

Fall 2006

# THEATRE III

## Why we do it!

The cast of Urinetown take a moment to reflect on the special bond that has developed between the cast.



Urinetown:  
the Musical

## WHY WE DO COMMUNITY THEATER:

Lessons from Urinetown the Musical by Tom Ryder and Rudy Borkowski

You know, I used to think doing community theater was all about being on stage, about basking in the warm glow of an audience's applause or laughter. But recently I have begun to appreciate that other aspect of community theater: Community.

Oh sure, anyone who does community theater very quickly gets caught up in what I refer to as "the 12 year old girl syndrome", (sorry ladies), where all your new friends are your "best friends 4ever". Yes, this happens in all community theater settings, and it's understandable. I mean, you're all working on a shared creative

passion, two to five times a week. It's no wonder you bond. Being in a show is the adult version of a teenage crush. It begins, blooms to full radiance very quickly, then withers after the show closes. Fade to black.

Although every cast promises they will stay in touch, most don't. So you start looking for your next theater fix. If you're lucky, some of the cast members from your last show are cast with you in another show. But whatever the show, it's rare to replicate the feeling. The new cast mating ritual begins anew and the show before it fades into memory. If the last show experience

was great, it becomes the benchmark for the new show. But we all know it fades, like our lines. They become faint, warm memories.

Recently, I was fortunate enough to be cast as Caldwell B. Cladwell in Theatre III's "Urinetown the Musical", in Acton. "Urinetown" involved a large and diverse group of people. There are 25 in the cast alone, and the number balloons to about 40 people if you count the producers, directors, musicians and crew.

In my day job at the Harvard Business School, I spend a lot of time thinking about how people teach and

learn. We are always looking for ways to deepen connections between people; to turn learning from the mere transfer of knowledge to the transformation of lives. It has occurred to me that one of the major challenges in any community theater is communication. And so I started wondering: how can we use technology to improve communication and create a heightened sense of community for the cast and crew of "Urinetown"?

What we did then was create a virtual community using a software called Basecamp. The project-based web blog software created a place; a virtual discussion spot where people could share their ideas.

Now as you might expect, at first this discussion area became a storage spot for often-inane banter that could have just as easily be distributed by email. But over time, the inane banter turned into schedules, director's notes, supportive comments, character insights, and enormously valuable actor-to-actor, singer-to-singer, dancer-to-dancer reflections, all of which helped to hone the quality of the performances. All of a sudden the technology allowed us to share a lot more than we

ever had time for within the tight constraints of our busy three-hour rehearsals.

That's the practical side of what this technology did.

But it did something far more important. "Urinetown Confidential" became a repository for the soul of the show. Oh yes, it's full of inside jokes and silly comments, but at the center it is the heart of a new form of community. It's a place where you get a better understanding of the people you are standing next to on the stage. It is a place of startling insights. And yes, it's full of the sappy self-congratulating flatulence that you'd find in any discussion board of creative people:

*Aren't we great? Don't we love this experience? Isn't this special? Aren't we wonderful?*

But then in the wee hours one November morning, a red-headed sprite from the hinterland of Brookline, New Hampshire floored us all with some of his late night ruminations. The following, written by Rudy Borkowski, (who plays the role of Billy Boy Bill), is a post taken directly from the "Urinetown" web blog. It was written after the cast party which following the

show's successful opening night performance and is shared here with his permission:

## **Looking at the sky, naming the stars**

By Rudy Borkowski (2:49 a.m., November 4, 2006)

*So I step out of the Ryder house this evening and did what I always do at night, look at the sky.*

*Stars.*

*There Orion, Gemini, Canis Major and Minor. Dippers. Cassiopeia. Taurus and the Pleiades. All my friends of many decades. Intimate acquaintances from being a one time very active amateur astronomer (before kids). Procyon. Sirius. Betelgeuse. Weird old Arabic names. Glance at the limits of the universe from a front porch with an inviting rocking chair. Objects in motion. Objects at rest.*

*I heard a few owls hooting in the distance. And I muttered to myself, "How did you get here?" I'm not quite sure. Right out of the gate, in my life, I thought I was headed straight over ---> there.*

