



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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RENT

Catchy Title Productions

Star Theatre 1, Hilton

Until 22 Nov 2008

Review by Richard Flynn

Thirty years on, "Rent" picks up for the MTV generation where the 1960's American Tribal Love Rock Musical "Hair" left off - in 'the dawning of the Age of Aquarius', with hippy youth, flower-power, protest, pot and promiscuity.

Its focus is a group of struggling young artists and musicians living in the shadow of AIDS with most HIV-positive, some gay and lesbian. The drugs and sex themes have changed little, but gay relationships are now open rather than implied. An added dimension for "Rent" is that playwright and composer Jonathan Larson has modelled his rock musical on Puccini's glorious "La Bohème". The parallels are many and significant. The use of the famous 'Musetta's Waltz' to cement the thematic and musical links is a neat touch. In "La Bohème" the creeping killer is tuberculosis; the city, Paris, one hundred years ago; in "Rent" it's HIV/AIDS; the place, New York City's East Village in the late 1980's.

While its 'message' is to live and value today as if there were no tomorrow, the "Rent" kids pick and choose when they follow that profound and commendable philosophy. Whatever of that, this company of twenty-two young performers, directed lovingly by Scott Nell, has few weak links. There are, however, plenty of standouts. Has Rod Schultz ever given a sub-standard performance? He's so right as Collins, great singing voice, vocals always comprehensible! Not so much Jason Ferguson, as Roger, who acts well enough but whose diction is often unclear. He is not helped in many places by an overpowering, though usually fine, band under the direction of Matthew Carey.

Ruth Blythman lights everyone's candle in a stellar performance as Mimi, an HIV-positive exotic dancer and heroin junkie; Fahad Farooque is excellent as landlord Benny, so too Josh Brittain as Mark, the documentary film-maker whose finished project, filmed over the course of one year (from Christmas Eve, through Valentine's Day, Hallowe'en and another Christmas), we glimpse as the show ends. James Christopher Reed minces around as HIV-positive drag queen, Angel, modelling outfits (by Harry Watt) some audience might be tempted to kill for, but as Collins' lover, he shows the essential vulnerability beneath all the flamboyance. Deanna Farnell is a real find as Harvard lawyer, Joanne, with her new girlfriend Maureen, formerly Mark's crush, played to powerful effect by Whitney Boyd. A special mention of Kerrie Klinsic as Mark's serially embarrassing, archetypical mother. Some sons do indeed 'ave 'em!

The show disappoints in a few areas, though most can be ironed out with more performance runs. Set design is inventive (by Nell himself, with Bluey Byrne, Scenic Artist) but lighting, by choreographer Leigh Warren with Dan Smith, is sometimes patchy, leaving some actors in relative darkness. In addition, Lighting Operator, Michael Treasure, needs to fine-tune his cross-fades – sometimes way too quick, at other times too early. Follow-spot work is about as good as it can be in a bunker-like theatre whose ceiling is too low to accommodate good lighting angles.

With everyone (and the percussionist!) miked, there should be no question of intelligibility, but Tim Freedman at the Sound Desk has a way to go to get the levels right, and just BEFORE a channel is wanted. The performers themselves might help with better diction.

If it does nothing else, "Rent" teaches us that we are, all of us, renting – from the next generation – and that the only thing we can take from this world is the love and esteem of family and friends. Not bad lessons!

And not a bad night out to affirm and celebrate them!