

# "Rent" reexamined

**Capital Playhouse production appeals to underappreciated artists, even if few know the ostracism it recalls**

By [Christian Carvajal](#) for The Volcano  
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Despite my oft-noted vocabulary, I can't think of a word for ... What do you call a feeling of nostalgia for something you hated when it actually happened?

The first time I saw *Rent* was in Los Angeles. Neil Patrick Harris played Mark the



documentarian; Wilson Cruz played Angel the lovable drag queen. I'd been hearing about it for a year or two. Here, we were told, was a show about arty young people like me and my friends. What I got was well-sung, well-acted, energetic to the nth degree. It also felt inauthentic. It seemed, at least to me and my bohemian brother - the audience loved it -like a 40-year-old's mistaken impression of what "la vie

bohème" must be like for young people in the '90s. It was exactly the kind of self-conscious poseur parade *Team America: World Police* mocked so devastatingly with its song, "Everyone Has AIDS!"

How was it possible to defang late playwright Jonathan Larson's journal of the Plague Years? The L.A. production managed. Only a few years before that, I'd sobbed with friends as long lists of the deceased were read in gay nightclubs. I didn't feel this subject was fair game for a faux-edgy pop musical. So you can see why I wasn't excited going into the Olympia production of *Rent*, even as I sat in the Capital Playhouse's comfortable new seats. (No longer will Sondheim cause spinal disorders.) Much to my surprise, the show won me over in a way even the 2005 movie version, which featured most of the original cast members, could not.

It's not that director Stephen Nachamie's version is any better produced, frankly, though in general it holds up fine. Mike Spee is perfect as Mark, and the posters rightfully feature Juan Torres-Falcón's graceful work as Angel. Katin Jacobs-Lake reprises her role of Mimi straight from a production in Tacoma. She's certainly heroin-chic enough for the part and moves well, though articulation issues made it difficult to make out her lyrics, at

least on opening night. Jarvis Green is well cast and compelling as Tom Collins, Angel's anarchist lover, but he had trouble finding his pitch at various points in the evening. Amateur rights for *Rent* just became available last April, and it's obvious Capital Playhouse was excited to pounce on the material.

I enjoyed the show. Why this time? Why now? And why are my college-aged friends in Oklahoma, teenagers who have little connection to the Lower East Side of 20 years ago, such adoring "*Rent*-heads?" They don't remember when it seemed to AIDS sufferers that the world around them didn't just shun them, it actively hoped they would die en masse. *Rent* still appeals to those who consider themselves underappreciated artists outside the American mainstream, but few of today's young bohemians have experienced the intensity of ostracism this play recalls.

Capital's *Rent* isn't the work of middle-aged producers trying to replicate the lives of artists younger and hipper than themselves, it's an all-grown-up company (and for the most part, cast) remembering what it was like to have been those young artists a generation ago. The sheer awfulness of the Plague Years has faded in our aging memories, leaving mostly perverse nostalgia. There's no name for it, so far as I know, but it reminded me of the age when a year really did feel like 525,600 minutes. I walked out singing.