

Monterey County
The Herald

Lack of clarity mars MPC's rendition of Broadway hit 'Rent'

By BARBARA ROSE SHULER
Herald Correspondent

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The Broadway hit "Rent" — music and lyrics by Jonathan Larson — makes an enticing, though ambitious, summer offering by the Monterey Peninsula College theater company. Directed by Gary Bolen with musical direction by Don Dally, "Rent" promises high-energy music delivered by a youthful cast telling a story that tracks the characters and plot of Giacomo Puccini's beloved opera "La Bohème." It's a smart, intriguing and edgy modern opera, rock-style, that already ranks as a late 20th century classic.

Larson converts Mimi, Rodolfo, Marcello, Colline, Musetta and the rest from bohemian Paris into a close group of struggling artists in New York's East Village circa 1994. The epidemic of tuberculosis of Puccini's Bohème becomes AIDS in "Rent."

Though the music serves up a contemporary pop-rock sound, the style is traditional opera in that the story is sung, not spoken. No interludes of normal dialogue help carry the plot as with a typical American musical. Characters, plot, dialogue and drama are driven exclusively by the music. Therefore success of a production of "Rent" depends on careful balancing of the musical elements. Instrumentation, vocal solos and choral work must serve the clarity of the libretto or lyrics.

If these core aspects aren't skillfully differentiated, you have a problem. Sadly, the MPC performance

Sunday afternoon fell short in this regard. Anyone new to the saga of these latter-day bohemians sat in a limbo of confusion about

the action and characters mostly because the musical sound blurred too much of the words and meaning. If you get to the climax of the show but haven't sorted out who's who and what their challenges are, the full pathos of the drama will be lost on you.

It's no fun to have to write this — especially since I was eager to see a live production of this popular musical — but the hardworking performers of this show won't be successful in conveying its content, heart and special appeal until something is done to rectify audio balances. In the DVD version of the Broadway performance, for instance, every word is crystal clear and the instrumental ensemble never overwhelms the exposition in the lyrics.

Sunday, the instrumentalists, a great little ensemble by the way, were boosted electronically to a loudness factor that consistently overwhelmed the singers. The singers wore microphones but had to compete with the orchestra so hard that they came off shrill and off-pitch part of the time.

The principal roles are filled by high-energy and enthusiastic performers with a range of singing and dancing skills. Daniel Renfer in the role of Mark, the documentary filmmaker, is the clearest to understand of the core group, although as the narrator, when his words are missed significant story threads get dropped. Kenneth Neely makes an appealing Roger, a musician who is HIV positive and who hopes to write one good song before he dies. As Mimi, the exotic dancer who seduces Roger, Camila de la Llata conveys sexy sizzling with brio but doesn't show the character's tender vulnerabilities as well.

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Beth Elderkin plays bisexual Maureen with energy and charisma, but her identity as a performance artist was lost in the blaze of sound, which made the signature number "Over the Moon" a bewilderment to newcomers to "Rent." Nathalie Hall appears as Joanne, her Ivy league lover, and was most fun to watch in her number "Tango: Maureen" with Renfer. Tyler Vocolka plays the landlord who demands the rent, a former roommate who sells out to money and privilege. Michael Blackburn portrays Tom Collins, a gay philosopher who pairs up with Angel, a drag queen, portrayed with panache by William Griffin, Jr. Both have AIDS.

The rest of the ensemble, about 10 performers, take various roles as needed and serve as the chorus.

Choreography by Susan Cable enlivens the show with constant movement, sexy dances and energetic production numbers. D. Thomas Beck's sets give a large-scale feel to the show, and are made of metal, suggesting the drafty and rather bleak environment of the East Village property. Gloria C. Mattos Hughes provides costumes that convey the down-and-out circumstances of the artist community, though could use more color, Mimi's neon blue spandex tights notwithstanding.

Bottom line for this production of "Rent," unless the musical problems are fixed, you're best off preparing in advance by studying the lyrics or a detailed explanation of the plot so you can understand what it happening. You might bring a print-out for reference. Prepare for loudness and singing that is uneven and sometimes hard on the ears.

But let's hope the problems are fixed before the next two weekends of performances. Maybe the theater's sound man David Rigmaiden can adjust the audio

elements. A supertitle projector would be another way to resolve these issues.

Barbara Rose Shuler can be reached at wordways@comcast.net. GO!

THEATER REVIEW ·What: MPC Theatre Company presents Jonathan Larson's "Rent" ·Where: Morgan Stock Stage, Monterey Peninsula College, 980 Fremont St., Monterey ·When: Continues at 7 p.m. Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays through Aug. 22 ·Tickets: \$10-\$25, with young adult (16-25) and group discounts available, at MPC Box Office (646-4213) 3-7 p.m. Wed-Fri. and two hours prior to each show, or online at www.mpctheatre.com ·Information: 646-4213 or www.mpctheatre.com

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