



PUPPET MASTER

AVENUE Q'S JOHN TARTAGLIA

Thanks to Steve Wynn's powerful pocketbook, the adult-themed, puppet-and-people musical *Avenue Q* — which features such catchy songs as “If You Were Gay,” “The Internet is for Porn” and “Everyone's a Little Bit Racist” — took a controversial step last spring when opting for an exclusive Vegas run over the more typical Broadway tour. Actor/singer/puppet master John Tartaglia, who plays both naïve college graduate Princeton and uptight (and closeted) investment banker Rod, joined a new crew along with some other Broadway buddies, to bring Vegas one of its most anxiously awaited and hysterical new mega-hits. 944 met up with Tartaglia at Wynn Las Vegas, where he discussed the reasoning for his westward move and his interest in Vegas' new Broadway renaissance.

Having left the Broadway production earlier in the year, what made you decide to join the Vegas cast?

It was a hard decision. I'd met Steve Wynn at the Tonys, and he came to see the show like three times on Broadway. He was so passionate about it. I wanted to be part of this Broadway renaissance in Vegas. Even though I didn't sit down with the writers, [the show] was like a baby to me. My baby had gone to high school and college and now it was going off to grad school. And I'd never been to Vegas. It was a new frontier.

What was it like attempting to recreate the Broadway chemistry with a new cast?

We were such a family on Broadway, I was hesitant about doing this production with 16 new people. But every person in this cast has an energy and passion for the show. They also respect the art of the puppetry, which is really important. It takes a certain check of your ego to do the show because it really isn't about you. The puppets are the stars.



TARTAGLIA (CENTER) ONSTAGE WITH HIS PUPPET ALTER-EGO PRINCETON

You had such great chemistry with the actress, Stephanie D'Abruzzo, who played Kate Monster, Princeton's love interest, on Broadway.

That was the one I was most worried about. Stephanie and I had known each other for 11 years, having worked together on *Sesame Street*. We always joked we were like brother and sister. One of the best experiences here was being able to go home that first night here [of rehearsals] and going, "Oh my god, I love the girl playing Kate Monster." Next to Rick [Lyon, the show's original puppet designer and supporting castmember, who also co-stars in the Vegas production], that's the person I have the most to do with. Brynn [O'Malley, who shares the Kate Monster role with Kelli Sawyer] is great and we get along well.

Any high points from the Vegas production so far?

For our first invited dress rehearsal, they invited the cast of *Le Rêve* and other shows around town. We were the talk of town in two ways: some people were threatened by us, some were excited. We had both in the house that night. It was great watching the other actors ... making their debuts and premiering in that show, and the love they got from the audience was really emotional for me. I remember what that felt like. And when you hear Siegfried and Roy are in the audience, that's monumental. That's when you're like, "I'm in Vegas."

Does a show like *Avenue Q*, as opposed to your children-focused roles, offer more freedom as an actor?

On *Sesame Street*, when the cameras stopped rolling, we were always very blue and ridiculous on the set, having the characters say dirty words and thinking that was hysterical. It's fun having no limits with what I can do with these puppets. From a philosophical place it's wonderful to help people and change the world. At a more surface level, it's just fun to be

able to do all the dirty things you really wanted to. I can say "Fuck" with Rod during an interview and not think, "Oh my God, I can't believe I said fuck." I'd be a wreck if I said that with Big Bird.

I love Princeton, he's fun to play. But Rod is so much more interesting than Princeton. I had to come up with a background for Rod; like, was he always just Rod from *Avenue Q*? Okay, he's an actor, no, he's an investment banker and this is a story he tells every night, so now he *thinks* he's this big actor and now he's this gay advocate. I got to come up with all these great things for him.

Any parting advice Princeton and Rod could offer?

Princeton would say cut out the beer, because it clouds your thinking. If you're going to date a monster, invest in floss. And live each day the best you can be and learn and be prepared to fall flat on your ass.

Rod would probably say go with Bath and Body Works products. Condition your fleece or fur at least once a day. Take a deep breath and learn to be a better person. Build a shrine to at least one of the following: Judy Garland, Olivia Newton-John or Liza Minnelli. And live life to the fullest and be happy with who you are. It's the only person you get to be.

SHOWTIME

Starting November 8, a new schedule for *Avenue Q* will go into effect:
 Thurs-Sat: 6:30 and 10 p.m.
 Sun: 4 and 8 p.m.
 Mon-Tues: 8 p.m.

Note: There are no performances on Wed.
 Visit www.wynnlasvegas.com for tickets