

## New Lease on Life: "Rent," at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre through June 13

Written by Thom White  
Monday, 07 June 2010 06:00

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As a frequent theatre-goer, both professionally and preferentially, it's refreshing to see familiar material presented in a different way. Such is the case with the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's production of *Rent*. Director Patrick Stinson and his cast abandon most of the conventions of the Broadway production, creating their own interpretation and consequently instilling more fun into this musical story of Bohemian life in New York's Alphabet City.

This is mostly due to the cast *having* such fun being part of this iconic piece of musical theatre. On Saturday night, I could sense the delight wafting from the stage as the actors belted their way through the show's familiar tunes... although, in truth, the Showboat's production is better sung than acted. The men and women portraying *Rent's* characters don't seem to understand their depth, and, for the most part, fail to connect in their interpretations. However, they do get that this is an exciting show, that it's exciting to be a part of it, and that the audience is most likely excited to see it. (They even play some jokes directly to the audience.) That's why it's so much fun... at least for the first act.

What drives Act I pulls Act II back, since - as with too many musicals - *Rent's* most upbeat numbers heavily populate the first half of the show, leaving the emotionally heavy and more serious songs for the second. And given this cast's lack of connection to their characters, Act II drags, plodding along through the storyline.

Making matters worse, Stinson has chosen to remove the song "Contact" altogether. I will argue to my dying day that the character of Angel is less poignant than intended by the show's creator, Jonathan Larson. "Contact," however, at least adds emotion to Angel's death, with its

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instant flip of feeling mid-song; *without* the song, Angel's death carries little impact. We suddenly hear the other characters eulogize Angel, but since we didn't "experience" his death with them, there's a disconnect between what the characters on stage are feeling and what we in the audience are. (Or rather, are *not*.)



Still, there's much that's good about the Showboat's *Rent*, not least of which is Amber Grey, who plays Joanne. If anyone on stage understands, feels, and disappears into a character, it's Grey, who hits all the right notes, both vocally and emotionally. (It's a shame that Joanne isn't a bigger role!) Also too small, here, is the role of Benjamin, which showcases Antwaun Holley's talent and impressive vocal ability, but leaves you wishing he were on stage more often.

Jeni Noble's Mimi also connects with the emotions of her character, though not as consistently; there are a few moments in the first act where Noble seems to be going through the motions rather than fully expressing Mimi's thoughts and feelings. In the second act, however, Noble doesn't miss an emotional beat, enacting love lost, then *life* lost, then the joy of living again.

And speaking of beats, some of the cast members had trouble staying *on* them, so the musicians deserve high accolades for their ability to adapt quickly - catching up to, or slowing down for, rhythmically-off actors on several songs. To their credit, the musicians made such corrections seamlessly, keeping the momentum of the show moving.

The same cannot be said for those controlling the levels on the cast's body microphones, as actors - on far too many songs to be overlooked - were all-too-often several words into a number before their mics were turned up. It's a tough task, especially with so many microphones to manage, but it's troubling to the audience when so many lines are missed or volume is set too high, distorting the quality of an actor's voice (as was the case on almost all of Grey's songs).

The Showboat's *Rent* is not a polished production. While far from perfect, though, it's still a lot of fun in the first half. Were the cast to bring the energy of Act I to Act II, the show would still be imperfect, but you'd have too much fun to care!

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*For tickets and information, call (563)242-6760 or visit [ClintonShowboat.org](http://ClintonShowboat.org) .*

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