

## MUSKET's season of love



Teresa Mathew/Daily

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In an unassuming rehearsal space in the hinterlands of South Campus, distressed garbage cans stand at the ready in one corner and backpacks are strewn across another. In the center, 16 students wait to transform into AIDS-afflicted, poverty-ridden, fatally idealistic New Yorkers.

Before the acclaimed musical starts, each actor takes hold of a piece of scaffolding, pushing the set into place until a bare loft centered around a dingy couch comes alive. They begin to sing, and as the music swells, their Wolverine garb and fresh faces fade away.

When School of Music, Theatre & Dance senior Ryan Vasquez, playing lost musician Roger Davis, puts down his guitar to back away from Mimi's seductions, you can barely see a tattoo of the Block 'M' peeking from behind his shirt. This is the heart of the University, just in a context not always associated with it.

This is “RENT” as imagined by MUSKET, the student-run musical theater organization on campus. MUSKET is made up entirely of students, and is currently run by producers Ryan Lucas and Hannah Rosenthal, both performing arts management seniors in MT&D. The program puts on one musical each semester that premieres to an audience of around 1,300 people in the Power Center for the Performing Arts.

“MUSKET is this amazing opportunity and this amazing pool of resources,” Lucas said. “We get to use it to experiment, create, make mistakes, grow as leaders and create material that is so fun and accessible for the University.”

As the producers and only members of MUSKET that don’t rotate from show to show, Lucas and Rosenthal were tasked with electing which musicals to perform this year.

“We look for something that we think that people are not only going to be excited to be in but that the campus will be excited to see,” Rosenthal said.

“RENT” is often identified as the ultimate musical for our generation — for so many performers it’s the reason they fell in love with musical theater. Lucas and Rosenthal both have felt connected to the show since childhood, and say everyone, regardless of background, can relate.

### **More than just a show**

MT&D junior Sam Yabrow first heard “RENT” in middle school, riding in the backseat of his mother’s car. He would only sing along to character Mark Cohen’s lines, and now he is reprising the role of warm-hearted and neurotic Mark, albeit in a grander format.

Rosenthal was an unusually short eighth grader when her dad took her to see the movie in theaters; the patrons around them were shocked to see this diminutive little girl watching that “show about AIDS.” She says she understands the themes so much better now — and understands why others were so disapproving.

“RENT” ’s often stigmatized as “that one play about HIV/AIDS” — a practice in extremes and impossibilities rather than vivid humanity.

“When you saw the musical for the first time you were like ‘Oh, it’s about AIDS, everyone dies of AIDS,’ but there is so much more to it than that,” Lucas said.

Written by Jonathon Larson in the late 1980s and early ’90s, “RENT” chronicles a group of artists and activists surviving in New York’s East Village. While many are infected with HIV, the virus isn’t the preeminent theme of the story. Characters fall in and out of love, they sell out, they protest, they lose power just as they lose friends.

As MT&D junior Adam Quinn, the show’s director, puts it, “‘RENT’ is about community. It’s about love. It’s about acceptance. It’s about finding light in the darkness.”

Larson passed away the day of the show's original debut, and since then the musical theater community has revered "RENT," placing his work on a pedestal. Directors can be wary of changing the show in any way, afraid of desecrating the image Larson initially created. However, Quinn wanted to revamp this production, casting away some of the tropes that have become stale over the course of 20 years.

"Any production you see, you see Mark's plaid scarf, and Roger's plaid pants, and Mimi wearing the ridiculous blue leggings, and all the staging is the exact same," he said.

This summer, he tore into the script, trying to understand the driving desires of each character. He wanted to do justice to Larson's masterpiece but in a fresh way. While no changes were made to the script, he completely reworked the staging and casting of the production.

The production team auditioned more than 300 students — the largest number in MUSKET history — for 16 roles, consolidating 45 ensemble parts into just eight.

This intimacy and fluidity between characters illustrates just how universal the situations in "RENT" are. LSA freshman Nick Shaheen plays a drug dealer in one scene then swiftly transforms into the HIV support group leader in the next.

By doing away with some of the oft-used symbols of the musical, Quinn hopes to surprise students who love "RENT" and invigorate those who aren't familiar with it.

### **Uncommon dedication**

MUSKET rehearses at the Student Theater Arts Complex, a small, unremarkable building tucked next to Michigan Stadium. During their rehearsal times, 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. six days a week, the area feels unreal — a still, cold land bowing under the giant M. It makes these students' commitment seem all the more extraordinary, as they spend 24 hours a week rehearsing far from Central Campus.

"You know when you are going to do a show, especially like this, that you really are in it so much and you are investing so much into the material," Vasquez said. "There is going to be some wear and tear on your voice, on your body, on your emotional state, on everything."

