

Broadway, College Station

MSC OPAS brings "Rent," a Broadway production, to Texas A&M University

By Kendra Kingsley
THE BATTALION

When Justin Rodriguez auditioned for the Broadway production of "Rent," he felt a little out of place.

"I showed up wearing boots and jeans. Other people there (at the audition) were in dance shoes and sweatpants," Rodriguez said.

"From what I saw, (others who were auditioning) were very talented. In New York, so many people are very trained in dance and drama. I had never thought about trying to take lessons, so I had no dance experience."

At the time of the auditions, 20-year-old Rodriguez was a salesman at Bang Bang, a clothing store in New York, and was reluctantly preparing to return to his hometown of Las Vegas.

"The reason I tried out for 'Rent' in the first place was because I didn't want to go back to Vegas yet," he said.

Regardless of his motive and lack of training, Rodriguez continued to get call-backs from the casting directors.

"I'd never auditioned for anything," Rodriguez said. "I just showed up at auditions and kept getting call-backs."

Now cast as "Angel" and equipped with dancing, singing and acting experience, Rodriguez will join his fellow cast members to perform in the off-Broadway touring production of "Rent." Presented by

OPAS, the Tony- and Pulitzer Prize-winning production will take the stage at Rudder Auditorium on Tuesday, Oct. 29 and Wednesday, Oct. 30.

Kaycee Taylor, a manager of publicity and advertising for OPAS and a sophomore business major, said Rent has already received a positive response from students.

"We give out surveys every season to see what shows students are interested in, and we always see a big interest from the college crowd to bring 'Rent,'" Taylor said.

"This season, we finally got the chance to bring it to College Station, and I think a lot of students are excited to see it."

Despite Rent's controversial themes, including alternative lifestyles and AIDS, Taylor said audiences will appreciate the production as a form of art.

"I think that it's really wonderful that OPAS is bringing 'Rent' because it's such a valid piece of art," she said.

"Even if some parts of it are seen as controversial, it's still an important part of bringing art into the Brazos County area."

Rodriguez agrees audiences should be accepting of Rent's message, rather than judging it by themes they may find controversial.

"Some people might not be familiar with some of the subject matter that's in 'Rent,' but just because it doesn't exist in their town doesn't mean that it doesn't exist," he said.

"I've seen people leave during intermission, and they walk away without understanding what the play is all about. Rent's



message is to live life day by day because no one knows what will happen tomorrow. I hope people will open their eyes and minds and let that message get through."

Sharing Rent's message has meant serious time away from the comforts of home, but Rodriguez said performing more than compensates.

"I moved out of my house at 18, but I still talk to my mom every day," he said. "I miss the comforts of being at home. On the road, you can't always do laundry or grab something to eat. But when you get on stage, it's all worth it. I love it, and I feel so lucky."

While tonight's performance is a long way from Broadway, Rodriguez said he enjoys traveling.

"It's so much fun on the road," he said. "I always wanted to go see the country, and that's been so amazing for me."

To keep him going from performance to performance, Rodriguez said he draws energy from his fellow cast members as well as those behind the scenes. Rodriguez names Jonathan Larson, who wrote Rent and died of an aortic aneurysm the

night of the performance's final dress rehearsal, as one of his major inspirations.

"The week before we went on tour with Rent, Jonathan (Larson's) dad took the entire cast out to Life Cafe, which is from a scene in La Boheme and also the place where Jonathan used to eat with his

friends," Rodriguez said. "Everything in Rent is basically a true story. It was so amazing to meet the people behind the scenes and put faces with characters to see how they related to (Larson's) life."

Since its first performance in 1996, "Rent" has connected with audience members such as Marty Hopkins, a senior political science major. Hopkins, who saw "Rent" last summer in New York, said she plans to see the show again at Rudder Auditorium.

"When I saw 'Rent' on Broadway, it was a phenomenal experience," Hopkins said. "It's an awesome musical and it deals with a lot of modern society's problems so I think a lot of people can relate. I just can't wait to go back and see it all again."

Rodriguez hopes audience members will walk away from the production with the same sentiment.

"(Audience members) shouldn't expect a standard Broadway performance, but they should expect to have a good time," he said. "Most of the time, the audience will walk out smiling with tears in their eyes."

For each performance, 28 seats on the first row will be available for purchase for \$20 the night of the show. These "rush" tickets will go on sale two hours before each show. Additional tickets can be purchased by calling the MSC Box Office at 845-1234.

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