AMATEUR THEATRE REVIEW: RENT – Edge of Town Arts, 53two, Manchester



There is something particularly rewarding about seeing a new theatre company come together with a shared creative ambition and a desire to make a difference beyond the stage. I had the pleasure of attending Edge of Town Arts' production of *RENT* at Manchester's 53two, directed by James Cave. Presented to mark the musical's 30th anniversary and to raise awareness and funds for bereavement causes through the Jennifer Trust, this was an ambitious first production for a company still finding its feet, but one with a great deal of heart, enthusiasm and genuine commitment to the material.

Written by Jonathan Larson and inspired by Puccini's *La Bohème*, *RENT* follows a group of struggling artists and friends living in New York City's East Village between Christmas Eve 1989 and Christmas Eve 1990. Set against the backdrop of the HIV/AIDS crisis, the musical explores poverty, addiction, identity, friendship, love and loss. Beneath its rebellious rock score lies a deeply human story about the importance of connection, the fear of an uncertain future and the need to appreciate the time we have with those we love.

James Cave's direction made sensible use of the venue's relatively limited performance space. *RENT* is not an easy musical to stage, with its demanding score, multiple relationships and frequent changes in location and emotional tone. The production team had clearly considered how to accommodate these challenges without allowing the staging to become unnecessarily complicated.

The exposed brick arches worked naturally alongside the production's industrial aesthetic, creating a believable environment for the bohemian world of New York's East Village. Props remained visible throughout, contributing to the slightly cluttered, lived-in atmosphere, while a scaffolding-style structure at the rear provided additional levels and helped separate scenes. Flight cases, chairs and staging blocks were moved by the cast to create different settings, with transitions generally handled confidently and efficiently.

The intimate surroundings also brought the audience closer to the characters. At times, it felt as though we were sharing their living space rather than observing it from a traditional auditorium. This worked particularly well during the quieter exchanges, where facial expressions and small reactions could be appreciated without the need for exaggerated performances.

The company had reportedly brought the production together in just two months, an especially demanding rehearsal schedule for an amateur theatre group tackling a musical of this scale. There was a clear sense of preparation and commitment across the cast, although the production was not without its challenges. The pace of the musical and the number of interwoven relationships made some transitions demanding, but the cast maintained a good sense of energy, and the stronger character relationships helped keep the audience emotionally invested.



Chris Burr brought a relaxed and likeable quality to Mark Cohen, the aspiring filmmaker who documents the lives of those around him. He appeared comfortable in the role, capturing Mark's slightly awkward nature without making the character overly exaggerated. His more playful moments were particularly enjoyable, especially during *Tango: Maureen* and *La Vie Bohème*, where Burr embraced the opportunity to demonstrate his movement and comedic timing. These scenes provided a welcome contrast to Mark's more observational personality.

Ben Rigby delivered some strong vocal moments as Roger Davis, particularly when embracing the rock elements of Larson's score. His performance of *One Song Glory* was a highlight, with emotional vocals that suited Roger's frustration and underlying vulnerability. Rigby also worked well opposite Becky Brown as Mimi, with their exchanges during *Light My Candle* creating an enjoyable sense of playful tension.

Brown brought confidence and personality to Mimi, particularly during *Out Tonight*, where she clearly enjoyed the opportunity to entertain the audience. Her energetic approach suited the character's more outgoing nature, while her interactions with Roger helped establish the complicated relationship at the centre of their story.

Libby Blindell's choreography was well rehearsed and generally suited to the limitations of the performance area. The opening company number, *Rent*, used movement effectively to establish the restless atmosphere of the characters' world without overcrowding the stage. The choreography supported the storytelling, allowing the performers to move confidently while maintaining the sense of a busy, communal environment.

La Vie Bohème was one of the more enjoyable ensemble numbers, bringing a welcome burst of humour and energy to the production. Libby Blindell's choreography featured lively group arrangements and playful interactions, with clear, recognisable influences from Marlies Yearby's choreography for the US *RENT* 20th Anniversary Tour, which launched in 2016. The cast embraced the rebellious spirit and humour of the number, making it an entertaining moment in the production.

Darcie Quilligan made a suitably confident entrance as Maureen, bringing the sass, theatricality and self-assurance the character demands. Her performance was bold and entertaining, particularly during *Take Me or Leave Me*, where she fully embraced Maureen's larger-than-life personality.

