



Theater review: 'Rent' shines at Seacoast Repertory Theatre

Vocals, acting and set design are impeccable

By **Jeanné McCartin**

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Fans of particular musicians are often hardest on a cover band. Same goes for theater; you do an infrequently done, well-loved show that comes with an original cast CD and you have the perfect recipe for disappointment — if not disaster. Breath a sigh of relief, "Rent" lovers, and buy your tickets quickly; the Rep's production is going to be the hottest one around, and sadly not around for long.

"Rent" is based on Giacomo Puccini's opera "La Bohème." Let's start at the top and work outward — because there is no down.

Brian Swasey is both director and choreographer, and proved himself a master at multitasking. For starters, Swasey did an impeccable casting job. Ensemble to lead, they look, sing and act the part. Too often, musicals sacrifice the latter, allowing performers to dazzle with vocals and footwork. Not so here. Each performer imbues his or her character with personality.

Swasey's blocking and action is visually interesting and vivacious, with a palpable mix of energies — hysterical to heartfelt. His skill as a choreographer is evident in the larger, non-dancing scenes, which often demonstrate a dance-like quality in the action or staging's configuration.

As for the dance routines themselves, they're spot-on, "Tango Maureen" to Mimi's bawdy solo.

This is simply as strong as a cast comes. It would get tedious laying down adjective after adjective to say the same thing for each of the actors' vocal and acting skills. Each is perfectly suited for his or her role, and all demonstrate a disarming ease in their portrayals.

Graham Bailey as Mark has the look and a completely natural presence; Knate Higgins embodies Roger, again vocally and visually; Albert Jennings as Angel is a mesmerizing ball of fire; Babs Rubenstein as Joanne is sassy and smart and Christine M. Dulong as Maureen is dead on. Terrence Oliver as Benny — well, he couldn't be more Benny, and Natasha Ashworth sizzles as Mimi.

OK, Ashworth admittedly was difficult to hear at times. The show's one glitch on opening night

was sound, mics occasionally coming in late or voices nearly overpowered by the band. It was toughest on Ashworth, whose voice doesn't have the same carrying power of some of the others. That aside, the remaining leads have outstanding vocals, Dulong and Rubenstein deliver a battle of the voices that leaves your hair on end. Ashworth and Higgins' "Light My Candle" reaches deep — and so it goes.

Now add to that Scottie McLaughlin's Tom Collins; NOT to be missed. Even amongst this embarrassment of riches, his is a stand-out voice, backed with acting talent. It's the voice for which the phrase "black velvet" was coined; it starts deep in the earth and rises to move mountains. It also moves souls when McLaughlin's Collins laments the loss of his Angel in "I'll Cover You." Ashley D. Kelley, who does the solo in "Season's of Love," delivers another phenomenal vocal performance. We're talkin' wow.

As Kelley demonstrates, this is a production that blurs the line between lead and ensemble. It's not that Mark, Roger and the others aren't the focus, but that ensemble member lifts their role. Kudos to Randy Blake, Kyshawn Lane, Alden Caple, Chelsea Hermann, Brittney Mack, and Joshua P. Moore.

The production is beautifully glued together and polished by William Asher, music director and his five-piece band; the lighting by Matthew Guminski; scenic design by David Towlun and costume design by Tony Lauro and Jessica Moryl.

Finally, do be warned, this is for an adult audience. But, if you can handle sexual content and foul language — then don't wait. Get a ticket before it's too late. You just might want to catch this one twice.