

Theater

BEN BRANTLEY | THEATER REVIEW



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Gavin Lee, accompanied by a kick line of sequined sea anemones, wears four-legged pants and does a four-footed tap dance as Squidward Q. Tentacles in "SpongeBob SquarePants."

SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS: THE BROADWAY MUSICAL

Tickets At the Palace Theater in Manhattan; 877-250-2929, spongebobbroadway.com. Running time: 2 hours 20 minutes.

Credits Book by Kyle Jarrow; directed by Tina Landau; music supervision, orchestrations and arrangements by Tom Kitt; choreography by Christopher Gattelli; original songs by Yolanda Adams, Steven Tyler & Joe Perry of Aerosmith, Sara Bareilles, Jonathan Coulton, Alex Ebert of Edward Sharpe & The Magnetic Zeros, The Flaming Lips, Lady Antebellum, Cyndi Lauper & Rob Hyman, John Legend, Panic! At the Disco, Plain White T's, They Might Be Giants, T.I., Domani & Lil' C; songs by David Bowie & Brian Eno, Tom Kenny & Andy Paley; additional lyrics by Jonathan Coulton; additional music by Tom Kitt; sets and costumes by David Zinn; lighting by Kevin Adams; projections by Peter Nigrini; sound by Walter Trarbach; hair by Charles G. LaPointe; make-up by Jon Dulude II; Foley by Mike Dobson; music director, Julie McBride; musical coordinators, Mike Keller and Michael Aarons; production stage manager, Julia Jones; production management, Juniper Street Productions; general management, 321 Theatrical Management; executive producer, Susan Vargo. Presented by Nickelodeon, the Arca Group, Sony Music Masterworks and Kelp on the Road.

Cast Ethan Slater (SpongeBob SquarePants), Danny Skinner (Patrick Star), Gavin Lee (Squidward Q. Tentacles), Lilli Cooper (Sandy Cheeks), Brian Ray Norris (Eugene Krabs), Wesley Taylor (Sheldon Plankton), Jon Rua (Patchy the Pirate, Sardine Corps, undersea creature), Vashy Mompoint (security guard, Sardine Corps), J.C. Schuster (security point, old man Jenkins, undersea creature), Stephanie Hsu (Karen the computer, undersea creature), Gaelen Gilliland (the mayor, undersea creature), Abby C. Smith (Mrs. Puff, undersea creature), Allan K. Washington (Larry the lobster, undersea creature), Ja'Len Christine Li Josey (Pearl Krabs, undersea creature), Kelvin Moon Loh (Perch Perkins, undersea creature), Lauralyn McClelland (Sardine Corps, undersea creature), Oneika Phillips (Sardine Corps, undersea creature), Robert Taylor Jr. (Sardine Corps, undersea creature), Logan Jones (member of the Electric Skates, undersea creature), Kyle Matthew Hamilton (member of the Electric Skates, undersea creature), Curtis Holbrook (member of the Electric Skates, undersea creature) and Tom Kenny (French narrator).

Aye, Aye, Captain!

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tips of whatever the underwater phyla equivalents of fingers are. Try that on for size, Mr. Christian Bale, and all you other body-morphing Method boys.

Mr. Slater, I should hasten to add, shares the stage with a peer in capturing exactly the innocently idiotic spirit of the Nickelodeon television series — and \$1.3 billion retail merchandising empire — that inspired this lavish production. By whom I mean the designer David Zinn, whose sets and costumes raise the bar for trippy visuals in mainstream theater.

Like that of the original television show, created by Stephen Hillenburg and first aired in 1999, Mr. Zinn's aesthetic combines the literal-mindedness and repetitively riffing wildness of a toddler's fantasy life. Exhibit A is the punning physical form of the animated SpongeBob himself, which is that of a familiar household object, not a specimen of aquatic zoology.

Similarly, in recreating the series' submarine town of Bikini Bottom, Mr. Zinn shows the wonders that can be worked on everyday rec-room items by hyper-magnification and coats of psychedelic color. Giant plastic party cups and pool noodles are combined in immense clusters to evoke underwater flora and fauna, with matching costumes that might have been assembled from Salvation Army bins.

