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THEater BY MELISSA BEARNS

Rent Proves Timeless

Record-breaking play still draws crowds and devotees.

Almost a decade after *Rent* raised the bar for Broadway and shocked its complacent directors out of a slow, slide into boring, irrelevant theater, fans are still packing the room at every performance.

More than 15 years after HIV and AIDS first exploded into the national consciousness, mesmerizing us with fear and mystery, people stand in line for hours to get cheap front-row tickets to a theater production where three of the eight main characters are HIV-positive.

Rent is so much more than a slice of life in the late '80s. While everything from the rockin' tunes to the hairstyles and slang capture the essence and energy of New York's Lower East Side during that time period, the themes are universal and eternal.

Rent is about life. My life. Your life. Everyone's life. And on one level or another, we can all relate.

That's part of the reason that on Feb. 10, *Rent* beat out *Fiddler on the Roof* to become the 10th longest running show in Broadway history.

"I think people relate to the struggle these characters are going through," said Ava (she doesn't use her last name) who plays the character of Maureen. "These are the stories that are timeless. They're all artists trying to have a life, trying to make a difference. They want to be in love and live their lives to the fullest and at the same time, they're struggling with their own mortality."

Rent is about being 20-something and trying to figure who you are, how not to sell out, how to make the most of the time you've got.

Who hasn't asked those questions at one point or another?

Inspired by Puccini's *La Bohème*, Jonathan Larson's creation was first performed off Broadway at New York Theatre Workshop on Feb. 13, 1996.

The powerful, in-your-face musical

rapidly gained popularity and moved to Broadway just two months later. It won the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for drama, the 1996 Tony awards for best musical, best score, best book and best featured actor in a musical, the 1996 New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best musical, three Obies, and a slew of other awards.

But the success was tinged with tragedy because Larson never lived to enjoy the it. Just hours after the final dress rehearsal he died unexpectedly of an aortic aneurysm on Jan. 25, 1996.

Speaking to the *Washington Post* in 1997, Larson's father Allan said "He (Jonathan Larson) was very confident that it was going to bring about a marriage of the MTV generation and Broadway."

The music of *Rent*, which ranges from the blues to pop to dance club, accomplishes that, and is one of the reasons the production has die-hard fans who've seen it dozens of times, and know every line and every word to every song.

"We see a lot of high school and college kids coming to the shows and just freaking out," Ava said. "This show is speaking our language, much more so than a play like *Oklahoma*. Plays like that are purely for entertainment. And *Rent* is real life."

Since it first opened, *Rent* established a unique tradition: the first two rows of seating go on sale the day of the show for \$20.

"Jonathan was himself a struggling artist and his dream was to create a universal piece of musical theater that's available to everyone," said original *Rent* producer Kevin McCollum.

That tradition will continue at The Hult Center when *Rent* makes its return Oct. 8 and 9. The \$20 tickets go on sale an hour before the show at the Hult Center box office. Cash only. For general tickets or more information, call 682-5000. **EW**

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Please note: contains adult themes and language.

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