

Mac-Haydn Theatre, Chatham, NY

RENT, Book, Lyrics and Music by Jonathan Larson

Choreography by Elizabeth McGuire

Directed by John Saunders

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“Just let me be.”

To be clear, I do not like “RENT.” This is the fourth production I have seen and each time I feel let down and almost embarrassed that I am sitting through it. There are twenty identifiable songs in Act One and I only like two of them: “Tango Maureen” and “La Vie Boheme.” I also enjoy the twanging electric guitar riffs on the melody of “Musetta’s Waltz” which is referred to in a negative manner in the second act. Loosely based on Puccini’s opera La Boheme, this modern update retains only one character name: Mimi. However, the show blatantly exploits her manner of living which makes her a disagreeable character, not good for the heroine of the show.



The Cast of Rent; Photo: Ann Kielbasa

I have to hand it to director John Saunders, however. He has given us a stunningly gorgeous production of the show. Along with choreographer Elizabeth McGuire and Music Director Eric Shorey the resultant show is eminently watchable. A beautiful cast, both physically and vocally, also helps. Angel Schunard, the drag queen, is a character with AIDS who has always been sympathetic, but this time around is presented with dignity and charm, an unusual take on this character in my experience.



Marcus A. Jordan, Adeline Invers;
Photo: Ann Kielbasa

actually survive an encore.

Mimi's amour, Roger Davis, is decently played by Jared Goodwin whose sullen attitude matches his situation as an unsuccessful artist. He has a lovely voice and he acts the role very well, sullen and hard to reach when he needs to be, charming in the romantic moments.

Puccini's comic landlord has been transformed into the marginally sympathetic Benjamin who comes to collect a year's rent on what is essentially a squatters set of rooms and who turns into a sweetheart of a man for no apparent reason. Josh Walker undertakes the role with panache.

The show is really held together by fledgling film-maker Mark Cohen, perfectly played by Andrew Burton Kelley. This character both acts within the show's action and narrates the show for his documentary film in the works as it develops, never an easy task for an actor. Kelley does it all with style and grace and makes it work easily.

The entire company are beautiful and talented and they do all that can be done to make this an excellent evening which the opening night audience loved, and cheered, and thrilled to as the story progressed. Having lived through this lower east side Manhattan environment in the 1960s I was drawn into this world as much through memory as I was through the show itself. The



Josh Walker; Photo:Ann Kielbasa

As in "La Boheme: there is a secondary couple, Maek Cohen and Maureen Johnson. She has left him for Joanne Jefferson and he cannot win her back, though he tries. Mark is played by Andrew Burton Kelley and Maureen is played by Adeline Invers. Joanne is played by Amber Mawande-Spytek in her best role since playing the daughter in "Next to Normal." The trio are excellent in their roles and when Joanne and Tom perform the "Tango Maureen" it is a definitive highlight of the show. I could

side story of Angel, played very well by Anthony Michael Velez, his lover Tom Collins, well played by Marcus A. Jordan, and their friends and supporters, is indeed touching, though ultimately overlong.



Ana Viveros; Photo: Ann Kielbasa

The central character of Mimi is undertaken by the beautiful and sensual Ana Viveros whose costumes make it very clear who and what she is in life. Viveros does a beautiful job portraying a 1960s Mimi and she makes the role decidedly her own. Larson and his original director Michael Greif; made many changes from the early versions of the show to the one that opened on Broadway on April 29, 1996. These may have included Mimi's final scene.

On a beautiful set designed by Alivia Cross, director Saunders has delivered a definitive production of this show. His actors have well-developed characters.. His coordination with McGuire on movement is seamless. Andrew Gmoser has lit the show with exceptional quality and the combination of

natural and extreme costumes designed by Bethany Marx is exceptional.

I just wish I liked this show. Some very good songs in Act Two help, but by that time I am rather bored with the concept. Everyone around me had a good time and that's an excellent sign that the Mac has another hit on its hands.

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RENT plays at the Mac-Haydn Theatre, 1925 State Route 203 in Chatham, New York through July 28. For information and tickets go to machaydntheatre.org or call 518-392-9292.