

A season ripe for reinvigorated 'Rent': New national tour launches in Cleveland

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Joan MarcusMark (Anthony Rapp, left) and Roger (Adam Pascal) let it be known they have no intention of paying last year's rent. But plenty of screaming and appreciative "Rent"-heads were happy to pay to attend Thursday night's debut in PlayhouseSquare's Palace Theatre of a new national tour of the more-hopeful-than-ever rock musical.

REVIEW **Rent**

Attention, "Rent"-heads: Your lease on *la vie Boheme* is renewed.

The Broadway rock musical that opened theater to a whole new generation in 1996 has ended its 13-year New York run.

But now it's back with its two original male icons -- Adam Pascal and Anthony Rapp -- in a national tour that launched at PlayhouseSquare Thursday. And it's more vital than ever.

That from a non-"Rent"-head.

My previous attitude about this show -- concerning a bunch of mostly pretentious artists, mostly infected with HIV, mostly addicted to drugs, squatting in a building on Manhattan's Lower East Side in the late 1980s -- has run from lukewarm to chilly.

When I first saw the show, at an opening-week performance in New York's Nederlander Theatre, I wrote that it "owes its plot outline to 'La Boheme' (except that in this case Mimi lives) and its Gap jokes and filmmaker/sellout theme to 'Reality Bites.'

"It is facile, predictable, a little too easy on itself and way too long at two hours and 45 minutes. That said, it is also a fresh, invigorating and exuberant musical at a time when so much is old, tired and recycled."

Most recently, about a second-rate, 2006 nonunion tour that visited PlayhouseSquare, I was harsher: " 'Rent' had a nice ride on the zeitgeist, but it appears destined to become a relic."

I'm happy to report the new, reinvigorated tour has proven me wrong, wrong, wrong.

The show's message of hope -- even Mimi's unlikely resurrection -- comes across as even more urgent in today's turbulent times than it did in '96

If there has ever been any doubt about the ownership of this musical -- creator Jonathan Larson, (who died on the eve of the off-Broadway opening), director Michael Greif, the close-knit original ensemble of 15, the fans -- the ownership of the tour is clear.

It belongs, heart and soul to Pascal (Roger, the guitar-playing **love-song writer** who can't fall in love) and Rapp (Mark, the filmmaker who wants to be involved but is always on the sidelines).

These two move, speak and sing with a synchronicity that comes only with years at a mutual labor of love, but it feels like it's the very first time.

Pascal, still long, lean and moody, sings with a compelling mix of confidence and angst. The bespectacled, nerdy-attractive Rapp, quirky to his fingertips, appears to choreograph the entire evening from the stage while at the same time remaining the detached observer.

Around them, the original producers and creative team have built an impressive array, including the penetrating gospel vocals of original cast member Gwen Stewart to lead the haunting anthem "Seasons of Love."

Other assets include Broadway "Rent" veterans Nicolette Hart as a sassy Maureen, Justin Johnston as a tease-y Angel and Michael McElroy (of Shaker Heights) as a mellow Tom Collins, along with newcomer Lexi Lawson, who grows better as sad and sexy Mimi as the evening goes on and will no doubt get even better as the tour rolls on.

"Rent's" repeated affirmation -- "There's only us / There's only this / Forget regret / Or life is yours to miss / No other road / No other way / No day but today" -- has in the past sometimes come off as 12 step-ish rote.

Today there's reason to actually buy into it. There's only "Rent."