

Passionate, powerful 'Rent' still inspires

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Anthony Rapp (left) and Adam Pascal have unique ownership in "Rent" as original cast members. JOAN MARCUS – ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

"Tell them to go see it, just GO," the woman next to me said, through streaming tears.

That was the prevailing sentiment at Ovens Auditorium on the opening night of "Rent: The Broadway Tour" – and I certainly won't disagree. This bold, dynamic production will have you dancing on tables, staging a protest and falling in love at first sight.

The show traces its roots to Puccini's classic opera "La Boheme." But instead of taking place in a 19th-century Parisian garret, the action is set in New York City and unfolds circa 1989 in an East Village industrial loft.

The large ensemble cast of passionate bohemians includes aspiring songwriter Roger (Adam Pascal); Roger's roommate and wannabe filmmaker Mark (Anthony Rapp); computer genius Tom (Michael McElroy); Tom's cross-dressing lover Angel (Justin Johnson); and Benny (Jacques Smith), who betrayed his friends when he married their landlord's daughter and is now threatening the group with eviction.

There's also Legal Aid lawyer Joanne (Haneefah Wood), Roger's downstairs neighbor Mimi Marquez (Lexi Larson), a heroin-addicted exotic dancer with a cartload of emotional baggage, and the unforgettable performance artist Maureen (Nicolette Hart), who is Mark's ex-girlfriend and Joanne's current flame.

Pascal and Rapp are original cast members, along with Gwen Stewart, who's best known as the "Seasons of Love" soloist. All have been with the show since it opened off-Broadway in January 1996 through its Pulitzer- and Tony-winning Broadway run which ended in September 2008. Rapp and Pascal also reprised their roles in the 2005 movie.

The entire cast is excellent, but Pascal and Rapp are particularly astonishing as Roger and Mark. Both have strong, powerful baritones and completely inhabit their struggling artist characters. Nicolette Hart is another standout as Maureen – her performance art piece, “Over the Moon,” is easily the night's funniest moment.

Director Michael Greif, who directed the original and Broadway production, keeps the action moving at a breakneck pace. Actors bound all over the vertical set in bursts of energy in the fiery opening number, “Rent,” and in the play's boisterously joyous anthem of freedom at the end of Act I, “La Vie Boheme.”

This explosive crowd energy is well-balanced by several two-character songs, however. Roger and Mimi's first meeting is a finely calibrated flirtation in “Light My Candle.” Tom and Angel share a melting moment of new love in “I'll Cover You.” Mark and Joanne have a spirited duet in “Tango: Maureen,” and Joanne and Maureen, in turn, perform a frenzied pas de deux of their own in “Take Me or Leave Me.” Superb musicians play on stage throughout – David Truskinoff on keyboards is especially magnetic.

The theme of “Rent” – young people trying to find their personal passions in a world they don't necessarily respect and deciding how to spend their lives – is just as relevant today as it was in 1996 or 1896. Its message of hope and love continues to inspire and is perhaps needed now more than ever. As Mimi says, “Forget regret / Or life is yours to miss.”