The effect is a D.I.Y. playpen-aquarium as it might have been conceived by an industrious 5-year-old. Or a 5-year-old with an obsessive-compulsive attention to detail and a budget of the reported \$20 million invested in this production.

Overseeing this grandly infantile uni-

verse is Ms. Landau, who made her name as a boundary-testing director of the avant-garde. She turns out to have been just the person for the job, never betraying the tone of instructive anarchy — packaging life lessons in Looney Tunes-style adventure yarns — that has always been the hallmark of "SpongeBob SquarePants."

In other words, you will probably adore this musical if: a) "SpongeBob" was a formative influence of your childhood; b) you are a stoner who takes up to watch reruns of the show on YouTube (categories a and b are not mutually exclusive); or c) if you are (like my date for this show) a parent of "SpongeBob"-bingeing progeny and found its sensibility crept into, and wallpapered, your weary mind.

If you are none of the above, you will find your patience sorely tested. But if you are obliged to accompany one of the "Sponge"-happy types listed above, might I suggest you do what I did?

That would be to immerse yourself in random (preferably early) episodes of the series, and then marvel at how the creative team here replicates their seemingly inimitable tone and substance. (Or you could indulge in some illegal inhalation, although I didn't say that.)

Still, you may indeed enjoy such improbable spectacles as a misanthropic squid named Squidward (Gavin Lee, wearing four-legged pants) doing a virtuosic four-footed tap dance with a Busby Berkeley kick line of pink-sequined sea anemones. Or a heavy-metal boy band made up of sea skates on skateboards, with music by Steven Tyler and Joe Perry of Aerosmith.

Oh, I forget to tell you. The show's songs

(supervised, arranged and orchestrated by the composer Tom Kitt) have been written by a plethora of pop-rock eminences, including John Legend, Cyndi Lauper, Lady Antebellum and They Might Be Giants.

But a lot of these numbers register as polyphonically enhanced variations on the kinds of instructional ditties once heard on "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," starting with the opener, "Bikini Bottom Day" (by Jonathan Coulton, known for his songs for the "Portal" games). There's even one called (shoot me now) "BFF" (by the Plain White

A trip to Bikini Bottom should leave you smiling, or maybe with a case of the munchies.

T's), performed by SpongeBob and his bestie, the indolent starfish Patrick Star (a very good Danny Skinner).

As for Kyle Jarrow's script, it also honors its bright yellow template. SpongeBob, a relentlessly cheery fast-food worker with self-esteem issues, learns that his beloved Bikini Bottom is in danger of being destroyed by a volcano.

So he, Patrick and the brilliant scientist Sandy Cheeks (Lilli Cooper, in an astutely underplayed performance), a squirrel (don't ask), must come up with a plan to save their world. And this in the face of all sorts of topical horrors, since even children have their apocalyptic fears these days.

Among the obstacles on the path to heroism: xenophobic prejudice (Lilli is dis-

daind as a mammal), the bureaucratic paralysis of the mayor (Gaelen Gilliland), panic-rousing media coverage (Kelvin Moon Loh is fabulous as a glam-rock newscaster) and the villainous obstructions of the evil Sheldon Plankton (Wesley Taylor, who isn't scary, presumably by design) and his wife, Karen the Computer (Stephanie Hsu).

Did your brain just freeze? If you're a "SpongeBob" virgin you will only short-circuit if you try to make scientific sense of this water wonderland. Instead, tune out until the next amazing set piece, and then gape at the ingenious reconfigurations of objects like packing crates and parasols.

Christopher Gattelli's choreography of his sexually ambiguous ensemble (genders blur when wet) is perversely brilliant, suggesting piscine movement through breakdance and voguing gestures instead of the expected swimming motions. But no one matches Mr. Slater in conveying the physicality of the life aquatic.

An uncannily bendy-bodied figure, he is so springy and supple that you're not surprised when one of his arms suddenly stretches across the stage. Possessed of a squeaky-clean belter's voice, he is steeped in a sunny (or sunshine-yellow) chipperness that can absorb all gloom and doubts.

