

t h e a t e r

Muppet boy makes good

The hit play *Avenue Q* tells a coming-out story in *Sesame Street* style—and predicts stardom for out puppeteer John Tartaglia **By Michael Giltz**

Avenue Q is a mythical neighborhood in the lower East Village, “the place you live when you can’t afford to live anywhere else”—especially if you’re a young puppet on the go or just like catchy songs with memorable, hilarious lyrics.

Arguably the boldest theatrical gamble of the summer, the musical *Avenue Q* opened in March off-Broadway to some of the year’s best reviews. *Time Out New York* described it as “*Rent* meets *Sesame Street*”; “wicked fun,” *The New Yorker* raved.

Opening on Broadway on July 31, *Avenue Q* is the perfect home for its out star John Tartaglia, the 25-year-old who plays two of the show’s lead roles. He’s been working half his life to get there.

When he was 12, Tartaglia wrote a letter to Jim Henson saying he wanted to follow in Henson’s footsteps. A short time later he created a puppet modeled after Carol Channing. Kids at school called him “puppet fag” and “Muppet boy.” When he had to choose between college and working on *Sesame Street* at 18, Tartaglia chose wisely. Goodbye, University of Maryland; hello, New York City.

The always optimistic Tartaglia finds a lot of himself in *Avenue Q*’s character of Princeton, the newest puppet on the block. A rather naive fellow, he doesn’t

realize his buddy Kate wants to be more than friends. But even Princeton could figure out what’s up with Rod, an uptight closet case who’s in love with his roommate and best friend, Nicky, and doesn’t even know it.

“I’m very much Princeton in many ways,” observes Tartaglia, who says you can measure how physically demanding the show is by watching his arms—at the beginning the puppets are poised way up high, but by the finale, he jokes, they’re dragging toward the ground.

“I’m always looking at things in the most positive way, which is what Princeton does. Even to the point where sometimes you look back and go, *What was I thinking? Why didn’t I see that?* But that’s what Princeton is. He looks at everything happy, and the world is OK and nothing’s impossible and he’s got his BA in English and he knows he can conquer the world.”

Tartaglia also sympathizes with stressed-out Rod. “Rod is me in a lot of ways too, besides the obvious gay factor,” he says. “He’s kind of a closed-off, uptight person, which I’m not anymore—but I know in high school I definitely was. I was the guy who was reading *Broadway Musicals in the 1940s*. I was the one who would deny everything, and I’ve totally been in situations

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Puppet master

Tartaglia brings upbeat Princeton (left) and closeted Rod (right) to life in *Avenue Q*.

where I felt very strongly for someone, but I knew there was no hope with them, so instead of just letting it go I dammed it all up. Rod loves Nicky so much and cares for him, obviously, as a best friend and more. But he comes off as this closeted, standoffish guy, and until I came out I felt the same way."

Their two stories are at the heart of this offbeat and charming musical, which is far more than a loving spoof of *Sesame Street*. Thanks to terrific songs like "Everyone's a Little Bit Racist" and the closet-case anthem "My Girlfriend, Who Lives in Canada," *Avenue Q* is simply a terrific story with the added surreal spin that most of the characters look like distant cousins to Kermit and Elmo and the rest of the Muppets.

The concept and all the songs come from out composer Jeff Marx and his "openly straight" collaborator Robert Lopez, who together developed the show after working on an idea for a new Muppet movie called *Kermit, Prince of Denmark*.

"Johnny brought it to life," says the 32-year-old Marx of Tartaglia. "Having a recording on a tape and listening to the words and music is one thing. But having Johnny with the puppet and his inflections and the way he'll emphasize parts—he just makes choices and turns it from a song into a real person's experience. And then you catch yourself and go, *Wait a minute, it's not a real person. It's a puppet!* He's acting. It's beautiful, wonderful acting."

For Tartaglia, puppetry has evolved from a way of hiding when he was closeted and his parents were divorcing to—finally—an expression of joy.

"There were a lot of secrets I harbored before I came out, and especially, obviously, [being gay]," says Tartaglia, who is now in a relationship. "I never incorporated it into my puppetry, because at the time I was doing stuff for kids, and I wasn't going to go 'Hey kids, gay people are great!' at a birthday party."

"Now that I've come out, it's more freeing, especially with Rod," Tartaglia says. "So many people come up to me after the show and say, 'I am Rod. That's me. That's totally me.' But at the end of the show," he adds, striking a pose, "Rod is like, 'Hey, world!'" ■

Giltz is a contributor to such periodicals as the New York Post.

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