

# AWAKE

ADVANCE WEEKLY ENTERTAINMENT

{FEBRUARY 21-27, 2013}



INSIDE: Evelyn's Gospel, Joe B's & the Movie Contest deadline!



Tony-winner  
Michele Pawk  
helms Wagner's  
production  
of a modern  
musical classic

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## 'RENT' CONTROL

**St. George Theatre** Staten Island, NY

**Friday 3/8** Humpty Dumpty and The Big Book of Nursery Rhymes

**Sunday 3/10** Wizard of Oz

**Saturday 4/6** Joan Rivers

**Sunday 4/7** Second Annual Fashion Show

**Saturday 4/13** An evening with "Island Originals"

**Saturday 4/20** The 80's Ultimate Explosion

**Saturday 4/27** Sing-a-Long GREASE

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# Staten Island Advance

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## NEWS

### SUSPECT IS HUNTED IN TOURIST'S MURDER



Police in Turkey have linked a suspect to the murder of Staten Islander Sarai Sierra in Istanbul, but the suspect fled as police closed in. **PAGE A 9**

## AWE

### 'RENT' CONTROL

Tony winner Michele Pawk helms Wagner College's production of the modern musical theater classic.

**ENTERTAINMENT  
GUIDE INSIDE**



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE / JAN SOMMA-HAMMEL

*A struggling couple, victim's of Sandy's wrath, are losing their home. And the bank, the insurance companies, the government just watch.*

## WHEN THE BIG GUYS LET US DOWN







AWE PHOTOS / HILTON FLORES

Above, Olivia Puckett as Mimi Marquez and Robby Haltiwanger as Roger Davis. Below, the cast during a recent rehearsal.

# 'RENT' CONTROL



## Tony-winner Michele Pawk helms Wagner's production of a modern musical classic

BY MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA  
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With its rock score, romantic life-and-death plotlines and multiracial 20-something characters, "RENT" is perfect for an undergraduate drama program.

But at Wagner College, where the show opens Feb. 27, it represents a kind of homecoming.

Years ago, while the show was still incubating, Jonathan Larson — source of the whole package: book, music and lyrics — submitted a rough cassette recording to the school's Stanley Drama Award playwriting competition.

It was no surprise Larson won the \$1,000 award. His East Village homage to Puccini's "La Boheme," (the tuberculosis of the opera becomes AIDS-HIV in the update), was miles ahead of the other front-runners.

Picked up a little later by the New York Theatre Workshop, the not-for-profit propulsion machine ("Peter and the Starcatcher" is its most recent success), "RENT" made its way to off-Broadway and Broadway, copying awards and acclaim left and right.

But Larson, who had been waiting tables for years, endured all of the struggle and missed nearly all of the applause. He died of an aortic rupture on Jan. 25, 1996, the night before the first Broadway preview.

Sadly, this cruel blow added glamour to the "RENT" brand. The show went on to win every major prize, including the Tony Award for Best Musical and the Pulitzer for drama.

The show launched Idina Menzel, Adam Pascal, Taye Diggs and Daphne Rubin-Vega, and brought new young audiences into the theater in droves. It wisely advertised a \$20 rush ticket — for years avid fans spent the night in sleeping bags under the Nederlander marquee on 41st Street.

The Broadway production closed on Sept. 7, 2008, after a 12-year run of 5,124 performances. The ninth longest-running show at the time, it grossed more than \$280 million.

Michele Pawk — Wagner's very own Tony-award-winning actress/theater faculty member — is directing the school's upcoming production of "RENT." She recently discussed her cast, their preparation, her own ties to the show and the amazing rate at which time flies:



The set, representing a ramshackle illegal "squat" in Alphabet City, is the work of Wagner senior Anthony Freitas. "I like the look of the bare bones, an everything-exposed set," Pawk said. "It allows the cast a lot of freedom."

**Q. When Jonathan Larson began "RENT" in the late 1980s, your cast wasn't born. Their world is more like HBO's "Girls." Could they be thinking of the show as a relic of their parents' era?**

**A.** "I think what is really important is that, even though it is now more of a period piece, the ideas that are written about so beautifully in this play are still important. It's about love, life and not wasting a second, because 'you have no day like today.'"

"RENT" changed the musical theatre art form in ways similar to what "HAIR" did for that generation. These students grew up during the "RENT" craze. Even though there are other pop/rock musicals, most of our students feel that they cut their teeth, so to speak, on "RENT."

