

Wednesday, April 21, 2010

## 'Rent' rocks

Strong cast and direction make musical drama sing

by Tom Helma



Volcanic eruptions in Iceland, earthquakes in China and Haiti, Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the events of Sept. 11 have all, in turn, pushed what was once called the AIDS epidemic off the front pages of America's newspapers. However, those who have lost life-long friends, mentors, lovers and partners will never fully recover from the aftermath of the scourge that claimed the lives of so many of our most creative and artistic individuals.

"Rent," the rock opera playing at Michigan State University, brings it all back, a slap-in-the-face reminder of the havoc a disease can wreak upon a society.

The mournful lyric "How do you figure a last year on Earth?" from the ensemble number "Seasons of Love" addresses a central existential question. The surprising answer is that "Rent" portrays — in addition to a deep sense of loss — an

amazing sense of the capacity for joy among those who realize life is about to be cut short.

The cast and crew have poured heart and soul into this dynamic and powerful production. Kirk Domer's shadowy set design — all broken skylight windows and dark dark midnight Manhattan streets — combined with Kristina Miller's superb selection of vintage urban street costuming, surround a cast of actors and singers that explode with a multi-layered cacophony of powerful overlapping voices, topped off with a coloratura solo by Trish Amanda Hubbard on the aforementioned "Seasons of Love."

Nick Strong, as Mark, the videographer capturing every nuance of the Manhattan street scene, matches up well with the powerful singing voice of Kate Kilpatrick as Joanne Jefferson and they glide through a charming "Tango: Maureen."

Brandon M. Piper, as the transvestite Angel Dumont Schunard, delivers solos on "Today for You" and "I'll Cover You" that are powerful, reassuring assertions that allow others to continue on, day by day. As Maureen, Kellyn Uhl puts together a remarkably complex characterization of an East Village performance artist.

Visiting director Scott Burkell and choreographer Joni Starr bring a host of visually creative stage movement to the production. There are no dull moments, no dragged-out transitions; one scene follows another smoothly, with nary a skip in the beat.

"Rent," the title, superficially represents sordid living conditions. At a deeper level, it also references garments that have been ripped and torn apart. The metaphor here is obvious: that our society was rent, tripped and torn apart by a cosmic circumstance well outside our individual spheres of control.

### 'Rent'

*Pasant Theatre*

*Michigan State University*

*7:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 21 and Thursday, April 22; 8 p.m. Friday, April 23 and Saturday, April 24; 2 p.m.*

*Saturday, April 24 and Sunday, April 25*

*\$20 general admission; \$15 students; \$18 seniors*

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