

'Rent' gets raw

Musical Rocks: Capital Playhouse treats cult classic right

Alec Clayton for The Olympian
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A simple statement in the program for "Rent" at Capital Playhouse: "'Rent' fits our motto 'You haven't seen it until you've seen it here!'"

What that means was brought home to me when I reflected back on performances by other companies.

The first time I saw "Rent" was at the Paramount Theatre in Seattle with the original touring company. The sound was too loud and distorted, I could not hear the lyrics, and the stage was too far away.



Two months ago, I saw it at Tacoma Musical Playhouse. It was a flawless production.

Seeing it at Capital Playhouse was a totally different experience. There, the audience is practically face-to-face with the actors. You almost feel their sweat. The performance was loud, raucous and edgy. The music was hard-edged, with screeching guitars. The singing and acting were outstanding, but rough around the edges. I got the impression that was exactly what Jonathan Larson had in mind when he wrote the book, music and lyrics.

"Rent" is a musical phenomena with a devoted following; people come back to see it 10 or more times. It won Tony Awards, Obies, and even the Pulitzer Prize. It is the story of a community of bohemians in New York's Alphabet City celebrating life in the face of death and AIDS at the end of the millennium. It follows a year in the life of a group of artists who live in a loft without heat or electricity on the corner of Avenue B and 11th Street.

Mark (Mike Spee) is a filmmaker whose camera insulates him from real life. Roger (Bruce Haas) is a singer/songwriter living with HIV whose girlfriend killed herself. He is now reluctantly falling in love with Mimi (Katin Jacobs-Lake), a dancer and drug addict also living with AIDS.

Tom Collins (Jarvis Green) is a gay anarchist computer genius.

Benjamin (Kevin McManus) is a former roommate who has married into money, has sold out to the establishment, and is threatening to evict his old roommates.

Maureen (Christie Murphy) is Mark's ex-girlfriend and a performance artist now in love with Joanne (Melissa Backstrom). And Angel (Juan Torres-Falcn) is a drag queen street drummer with AIDS and is Tom's boyfriend.

It is an all-singing musical. Even the narration between songs and the constant telephone calls to the loft are sung-talked in a manner that is almost a parody of the musical tradition of singing dialogue. The phone calls, many from worried and meddling parents played by the ensemble cast, provide a comic counterpoint to the serious business of love and poverty and death.

Haas is amazing as the brooding songwriter who struggles against his growing love for Mimi, the hesitancy of their love expressed by the repetitive refrain "I should tell you, I should tell you." His stage presence is magnetic. It's hard not to focus on him when he's on stage with others.

The same can be said for Torres-Falcn, whose sweet smiles make you want to hug him, and Murphy, who is sassy and sexy and brimming with energy. And while Spee does not have the magnetism of Haas, he does have a powerful voice, and when the two of them sing together, it is riveting.

Highlights include the funny "Tango Maureen" sung and danced by Mark and Joanne; Maureen's "Over the Moon," a song that had the audience mooring; Roger's plaintive solo on "I'll Cover You;" and powerful solos and duets by Joanne and ensemble cast member Gregory Conn on the signature number "Seasons of Love."

"Rent" is harsh, hard rocking, hilarious, tragic and ultimately uplifting. It has been called the "Hair" of the '90s, and it will surely go down in history as a play that epitomizes an era.