

# British Theatre Guide

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## American Idiot

Billie Joe Armstrong and Michael Mayer with lyrics by the former  
Selladoor Worldwide and Piu  
Palace Theatre, Manchester  
2–6 April 2019

Current events point to the depressing conclusion change has to be for the worst. Take Green Day's *American Idiot*, for example. The concept album was a state of the nation survey when George W Bush, the intellectually challenged 43<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States, started his morally dubious war in Iraq. Hard to believe that things could decline even further, yet, on the fifteenth anniversary of the album and the tenth of the musical, the current incumbent of The White House makes dear old 'Dubya' look like a great statesman. Oh well, at least the decline in civility ensures *American Idiot* still has relevance.

One characteristic that the musical version of *American Idiot* shares with Tweeter-in-Chief Donald Trump is a lack of coherence. The plot, devised by Billie Joe Armstrong and Michael Mayer, is abstract and told almost entirely in song with little dialogue to clarify the lyrics. This hinders the ability of the musical to work as political criticism or satire which rely on clarity to be effective.

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers, teenagers Johnny (Tom Milner), Will (Samuel Pope) and Tunny (Joshua Downen) intend to leave their suburban homes to find a sense of direction and meaning in their lives. The journey, however, does not go as planned with Will ending up vegetating in front of TV, Tunny in the army and Johnny developing a demonic alter-ego, St Jimmy (Luke Friend), who articulates the populist rage and alienation experienced by American youth and pushes Johnny towards drug abuse.

Director Racky Plews does not try to clarify the abstract plot but rather sets a delirious mood of a party that has gone a bit too far. The tone is surprisingly light; the characters seem to be stuck in permanent adolescence rather than suburbia. Constantly making vulgar gestures, they imitate, instead of experiencing, alienation. Despite his outlaw aspirations, Johnny admits he borrowed the money to leave town from his mum and writes home regularly like a good boy. It is only in the second act the characters have to face the consequences of their actions with Tom Milner enacting a gruelling drug withdrawal sequence in total silence.

For a musical aspiring to be radical, there are aspects of *American Idiot* that conform to traditional showbiz requirements. The audience gets plenty of bare flesh to ogle with Joshua Downen contriving to be shirtless for much of the show. Luke Friend stands out as a menacing presence whose vocals have a rough, straining quality. However, this is a stage show not a rock album so the polished approach makes for a strong musical, particularly in the use of the ensemble. Multiple vocalists perform songs written for one singer, which amplifies the impact of the numbers making each one an anthem.

Plews choreographs as well as directing, which helps set a pace that never flags. Scenes have a claustrophobic quality with the cast performing pounding dance routines as a background for the

action to the front of the stage.

The lack of a coherent storyline prevents *American Idiot* from becoming a political call-to-arms but, as a musical with a driving soundtrack performed to a high standard, it is hard to beat.

**Reviewer:** [David Cunningham](#)