



A Broadway cast of *Rent*; (insert) the new Aussie production's director, Shaun Rennie.



# BOHEMIA IS BACK

The struggling artists of the East Village sign a new lease in Sydney with *Rent*.

**THEY SAY** if you remember the '60s you weren't really there, but if you remember the '90s you'd definitely know the Monica Lewinsky scandal and a show about nothing called *Seinfeld*. But in the world of theater, the show of the moment was *Rent*.

Penned by Jonathan Larson in 1989, *Rent* is the story of a group of young people trying to make ends meet on the streets of New York's East Village. Based on Puccini's *La Boheme*, the story features homelessness, drug addiction, homosexuality and AIDS. With a young cast battling the issues of the day, yet

celebrating what life has to offer, it reflected the rebellious enthusiasm often seen in other iconic productions such as *Hair*, *Godspell* and *Saturday Night Fever*.

Sadly, Larson died of a sudden brain aneurism the night before *Rent*'s first preview, however, the show went on to earn a massive following and adulation that included four Tony Awards and a Pulitzer Prize in 1996. But apart from the accolades, the biggest win *Rent* found was within the hearts of Generation X, who dubbed it the *Hair* of the '90s.

On Broadway it made stars of Idina Menzel and Taye



Diggs, while doing the same in Australia for Christine Anu and Rodger Corser. Fans of the show, known as Rentheads, spent hours lined up outside theatres for front row seats. It wasn't quite the dawning of the age of Aquarius, but it was certainly a new era in musical theatre.

Now, in the great intimate space of Sydney's Hayes Theatre, an ensemble of young Australian performers are once again belting out the rock, grunge and R&B tunes that defined their parents' generation.

Fresh from *Heathers The Musical*, Stephen Madsen plays Mark, the struggling documentary filmmaker and best friend to musician Rodger, played by newcomer Linden Furnell. Loren Hunter is dancer Mimi, Laura Bunting is performance artist Maureen and Casey Donovan plays her love interest, Joanne. If you managed to catch Casey Donovan's portrayal of Mama Cass in *Flowerchildren*, you know she's come a long way since her *Australian Idol* win.

According to director Shaun Rennie, this is an opportunity to see the show as it was originally

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intended. “*Rent* started out Off-Broadway in a theatre about the same size as the Hayes,” he says. “It was written to be edgy, in your face, fringe theatre, and doing the show here allows us to be true to the original intent of Jonathon Larson.”

He sees *Rent* as the musical that changed musicals for a whole generation. “It appeals to everyone who has ever felt lost, to everyone who has ever loved, to everyone who has felt unheard... and that is all of us!” says Rennie. “It’s going to blow the roof off the joint!”

Indeed it might. The music of *Rent* can be soulful, poignant and electrifying but let’s not forget that it also inspired the *Team America* parody, *Everyone Has AIDS*.

Still, to many, *Rent* is simply a masterpiece of modern theatre. It’s a shame Jonathan Larson never lived to see its success, which is a story in itself.

**MORE:** *Rent* plays from 8 October to 1 November. Visit [www.hayestheatre.com.au](http://www.hayestheatre.com.au).