

The RENT is due

Steve Wright looks at a new production of an old favourite.

Every self-respecting cultural queen has heard of the musical, *RENT*. Hell, most of you have probably performed in it, even if only in the security of your own shower.

With at least three productions of the popular rock opera being staged in Melbourne this year alone, potential *RENT* heads should be asking what a production company can bring to the show to make a viewing worthwhile.

Gil Bilson, Artistic Director of the newly formed New Beat Theatre Company, believes he has the answer.

For those not into shower-side musicals, *RENT* is a modern production based on Puccini's *La Boheme*. This 'rock opera for our times' to quote *The New York Times* follows a group of impoverished New York artists struggling to survive amidst the explosion of the AIDS virus in the early 90s. The production promotes diversity, acceptance, and fellowship – without pulling any punches in its narrative.

The New Beat Theatre Company was only founded in March, but is already affiliated with Melbourne University's Union House Theatre. Its primary goal is to bridge the gap between student-developed theatre and the thriving amateur community. Gil Bilson, along with industry veterans Samuel Kitchen (who is performing in the production) and Joel Bow (working as Principal Choreographer) bring years of professional experience to the show, enabling mentorship opportunities for younger cast members looking for their big breaks.

Kitchen, as anarchist Professor Tom Collins, brings a multitude of Best Supporting Actor Guild Award nominations to his role. He's also been key in mentoring Joshua Peterson, a straight actor bravely



Cast members from the 2005 film version of *RENT*.

stepping into the challenging role of cross-dresser Angel Dumott Schunard.

"It's been a great opportunity. Josh is such a talent, a great singer and drummer, and I jumped at the opportunity to be able to work in a situation where I grow but can help the cast to do the same," Kitchen says.

Bilson's eyes light up at the mention of Angel and Collins.

"That's the core of *RENT*," he explains. "The show is instantly accessible because it's about relationships. The show doesn't put characters into boxes – Collins and Angel are the perfect example of love persisting and moving beyond sexual boundaries."

Bow nods his head in agreement as Bilson excitedly speaks about the show's central themes. He's well suited to offer the most to those wishing to perfect

their own craft: Bow is currently filming an upcoming feature film alongside Nicolas Cage entitled *Knowing*, and has also worked in key roles for the Production Company's *Sweet Charity* and in *A Chorus Line* for Whitehorse.

That deals with the cast, but what of the audience? Bilson has that covered as well by converting a majority of the show's 'seats' to standing room only. Or, more accurately, dancing room only.

"Our set has been constructed so our audience is literally in the spotlight," he says. "That's the real difference in our show – it requires emotional attachment, and [this] concept really allows and pushes that. Our audience will be able to dance when our characters are at their joyous points, and mourn during those that are sad."

It's worth noting that there is seating available for those who are not able to, or

who do not wish to stand for the production's duration.

"Though I doubt anyone will just be standing around anyways," Bilson laughs.

Bow asserts the concept will only help audiences appreciate the show.

"We all know these characters from different angles; I've been in dance schools and conservatories, I know artists who are dependent on drugs; the uni students are living like bohemians in share houses – we find ourselves in the world of *RENT* daily," he explains. "And if people can't identify with that, they can at least boogie to a great rock show!"

RENT at Melbourne University Union Theatre, August 7-9 and August 12-16 at 7:30pm; 2pm on Sunday August 10. Bookings: 0430 237 712 or www.newbeatcc.com

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PARTY LIKE IT'S 1958

None of this happened in Australia. The press (with the exception of *Truth*) would not touch sex scandals. The politicians weren't interested. Even the clergy felt no need to warn against the 'unnatural vice', such was its invisibility. The Left was just as bad. Laurie was a good Party member, but he kept his sexuality well-hidden.

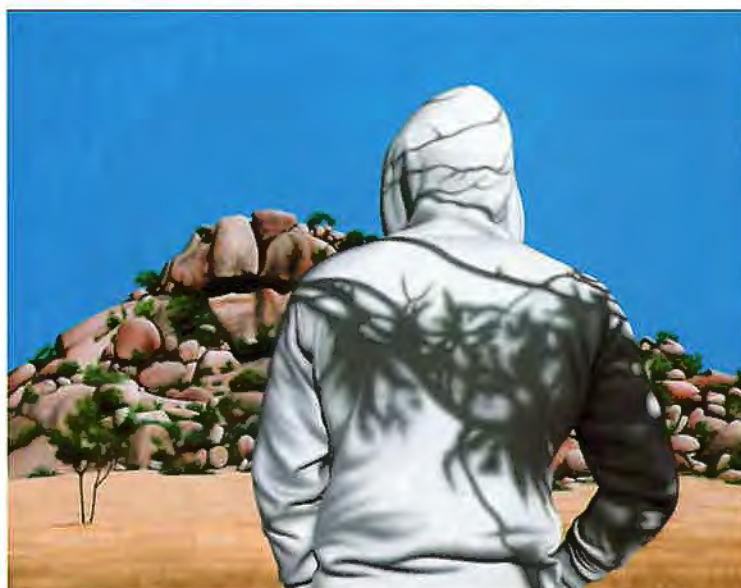
It would be a decade before the time was right for change, and when it did, it came with a small flurry of organisations wanting law reform, and more.

In Canberra, a small group of academics and journalists took up the banner of decriminalisation. In Melbourne, a tiny group of lesbians founded a local branch

of the US organisation, Daughters of Bilitis. And in Sydney, a few friends – with the help of a great big bottle of whiskey – decided, as Laurie had done 11 years prior, that the time had come.

This time, they were right. The Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP) was born. History was about to be made.

The Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives celebrate their 30th anniversary with a B'day Bash at Fitzroy Town Hall on Friday Aug 22: a night of dancing, dinner, drinks and discussion with MC Julie McCrossin. For bookings and details contact mark.pendleton@gmail.com or call 0423 857 303. <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~alga/>



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