

“RENT”

7:30 p.m Thursday, October 16

8 p.m Friday and Saturday, October 17-18

2 p.m Sunday, October 19

7:30 p.m Thursday, October 23

8 p.m Friday and Saturday, October 24-25

2 p.m Sunday, October 26

It ran on Broadway for 12 years, became a major motion picture and found its way onto the iPods of angsty teenagers and showtune junkies everywhere — and now it’s infiltrated Ann Arbor. Starting tonight, with an extended run through Oct. 26th, the Department of Musical Theatre of the School of Music, Theater and Dance will be performing “RENT” live in the Union’s Mendelssohn Theatre.

For anyone who somehow missed the 5,124 Broadway performances or the film released nationwide, “RENT” is the story of eight friends living in the East Village of New York in the 1990s. As homelessness, homophobia, riots, drugs and AIDS prevail, these characters struggle to find love while living without fear. It’s a celebration amidst poverty and death, a refusal to sacrifice the bohemian lifestyle for corporate America and a reminder of the fragility of what matters most.

These heavy themes have caused the U of M cast to go on a journey far beyond the stage, into long discussions about 1980s punk rock, drugs, AIDS and homosexuality, as well as going into extensive research about the socio-political context of the era.

“Heroin’s become a huge part of my life,” joked Ashley Blanchet, a senior in the School of Music. Blanchet plays the role of Mimi, an HIV-positive exotic dancer and drug addict.

She pulled a dime bag of brown sand from her backpack and looked at it apprehensively, for a moment almost forgetting it’s a prop. “But seriously, it is dark; it can be difficult to shake off sometimes,” Blanchet said. “To find out what it means to be a drug addict can be really traumatic.”

School of Music junior Kent Overshown, who plays Collins, is taking a course about AIDS in America. Collins is a gay, homeless philosophy professor who falls in love with drag-queen Angel Dumott Schunard.

Research was a pivotal part of the rehearsal process for everyone involved. The cast learned about East Village Park in the late 1980s, a time when homeless people, drug pushers, prostitutes and skinheads domineered and tyrannized the neighborhood. By 1988, the situation was so bad that the local government instated a curfew, and the neighborhood reacted with the Tompkins Square Park riot. These two consecutive days of protest, violence and police brutality led the city of New York to wage a war on homelessness, led by Rudolph Giuliani.

The Internet also provided cast members with some unconventional research. School of Music junior Mark Ayesh has been reading blogs where people post their feelings and experiences with AIDS. Ayesh plays Roger, an HIV-positive musician and Mimi's love interest. Ayesh called the epidemic a Sept. 11 of the '80s and '90s.

"I can't even wrap my head around (AIDS) happening. The lack of scientific research done in medicine, a disease going around that people don't know about — that would be crazy."

The cast made a quilt for the show in cooperation with the Names Project, an organization with the goal of spreading awareness by respecting those who've lost their lives to AIDS. The Memorial Quilt, currently in Atlanta, is comprised of more than 40,000 three-by-six foot panels and growing. The cast made eight of these panels, filled with the names of friends, family members and influential figures with HIV.

Yet throughout these challenging topics, the show manages to rock. The vibrancy and revelry of the LGBTQ community is evoked with daring color and costume, electric guitar melodies and entertainingly uninhibited sexuality — all with the uncompromising "fuck you" attitude of idealistic youth.

That's what makes this cast so perfect for "RENT." Unlike most plays done in college, these students don't have to play grandfathers or farmers or little kids — the actors get to play characters who are supposed to be their age and have the same intensity in everything they do. There's a certain energy that only comes with being a 20-something artist, desperate to change the world, that these actors can bring to the stage.

"It's really hard not to bring part of yourself into the characters because they're so close to the heart," said Ayesh.

Overshown feels the same way: "If you asked me, I could sing the show backwards, word for word. It's so much a part of our generation it's only natural to feel magnetized to it," he said.

Director and Associate Professor of Musical Theatre, Mark Madama, is taking this energy to form the play. Instead of controlling the creative process, Madama is making sure to keep egos aside and tell the story as best he can, expressing the darker issues, but more importantly creating a celebration of life, a dominant theme he has instilled into the cast.

School of Music senior Cary Tedder, who plays Mark — an aspiring filmmaker and Roger's roommate — has embraced these values wholeheartedly. "Death and disease and homelessness and poverty — these things exist, but it's no reason to not live in love, live for today," Tedder said. "Give into love or live in fear."

Blanchet agreed. "The message isn't about drugs or AIDS. The message of the show is no day but today."