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'Rent' Control: Syracuse Stage director demands show's lyrics be heard, no matter how loud the music gets

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The Post-Standard

Jene Hernandez (as Mimi) & Ken Clark (as Roger) in Rent at Syracuse Stage. Rent, by Jonathan Larson, directed and choreographed by Anthony Salatino for Syracuse Stage. Troy Hourie (Scenic Designer), Jessica Ford (Costume Designer) Dawn Chiang (Lighting Design), Photo by T Charles Erickson

[Rent by Jonathan Larson gallery \(7 photos\)](#)

*Five hundred, twenty-five thousand
six hundred minutes.
How do you measure
a year in the life?*

That question and its answers roll out in the rock opera "Rent," which opens at **Syracuse Stage** on Friday.

Multiply 525,600 minutes (the number of minutes in a year) by 15, and you will be surprised by the passage of time since "Rent" opened on Broadway in 1996. To be exact, "Rent" opened off-Broadway in February 1996 and on Broadway in April 1996.

Playwright Jonathan Larson exposed the complexities of life in the late 1980s, wrapping them around the framework of Puccini's opera "**La Boheme**," about bohemians in Paris in the 1830s.

In a 1996 New York Times interview, Larson said he wanted to "bring musical theater to the MTV generation."

Told through the lives of eight friends, many of them artists, in New York City's East Village, the playwright put onstage the despair of the AIDS epidemic, homelessness, poverty, drug addiction, homosexuality, gentrification, the torment of trust, faith and love. Audiences experience the many gradations of suffering. Yet, Larson's musical doesn't surrender to hopelessness. He wove threads of optimism — a resiliency and celebration of life — throughout the bleakness.

Anthony Salatino directs and choreographs the Syracuse Stage and Syracuse University drama department co-production. He is an associate professor in the drama department. Eight professional actors are joined onstage by 11 SU students.

Salatino wrestles to maintain the balance between music and text in the rock opera.

"For me, the text and the lyrics really flesh out the characters, and that's paramount in this," he says. "It's operatic in the sense that there's very little spoken lines. It's really composed."

Not so composed that characters can't freely express their emotions.

"It's very exposed in that way, raw. That's why I'm always devoted to the text and fleshing out the characters."

As he does so, Salatino is up against a tidal wave of sound. He fights being "overtaken by this rock beat all the time," he says.

"It's difficult because it's relentless. It keeps driving forward. But I've been making many attempts to articulate and to really know what the operative words are when you're singing and how does that directly move the plot forward or expose your character further. It's a constant focus for me to do that because the backbeat of this rock, you can get lost in that backbeat."

Salatino knows that sound has drowned out other productions.

"There's nothing dramatic in that, just screaming out things. I'm trying to temper these characters. But it's hard sometimes because the music just pushes you and pushes you and pushes you."

"The lyrics need to be paramount. The songs are philosophical in introducing the play and themes of connectiveness, for example."

With Salatino's emphasis on enunciation in "Rent," some audiences will hear references — to AZT, T-cells and Pee-wee Herman — that have faded from the everyday vernacular. Others will be reminded of what was shocking or is still shocking in the story line — a drag queen, a dancer at an S&M club and mention of sodomy, for example.

Salatino believes "Rent" audiences won't be shocked because of the saturation of sensationalism on television and onstage. He says "maybe that's a good thing: to look at the people, not just the exteriors."

Syracuse Stage has suggested the musical is suitable for children 12 years and older, because of the adult situations and sexual content.

The drama surrounding the premiere of the rock opera in 1996 was on- and offstage. Larson, its playwright, died of an aortic aneurysm after the last dress rehearsal before its off-Broadway opening. He was 35 and never witnessed the success of "Rent," which won four Tonys (for score, musical, featured actor in a musical, book for a musical) and the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

The details

What: "Rent," by Jonathan Larson.

Where: Syracuse Stage, 820 E. Genesee St., Syracuse.

When: Opening night is Friday; show runs through Feb. 13.

Tickets: Adults, \$25 to 48, and children, younger than 18, \$16. Call 443-3275 or go to **Syracuse Stage**.

Family guide: Adult situations, mature themes, sexual content (no nudity). Syracuse Stage recommends it as suitable for children 12 years and older.

Also: The Onondaga Historical Association will display an exhibition connected to "Rent" at Stage's Coyne Lobby during the musical's run. It reflects the similarities in social issues, AIDS, gay rights, artists communities and affordable housing, between "Rent" and Central New York.

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