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This Blog

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Wednesday, November 10, 2010

[Rock\(ing\) RENT](#)

at [1:00 AM](#)  

By Luke Connell

As the first Act of RENT nears its end, the cast belts out a number rejecting the (sexual) mainstream in favor of the many alternatives. Mike Donahue's production of RENT, which goes up tomorrow and will be playing through Saturday at the Yale University Theater, likewise deviates from the norm reinventing the show as a rock concert. And as the many characters in RENT might predict, this deviation may not be traditional but is way more fun.

The production opens with a short narration delivered by Mark, played by Sam Bolen '10, which comes off as the sort of banter with which an artist opens a show. Then, the exposed lighting flips on; the five-person band begins - the play commences.

The decision to re-imagine the show as a rock concert is brilliant. The lighting is designed as any concert might be: the lighting structures stand at the corners of the stage and alternate between the illuminating the stage and the audience. Spotlights supplement the main structures and allow more personal connection with the characters by silencing the rest of the stage, which is almost always engaged in a chaotic flood of motion.

Constituting the majority of this motion is the near constant change of props and props' location. Aside from a towering construction where the band is stationed, the rest of the set is perpetually rearranged. The furniture is simple—a couch and various chests—and amazingly functional for dancing on top of.

The lighting and the set design create the overall mood but it is the details that perfect it. Hand mikes, electric candles poster cutouts of unseen characters, and a few interactive audience surprises among others are all thoughtfully selected to add an endearing charm and sense of humor to the production.

With production value being so high, I feared that I would only see the lights and the set and that the play would sink somewhere into the background. But the powerhouse cast is nowhere near being outshined by the production and their performances ascertain that RENT remain the focus.

Sam Bolen plays Mark, a struggling filmmaker, with charm as his character navigates life through breakups, failure and unwelcomed success. Bolen like all other actors can also sing. Really well.

Mark's roommate Roger, played by Miles Jacoby '11, is devastated by the suicide of his girlfriend and his own approaching AIDS related death and is in the interim working to write a song that can live an imprint on the world. Jacoby shades his character with believable vulnerability that alternates between fear and hope as his character pursues a relationship with Mimi, a damaged, drug-addicted exotic dancer. Devon Martinez '11 endows Mimi with undeniable sex appeal but

also the striking sadness of an addict who realizes her actions are self-destructive but cannot control them nonetheless.

Mimi finds herself in and out of a side relationship with the corporate, yuppie Benny, played by Matthew McCollum '11, who is attempting to control the lot in which the performance operates as well as demanding the back rent for the apartment in which Roger and Mark live.

It is to save this empty lot from Benny that the audience is first introduced to the attention demanding Maureen. This performance does not come until nearly half way through the first act, yet Maureen haunts the stage from the beginning through her lovers Mark and Joanne. Joanne, played by Liz Dervan '12, is the Ivy League educated, neurotic, new lover of the free spirited Maureen. Liz Dervan plays the part well and delivers a particularly entertaining number in which she balances two cell phones and multiple calls. But before this number, Joanne and Mark share a tango in which the commiserate about the difficulty of dating the outrageous and alluring Maureen whose attention seeking leads her often into infidelity or at least produces sufficient paranoia to assume that she is cheating.

When Maureen finally makes her appearance on the stage; she does not fall under the expectations. Sarah Rosen '12 gives Maureen exactly what you would expect: boldness, beauty, sass and the ability to make funny faces. Her performance piece to save the lot is bizarre in a very good way.

As these characters navigate life, love and loss in the Bohemian culture of New York, they are joined by the friends to all: Collins and Angel. Scott Hiller '11 as Collins delivers a lovable performance that highlights the hope within despair that resonates throughout the play. Sam Tsui '11 as the cross-dressing Angel brings an innocence to his character, as he constantly serves as an arbitrator - all while wearing thigh high boots.

Just as the details that were paid to the production brought an interesting texture to the performance, so too does the talented ensemble cast bring wit and humor to a variety of minor creations that enrich the trajectory of the main characters.

As the characters live through life and loss, the details of the show make an otherwise great show into a memorable work. With engaging singing, performances, and production that include a few interactive surprises for the audience, this production manages to engage the audience and leave them singing as they leave the theater just as when one leaves any great concert. Unfortunately, like any great concert RENT is sold-out so for those of you lucky enough to get tickets: enjoy an amazing show; those without: get creative -scalp them?