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Rent

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
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Joan Marcus (Source:Annaleigh Ashford as "Maureen" and Corbin Reid as "Joanne" in "Rent")

"Rent", the musical inspired by "La Bohème," rocked Broadway for 12 years, picking up a 1996 Tony award along the way before closing in 2008. Now, this story of love, friendship, life, and death among a group of friends squatting in Alphabet City in the '90s is back at New World Stages near Times Square with a talented new cast.

"Rent" opens on the cold-water Avenue B flat of Mark (Adam Chanler-Berat) and Roger (Matt Shingledecker), two young men hoping to make their mark on the world. It is Christmas Eve 1991, and as filmmaker Mark throws himself into his work to forget that his girlfriend Maureen (Annaleigh Ashford) has dumped him for a lesbian, maudlin Roger tries to write the one great song that will change the world. But time's not on his side; AZT is all that stands

between him and the AIDS diagnosis passed on to him from his ex-girlfriend before her suicide.

Still, it's Christmas Eve, the time for friends to pop by spreading good will. Friends like Benny (Ephraim Sykes), their former roomie turned landlord, who stops by seeking a year's worth of back rent. Their loyal pal Tom Collins (Nicholas Christopher) also comes by for a visit, but is mugged along the way. Sweet, sassy drag queen Angel (MJ Rodriguez) comes to his aid, and the two find love.

Meanwhile, back at the flat, Roger's tortured artistry is interrupted when his stripper neighbor Mimi (Arianda Fernandez) stops by searching for a light for her candle. Although she's weak from cold and hunger, she's strong enough to make a pass at Roger, who rejects her. Afraid to disclose his status - and put off by Mimi's addiction to smack -- he pushes her out of his apartment, and out of his heart.

Down on the street, things are heating up as Maureen's new girlfriend Joanne (Corbin Reid) works to arrange a protest against the ousting of the homeless camp set up in the vacant lot next to the loft.

Benny, who has married rich, promises to release his friends from their rental obligations if they will get Maureen to cancel the protest. He wants the lot cleared so he can build his state-of-the-art cyber-studio.

The boys reject the proposal, and Mark puts aside his jealousy and loathing to help Joanne prepare for the show. They commiserate over Maureen's constant infidelities with the dance, "Tango Maureen."

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As Mark joins his friends at a PLWHAs support group, Mimi makes another pass at Roger, saying there is "no day but today." Telling her to "take the moonlight out of your hair," he sends Mimi away once again. The ensemble sings a sad tune about keeping one's dignity in the face of death, with Roger asking, "Will I wake tomorrow from this nightmare?"

As Roger pulls away from Mimi, Angel and Collins grow closer. They all come together to view Maureen's avant-garde performance art piece, and at an after party at Life Café, sing "La Vie Bohème." Angel helps pull the gang of friends closer together, Joanne dumps Maureen, and Roger succumbs for his attraction to Mimi when he discovers that she, too, is HIV-positive.

Act Two opens with the show's most well known anthem, "Seasons of Love," which posits the many

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F#*K'N Classy Thursdays at Score was hosted by Chyna Girl and Danny Ferro, with DJ Daisy

ways to spend the 525,600 minutes of a year. It's New Year's Eve by now, and the gang comes together to break into their padlocked loft, just before Benny comes by with the key, seeking to make amends.

But every silver lining has a dark cloud. Despite her love for Roger, Mimi is back on smack, and eventually gets back with her ex, Benny. Maureen and Joanne's precarious détente is threatened by a flirtation with a latex-clad babe at the Clit Club, and the two share an excellent, sultry duet, "Take Me or Leave Me." Reid really shows her singing chops here. By Valentine's Day, Angel begins to succumb to AIDS.

The funeral becomes a battleground. Roger accuses Mark of hiding behind his camera, and hocks his guitar to buy a car bound for Santa Fe. Mimi takes an unsuccessful stab at rehab, and Mark wrestles with the proposal to sell his riot footage to a sensationalist TV network. The ensemble sings, "Living in America," a tune about life at the end of the millennium.

Those 525,600 minutes eventually pass by, and it is Christmas Eve once again. Roger has returned to New York with the one perfect song for Mimi, who pulls a deathbed recovery. Collins is coping with the loss of his lover, remembering well enough how he brought them all together. Looking toward the future with hope, the ensemble comes together to sing "No Day But Today."

Although the stuff of "Rent" is still very much relevant to LGBT lives today, it is also very much the stuff of the '90s. Those Alphabet City squats have been replaced by boutiques and condos, and although AIDS still claims lives, many people live with the virus for years without getting sick.

Still, the cast and ensemble of "Rent" is a talented bunch, blessed with vocal chops, chemistry, and the ability to quickly scramble up ladders in six-inch heels. And as evidenced by the wealth of wistful gays and enthusiastic teens in the audience, the message of love and friendship imparted by "Rent" is one that people still yearn to hear.

"Rent" opens on August 11 for an extended run at New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. For tickets visit <http://newworldstages.com/1-rent.html>.

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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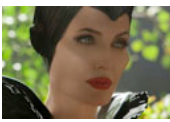
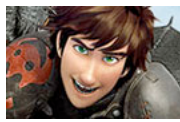
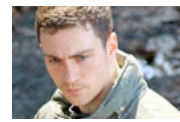


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