

The Wire

Laughter and tears at 'Rent'

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“Rent” is now stomping, bumping and grinding at the Seacoast Repertory Theatre in Portsmouth.

For his sophomore effort at the Rep, director Brian Swasey doesn't disappoint. If possible, he brings even more innovation and energy to one of Broadway's biggest successes, the “Hair” of its generation.

“Rent” is the story of a bunch of young artists, many of them suffering from HIV or full-blown AIDS. On Christmas Eve, Benny (Terrence Oliver), who used to be “one of the family,” married into money and now is renegeing on his deal to let his buds live rent-free in his decrepit building.

Now Benny's demanding a full year's rent—unless Roger and Mark (Knote Higgins and Graham Bailey) stop Mark's ex-girlfriend Maureen (the explosively gifted Christine Dulong) from holding a protest concert against Benny's plan to develop a vacant lot where homeless people sleep.

Maureen is talented, magnetic, demanding, and treats people like trash, yet they come running when she snaps her fingers. In fact, Joanne (Babs Rubenstein, who really belts out her songs), the woman Maureen dumped Mark for, is a lawyer, but is spending her day in the freezing cold setting up Maureen's equipment.

The appearance of Angel (Albert Jennings) changes life for everyone. Tom Collins (Scottie McLaughlin), a down-and-out teacher, is broke, mugged and bleeding when Angel finds him, and the two quickly fall in love. Angel brings optimism to every situation, shares what very little he has with total strangers, and creates a family out of their little Bohemian existence.

Roger, an HIV-positive musician who is determined to write just one perfect song before he dies, hasn't left the building for six months. When Mimi (Natasha Ashworth), an HIV-positive dancer and junkie busts her way into Roger's life with smack and a candle, they find hope again, until Mimi's addiction threatens everything.

Swasey uses the entire theater in his production—not just the stage, but the aisles, the pipes and even the audience. He has a way of inserting tiny heartfelt moments that bring viewers emotionally into the action. For example, during a reference to the disease in song, ensemble member Chelsea Hermann glances down at the stage for a heartbeat of time, but in that heartbeat we can see the fear, cold and loneliness she experiences on a moment-to-moment basis. During the show's signature song, “Seasons of Love,” the cast deliberately and warmly makes eye contact with members of the audience. That bold action brings us right up onstage, holding hands and hearts with the characters.

The leads in this production are incredibly well cast. Christine DuLong, especially, brings power to the stage the second she steps onto it. Albert Jennings charms in either jeans or a Christmas dress and fishnets. Natasha Ashworth's powerhouse voice and vulnerability make it easy to see why all the guys fall for her. Scottie McLaughlin's strength and basso profundo give a sense of safety and security throughout the play's scariest moments.

But it's the ensemble that really glues the show together. Hermann plays a number of roles, including a teen struggling to survive on the streets, Mark's overprotective mother, and a homeless person. She manages to change costumes within minutes and never breaks character.

The same can be said of Joshua Paul Moore, who plays an uptight businessman, a terrifying drug dealer, and another member of the family. Alden Caple plays a window washer, a waiter and other roles. He brings cheeriness one minute and then turns on a dime to express frustration, and then back to cheer. It's much harder to play several parts and do numerous quick costume changes than to stay in one role for the entirety of a show. The fact that these performers so magnetically hold our attention proves the adage that there are no small parts, just big egos.

Swasey, who previously directed “Altar Boyz” at the Rep, serves as director and choreographer of “Rent.” He deftly molds the characters and then lets the story tell itself. His insight and boldness in actions large and small bring a passion that's infectious (teenagers and senior citizens, alike, whoop it up at this show). The choreography flows in a seamless pattern so that, from beginning to end, it feels like one long dance movement.

When you see the name Swasey on a poster, book your tickets promptly, because the shows sell out fast—as evidenced by the fact that the Rep added another week to its production of “Rent,” which now runs through July 24.

For the laughter and the tears, and for every delicious and painful emotion these kids pull out of you, you don't want to miss this one. “Rent” is running through July 24 at the Seacoast Repertory Theatre, 125 Bow St., Portsmouth, 603-433-4472. For more information, visit www.seacoastrep.org.