtrack of the show is fairly brash and loud, which is to be expected, considering the songs were taken from the canon of the pop-punk band Green Day. But because “American Idiot” is not a concert but a musical, some of the most beautiful musical moments in the show are the simpler ones. The band is on stage left of the performers, and the pieces with the cello were very nice.

Audience members should stick around for an encore by the cast in which each character strums “Good Riddance” on acoustic guitars. It’s the best number in the show because in the absence of moving lights, TV screens, flailing bodies moving through space, and lyrics being shouted, the cast can tell a simple story in harmony with one another.