Lauren Ormesher provided an effective contrast as Joanne, ensuring the character was not simply overshadowed by her more flamboyant partner. Her performance of *We're Okay* was particularly strong, demonstrating her ability to hold the audience's attention alone on stage while communicating Joanne's growing frustration with the relationship. Together, Quilligan and Ormesher created a believable contrast between two characters who care for one another but struggle to understand each other's needs.

The lighting and projection design was relatively simple but included several effective moments. Projections across the rear wall suggested the outside world of New York and the changing seasons, helping establish the passage of time. The inclusion of prerecorded rehearsal footage featuring the cast was a lovely personal touch, offering a glimpse of the people behind the production.



The lighting was most successful when used with a clear dramatic purpose. A corridor of light helped bring the company together visually, while a focused spotlight during Mimi's more vulnerable moments created an effective sense of isolation. The colourful disco lighting supported the energy of the dance numbers, and practical effects such as candles and the burning rubbish bin added a welcome touch of realism.

One of the production's greatest strengths was undoubtedly the relationship between Tom Collins and Angel Dumott, portrayed by Jake Liken and Liam Darbyshire, performing as Kiki Inferno. Their natural chemistry and emotional sincerity made them two of the evening's standout performers.

Jake Liken was particularly impressive as Collins, delivering a beautifully understated and naturalistic performance. What I appreciated most was his ability to remain completely engaged, even when he was not the focus of a scene. This was especially noticeable during the Life Support meetings, where subtle glances, reassuring touches and quiet reactions

towards Angel communicated genuine affection without drawing attention away from the wider action. His performance demonstrated how effective acting can be without the need for exaggerated gestures or dialogue.

During *I'll Cover You*, Liken's warmth and sincerity made the relationship feel wonderfully believable, with an effortless connection between the two performers. This made the scenes following Angel's death particularly affecting, as Liken portrayed Collins' grief with honesty and emotional restraint. His thoughtful characterisation and attention to detail made him one of the strongest actors in the company.

Liam Darbyshire, performing as Kiki Inferno, was equally memorable as Angel, combining impressive vocals, confident characterisation and excellent physical ability. Kiki captured Angel's flamboyance and infectious humour while allowing the character's kindness and vulnerability to shine through.

Today 4 U was a particular highlight, showcasing Kiki's energetic dancing and commanding stage presence. And let's not forget those heels! As if strutting confidently in towering heels wasn't impressive enough, Kiki was leaping from flight cases and cartwheeling across the stage with remarkable ease, all while remaining completely in character. I was amazed just watching!

Beyond the energetic numbers, Kiki demonstrated strong vocal versatility and a thoughtful approach to Angel's gradual decline in health. Subtle changes in movement and physical energy conveyed the character's increasing vulnerability without losing the warmth and individuality that made Angel so endearing. This made the character's eventual death all the more poignant.

Together, Liken and Kiki created a wonderfully believable relationship built on affection, companionship and unconditional support. Their contrasting personalities complemented one another beautifully, with Angel's colourful confidence balanced by Collins' quieter warmth. Their chemistry never felt forced or overly sentimental, and it was this genuine connection that gave their story such emotional impact.

A particularly thoughtful element of Cave's direction was the recurring use of Angel's scarf. Throughout the production, the accessory appeared to be a relatively small part of the character's costume, something that could easily have gone unnoticed. However, its significance became clear during the funeral sequence, when the wider company appeared wearing colourful scarves in tribute to Angel.

This was a simple but effective visual idea. The scarves became symbols of remembrance and the lasting influence of someone who had brought so much love and individuality into the lives of those around them. The moment when the company raised their scarves to form the colours of the Pride flag was especially moving, creating a unified image of acceptance, solidarity and love.

With the Pride flag also displayed throughout the production, the symbolism felt connected to the wider message of *RENT*. It reminded us that Angel's importance was not simply in how they lived, but in the love and acceptance they inspired in others. The decision demonstrated

how a relatively small costume detail can gain considerable emotional significance when used thoughtfully within the storytelling.



Peter Rowland's costumes, hair and makeup were appropriate to the characters and the bohemian setting. The mixture of casual, layered clothing and more expressive styling helped distinguish individual personalities without making the production feel overly polished or removed from the world it was portraying.