When you think about it, there aren't as many real pop/rock scores as there are more classically structured musicals. But you are correct, we had to begin looking at "RENT" as a period piece. Luckily for them, their director was around during that time.

Hearing some first-hand accounts from me, (the original, Tony-winning "RENT" director) Michael Greif, and our department chair, Felicia Ruff, has helped.

**Q. Larson used "La Boheme" as a blueprint. Did you ask your cast to listen to the opera?**

**A.** We have certainly talked a lot about the opera, the source material that preceded the opera that Jonathan was greatly inspired by, and the ways in which they are similar and different. It's important and fun to examine both pieces, but eventually you have to deal with the script you have been given, and treat that as the truth. If only we had months and months to

rehearse! The musical is definitely operatic in scope, as my cast has discovered.

**Q. What about the timeframe? In the era of "RENT," HIV-AIDS was virtually a death sentence. No longer. Have you talked with the cast about those days?**

**A.** We've done extensive research; without a grave understanding of what that time was like for so many of us, it's impossible to bring truth and heart to our story.

We've read countless first-hand accounts and viewed the amazing documentary, "How to Survive a Plague." Because the voices of the victims and survivors are still so strong and present, there are endless research sources.

It is also imperative for me that the students understand that AZT was not a cure, but only prolonged lives. Until the inven-

tion of the drug cocktails, people were still dying while taking AZT. Hell, people are still dying now. That's what makes Rogers' need to leave a legacy so great. He believed he was going to die.



MICHELE PAWK

**Q. Playing characters not so far removed — in age or experience — from themselves is not so easy as it sounds, is it?**

**A.** Doing anything on stage is never easy! There's a tremendous

amount of work and skill that goes into any production, whether it's high school, college, or on Broadway!

On the one hand, our Wagner students are the right age, so the passion, energy, and fire comes easily to them. But on the other hand, setting the play in 1990 in the East Village requires a different kind of feel than a contemporary 2013 one. One that should hopefully be a beautiful reminder to those of us who hung out down there. Ah, it's crazy when parts of your life become period pieces. How does that happen?

**Q. Very good teachers are often compelling performers who treat the classroom as a stage: Does this describe you?**

**A.** I so enjoy directing the students after having had them in class. It's imperative that they start to apply the mechanics we

talk about in the classroom to the work in performance. It's a difficult thing to do because at their age, things are blossoming and their lives are full of discovery.

It's much easier to compartmentalize, and simply resort to old habits or behavior on stage. It's an incredibly brave thing that they do. I am proud of them for their fearlessness, and truly am inspired. We have amazing students at Wagner. Not just great actors, but beautiful, loving, compassionate young adults.

**Q. It's easy to see how "RENT" pleases audiences: The story is dramatic; the music is rousing, contagious and full of emotion. What does it teach young actors?**

**A.** From a purely technical standpoint, "RENT" is incredibly difficult musically. People underestimate the skill it takes to sing that

score. We were all surprised by the five- and six-part harmony in most of the ensemble numbers. Nobody remembers that!

It will certainly teach students a lot about how to protect their voices, and learn how to take care of themselves for a long run. They will have to live like nuns, so to speak.

Once we start running the show, they will also learn how much energy it takes to tell a story in an almost entirely sung-through piece. There's a great misconception that because it's a contemporary piece, actors just mumble, slur, and throw lines away.

They're finding out now how much power there is in the economy of their movement while energizing everything with specific, strong choices. They've all done such a great job of bringing themselves to their work. It's a joy to watch.

**'RENT'**  
Jonathan Larson's landmark musical featuring "La Vie Boheme," "Seasons of Love" & many more. The cast & crew: The cast includes seniors Robby Haltiwanger, Alex Boniello, Melanie Brook, Jenny Kelly, Dave Resultan, Anthony Colasuonno, Olivia Puckett, Liza Colpa, Rhea Francani, Seth Price, J.R. Goodman, Caitlin Beckman, Concetta Raineri and Paige Howell. Brandon Suriale is musical director; Ashley Berger choreographs.

**Where:**  
Wagner College Main Stage, 1 Campus Rd., Grymes Hill; 718-390-3259.

**When:** Feb. 27 & 28, 8 p.m.; March 1 & 6-8, 8 p.m.; March 2 & 9, 2 & 8 p.m.; March 10, 2 p.m.

**How much:**  
Tickets are \$16-\$27 at the box office (Monday-Friday, noon-4 p.m.) or [wagner.edu/theatre/production/boxoffice/](http://wagner.edu/theatre/production/boxoffice/).