



THEATER REVIEW - RENT

By
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RENT

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(From the aisle seat, fifth row of the orchestra: July 23, 1997)

Rent is a current smash hit on Broadway, settled in for a long sold-out run at the Nederlander Theater. It is being hailed as the new American musical—a rock opera that thrills the eye and ear and emotions—that sings of young, impoverished, endangered young people rejecting the alienating (to them) world that we (the establishment) prosaically see as home, safety, and security. (We must be the establishment, paying, as we are, \$75 a ticket for the experience from the orchestra and mezzanine rows.)

See *Rent* by all means, or buy the original cast recording (for the price of a ticket in the rear of the balcony). If you are contemplating becoming a helping professional, or if you have been one for years, *Rent* will give you a look at our young people, who don't feel like "ours," either from their viewpoint or "ours"; who don't feel they belong, who don't feel they are recognized as full members of the land of their birth, their homeland. See it for its provocation.

The music from the on-stage band is loud and assertive, the miked lyrics exhilarating, touching, funny, scary (when you can understand

them). The choreography is energetic. There are moments when you are genuinely moved. *Rent* is populated by a vibrant, young and talented interracial and immensely hard-working cast, working to transport us to a world alien to the orchestra seats occupants: a world of poverty, of homeless persons and squatters who owe "last year's rent," a world populated by aspiring artists, drugs, where normality is friendships transcending multiple sexual identities and young men and women infected with HIV and slowly dying of AIDS. We sit in the comfort of the theater watching a world—New York's East Village—where we, the establishment (read parents, jobs, "success") are the rejected. Lending true pathos to the experience is that its creator, Jonathon Larson, lived the East Village life and died (of an aneurysm) just as his creation was opening Off-Broadway.

Though it is about some of the most difficult personal/public health issues of the day, *Rent* aims to send you out of the theater exhilarated, not thinking. The rock music transports, the gospel-tinged singers uplift, and the romance blurs the issues.

Despite its hip setting, *Rent* is a romance. It is a romance, just as *La Bohème* (its

19th century opera model) was, with Mimi's death of tuberculosis a tearjerker (a sign of a sensitive soul, not a serious public health problem). *Rent's* Mimi is also dying, of AIDS, but the sadness is kept at bay. This heroine has only a "near death" experience and miraculously comes back to life and love. *Rent* is a 20th century romantic view of dangerous activity and death. It colors with soft pink stage lights personal and public health problems: uncontrolled street drug sales and abuse; HIV and AIDS; true poverty (as well as the voluntary poverty chosen by the well-born artists); homelessness; and gay, lesbian and transvestite life styles on the fringe.

As in real life, there are cross-currents of joy, sadness, fear and contentment in the evening. A young man, in danger of the finality of AIDS, sings "Will I lose my dignity, will anyone care?" An AIDS support group asserts to each other "There is no day but today." And others worn down by the life fantasize "Let's open a restaurant in Santa Fe." (The Santa Fe fantasy is a wonderful piece of dark humor. These self-described outcasts imagine themselves in what has turned into a quintessentially moneyed upper class "insider" enclave.)

All this is seen through the indomitable eyes of youth with death all around them, not

perceiving their own deaths. They see themselves as the "insiders," as "family" huddling together to resist the blandishments and punishments of the crass outside money-grubbing world. They know themselves as disenfranchised in their own homeland—scrabbling for a place to live when there's "No room at the Holiday Inn," harassed by the police when they are just trying to make an "Honest living, Man" like the Squeegiemans. They are focused on how they will live (not how they might die). "How can you connect in an age when strangers, landlords, lovers, your own blood cells betray you?"

That *Rent* connects with its audience is affirmed by the seats filled with young men and women - not the usual big Broadway musical audience. Do they connect with the tale of the dangers of today's version of the plague, or is it just the music? Or do they, like the primary characters in the play, feel protected by their youth and their parents' money and status? Is this the message of what it means to be "inside?" *Rent* gives you ample entertainment.

What is the message of *Rent*? Is it that young people in this country don't have the security to freely experiment with life styles? Maybe. Or is it sending other messages: that income support and decent housing

should be available to everyone, that persons' color makes them socially vulnerable to the worst ravages of poverty, joblessness, and illness? Maybe. Maybe it is saying that the older establishment doesn't understand, or perhaps doesn't care enough about what happens to the young. Scariest is the possibility that it is saying for the young the experiences justify the risks.

When one sees this play as a helping professional, or a potential one, it is inevitable that thoughts arise about "implications for practice." What the play brings home is that the individuals we are watching are unique constellations of strengths and weaknesses, resisting easy categorization as "victim" or "pathology," unlikely to be captured or helped by any one single-strategy approach. (Indeed, we suspect that few of the *Rent* denizens would see themselves in need of the helping professions, though we notice the AIDS support group and the mention of drug rehab.) The clearest message that professionals might take away with them is affirmation of social work's historic and professionally unique approach to "persons in environment" that allow equal professional recognition of such opposite approaches as counseling and community organizing. □

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