Mark's understated clothing reflected his relaxed, slightly scruffy personality, while Angel's costume was undoubtedly the most memorable. The striking blonde wig, sparkling red dress and towering heels perfectly complemented Kiki Inferno's performance, creating a look that was bold, glamorous and full of character. Angel certainly took the crown for best dressed of the evening.

Keiran Hickey gave a suitably antagonistic performance as Benny, capturing the character's more self-serving nature and his uneasy relationship with the wider friendship group without turning him into a pantomime villain. He brought a certain confidence and authority to the role, reflecting Benny's position as someone who has moved away from the bohemian lifestyle once shared with his friends. His vocals during *You'll See* were strong, while his visibly unimpressed reactions during Maureen's *Over the Moon* provided some entertaining comic moments. I particularly enjoyed his facial expressions during this scene, which added to the humour without distracting from the performance.

A special mention must also go to 53two, which proved to be a particularly fitting venue for this production. Situated beneath the historic arches of Manchester Central, the Grade II listed surroundings have been transformed into a wonderfully characterful arts space. The exposed brickwork, rustic decoration, paintings and retro cameras scattered across the tables gave the venue a relaxed, creative atmosphere. The mixture of traditional theatre seating, restaurant tables and smaller seating areas made the space feel welcoming and individual rather than conventional.

What I particularly appreciated was the sense of space and accessibility. Despite the number of people attending, the venue never felt overcrowded, with plenty of room to move around and a calm atmosphere throughout. The staff were friendly and helpful, adding to the overall experience.

Beyond its appearance, 53two is also doing important work to make theatre more accessible and inclusive. Its facilities include gently sloping access, a lowered bar, accessible toilets

and flexible seating arrangements, alongside provisions such as ear defenders for neurodivergent visitors and efforts to improve communication with Deaf audiences. As a charity supporting artists and creatives, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and disabled communities, it is encouraging to see a venue placing such importance on making the arts welcoming to everyone. This commitment to inclusion felt especially appropriate for a musical that celebrates individuality and acceptance.

The ensemble contributed positively to the production, particularly during the larger musical numbers and quieter support group scenes. What I particularly appreciated was their continued engagement throughout the performance. Even when they were not the central focus, performers remained connected to the action through subtle reactions, glances, movement and moments of stillness. This helped create the impression of a living, breathing community rather than a collection of characters appearing only when required. Maintaining that level of concentration throughout a demanding musical is no small task, and the company's commitment to supporting the wider storytelling was commendable.



Leanne Houston had a noticeable presence, demonstrating committed dancing during *Out Tonight* alongside entertaining character work as the drug dealer. She moved effectively between comic and more confrontational moments while contributing to the ensemble harmonies.

Jessica Taylor was particularly engaging through her characterisation and reaction work. Her portrayal of the increasingly stressed waiter provided some enjoyable humour, while her performances during the support group scenes showed a more serious and emotionally connected side to her acting. She remained engaged throughout and was clearly enjoying the experience of performing.

Maddi Bajer-Hunt brought energy and good stage awareness to the ensemble, making effective use of the different staging levels and contributing to *Out Tonight*. Her solo vocal moments during the voicemail sequences were particularly commendable, especially given the exposed nature of the phrasing without the support of a backing track. She also handled set movements efficiently while remaining connected to the action.

Nikita-Jade Chambers was another strong ensemble contributor, particularly through her dancing in *Out Tonight* and her expressive vocals during *Seasons of Love*. She embraced the opportunities to step forward from the wider company, demonstrating confidence and good vocal control.

Mel Meadows provided a calm, consistent presence throughout, with nicely controlled vocal contributions during *Life Support* and *Seasons of Love*. Her work as pianist during the latter number also deserves particular recognition.

One of the loveliest features of 53two's bar area was the piano, which initially appeared to be another charming part of the venue's relaxed and creative surroundings. However, towards the end of the interval, this seemingly decorative feature became the centre of one of the evening's most memorable moments, as the company gathered around it to perform *Seasons of Love*.

With the remainder of the production performed predominantly to backing tracks, this was the only live-accompanied number of the evening, featuring Mel Meadows at the piano alongside vocal contributions from Nikita-Jade Chambers and the wider cast.

This was a wonderful piece of creative thinking and, for me, one of the production's greatest successes. Rather than returning to the traditional stage setting, the performers brought the music directly into the communal space of the venue. The audience were able to experience the number at close quarters, creating an intimate atmosphere that felt particularly appropriate for a song concerned with love, memory and the passage of time.

