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Raising RENT

Gary Bolen directs the local premier of Jonathan Larson's gritty mega-hit musical *RENT*.

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By Walter Ryce



RENT's edgy elements – including scenes with Roger and Mimi – inspired some matinee-attending seniors to leave early. “Outrageous,” said one.

The near-capacity audience that filled MPC's Morgan Stock Stage theater last Friday was populated by an uncommon amount of young people. Their energy was evident in the hooting and cheering, the shouting of actors' names as they appeared onstage, and the clapping and call-and-response to the songs of *RENT*, one of the most phenomenally successful musicals in recent theater. Disney's *High School Musical*, FOX's *Glee* and Green Day's Broadway adaptation of *American Idiot* might not have happened if writer and composer Jonathan Larson's opus had not showed that young people could be coaxed, in the millions, away from multiplexes and MTV in favor of a musical.

Though the rock opera is based on Giacomo Puccini's opera *La Boheme*, and though it adheres to the modern musical's arsenal of ersatz sentimentality and projected overacting, *RENT* is subversive. It proudly waves its über-progressive freak flag, revolving around struggling artists, HIV and AIDS, drug addiction, the homeless, GLBT and alternative lifestyles, all served with a dash of anarchy.

It opens on Christmas Eve in a run-down studio loft in New York's gritty Alphabet City in the late '80s. At the first crack of the opening number, “Tune Up,” when all the characters emerge to sing, the younger portion of the audience erupted with an appreciative, knowing cheer fit for a rock concert.

When things settled down, we found Roger (Kenneth Neely), a former heroin addict who has AIDS, strumming on his guitar, trying to write a song while his roommate and friend, Mark (Daniel Renfer), films him on a super 8 camera.

They've been squatting in the loft space, which is owned by former friend Benjamin (Tyler Vocelka), who married rich, bounced right out of their impoverished circle, and now wants to gentrify the neighborhood. That sets in motion the scrappy group of friends, including gay HIV-positive philosophy teacher and activist Collins (Michael Blackburn), AIDS-afflicted drag diva Angel (William Griffin, Jr.), HIV-positive stripper/junkie Mimi (Camila de la Llata), and bisexual performance artist Maureen (Beth Elderkin), who dumped Mark for lawyer Joanne (Natalie Hall).

That stand-off, between the underprivileged but creative masses and the wealthy bourgeoisie elite, sets up the central conflict.

The decimation of New York's creative community from AIDS, as well as their rallying around their falling comrades, makes up much of *RENT*'s milieu. But other strands of the story follow relationships: Roger and Mimi's tentative romance, aptly started in the touching “Light My Candle” (from *La Boheme*); Collins' encounter with Angel, following a beating he sustained for being gay; Maureen's tempestuous relationship with the more conventional Joanne.

Almost the entire story evolves through nonstop music. It's a good thing, then, that the songs are good. They're sentimental and naïve in places, despite the risqué subject matter, but damn if they're not an effective in strapping you into a rollercoaster that

veers into the depths of a gay man's fear of losing his dignity to the deterioration of AIDS, an athletic song-and-dance by Angel, and a performance art piece by Maureen that actor Elderkin fully commits to.

Blackburn, who sounds like rapper Xzibit, shows power in a lament ballad; Griffin, in drag, consistently delighted with outlandish antics; and Renfer is boyishly enthusiastic; but Llata is sexy and fierce as a tigress. Neely, as Roger, held his own in duets with Renfer and was received like a rock star, but Llata just shined. The live "orchestra" of guitar, keyboards, bass and percussion tended to overpower individual singers, rendering some of the lyrics unintelligible. And these lyrics deserve to be heard.

The closing song of Act One, "La Vie Boheme," borrows from The Capitol's "Cool Jerk" and is really rousing. It lays out where the bohos are coming from in a way that made Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" and REM's "It's the End of the World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)" iconic songs for previous generations. It's a paean to staples of the characters' lifestyle: the *Village Voice*, Maya Angelou, Stephen Sondheim, vegetarianism, cigarettes, compassion, sodomy, wine, etc. "To Uta, to Buddha, Pablo Neruda!" they sing.

"Seasons of Love," with its now-famous refrain, "525,600 minutes," is the soul, a gospel-tinged chorus that soars sweetly, spiked with a few solos, here handled especially well in Denice Luna's powerful, church-marinated voice.

While *Hair* and *Angels in America* count as predecessors, *RENT* breached subjects that rarely see a Broadway stage, and stamped itself on the culture beyond. Aside from winning three Tonys and a Pulitzer, earning productions worldwide, and garnering one of the longest Broadway runs, this show mitigates its deviance by being crazy entertaining. Larson, who died the day before *RENT*'s off-Broadway debut in 1996, achieved his "One Song Glory" before he left. Now Monterey County has too.

RENT runs 7pm Thursday, 8pm Friday and Saturday, and 2pm Sunday, through Aug. 22 (Aug. 20 there is a costume/sing-along show at midnight, \$15), at Monterey Peninsula College Morgan Stock Stage Theater, 980 Fremont St., Monterey. \$10-\$25. 646-4213, www.mpctheatre.com.

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