

'La Boheme'



ROBERT KILLIPS/Lansing State Journal

Love: Lateena Dinkins and Kevin Doherty star in "La Boheme."

For centuries, young people have been lured to the artistic life in big cities.

Many have found friends and fun; a few have found success. Some have found wrenching tragedy.

Giacomo Puccini realized that in 1896 when he adapted a novella into "La Boheme," the story of six young artists and musicians. Jonathan Larson realized it a century later, when he turned Puccini's story into "Rent," the rock opera.

Between those two milestones, others had city-artist adventures. Just ask Melanie Helton.

She's on the Michigan State University faculty now, directing a "La Boheme" that will look a lot like "Rent." Long before that, she knew the world that both shows describe.

"I moved to New York when I was 22, with \$900," Helton said. For someone from Cincinnati, Ohio, and the University of Indiana, it was a culture shock.

The good news involved the entwining friendships of young people sharing similar lives. "When I would walk up Columbia Avenue, I would run into 75 people I knew," Helton said.

The bad news ranged from poverty to illness. Half of her chorus-mates in one Broadway show would eventually contract AIDS, she said. "You had these young, beautiful people dying," she said.

That had similarities to Puccini's story of artists facing poverty and tuberculosis.

"I fell in love with 'La Boheme,'" playwright Billy Aronson once said. "The similarity between these artists and their poverty and New York in the late '80s struck me."

He passed the idea on to Larson and they began creating "Rent." Now MSU is doing "La Boheme" with a decidedly "Rent" look.

The songs — in Italian, with English translation shown above the stage — are opera, from "La Boheme," but the setting is modern.

This is a steeply ambitious piece. Kirk Domer created a multilevel, urban set and Raphael Jimenez is conducting a 50-piece orchestra.

The costumes and makeup, however, are fairly easy. These are college students, playing people their own age — and living a life that they might try in a year or two.