The live piano accompaniment made a noticeable difference, giving the performance a warmth and immediacy that naturally contrasted with the recorded tracks used elsewhere. Meadows played and sang with sensitivity, while Chambers delivered her vocal moments with confidence and emotional control. The ensemble harmonies were well blended, with a good balance between the individual voices and the wider company.

What I particularly appreciated was that the cast did not attempt to overpower the song. *Seasons of Love* is such a familiar and emotionally significant number that it can be tempting to approach it with unnecessary vocal exaggeration. Here, the company allowed the music and lyrics to speak for themselves, resulting in a performance that felt sincere and connected.

For a few minutes, the separation between performers and audience seemed to disappear. Everyone was sharing the same space, listening to a song about the importance of love and human connection. It was community theatre at its finest, demonstrating that an effective theatrical moment does not necessarily require elaborate staging or technical effects. Sometimes, a piano, a group of committed performers and a thoughtful creative decision can achieve far more.



One aspect I was surprised by was the absence of a named Musical Director within the production credits. Musical Directors play an incredibly important role in any musical theatre production, providing guidance with vocal technique, harmonies, musical phrasing and the overall interpretation of the score. This is particularly important for a musical as vocally demanding as *RENT*, where the performers are required to navigate a wide variety of musical styles and complex vocal arrangements. While the cast demonstrated commitment and there were some strong individual vocal performances, I felt that the production would have benefited from more consistent musical guidance and vocal coaching throughout the rehearsal process. This is not a reflection on the efforts of the performers, but rather an area of the creative process that deserves greater attention. A dedicated Musical Director can make a considerable difference in helping a company develop confidence, musical consistency and a unified sound, and I hope this is something Edge of Town Arts will consider for future productions.

Sound was one area where the production experienced some noticeable difficulties. The balance between microphones and backing tracks was inconsistent at times, with certain vocal passages not coming through as clearly as they might have. The acoustics of 53two undoubtedly present their own challenges, particularly when working with amplified vocals and prerecorded accompaniment within such an unusual space. Microphone positioning may also have contributed to some of these inconsistencies, although the cast generally projected well and worked hard to maintain vocal clarity despite the occasional technical difficulties.

There was also a moment when a backstage conversation was accidentally picked up by a performer's microphone. While these technical mishaps can be distracting, it was rather lovely to hear that the performer had family in the audience supporting them! The cast handled the occasional difficulties professionally and continued without allowing them to interrupt the overall flow of the performance.

What ultimately carried this production was the commitment of its performers and their evident affection for the material. While not every moment achieved the same level of theatrical or emotional impact, and greater consistency in sound and musical direction would have strengthened the overall experience, there were some genuinely memorable moments. The touching relationship between Collins and Angel, the thoughtful scarf tribute and the intimate performance of *Seasons of Love* demonstrated what this company could achieve when its creative ideas and performances came together.

Overall, Edge of Town Arts' *RENT* was an enjoyable and heartfelt debut production, particularly considering the relatively short rehearsal period and the challenges of tackling such a demanding musical. There is certainly room for development, but also potential for this newly formed company to build upon its first production. Most importantly, it was encouraging to see a group of performers and creatives coming together to support the valuable work of the Jennifer Trust.

The Jennifer Trust, founded in 2010, provides support for widowed fathers and their children, including bereavement counselling and practical, financial and psychological assistance. Edge of Town Arts was established as a community theatre collective with the aim of raising funds and awareness for bereavement causes through theatrical and artistic projects. It is a lovely cause and one that deserves recognition and support. There is something especially meaningful about a company choosing *RENT*, a musical so deeply concerned with grief, love and chosen family, as its inaugural production. Anyone wishing to learn more about the charity or support its work can visit www.jennifercharity.org.

Thirty years after its Broadway debut and Jonathan Larson's untimely death, the musical's central message remains as relevant as ever. Larson was a passionate advocate for artistic freedom and the bohemian lifestyle, and I imagine he would have appreciated seeing his work performed within such an unconventional creative space, particularly in support of a charity dedicated to helping those experiencing bereavement.



A sincere thank you to the cast, creative team, volunteers and everyone involved with Edge of Town Arts and 53two for a welcoming evening. I wish the company every success as it continues to develop and look forward to seeing what it brings to the stage next.

No day but today.

Reviewer: Abigail Bradbury - AMT Productions

Date: 08.10.26

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https://www.edgeoftownarts.com/