

REVIEW: 'Rent' at Paramount Theatre in Aurora

Broadway-scale 'Rent' will satisfy die-hards

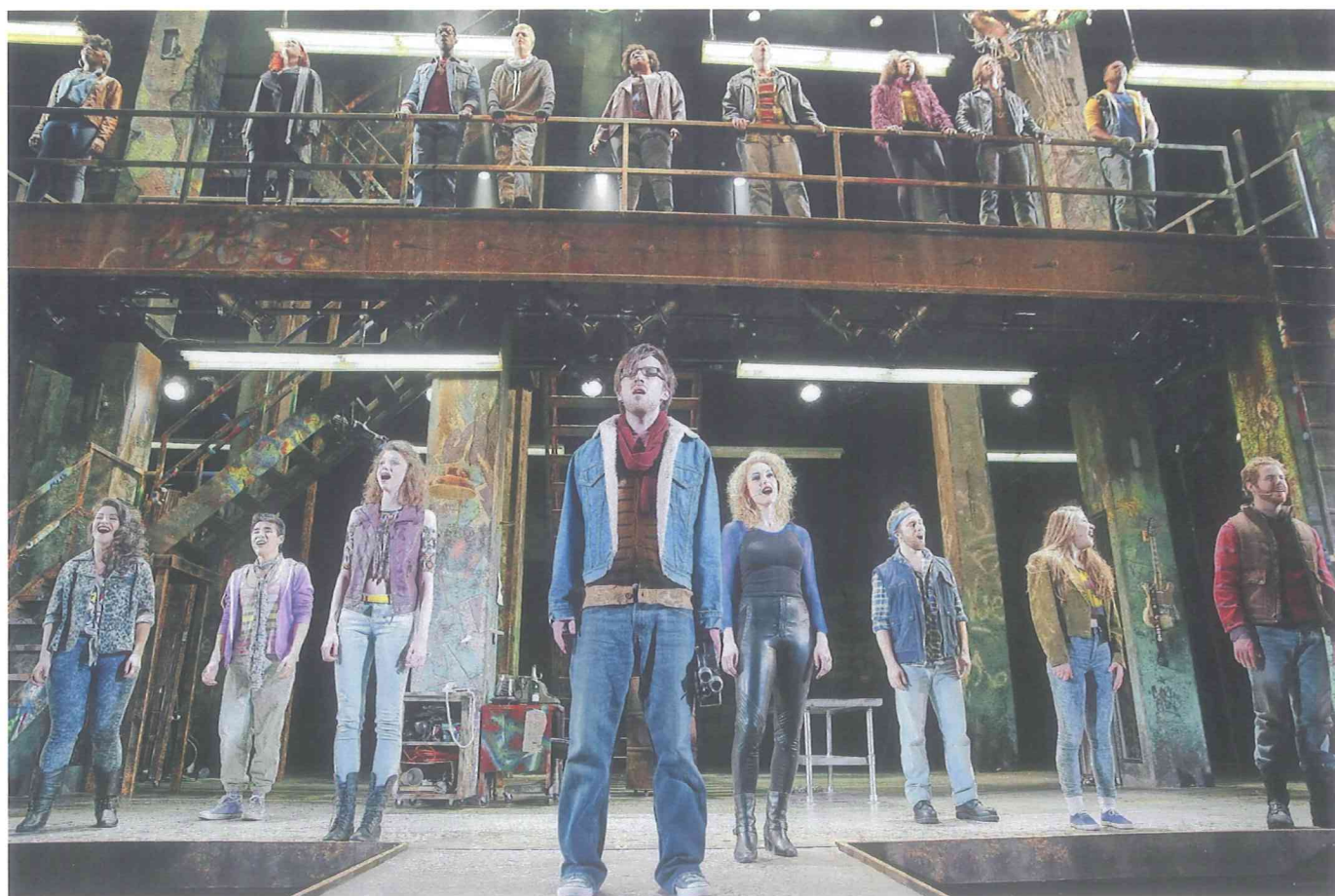
THEATER REVIEW: "Rent" by Paramount Theatre in Aurora

★★★½

March 17, 2014|Chris Jones

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(Liz Lauren,)

I have reviewed "Rent" at least 525,600 times, or so it feels. The vast majority of them have begun with some kind of lament for Jonathan Larson, its creator, who died in 1996 at the age of 35, headed, perchance, to glory and instead leaving far too few songs, and shows, behind.

