

## **RENT**

### **Arts a la Mode**

#### **Review by Tim Baxter-Ferguson**

The musical *Rent* returns to Charlotte this week, this time with stars Adam Pascal and Anthony Rapp in the roles they created in the original 1996 Broadway production. Based loosely on the Puccini opera *La Bohème*, the rock musical replaces consumption with AIDS and follows a youthful group of artists struggling with love, death, and dying. For those who haven't seen this production yet, this is one to make time for. Director Michael Greif's imaginative staging (using little more than scaffolding and folding chairs) is astoundingly rich and varied and Larson's exuberant and muscular score is infectious.

The musical follows the complex lives of Roger Davis (played by Adam Pascal) and Mark Cohen (played by Anthony Rapp). Roger is a failed rock musician who finds out he has AIDS from the suicide note of his girlfriend. Mark is the failed film maker who can only stand by and observe as his friends fade away.

Roger falls for the exotic dancer Mimi Marquez (played with an appropriate mix of waifish innocence and violent sexuality by Lexi Lawson). Mimi also has AIDS. All of the characterizations in *Rent* are larger than life and Larson's brisk score moves at such a breakneck pace that one must either accept this or get out of the way. Other major characters include Tom Collins, a former college professor who falls head over heels in love with cross-dressing Angel Schunard.

Collins, played by Michael McElroy, is a captivating presence. His mix of strength and heartbreaking vulnerability makes him a good match for Justin Johnston's campy but nurturing Angel. Both actors have remarkable voices and both hold their own in this fantastic ensemble.

Nicolette Hart as the performance artist Maureen Johnson and Haneefah Wood as legal aid counselor Joanne Jefferson create a compelling relationship that forms much of the comic relief in the musical as well as some of the most energetic and memorable songs. Hart's performance of "Over the Moon," which has become nearly as iconic as "Rose's Turn" is to *Gypsy*, is solid and humorous.

Each of the fifteen actors in the ensemble is strong and memorable. What impresses me most is how generous both Rapp and Pascal are to their fellow performers. They give stage and focus when appropriate and act like equal members of this wonderful ensemble. It is clear they each understand what this production is about—fellowship.

The staging of *Rent* is one of the things that makes this production stand out. The director resists big and flashy effects and staging for imaginative simplicity. Don't mistake this for boring visuals, the set is massive, the lighting explosive, and the choreography amazing—but everything on the stage is there for a reason, everything has a purpose.

*Rent*, like the musical *Hair* was to the seventies, has become an iconic representation of the nineties. Written by a young composer who died tragically before the show opened Off Broadway, the musical suffers many of the faults one might expect of a new writer, but it succeeds more often and it strikes a chord that captures the essence of human experience at that time. That Larson died before he could see the success of his creation; that he died before we could really see him fulfill the promise he clearly showed; is one of the beautiful sad coincidences that infuses every moment of this haunting production. Go see this musical at least once. That's all I can say.

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