

Cast readies for three-day run of 'RENT' at LMC



Tierra Payne portrays Mimi Marquez during a dress rehearsal for the Lake Michigan College Performing Arts Department's musical "RENT," which begins Friday in the Hanson Theatre of LMC's Mendel Center.

By RALPH HEIBUTZKI
HP Correspondent

BENTON HARBOR — If you only associate the award-winning "RENT" with starving artists and their struggles against disease and drug abuse, you don't really know the whole story.

While those elements definitely loom large in the musical, there's also a deeper message in the vision of the play's late creator, Jonathan Larson, that's often overlooked, Director Susan Matheny says.

"I don't think he was trying to expose us to the HIV epidemic, or to promote the bohemian lifestyle," she says. "He was thinking about the most important thing you can do — surround yourself with a group of people that you love, who love you in return, and don't let go of those people. And be brave enough to love those people, regardless of whether somebody else thinks you shouldn't."

Set in the late 1980s, "RENT" follows a group of impoverished artists and musicians struggling to hold their lives together in New York City amid drug abuse, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and gentrification.

What's not always known, however, is that Larson and his collaborators drew much of his inspiration from Giacomo Puccini's opera, "La Boheme," Matheny says.

"They took this opera set in Italy, and said, 'Let's put it in New York — and instead of tuberculosis being the disease du jour, let's make HIV the disease,'" Matheny says. "It's really moving, because we all have a story like that in our head, of whether or not some group was right for us, or not. And we've all had loss."

Larson never lived to see the success of his vision, dying of an undiagnosed aortic aneurysm at age 35 on Jan. 25, 1996 — opening night of the musical's Off-Broadway run.

The show stirred a groundswell of critical acclaim and public demand that led to a 12-year stint on Broadway, which ended in 2008, and a film in 2005



LMC's cast of "RENT" had to learn the cultural, historical and topical references, so they could dig deeper into their roles, including finding a landline telephone with an answering machine.

featuring most of the original cast members.

However, don't expect LMC's production to have any real similarity to the film, since it's a different medium.

In a movie, "they can take you to the mountains, and then, take you somewhere else," Matheny says. "What we've done with our version is, we've kept it intimate. We use the whole theater. We're not using much in the way of props, because it just doesn't need it. It's a wonderful story that is told through almost complete singing. So it doesn't need a ton of embellishment and fireworks."

The LMC production's cast includes Lane Alsup (playing Mark Cohen), Kendra Ann (Joanne), Kuanus Harnett (Tom Collins), Tierra Payne (Mimi Marquez), Brandon Rock (Roger Davis), Ricky Walston (Angel) and Tristan Wright (Benzy).

Music is directed by Rebecca Selvidge, pit musicians are directed by John Owens, and choreography is directed by Emily Hosinski.

IF YOU GO

What: Lake Michigan College Performing Arts Department presents "RENT"

When: 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 3 p.m. Nov. 22

Where: Hanson Theatre, Lake Michigan College Mendel Center, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$7, \$5 for seniors, free for LMC students

Contact: 927-8876, 927-1221 or www.themendelcenter.com

For the cast, getting a part also meant learning about "RENT's" cultural, historical and topical references, so they could dig deeper into their roles.

"We were going through our Facebook group, and everybody was popping things that they'd figured out. It's been a really educational production for us, in

that way because there's a lot of stuff that they talk about," Matheny says.

Such discoveries had their lighter side, such as when Matheny asked some of her actors to find a certain type of telecommunications device in the LMC prop shop.

"I said, 'We're looking for a phone with an answering machine, so dig around, and see what you see.' I don't think any of them knew what they were looking for. I said, 'Preferably one with a cassette tape in it,'" Matheny says, laughing. "And they were like, 'What?' And it's been kind of fun."

All jokes aside, however, "RENT's" story remains as relevant as it did at the time, which is why Matheny recommends checking out "La Boheme," the opera that inspired Larson so much.

"This show will break your heart," she says. "There's such beautiful music, first of all. 'Boheme' is probably my favorite opera, so it's very close to me, and all of the themes I'm hearing throughout (both musicals) really do connect with me."