So. Aurora, this time around for me. Once again: how Larson is missed.

You might construe that as the repetitiveness of a critic who has wallowed in and around Alphabet City one too many times. But if you see a lot of new musicals, on Broadway or wherever, the way you miss Larson is really a very active state of being, for his songs for this show are just so very, oh, I don't know — if you are reading this, you probably know. In the contemporary branch of the great art of the musical, they are as yet unequaled — sometimes, I suspect, because it's just so hard to feel at the level that Larson felt, and then to make music from that. There is a disconnect in "Rent" between the squalor of the situation that many of these characters, living in the AIDS "plague" days and the just-gentrifying Lower East Side in Manhattan (long, long ago), and the harmonies wherein they cry. That was Larson all over, for he was a songwriter who understood when and why you have to rise above ironic self-awareness, all the commenting and attitudinal posturing that can make up a show today, and take an old-fashioned risk.

I only have to hear the opening strains of "No Day But Today," and well, you get the idea. Enough. You want to know to know if this particular "Rent" is any good.

Picky die-hards, especially those who grew tired of diminishing touring facsimiles coming through town, should hit the Ronald Reagan Memorial Tollway. It won't be a surprise to those following the resurgent Paramount Theatre that this is a very fulsome and expansive union "Rent," replete with the full Broadway charts for the band and staged on a colossal, exciting, Broadway-size set from Kevin Depinet that not only contains some visual sculptures that can occupy you all by themselves for a good few minutes, but at least five different levels of platforms, which allows director Jim Corti to come up with some very interesting ideas that true "Rent"-heads will appreciate. For example: a very long exit for Angel (Sawyer Smith) and lots of hidden-but-visible corners wherein Roger (Adam Michaels) and Mimi (Adaeze Kelley) can dance their sad dance. The show, which is musically directed by Shawn Stengel, comes at you with a great wall of sound from excellent singers; Paramount has achieved much in a short time with its productions, but nothing more important than the quality, and excitement, of its sound mixes.

The strengths of the Corti production, which [features](#)



a cast nicely removed from Broadway homogeneity, include Andrew M. Mueller as a strikingly alienated Mark — the main storyteller and, in Mueller's hands, a half-involved young man who very clearly has no clue who he is or what he is doing. Michaels is a broody, rocker Roger, with shaggy hair and a certain earned misery about him, and yet he's clearly very young, which is as it should be. Andrea Prestinario makes "Over the Moon" (which is the weakest part of "Rent," generally) entertaining. But the best work of all is from Evan Tyrone Martin, who has been impressing all over town, and whose Tom Collins, and his "I'll Cover You," are very real and true.

Corti is doing the all-original "Rent," of course, but he shrewdly has switched emphasis away from some of the more tired devices (the phone messages, some of the choruses of the impoverished) and toward

the personalities that abide, putting them subtly within their period, adding to the show's pervasive sense of absence, musical and otherwise.

Kelley, the young actress playing Mimi, has the voice and the personality but not, entirely, the requisite fragility. This is, after all, a retelling of "La Boheme," and poor Mimi has to shrink down virtually to nothing. Kelley has yet to find that last 10 percent of that trip. And Smith, whose Angel is a visual scene-stealer and potent singer, has to find how to make her character a moral beacon. Perhaps these talented young performers will get there yet, for they are working within a [company](#)



that clearly has imbued one of "Rent's" famous emotional qualities, the one that binds.

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When: Through April 6

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd, Aurora

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$36.90-\$49.90 at 630-896-666 or paramountaurora.com