

Rent (2005)

Rated PG-13 Our ratings: V-1 ; L-3 ; S/N-4 . Running time: 2 hours 15 min.

*Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,
but those who are kind to the needy honour him.
Proverbs 14:31*

Not having much opportunity to rent catch even the touring companies of Broadway plays, I am always glad when Hollywood adapts a recent stage hit. This is especially true with director Chris Columbus and screenwriter Stephen Chbosky's adaptation of Jonathan Larson's Rent, which combines the best and the worst of rock, Broadway, and opera. The work is so crammed with tuneful, powerful music that it made me realize how vacuous is Phantom of the Opera, the latter having but one memorable song. Celebrating friendship and loyalty, love and the joy of living in the moment, the film is a fascinating updating of one of my favorite Puccini operas, La Boheme—and it is for this latter reason that I came away with one misgiving, though it did not come fully to consciousness until the morning after.

The action is moved from a 19th century Parisian bohemian loft to the tenements and vacant lot of Manhattan's East Village in the later 1980s, a time when to be HIV positive meant living under a death sentence. The less than savory characters might make the film a difficult sale for use with a church group, but the human emotions of all the characters, straight and gay, burst forth with each song that reveals the singer's thoughts and values. The exuberant cast, most of whom were in the original Broadway production, includes Rosario Dawson (Mimi), Taye Diggs (Benny), Wilson Jermaine Heredia (Angel), Jesse L. Martin (Tom Collins), Idina Menzel (Maureen), Adam Pascal (Roger), Anthony Rapp (Mark Cohen) and Tracie Thoms (Joanne). My misgiving has to do with Mimi: does her fate seem to smack a bit too much of Hollywood for you, too?

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