

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 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 sto-

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 of-ten 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 importhinking about the most impor-tant 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

Set in the late 1980s, "RENT" follows a group of impoverished featuring most of the original artists and musicians struggling cast members.
to hold their lives together in However, don't expect LMC's New York City amid drug abuse the HIV/AIDS epidemic and gentrification.
What's not always known,

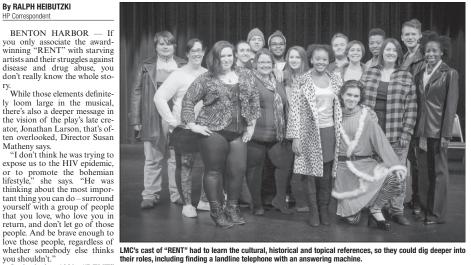
however, is that Larson and his to the mountains, and then, take collaborators drew much of his you somewhere else," Matheny inspiration from Giacomo Puc-cini's opera, "La Boheme," Matheny says.

Italy, and said, 'Let's put it in props, because it just doesn't New York – and instead of tuneed it. It's a wonderful story beculosis being the disease du that is told through almost comjour, let's make HIV the disease, "Matheny says." It's really a ton of embellishment and firemoving, because we all have a works."

The LMC production's cast

Broadway run.

The show stirred a groundended in 2008, and a film in 2005 Hosinski.



production to have any real sim ilarity to the film, since it's a different medium.
In a movie, "they can take you

says. "What we've done with our version is, we've kept it intimate. We use the whole theater. We're They took this opera set in not using much in the way of

story like that in our head, of whether or not some group was includes Lane Alsup (playing 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-gel) and Tristan Wright (Ben-

ny).

Music is directed by Rebecca

IF YOU GO

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

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

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.the mendelcenter.com

For the cast, getting a part opera also meant learning about much "RENT's" cultural, historical and topical references, so they heart, could dig deeper into their roles.
"We were going through our

The show stirred a ground-swell of critical acclaim and Selvidge, pit musicians are dispublic demand that led to a 12-rected by John Owens, and chover stint on Broadway, which reography is directed by Emily figured out. It's been a really educational production for us, in really do connect with me.

that way because there's a lot of stuff that they talk about," Ma-

stuff that they take 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

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