

## **Rent @ The Muny**

Music, Lyrics and Book by Jonathan Larson

Based on *Scènes de la vie de bohème* by Henri Murger and *La bohème* by Giacomo Puccini

Ran August 4 - 10, 2023 @ The Muny

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The anticipation for the Muny's production of *Rent* was equivalent to last year's *Sweeney Todd*, both musicals that I never thought the Muny had the balls to produce. However, after actually seeing their *Rent*, I was no longer convinced they did. *Sweeney* is an edgy show like *Rent*, but the Muny still presented it not only faithfully but tastefully. The Muny's *Rent* is a huge step forward for them as an organization, but the show definitely felt like they had to cut a lot of corners in order to appeal to its patrons – censored language, no nudity, and toned-down on the grittiness. I'm a staunch *Rent* purist – I'm of the opinion that if you're going to produce it, you have to go all out. The way the Muny censored the show really affected my level of engagement, as did a good chunk of the audience I saw it with. They were positively dreadful, being very loosey-goosey about viewing the show: bringing children to a very adult show, eating food, talking, being on their phones – they treated seeing *Rent* like some kind of social function instead of an important story that needs to be seen. Most of them left at intermission, which made Act II more bearable. It also happened to be the half that took the most chances in their staging, which makes it all the more frustrating that the Muny didn't go all the way with it.

What makes it worse is *Rent* is a very misunderstood show, often maligned for the implications of its content without taking its context into consideration. Heavy criticism has been lobbed at the characters and the songs for being very preachy and very whiny. These critics are not wrong, but they are kind of missing the point of the show. The characters are young bohemians in Manhattan's East Village circa 1989 (or 1992 if a certain lyric in "Today 4 U" is to be taken literally). Within this time and place, the characters experience pretty terrible stuff that no one college-age or in their early twenties should ever have to go through: living with HIV/AIDS, homelessness, drug addiction, suicide, unsafe streets, the death of everything and everyone you love and hold dear, and unchecked capitalism (the worst of them all). It stands to reason that these people take desperate measures in order to live through this: turning tricks, perpetrating muggings, putting on terrible performance art, and murdering other people's dogs for money. This is a story about a group of young people living in dire straits, starting out as horrible, messed up people and slowly learning to see past themselves, learning to grow up and be adults. Hell, the ending isn't some sort of comeuppance for the actions the characters took – it's a vague reassurance that they're starting to get their shit together, though we never see it happen. It may not be satisfying, but that's life, especially in 1989 New York City. And it's all told in the form of rock, music's universal language of strength, survival, rebellion, individuality, and freedom. Saying the characters and songs in *Rent* are whiny and preachy is a very shallow, very shitty, very "basic bitch" take that is extremely disrespectful of the life, work, and legacy of Jonathan Larson, as well as the real people he based the show on.

Okay, now that I've firmly stomped my feet through my soapbox, I can finally go into specific details about the production itself. In general, it feels very half-baked. The staging by director Lili-Anne Brown does a lot to infuse the story with a reality that hasn't been replicated that much by smaller productions, which is really cool, but I don't think everyone was on the same page. Arnel Sancianco created a massive, intricately detailed unit set of the skeletal version of the factory where the characters are squatting, flanked on either side by cleverly-placed billboards and a small tent city that is almost never utilized. Even the choreography by Breon Arzell is very restrained, never really doing any complex dances on the sprawling set and essentially keeping everyone's feet on the ground. The musical direction by Jermaine Hill also doesn't do the material justice, often giving the actors vocal lines that they can't hit well and not giving them proper voice control during the more intensely emotional moments. The costumes by Raquel Adorno and hair design by Rueben D. Echoles are also detailed, though some looks don't fit well for the characters. By far the strongest element of the production values, outside of the set, is the video design by Paul Deziel, featuring striking period images that create brilliant, stark tableaux on stage; there's also wonderful usage of live video and even animation. Other great production elements are Heather Gilbert's lights and John Shivers and David Patridge's sound.

Even though the staging and singing are less than stellar, the cast does give serviceable performances. Vincent Kempinski and Ashley de la Rosa as the romantic leads Roger Davis and Mimi Marquez are quite convincing; Kempinski gets a chance to show off his proficiency in electric guitar, but I wish de la Rosa's erotic dancing had a bit more of an edge. Lincoln Clauss as the show's narrator, amateur filmmaker Mark Cohen excellently portrays his conflict between living life and capturing life, and he ably operates the live camera during the video segments. Tré Frazier as the landlord Benjamin Coffin III also does a great job playing this conflicted character, having to choose between protecting his social status or following his heart. Evan Tyrone Martin as the anarchist professor Tom Collins and Adrian Villegas as drag queen Angel Dumott Schunard have fantastic chemistry that gives way to some genuinely heartbreaking moments. Contrasting Collins and Angel are the fiery performances of Anastacia McCleskey as the exasperated lawyer Joanne Jefferson and Lindsay Heather Pearce as the pretentious theatre artist Maureen Johnson, whose volatile relationship explodes on the Muny stage. The ensemble also does a great job, especially with the dozens of characters they have to juggle. The standouts are Julia Yameen, Shelby Brown, Jhardon Dishon Milton, Ricky Cardenas, Josh Hoon Lee, Sage Lee, and Erica Stephan.

*Rent* is to the Muny what *Godspell* is to Stray Dog Theatre: a production whose directing poorly serves the material. It's honestly disappointing to see a cultural phenomenon that swept the world become so sanitized and, well, corporate. This probably won't be the last time the Muny does *Rent*, nor will it be the last in St. Louis. I look forward to the day I see a professional production that, as I stated in the last review, *sticks to the script*.