

Revenge of the NERDS

Nancy Opel shines in *The Toxic Avenger*, the hilarious new musical based on the '80s cult classic

by Harry Haun



Opel's Mayor Belgoody finds inspiration in some real-life counterparts

Over the top and into the words gleefully charges Nancy Opel, proving herself in play after play a gifted, risk-taking, high-flying funny lady. These days you'll find her on display at New World Stages in *The Toxic Avenger*, a giddy giggle of a musical with a book by Joe DiPietro (author of the long-running *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*) and songs by David Bryan (keyboardist and founding member of Bon Jovi). It's a redeemably loose adaptation of a deeply awful Grade-Z film that found a cult following among the very tolerant (or indiscriminate) who saw it while stoned.

Three faces of Opel are on view here. She is, by quick turns, a hot version of Mother Teresa

bumping and grinding through the opening number, an environmentally corrupting mayor dressed in Sarah Palin red, and the domineering but disappointed mom of the title character, a nerd named Melvin Ferd the Third who, when dunked in a barrel of chemical waste, turns into "Toxie," a superheroic mass of green slime.

The mayor and the ma consume most of her kinetic energy, and in one moment of inspired lunacy that the creators specifically wrote for her, she splits in two on stage and dukes it out with herself—clearly a comic who knows no fear or boundaries.

"It's easy to be fearless when you can get lost in something that feels very not like you," Opel explains. "I'm more comfortable doing things

far away from me where I can make bold choices. It's hard to do that if you're like the person you're playing."

True to those words, the off-stage Opel is far from the flake she has played in the wild-witted works of David Ives. She is grounded and intelligent and real—qualities that have helped her get away with her broad-stroked buffoonery on stage.

In fact, she now teaches acting. "I started in earnest in about 2005 because I really felt like I had something to tell actors. It takes a while to learn your own lessons and figure out how, then, to give the lessons. I would say, for the most part, my overall lesson in life *and* in theatre is to do it for yourself—the auditions, the work on the material, the character exploration. It can't be about getting attention or showing off because, if it's honest and right and well thought out, you will get the attention."

The Toxic Avenger is her eighth outing with director John Rando, who helmed her Tony-nominated work in *Urinetown*. In its cartoony outline, that's just down the road from their current Tromaville—"five miles of bad road," she adds with a hoot.

"John Rando will bust your butt—they're always physical shows—but the thing I like is that, even though he's running the show, you feel like you're heard. I feel like a collaborator when I work with John because he loves actors. He likes their minds. He gets tickled by the things they come up with. He's the benevolent kind of leader you want, especially with comedy, because you're sticking your neck out. In rehearsal, you're getting out on the skinny branches when you're working on stuff that's as broad as this is. You wonder, 'How far is too far?' or 'What's not enough?' You have to *need* what you're going for and lose yourself into your character's need—as opposed to being in that place where you go, 'Wow! I want to be funny, and I want to make 'em laugh.' John will say, 'I don't care if they don't laugh. I need honesty.'"

Opel came from Kansas to Juilliard in 1976 and, from that, three years later, stepped straight into *Evita* as a second cover for the title role. "Paul Gemignani kept saying, 'She may be 22, but she can sing it.' I was there for a year and

never went on in the role—I had my own part in the show—and after a year I took over the matinees and did the show for four years. I took a leave of absence to do the *Sunday in the Park with George* workshop, and I was in *that* original production. It was the experience of a lifetime—the first time I'd ever experienced the creation of a show from the ground up—and it had a profound effect on me. I was aware that miraculous things can happen at any moment within a show *and* that, no matter how the chips may fall, it's just a play. You have to work hard and give it everything, but you can't let all the crazy stuff that happens, with lots of changes and whatever, injure you."

It was during *Sunday in the Park* that Opel recognized her character-comedienne destiny. "I realized, 'I'm playing a role that could be played by somebody easily ten years older than I am.' And, with the exception of my one ingenue role where I did Hope Harcourt in *Anything Goes*, I don't think I did one ingenue. Somehow I knew when I was a youngster, if I was going to make it in show business at all, I felt like my time was going to be later. I think I practically heard it, like in my head, saying, 'I just have to hang in because it's going to be more interesting in my middle age.'"



Demond Green as Professor Ken and Opel as Mayor Belgoody perform "Evil is Hot"