‘Rent’: when truth is stranger than fiction

It reads like the plot of a tragic novel: an impoverished young musical theatre composer living in New York works as a waiter to support his artistic endeavours. After seven long years of struggle, the composer’s magnum opus scores a season on Broadway, the pinnacle of the American theatre industry. However, just hours before the musical’s premiere performance, the composer suddenly dies. The musical opens, becomes a Broadway sensation, and goes on to play in theatres around the world. It is later revealed that had the composer been properly diagnosed and treated, he would have lived.

Yet this is not fiction, this is the real-life story behind the musical Rent.

In 1996 Rent burst onto Broadway, picking up a swag of awards including a Pulitzer Prize and four Tony Awards. It was described as “a raw and riveting milestone in musical theatre” by Rolling Stone, “a landmark rock opera” by The New York Times and “the most exuberant and original musical to come along in a decade” by Time Magazine.

Jonathan Larson, the writer, composer and lyricist of Rent, was not alive to see its success, having died of an aortic aneurysm just one day before the show’s opening night.

The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts has chosen this multi award-winning musical as the first showcase for its 3rd Year Music Theatre students for 2009. Rent will open on Saturday 14 March in WAAPA’s Roundhouse Theatre for a week of performances. It will be directed by WAAPA’s Program Director of Performance, Andrew Lewis, with musical direction by WAAPA’s Head of Music Theatre, David King, and choreography by WAAPA’s Dance Coordinator, Jenny Lynnd.

A modern spin on Puccini’s opera La Boheme, Rent tells the tale of a group of impoverished young artists and musicians struggling to survive in the wildly bohemian days of New York in the early 1990s. It is little wonder that Larson used his own experiences as a struggling artist to inform his work.

While Rent’s storyline delves into serious social issues of the times such as drug addiction, homophobia and the AIDS epidemic, its exuberant, high-energy music reveals the underlying message that love can prevail despite all odds.

Performance Information: Rent
Saturday 14 – Saturday 21 March at 7.30pm. Matinee Saturday 21 March at 2pm.
The Roundhouse Theatre, WAAPA, Edith Cowan University, 2 Bradford St, Mt Lawley.
Tickets are $39 full/$34 concession. Bookings through WAAPA Box Office on 9370 6636.