Whether he likes it or not, Mr. Slater seems destined to be identified forever with what is surely a once-in-a-lifetime match of actor and character. He might want to consult with Joel Grey (eternally remembered as the M.C. in "Cabaret") or Carol Channing (the same with "Hello, Dolly!") about dealing with the attendant blessings and burdens.

Channeling Emma Stone, With Love and Wit

A 'La La Land' spoof imagines an unseen one-woman show that makes a character's career.

By JOSE SOLÍS

When she's not soaring through a Los Angeles planetarium with her dance partner, or being humiliated at an emotional screen test, Mia Dolan takes fate into her own hands and creates an autobiographical one-woman show.

Or so audiences discovered in small glimpses in "La La Land," the modern-day musical that won Emma Stone an Academy Award for playing Mia, a struggling actress who falls in and out of love with Ryan Gosling's struggling jazz musician.

The movie's passionate fans included Jimmy Fowlie and Jordan Black, a pair of Los Angeles performers who were also loving critics of what they considered its flaws.

They demonstrate that in "So Long Boulder City," a spoofy one-man version of Mia's barely seen one-woman show, which was an unexpected hit in Los Angeles and has arrived in New York.

In a red wig, black skirt and white button-down shirt dress, Mr. Fowlie, as Mia, traces the path from home — she was too big a fish for such a small pond — to drama school, and eventually Los Angeles. She is all heart — and delusional confidence.

The show's creators first worked together on "Go-Go Boy Interrupted" a comedic web series directed by Mr. Black, in which Mr. Fowlie played an aging go-go boy.

For the longest time Mr. Fowlie's friends suggested that he should write a comedy based on his own life. "Both my parents met in a mental institution and I was in a foster home," he explained. "I tried to write about



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LIONSGATE

Mia Dolan times two: Jimmy Fowlie in "So Long Boulder City" (top) and Emma Stone in "La La Land."

that but it was so sad."

Inspiration hit the second time he watched Damien Chazelle's Academy Award-winning musical. "We wanted to do the show once as a joke," Mr. Fowlie said. But in a twist, "Mia's show was terrible and ours is in New York Off Broadway."

It is now playing at SubCulture, after a run in Los Angeles that was attended by the likes of Melissa McCarthy, Helen Hunt and Ms. Stone's mother.

Mr. Fowlie and Mr. Black recently sat down to talk about their show and its cinematic inspiration, after a rehearsal that featured several costume changes and worries about misplaced stuffed animals. An edited version of the conversation follows.

How many times did you watch "La La Land" to make this show?

JIMMY FOWLIE More than 10 times. We were looking for clues, and there's this innocuous moment in the film when Mia tells her roommates she's writing a play, and there's a close-up of what she's written. It's something like "Genevieve walks in, she's wearing a trench coat and a cigarette in hand. She stops, blinks," which is how our play begins. It's all on-the-nose dramatics.

You're not doing an Emma Stone impression. But what would be the most challenging aspect of her to capture?

FOWLIE Our Mia just really wants to show you how great everything is. Holding that facade is hard. Emma Stone does it so well.

Why do you think the movie became so polarizing?

JORDAN BLACK It's a musical, so people who love musicals had certain expectations, and they wanted great dancing and singing.

FOWLIE My feeling is if you can't handle Ryan Gosling's singing voice you don't deserve his speaking voice.

By exploring the pitfalls of putting on a one-person show, do you deal with your own fears?

FOWLIE I've always loved characters who are bombing but don't realize it. One of my friends pointed out that maybe subconsciously that gives me a safe space, because if the show we're putting on is supposed to be bad, there's no way we can get it wrong.

At the end of the movie, Mia has become a star, comes back to the cafe where she worked and is very nice to people who work there. If you become a superstar, where would you want to return?

FOWLIE I'd go back to college and tell my classmates, "And you thought I wasn't gonna make it!"

BLACK I worked in a supermarket, so I'd just be nicer to the employees. People can be so mean to you when you work in supermarkets.

Mia is obsessed with her legacy. How would you want people to remember you?

BLACK As a man who had a full head of hair, 20 more pounds of muscle and could dance like Michael Jackson.

FOWLIE As a man who liked wigs and had a tattoo that says "wall painting."

Remember the Neediest!