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Rent

by Andrew Clark

EDGE Contributor

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Julian Alvarez (Angel), Mark Willis Borum (Roger), Brit West (Mimi), and Carl Nathaniel Smith (Ensemble) in "Rent" (Source: BRT Staff)

One of the longest running and also one of the most widely loved Broadway musicals in history, "**Rent**," has arrived at the Bristol Riverside Theatre, and it is quite a satisfying production. Being something of "Renthead" myself, I saw the Broadway production many times and enjoyed every cast.

Sure, not every show was perfect, but "Rent" is a strong production and doesn't ever depend on one thing or one cast member to make it a success or failure. Still, it was with trepidation that I entered Bristol last night because despite never having a bad experience seeing "Rent," this was my first showing off of Broadway.

I am pleased to say that it was not only a faithful showing, but also a surprisingly exhilarating one! That said, there were a few problems. First of all, I didn't love the set. I am sure it is very difficult to

replicate the original staging, but I will say it felt a little bit more bare bones than I would have preferred and one or two scenes suffered for it.

Secondly, the male leads in the show did not quite measure up their female counterparts. While I find this to be annoyingly common in "Rent," it was still a bit distracting.

There was also one key factor missing in much of the show and that was a sense of urgency. One of the most spectacular and important aspects of "Rent" is the constant message and feel of the characters living for the immediate, and this did not come across as often as it should have.

But with all of that being said, there was more than enough of the good to counteract any of the bad. It was faithful without feeling derivative, familiar without losing its excitement. This is a production that seemed set to not only prove that "Rent" deserved its incredibly long run, but also that it is still not ready to stop.

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The few moments where her voice wasn't quite up to the task, she always made that extra effort to continue to entertain in another way. Vocally,

of particular note was her strong and stunning performance of "Without You." West was mesmerizing from beginning to end and truly worthy of the role.

Another delight was Jamila Sabares-Klemm as Maureen. A difficult role to play due to a mostly unlikeable set of actions and far too few musical numbers, Sabares-Klemm truly made the most of every moment on stage. Whether it was performing the funniest "Over the Moon" I have seen, stealing the scene during "La Vie Boheme" or transforming into a vocal hurricane in her battle with Joanne in "Take Me Or Leave Me," the lady was an absolute superstar.

I would also be remiss in not mentioning Nadine Zahr. Always an interesting presence on the stage, she caught my eye early on. She is, of course, the ensemble cast member with many of the big female parts in ensemble numbers, and she was fantastic time and again.

But it was her vocal performance in "I'll Cover You (Reprise)" that truly blew me away. It is one of the most emotional moments of the show and the focus generally is very much on the character

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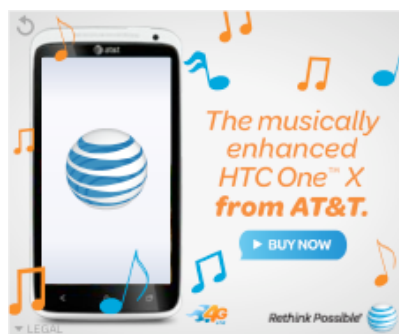
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"Rent" runs through June 3 at Bristol Riverside Theatre, 120 Radcliffe Street, Bristol PA. For info or tickets call 215-785-0100 or vis brtstage.org

Tom Collins. However, I was unable to tear my gaze or ears away from her stellar performance. So, congratulations on a truly impressive showing, Ms. Zahr.

Overall, "Rent" at Bristol Riverside Theatre did exactly what the show has always set out to do. It emotionally documented the underside of the late '80s/early '90s culture that was ravaged by HIV/AIDS and the overwhelming feeling of being left behind.

It made a strong case for living your life for love and always seeking a way to live in the present and to the fullest. Sure, some of the grit and sentiment has worn off over the years, but I was delighted that the feelings I have for the show have not.

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