

**THEATER**



**Giving Rent its due**

**Rent hits home with an inspirational message about the fleeting nature of life and what we make of it**

BY FLORA SUSSELY

I didn't expect to like it. After all, this is a "rock opera" with the undisguised plot of Puccini's *La Bohème*. And I wondered if the success of *Rent* wasn't due in great part to the fact that its composer, Jonathan Larson, had died just two hours after its final dress rehearsal. Talk about life imitating art—it is poignant, a tragedy of operatic proportions.

Imagine my surprise when, within minutes of the show's opening, I was in tears. A bit later I was smiling broadly and laughing heartily, then crying again. Finally, I was jumping up with applause before the stage lights came back up for curtain call.

*Rent* is indeed a surprisingly engaging ver-

sion of the standard "starving artists dying in their prime after a wine and song and passion." Except that we are not seeing flamboyant Mediterraneans doing it. These are Americans—African Americans, Jews from "good" families, kids that should know better. And that is probably why this show succeeds so beautifully.

Larson has written in a very North American '90s style, both lyrically and melodically. The libretto at times spells out our culture ("hand-crafted beers made in local breweries, to yoga, to yogurt, to rice and beans and cheese, to leather, to dildos, to curry vindaloo, to huevos rancheros and Maya Angelou...to Sontag, to

Sondheim, to anything taboo") and sets to music the analytical way modern North Americans perceive life. In "Seasons of Love," while a very catchy melody comforts us, the lyrics remind us that some of us are dying and counting the minutes we have ("Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes, Five hundred twenty-five thousand moments so dear").

Director Michael Greif worked with Larson on the original show, so it is not surprising that everything works so beautifully. The actors and lighting (designed by Blake Burra) create spaces in a set that essentially remains the same throughout the show. This is perhaps the

antithesis of *Phantom of the Opera* or *Les Misérables*, in which sets and costumes are part of the spectacle. In that sense, *Rent* also breaks a bit with the operatic proportions expected. Instead, the drama is entirely in the music, the poetry and the quantity of talent on the stage.

Everyone on the stage is an actor, a dancer and a singer—that is what musical theater requires. The wondrous part about this ensemble, though, is the way we identify and bond to these people almost immediately. Consider the universal desire to leave a thing of beauty before we die. Moments into the show, when Roger, who like many of *Rent's* characters, carries HIV, sings "One song, Glory, before I go," we feel the impact of that raw need.

In some ways, this modern day *Bohème* makes more sense in that we can sympathize, if not empathize, with a character's rushed fall into love. HIV creates its own urgency. In *Bohème*, we really have to wonder what kind of girl Mimi is that she falls in love with Rodolpho after one little song about how cold her hands are!

This show does not glorify all artists as talented. In fact, some of the funniest bits are at the expense of avant-garde and self-indulgent performance art. But, at its root it's about that world in which the creative soul lives and dies unrecognized and unappreciated. It is about the brotherhood of those who choose that lifestyle and those who love them for the courage to do so. It is about love as the ultimate artistic expression.

Throughout this work, which does include some trite pop music, there is a sense of wonder that we all survive and in some ways thrive, as long as we have loved one another. That is *Rent's* lasting message. We walk out of the show singing what we already know: "There's only this, there's only yes, no other road, no other way, no day but today!"

At its conclusion, we do not mourn the losses but celebrate that we have known these people. The stage lights up with the film clips one character has been shooting of his bohemian family. We sit in darkness and see these faces we now love, some whom we miss, most of whom we will remember. As maudlin as it is, it moves us. We want to sing and dance and paint and write and love before we die.

Indeed, no day but today.



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