*Not here.*

*As I've told a few, this is really my first community theater experience. I have done two shows in recent years (as recent as last week) at Indian Hill Music Center in Littleton, but no auditions were involved. Coming to auditions in June was equal parts terror and excitement, like being asked to walk on water.*

*At some point a few years ago, shortly after losing my father to brain cancer, I concluded that I had been through the most scary, difficult things. So anything else had to be less difficult. I was right, and wrong. There are harder things, but performing in front of people isn't one of them. There's a tangent there I'm not taking, it is thousands of words long.*

*I love musical theater. Always have. Would give my eye teeth to be in a production of Sunday in the Park with George or Assassins (the latter – speaking of bad subject matter with "happy songs", as I was telling Sherry*

The screenshot shows a Basecamp interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'Overview', 'Messages', 'To-Do', 'Milestones', 'Writeboards', 'Chat', and 'Files'. The main content area displays a message titled 'Looking at the sky, naming the stars' by Rudy Borkowski, dated 4 November. The message text is identical to the one in the main text of the page.

earlier this -- -- this morning). Grew up watching *The Music Man* on some UHF channel on the weekends. Finally got the DVD a few years ago and enjoyed the letterbox that allowed me to see the whole scene for the first time.

A year ago I saw *Urinetown* in Boston and after the show, walking on Clarendon Street, I talked with the fellow playing Mr. McQueen. I asked him what he did about doing these songs over and over, didn't it drive him crazy. He said he had a special ability to clear his mind after the show. I don't know if he was joking or not. He played a decent Richard Henry Lee this year down in Boston. But I digress. I was green with envy/admiration as someone being able to perform in a show, a show like that. Perchance to dream.

I seem to migrate towards interests that fulfill themselves in the late hours.

Yes, the old astronomy thing from high school and college days. Even spent two weeks in Australia, other side of the world, up every night to see Comet Halley in 1986. The comet was boring (I've seen better). The people were fantastic. The stars of the southern hemisphere – astounding.

Then, back in 1993, I took up ice hockey. Didn't even know how to skate. Played for a dozen years, late night amateur adult leagues. Learned how to curse and how to drink beer. (I had never done either before. Yes – that late a bloomer.) Never played that

well, though I did learn to skate backwards pretty darn well and play defense.

Now – this.



How did I get here?

You got me here. I didn't do it alone. That's for sure.

You – my friends in this cast. You have been a bet-

ter friend to me in the past half full of months than some people I've know for decades. Heck, better than some family.

How did you do that? How did YOU get here? I'd like to know. Tell me. Where does our universe end and what inhabits it? How much time have we got? Have you walked on water, or changed direction on a frictionless surface? You have.

I keep waiting for the pinch of waking up. Ain't happenin'. It must be real. May whatever God or force of the universe you believe in bless you.

You people are fantastic. I am humbled by your generosity. Yep – to put it succinctly. You do not suck.

But taking my 5-year-old to 8am soccer in 31 degree weather will suck. So I my recline for the evening/morning.

Keep yourself hydrated.

You are stars, and I'm honored to know your names.

**The next time you are asked why you do community theater;** why you rehearse five days a week, drive hundreds extra miles to rehearsal, spend your weekly ten-hour commute

for five weeks doing nothing more than running your lines; why you wear costumes, makeup and hair styles that make you look like the wreck of the *Hesperus*, you have an answer.

It's not only about the theatre part of community theatre; about strutting your stuff and sharing your talents in front of an adoring audience; not just that self-centered, feel-good ego boost. Sir Lawrence Olivier, in answer to the question why we act said, "Look at me! Look at me! Look at me! Look at me! Look at me! Look at me!" And that is true.

But it's more than that. Community theatre offers a way to feel connected in a fractured world. To feel a part of a family, a community. To feel whole, alive, engaged, together. whole, alive, engaged, together.

**Opening weekend is a great success and the crowds love the show**

**"Wow, there's a lot of talent on the stage. What energy, what excitement, GREAT SHOW!"**

**"In my opinion this is the best show Theater III has ever done!"**

**"URINETOWN is a MUST SEE!"**