

THEATER

A Lease on Life

Two Renters talk to *Just Out* as the show makes its way to Portland

By SUZANNE SIGMUND

If you're an opera buff, *Rent*'s story is familiar: an unabashed rip-off of Puccini's *La Boheme*. In Puccini's story, the action revolves around a group of charmingly romantic bohemians in Paris (where else?), cheerfully surviving on inspiration, the occasional bottle of wine and the ever-illusive l'amour.

Rent takes that premise and fast-forwards it into gritty '90s reality. Instead of a dreamy poet named Rodolfo in Paris, we have Roger, an HIV-positive rock musician living in New York City's East Village, whose HIV-positive girlfriend just committed suicide.

Add to that a cast of characters teetering way out on the edge of convention: a lesbian lawyer, an HIV-positive junkie and a drag queen. The late playwright, Jonathan Larson, takes the very people scapegoated by politicians—the multicultural, the multisexual, the homeless and the sick—and, instead of turning them into victims or symbols, lets them revel in their joy, their capacity for love and their fierce insistence on living immediately.

Andy Señor, who plays Angel Schunard, the HIV-positive drag queen-street musician, talked with *Just Out* from his hotel in Louisville, Ky. *Rent* is quite a major coup for this 20-something performer from Miami. After earning a fine arts bachelor's degree for acting, he traveled to Chicago for an all-college audition and, as serendipity and good timing would have it, *Rent* director Michael Greif was there, auditioned Señor for the part of Angel and, boom, he was in.

As a transvestite street drummer, the symbol of love in the show, Señor's challenge has been to get comfortable and become believable in some pretty wild accoutrements: a big black wig studded with flowers, zebra-striped stockings and eight-inch heels.

"At first I walked like a football player," he laughs. "Now the walk is graceful, beautiful. The walk is important. It's who the person is, how they live in their body. It wasn't until I learned what Angel walked like, until I really got comfortable in those shoes, that Angel emerged."

Señor received the ultimate compliment about his gender-bending performance in *Rent* when a newspaper reviewer spoke about the "female replacement" after the actor previously playing Angel left the role.

What is it about *Rent* that's making production stage manager, Mark Tynan,

Andy Señor and Mark Leroy Jackson in a scene from *Rent*



want to stick with the show another year? "Definitely the particular joy is being part of the mechanism that sends the message that *Rent* has across the country. We get letters from audience members saying, 'Thank you. I always felt that I was alone and seeing your show made me realize that I'm not alone out there.' Or, '...seeing your show has allowed me to grieve for a loved one. ...has allowed closure.' Getting that kind of response makes all the stresses and tribulations worthwhile," says Tynan.

The untimely death of Larson at the age of 35 from an aortic aneurysm (a broken heart vessel) brings an uncanny sense of "art mirrors life" to the picture. *Rent*, his boundary-defying innovation was six years in the works. It went to its first public performance and, by all accounts, was about to make the late composer the next Stephen Sondheim when he unexpectedly died.

"You know," Tynan muses, "something is telling me that the Creator did not want him [Larson] to leave this earth until he left us this piece."

As it turns out, besides enlightening Portland with the effervescent energy of *Rent*, Tynan also will be illuminating home environments locally. While in town last year with *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (with Ralph Macchio), Tynan met love interest, Portland resident Wally Schmidt, and the two have decided to start a business together in Portland. Watch for their candle shop called Radiance, opening this month at Northeast 19th Avenue and Broadway.

As for *Rent*, Tynan concedes the show won't appeal to everyone. With transvestites and drug-users sharing the stage, the show is bound to offend some.

"Yeah, some people don't like seeing two boys or two girls kissing onstage. And some people don't like that it's so loud. It's rock—it's got a driving beat to it and if you're not ready to sit through a driving beat, loud show, this may not be your cup of tea. All we ask is that you go in with an open mind and let the show happen in front of you," he says.

■ *RENT*, part of Portland Opera's Best of Broadway series, opens August 19 and plays until August 30 with evening performances and some afternoon matinees. Call TicketMaster (503) 790-ARTS or 241-1407 for group sales.

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