



DEFINITIVE 21ST CENTURY ROCK OPERA: (left to right) Michael Esper as Will, Stark Sands as Tunny, John Gallagher, Jr. as Johnny in *American Idiot*. Photo: Paul Kolnick

Theater Review

Green Day's *American Idiot* reinvents the 'rock opera' for a new generation

American Idiot

Book by Billie Joe Armstrong and Michael Mayer

Lyrics by Billie Joe Armstrong

Music by Green Day

Directed by Michael Mayer

St. James Theatre

246 West 44th Street

(212-239-6200), www.AmericanIdiotOnBroadway.com

By Scott Harrah

We have heard plenty of people (theatergoers and critics alike) complain that the American musical (as we once knew it) is dead. Granted, we haven't seen the likes of anything resembling a grand-scale musical opus on the level of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Kander and Ebb, and similar ilk in at least a decade. Why? Perhaps Broadway, like the media, mirrors society and what people want. Grumble if you must about the lack of harmonious traditional musical-theater fare in the 21st century, but Green Day's *American Idiot* is the perfect Broadway reflection of our times. It's loud, colorful, chaotic, anarchic yet devoid of any real political message other than the frustration of youth in the post 9/11 era. Its sometimes atonal songs depict a world without hope, in an America grappling with a plummeting economy, massively high unemployment, a meaningless war, and partisan divisiveness about nearly everything. *American Idiot*, as counterculture personified, is as relevant in 2010 as *Hair* was in the 1960s.

Based on the 2004 Green Day album of the same name, *American Idiot* is an in-your-face, pseudo-punk-rock opera. (Many have called the show "punk," but is there indeed such a musical genre as "punk" anymore? And besides, the grandfather of punk, Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren, died this month. Google him if you really want to know what "punk" was all about.) Musical nomenclature aside, *American Idiot* doesn't need descriptive appellations of its music because it is the energy and enthusiasm of the cast that really make the songs and the show itself a spectacle for both the ears and eyes. Stephen Sondheim may be a "god" for the mature Broadway show-tune set, but Green Day's shrill rock is certainly the chosen soundtrack for many under age 40. Under Michael (*Spring Awakening*) Mayer's sharp direction, *American Idiot* is a gorgeous pastiche of jagged entertainment that somehow manages to tell a story (albeit a paper-thin one). It's brilliant musical theater for the limited attention span of an ADHD-afflicted generation addicted to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and "American Idol" and anything concise, irreverent, and gimmicky.

American Idiot assaults the senses immediately in the opening scene with the eponymous song, with the cast jumping around, singing, and wreaking havoc on a stage filled with flickering TV monitors (showing news and disturbing current events), walls of newspaper clippings and various industrial filigree, looking like some overhyped Soho art installation gone haywire. (The set by scenic designer Christine Jones perfectly depicts the thematic turmoil of the show.)

What little narrative there is can be hard to follow if one is focused on the shrieking vocals and blaring music, but there is a tale here to be told. Johnny (John Gallagher, Jr.) and Tunney (Stark Sands) head for the city. Will (Michael Esper) stays home while his relationship with his pregnant girlfriend (Mary Farber) disintegrates. Johnny gets addicted to heroin and falls in love with a woman named simply Whatsername (Rebecca Naomi Jones). Tunney goes to Iraq and winds up having a leg amputated. *South Pacific*, it's not.

The song titles are as disjointed as the story, from "Give Me Novocaine" to "Jesus of Suburbia" and "Before the Lobotomy," all imbued with the anger and shock value that are the lyrical linchpins of frustrated youth anthems of any era, but are especially topical because the *American Idiot* album was released at the zenith of the George W. Bush presidency and all the madness that ensued.

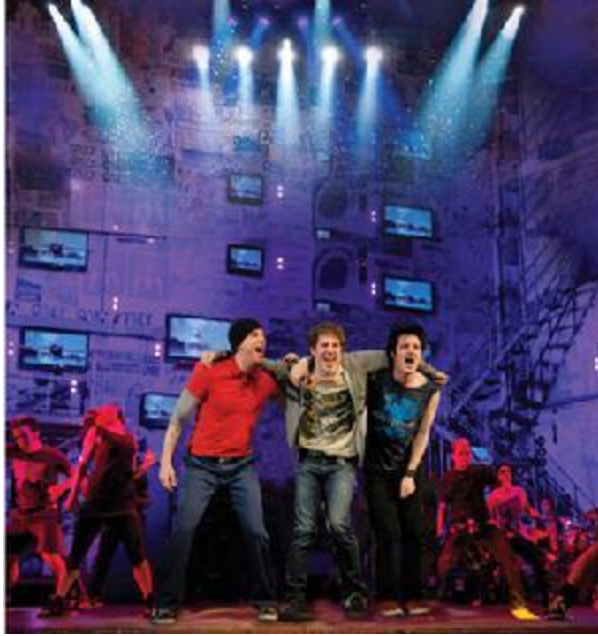
The top-notch performances of Gallagher, Jr., Sands, and Esper all display the stock personality traits of modern rebels without a cause: bored suburban man-boys ready to shed all responsibility in search of purpose in their complicated, meaningless lives, filtered through a haze of drugs and rock music to dull their senses and help them cope with their unpleasant surroundings. The nonstop party that is *American Idiot* may be visually and aurally spectacular, but the characters' lives are anything but. Whether one cares for Green Day's music is almost irrelevant because it is impossible for almost any audience member not to get caught up in the 90-minute trance of the show's portrayal of vice and self-destruction. *American Idiot* is socio-political musical Zeitgeist at its most provocative and ugly, and may seem dated in a few years, but for now this groundbreaking show is destined to become one of the most-talked-about, rock-and-roll Broadway spectacles for some time.

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Broadway and Off-Broadway Listings

ORIGINAL MUSICALS



'AMERICAN IDIOT': (left to right) Stark Sands, John Gallagher Jr.,

Michael Esper & cast in *American Idiot*. Photo: Paul Kolnik



AMERICAN IDIOT

Based on the rock album of the same name, music by Green Day and lyrics by Billie Joe Armstrong, *American Idiot* traces the odyssey of three discontented youths set in (album released in 2004) the middle of the George W. Bush era in suburbia, USA. Two of the boys do finally leave for the big city. The boys are Johnny (John Gallagher Jr., Tony winner for Best Supporting Actor in *Spring Awakening*) travels the streets searching for love and gets hooked on drugs and paraphernalia supplied by St. Jimmy (Tony Vincent). Tunny (Stark Sands) sleeps his life away until he enlists to go to the war in Iraq, and the third is the wastrel Will (Michael Esper) who stays home because his girlfriend is going to have his child and he can't leave, and he is not prepared for fatherhood.

Michael Mayer, the director and co-author of this piece, maintains all the raw anger, love, frustration, and aggression in this punk- rock opera. John Gallagher, Jr. gives a galvanizing performance. It is raw and gritty for he is the total lost boy; he finds love but doesn't know how to sustain it because he has fallen under the headier spell of St. Jimmy and the supply of drugs. Tony Vincent as St. Jimmy is seducer incarnate. Stark Sands gives a grounded and excellent performance as the boy who enlists. There is no lack of energy here. However, this is not your everyday musical, and the subject matter is not to everyone's taste. It is a harsh look at discontented punk-rock hipsters with all their angst, fury, and misspent youth, all of whom have to search for their salvation. Be ready for a very high decibel level, for the music is loud indeed.

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