

Slightly Off-Key: "Rent" and "Pride & Prejudice"

Written by Mike Schulz

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RENT

During its first 10 minutes or so, the film version of Jonathan Larson's Tony- and Pulitzer Prize-winning musical *Rent* is so thrilling you might want to applaud. As the opening credits unfurl, the movie's cast – all but two of whom reprise their original stage roles – sings

Rent

's signature number, "Seasons of Love," on a bare stage in dramatic downlight, and performs with fervent, passionate joy.

The camera glides past Adam Pascal, Rosario Dawson, and their co-stars, and the actors' elation is felt in both their soaring, resplendent voices and their gloriously animated faces, and all of a sudden this song that many of us have become *too* well-acquainted with over the years becomes heartbreakingly moving. This deceptively simple prelude is quickly followed by the performance of the show's title number, an angry, ardent rock tirade that culminates with Avenue A ablaze in balls of burning newspaper; the scene is like the flip side to Alan Parker's staging of *Fame*'s title track, the *Fa*

me

kids'

joie de vivre

replaced with a desperate New Yorker outrage.

Rent's splendid opening is not just exhilarating but surprising, because offhand, I can think of no

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director more ill-suited to this material than Chris Columbus. After draining the first two Harry Potter films of their magic and setting the art of screen comedy back a good 10 years with the grotesquely obvious and unfunny *Home Alone*, Columbus has proven himself be the most maddeningly pedestrian of Hollywood's successful helmers. Yet in

Rent

's first few scenes, and at odd moments throughout, Columbus and screenwriter Stephen Chbosky have done something unexpected and absolutely necessary with Larson's opus about love, death, and AIDS; they've taken a stage work acclaimed (and, in some circles, reviled) for its grit and honesty and have bestowed on it a giddy, show-biz razzle-dazzle.

Rent

the movie is now more theatrical than

Rent

the play, and that's actually the only way the material (in 2005, at least) can conceivably work on-screen.

Like *Hair*, which was similarly the Right Musical at the Right Time, *Rent* now has an insular, time-capsule air to it. Borne of fear and anger as much as exultation, Larson's work was a rallying cry for youths, artists mostly, ignored by the Bush administration in early-'90s America. But, seen a decade later, many of the show's attitudes have become clichés, and its Broadway-style presentation of characters suffering from discrimination and disease feels depressingly lightweight.

Rent

, at this point in time, has entered its awkward-adolescent phase, too old to be a "hip" musical – the show became a period piece

awfully

quickly – and too recent to be considered a classic. (People are now officially

embarrassed

to have been moved by

Rent

once upon a time.)

The presentation of *Rent*'s first two numbers here hints that the movie isn't afraid to be wildly theatrical, a style that many fans will despise, but which actually aids the material enormously; we're allowed to appreciate the show not as a social critique, but as a big, splashy Hollywood musical. And the movie occasionally delivers on its early promise.

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's most invigorating number, "La Vie Boheme," is a terrifically energetic musical bombardment – it has some of the freewheeling spirit of Milos Forman's staging of "I Got Life" in 1979's

Hair

– and several others here are sharply edited without seeming bombastic; this

Rent

is the rare modern movie musical that

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doesn't

feel edited within an inch of its life.

But damn Chris Columbus and his middlebrow blandness! By film's end, it turns out that the movie's imaginative sequences were actually aberrations; most of the film is as logy and rhythmless as Columbus' *oeuvre* dictates. He lingers over the blackouts to his musical numbers with pace-killing reverence, and he doesn't get any momentum going in the dialogue sequences; the movie *dies* between its musical interludes. Its rare high points excepted, *Rent* is devoid of personality. The show has been preserved with dignity and lovely voices, but it isn't *alive*

. When it veers off into flights of fancy – the staging of "The Tango Maureen" being a fine example –

Rent

has some flavor, but, for most of its two-plus hours, the results are tragically bland, as if the filmmakers didn't

trust

their more fanciful instincts.

Sadly, though, there's an even bigger problem with the film of *Rent*; despite their spectacular voices, the actors seem almost universally miscast. In theory, I'm all for stage performers getting to re-create their roles in film – how often do hard-working thespians such as Anthony Rapp and Wilson Jermaine Heredia get to front-line a movie? – but

Rent

belies the major difference between a stage star and a movie star: screen charisma. Some of the performers here – Idina Menzel, in particular – feel distractingly older than the age required for their characters, but what's more damaging is that this ensemble doesn't command the screen even in their solo numbers; you're hard-pressed to remember the actors' performances five minutes after the movie ends. Of all of

Rent

's cast members, the only one who seems truly vibrant is Rosario Dawson, who takes over the role of Mimi from Daphne Rubin-Vega, and whose sublimely damaged sexiness gives the movie real texture. (Her singing is spectacular, too.) Dawson grabs the camera with an almost carnal force that none of her co-stars can manage; even Taye Diggs, who has a longer list of film credits and can be an equally potent on-screen presence, blends into the scenery. When Dawson is grabbing the screen by its lapels – or when the musical numbers occasionally explode –

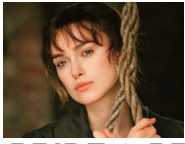
Rent

is a joyous experience. But more often than not, it feels under-imagined and generic, an explosion of music with precious few sparks.

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PRIDE & PREJUDICE

I hoped that director Joe Wright's adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice* – the author's humorously romantic meditation on love and class – would be handsomely rendered, and I was not disappointed; the stunningly graceful cinematography by Rowan Osin and haunting musical contributions of Dario Marianelli were especially noteworthy. I hoped the movie would be well-acted, and it is

spectacularly

well-acted; among a formidable cast, Matthew Macfadyen is a soulful, wounded Darcy, Donald Sutherland makes Mr. Bennett almost painfully touching, and Keira Knightley, as Elizabeth, has never been better. Playful yet wary, and in constant turmoil over how to maintain her independence within societal demands, Knightley gives the subtlest, most mature performance we've yet seen from her. In short, I was just hoping the film would do justice to the novel, and Wright and company have

more

than done it justice; the movie is blissfully assured, and Wright manages to keep the light comedy intact while also lending the material more emotional resonance than you might be prepared for – both the romantic sequences and the scenes inside the Bennett household carry the welcome weight of reality. I would never go on record as saying

Pride & Prejudice

the movie is better than

Pride & Prejudice

the book, but this adaptation has been so spectacularly produced and performed that it's almost a viable argument.