Written by Thom White
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In the program's director's notes, Matthew Helton reveals that he stepped into the role of director for the Harrison Hilltop Theatre's production of *Rent* hours before the first rehearsal, not giving him enough time to do much more than reproduce the Broadway staging of the show. The replication is arguably forgivable, given his time constraints, but also unfortunate, as little of the performance possesses the mark of being the local theatre's own take on composer Jonathan Larson's work. That being said, however, the production lives up to and even exceeds expectations, due to the singing ability of its cast, and the high energy of its band.

Rent follows a year in the bohemian lives of a group of artists and musicians living in the New York's Lower East Side. From one New Year's Eve to the next, several struggle with drugs, homelessness, and AIDS while they all try to hold on to a sense of family, and during Friday's performance, I could sense the cast's absolute excitement at being a part of such an iconic piece of musical theatre.

Among many outstanding performers, Jennifer Stone is one of the funniest of the several Maureens I've seen, with her unselfconscious, no-holds-barred, bare-all approach creating the first one to ever get me to willingly "moo." Tracy Pelzer-Timm's voice fills the room with impressively pleasing sound during her brief solo performance, and left me wanting more. And Joseph Baez - who, for me, stole the show in the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's *Holly Jolly Christmas* - excels as Angel, particularly outside of the character's scripted lyrics. (I especially enjoyed his haggling over the price of a coat.)

The character of Angel, however, is somewhat problematic. As written, the role is little more than a fun and likable drag queen. It's not until after Angel's death, though, that it's revealed how much the character meant to the others in the show - that Angel was the glue holding the group together - and because of this, I'd never previously cried over Angel's death. (Significance is less significant when conveyed in hindsight.) That changed when Rodney Swain, as Tom Collins, performed the reprise of "I'll Cover You." With tears streaming down his face, Swain's Collins lamented the loss of his love, and the moment was powerful enough that, while not

directly mourning Angel, I felt Collins' pain, too, and cried. (*Rent* marks Swain's theatrical debut in the Quad Cities - though you've perhaps seen him performing as a Bootlegger at Circa '21 - and his performance left me excited to see what's next for him theatrically.)

It's Steve Lasiter and Daryn Harrell, however, who most impressed me. Paired as Roger and Mimi, they possess some of the strongest singing voices of the cast, making their duets all the more emotional and enjoyable. Lasiter's skills as an actor are also laudable, highlighted in his two solo songs, "One Song Glory" and "Your Eyes," both of which gave me goosebumps.

While wildly enjoyable, Harrison Hilltop's *Rent* is not without its flaws. James Bleecker, who was remarkable as Prior in the Green Room Theatre's *Angels in America* and Benjamin in Harrison Hilltop's *The Graduate*, is out-of-place here; his off-key and off-rhythm singing were significant distractions. A shaky, sometimes oddly employed spotlight also pulled focus from what it was meant to highlight. And while much of Danny Boman's choreography was impressive, some of it seemed limiting to the actors (most significantly in "Out Tonight"), as if they either weren't given enough to do, or wanted to give more, physically, but were held back by their directed movements. There were also a few awkward compositions; I sat in the second row, in the second seat from center, and *still* couldn't see half of Maureen's "Over the Moon" solo. (Which is regrettable, as what I *did* see was fantastic.)

Weaknesses and issues of reproducing the Broadway staging aside, *Rent* should be considered a triumph for the Harrison Hilltop Theatre, counted among its best productions, if not *the* best. It'll be a shame if every seat isn't filled for the show's entire run.

For tickets and information, call (563) 449-6371 or visit HarrisonHilltop.com .

Thom White covers entertainment news for WQAD Quad Cities News 8.