

Rent

The film of *Rent*, the lauded and long-running “rock musical,” comes to the screen with energy and dash from a proven cast but with melodies and harmonies that don’t match the quality of the performers. This, the verdict of one movie reviewer who admittedly has never seen the work on stage. Very loosely plucking the premise of Puccini’s opera “La Boheme” and plunking it down in New York City circa 1989 and its AIDS crisis, *Rent* gives us one more bouncy ride through the proverbial lives of poor and starving artists living in a garret--er, Village loft.

“Rent is about a community celebrating life in the face of death and AIDS at the end of the millennium.” So said Jonathan Larson, who wrote this story of squatters in a New York East Village garret on Christmas Eve. For someone who knows Puccini, *Rent*’s borrowings from the opera are minimal, hardly crucial. The parallels include a cadre of destitute wannabe artists struggling for respect and work in the Big City, the hero and heroine meeting cute over a candle, the tight community threatened by disloyalty and disease, and a dramatic finale featuring a distressed Mimi.

Yet this updating is really very different, principally because it presents a hip and (overdressed) New York subculture, blended into an ensemble piece with much more complex romantic associations (including two gay couples). Moreover, the protagonists are affected by fresh health dilemmas and represent a considerable range of ethnic backgrounds. As with any musical transferred to film, there is the inevitable “opening up” of scenes for the screen and substituting up-close grit for what was once stylized on stage. I’m not sure whether such naturalistic scenes add much to the content of the picture.

The music, as noted above, seems mostly adequate show tune stuff, juiced and gussied up with amplified guitars and moaning deliveries to simulate rock. Most of it is not unpleasant, just not memorable to this listener. Some of it is rancid, like a slinky hootchie number delivered by Mimi (Rosario Dawson) in a show dance dive. There are, however, numbers that stood out, too, such as the vibrant, pistol-packin’ “La Vie Boheme” performed by the ensemble in a rough-and-tumble cafe, and a lament delivered at a funeral by the character Collins (Jesse L. Martin of TV’s “Law and Order”).

The cast, surprisingly for Hollywood musicals, has been transferred almost intact from the original New York performers. Only two of the eight principals are newcomers, the current screen hottie Rosario Dawson, and Joanne, played wittily by Tracie Thomas as one half of a restive lesbian couple. So, overall, we get a chance to see some true musical pros, like Andrew Rapp, Adam Pascal, and Idina Menzel, acquit themselves well with voice and acting panache. It’s a surprise, too, and a pleasure to see actors like Martin and Taye Diggs, so well known now from film and television work, return to musical roots some filmgoers probably didn’t know they had. The whole cast’s ebullience and their genuine camaraderie and affection for each other is the cement that keeps this *Rent* from being too cheap.

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