It's hard to imagine how it's worth it, but for so many actors, producers, crew members and musicians, it's an integral part of life. Talking with them isn't like having a conversation with an average student about their extracurricular. Their commitment is founded in an intense love for what they do and for "RENT" itself.

"For me this is so much greater than my schoolwork, which is bad, but this is what I love to do," LSA senior Kaci Friss, who plays Joanne Jefferson, said.

Many MUSKET students plan on going into musical theater, in some role, for a living — so this is their chance to show their abilities without the pressures of a career.

“In a professional setting you have adults who have done this a million times and they are just sort of phoning it in,” Vasquez said. “But right now for everybody this is sort of their shot to get it right.”

During a routine run-through of the show Quinn intently takes notes, muttering approval or frustration under his breath. Between acts, some actors whip out their phones, finding respite from the emotional wallop of the show in Instagram, while others stand to the side practicing their songs with closed eyes.

MUSKET isn’t a club. It isn’t a job — everyone is quick to point out that they aren’t getting paid. MUSKET is an outlets for talented and ambitious students to do what they are most passionate about.

### **Diverse love of theater**

Lucas and Rosenthal discussed how campus — in particular hordes of girls — has reacted to the premiere of “RENT.” There’s a special Greek-life package, cutting down ticket prices if a sorority or fraternity buys more than 30 tickets for their chapter. Walking into the sorority houses proved just how prevalent the story still is.

“The moment you say the word “RENT” people would be like ‘Ahhh!’ and all these girls would be screaming,” said Lucas.

More than some MUSKET shows in the past, “RENT” incites passion in its audience. People connect to the show on so many levels, regardless of their own experiences.

“It’s not just people who have AIDS or who are living in this bohemian lifestyle who can relate to this,” said LSA junior Kimberly Hay, who plays Maureen Johnson. “I think it really speaks to young people, and then you grow up and it’s still just so beautiful and wonderful.”

The universality of the show not only brings a fresh vitality to the performances, but is augmented by having a cast with diverse backgrounds.

While many cast members are theater veterans of theater, the production is peppered with first-timers and non-performance majors.

“I think the part we enjoy the most is when we have someone come into audition, and they are an engineer, a political science major, something completely random —and they just end up being incredible,” Rosenthal said.

Engineering freshman Chani Wereley plays Mimi Marquez, the unpredictable and fragile young stripper. When she belts out, her talent is indistinguishable from the performance majors.

“Chani has the most killer voice,” Rosenthal said. “She came in for her audition, and we fell over.”

Though they both would love to someday go into theater, Hay is a double major in Drama and Organizational Studies, while Friss is studying Communications.

“MUSKET shows tend to attract people who are really serious about what they are doing,” Hay said. “Who either have been trained or have this really raw special talent, and I really appreciate that. I really learn so much from all these different people.”

However, there are some reservations to working entirely with students, especially varying levels of expertise. In a show as emotionally charged as “RENT” — encompassing a whole range of issues from disease and death to sexuality and poverty — tension is bound to develop.

“There is a lot of rawness in the rehearsal room,” Vasquez said. “There (have) been a lot of tears, a lot of emotional outbursts and explosions.”

The characters aren’t imaginary for these dedicated actors. Whether they connect with Roger’s need to retreat or Mimi’s naïve uncertainty, these students can’t rehearse a scene and walk away unaffected.

“We have had to take breaks and come back, but that’s the fun of (it) because if you can’t do that you really are just playing pretend,” Vasquez said.

What unites everyone in the production is an earnest love for “RENT.” Despite the frustrations, fights and creative abrasion that go along with this show’s heightened emotions, everyone has parts of the story that they love.

Students had different answers for what was their favorite part of the production: For some it’s the beginning number, and for some the last. Others highlight a specific piano note — a melody that unites two voices at the perfect moment.

The word “chills” is thrown around rather cavalierly in their rehearsal room, but the messages of this musical do cut deeper than in many other shows. The MUSKET players admit that they didn’t necessarily understand these profound themes as children watching “RENT” for the first time.

“Now I am really thinking about the story,” Sheehan said. “What is it like if you knew you were going to die in six months? What is it like when you know that your friends are going to die in six months?”

Though Quinn joked that we shouldn’t all want to dwell on our own mortality after watching the show, “RENT” does instill unavoidable introspection. “No day but today” is the carpe diem-like tagline of the show, and in some ways it speaks to the partially satirical “YOLO” culture.

“It doesn’t mean you should go do heroin,” Yabrow said. “But definitely think about the people you have in your life and what they mean to you, and how thankful you are for having them.”

In a setting often filled with competitive individuals, “RENT” has the ability to unify performers and audiences in spite of professional or circumstantial differences. Collectively a lesson in sex and sorrow, futility and agency, presence and ambition, “RENT” is more than just a show about HIV/AIDS.

As Rosenthal said, “ ‘RENT’ is ultimately about love.”