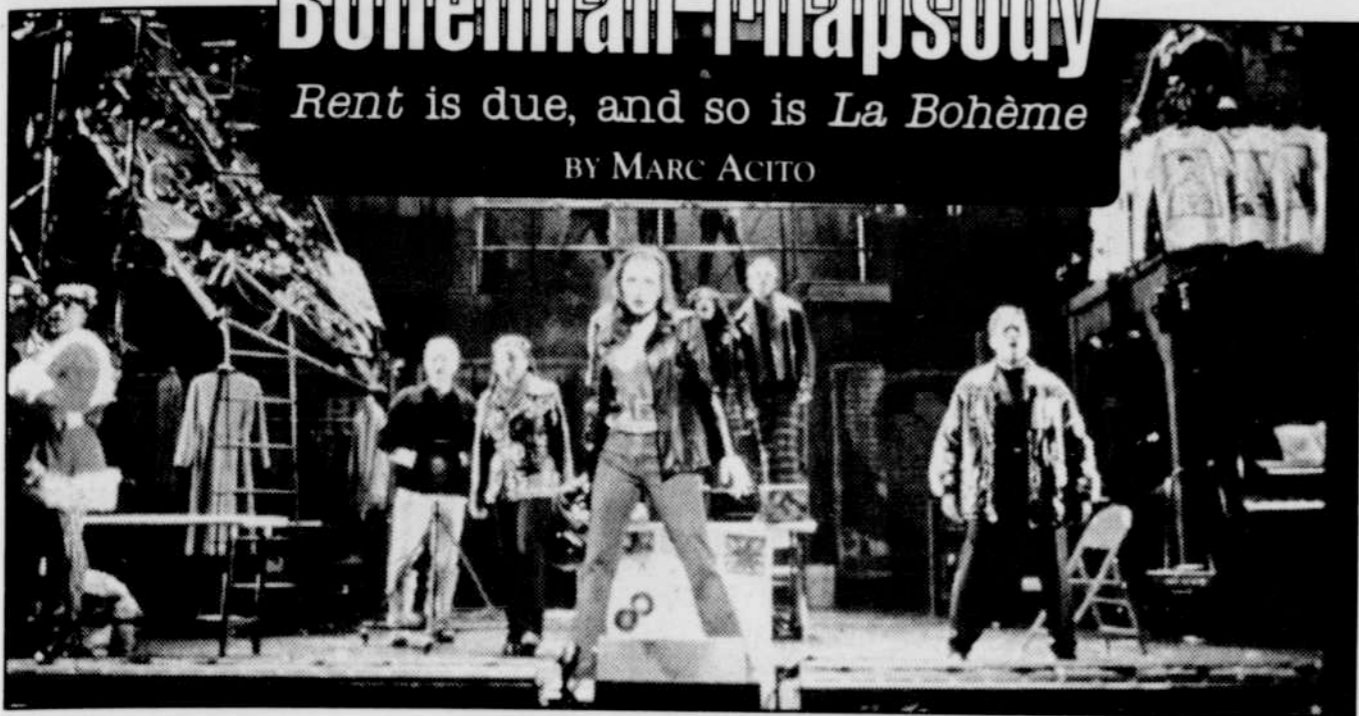


Bohemian rhapsody

Rent is due, and so is *La Bohème*

BY MARC ACITO



"You've got to see *Rent*." That's what my friends from New York all told me. "*Rent*?" I sneered. "Isn't that some kind of rock musical, a rip-off on *La Bohème*?"

(OK, I admit it. I'm an opera snob. I'm a gay man. It's an obligation.)

"Just go," they said. So when the national tour of *Rent* first came to Portland, I bought the cheapest seat possible, prepared to leave after the first act. Long story short: My friends were right. I was completely unprepared for the depth of this show (Hello! It won a Pulitzer) and for the emotional punch it packs.

First off, there's the audience. I haven't heard shouting like this in a theater since my high school musical days.

Because of the subject matter—starving artists—the producers of *Rent* always make sure \$20 tickets for the first two rows are avail-

able the day of the show for those willing to line up for them. This, combined with a huge teen following (I ask you, what Broadway musical has that?), makes for a far livelier audience than the usual West Hills crowd.

Then there's the show itself. Fresh, original, quirky and very, very gay, *Rent* indeed is based on Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*, which in turn was based on Henry Murger's 19th century novel about starving artists in the Montmartre section of Paris, *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*.

Composer Jonathan Larson skillfully updates the source material by setting it in New York's East Village and by substituting HIV for tuberculosis. In one particularly chilling moment, a love duet is brought to an abrupt halt when the lovers' beepers go off, reminding them to take their meds.

But for me the most moving sequence comes in the second act when three sets of lovers—one straight, one gay, one lesbian—lie on beds and sing of their devotion to one another. The thought of teen-age *Rent* fans accepting this triptych of lovers as normal does my heart good. Indeed, the most popular character is a drag queen, Angel, who also proves to be the emotional center of the show.

Starting next month, Portlanders will have the rare opportunity to enjoy *Rent* and *La Bohème* practically back to back. *Rent* plays Jan. 2 to 7 at Keller Auditorium, and Portland Opera produces *La Bohème* Feb. 10 to 17. *La Bohème* is such an audience favorite it's easy to forget how daring it was in its time, so seeing *Rent* should allow audi-



Scenes from *Rent*

ences to view this classic through new eyes.


Through the years the opera has become some kind of Hallmark card with quaint tableaux of young lovers on a snowy Parisian night. Although the classic love story proves irresistible, *La Bohème* is really a coming-of-age story. Puccini identified with the characters, having lived *la vie bohème* himself as a student in Milan, playing the piano loudly so his landlord wouldn't hear his roommate, Pietro Mascagni (who went on to write the opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*), cooking.

To get a taste of the power of *La Bohème*, be sure to rent *Moonstruck* before you go. This 1987 Oscar winner is a textbook example of the right way to use opera in a movie.

Typically, filmmakers get opera all wrong, like the choosing of "O Mio Babbino Caro" for the passionate love scenes in *A Room with a View*, when in reality the aria is about a young girl serenading her father. *Moonstruck* not only pays attention to the words—Rodolfo's aria "Che Gelida Manina" ("Your Tiny Hand Is Frozen") begins the moment Cher and Nicolas Cage join hands on a cold, snowy street—but the spirit of *la vie bohème* is put best by the Cage character:

"Love don't make things nice, it ruins everything, it breaks your heart, it makes things a mess. We're not here to make things perfect. Snowflakes are perfect. The stars are perfect. Not us. We are here to ruin ourselves and break our hearts and love the wrong people and die!"

When seeing *La Bohème*, listen closely to the simple aria in the final act when Colline, the philosophy student, bids farewell to his beloved coat before selling it to buy medicine for the dying Mimi. That melody returns as the final music in the opera; by placing it there, Puccini shows us how recognizing our mortality makes us love all the more.

Completely by coincidence, *Rent* opened on the 100th anniversary of the *La Bohème* premiere, but Larson did not live to see its success, having died of an aneurysm the night of the final dress rehearsal. He might be gone, but the spirit of *la vie bohème* lives on. Viva *la vie bohème*! 

MARC ACITO was in all of his high school musicals, so he knows what he's talking about.



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