

There's starring the
marvelous young
dancer savion



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

There's a scene in the new musical "RENT" that may be the quintessential romantic moment of the '90s. Roger, a struggling rock musician, and Mimi, a junkie who's a dancer at an S/M club, are having a lovers' quarrel when their beepers go off and each takes out a bottle of pills. It's the signal for an "AZT break," and suddenly they realize that they're both HIV-positive. Clinch.

Love duet. If you don't think this is romantic, consider that Jonathan Larson's sensational musical is inspired by Puccini's opera "La Boheme," in which the lovers Mimi and Rodolfo are tragically separated by her death from tuberculosis. Different age, different plague. Larson has updated Puccini's end-of-19th-century Left Bank bohemians to end-of-20th-century struggling artists in New York's East Village. His rousing, moving, scathingly funny show, performed by a cast of youthful unknowns with explosive talent and staggering energy, has brought a shocking jolt of creative juice to Broadway. A far greater shock was the sudden death of 35-year-old Larson from an aortic aneurysm just before his show opened. His death just before the breakthrough success is the stuff of both tragedy and tabloids. Such is our culture.

Now Larson's work, along with "Bring in ' Da Noise, Bring in ' Da Funk," the tap-dance musical starring the marvelous young dancer Savion Glover, is mounting a commando assault on Broadway from the downtown redoubts of off-Broadway. Both are now encamped amid the revivals ("The King and I") and movie adaptations ("Big") that have made Broadway such a creatively fallow field in recent seasons. And both are oriented to an audience younger than Broadway usually attracts. If both, or either, settle in for a successful run,

the door may open for new talent to reinvigorate the once dominant American musical theater.

"RENT" so far has the sweet smell of success, marked not only by its \$6 million advance sale (solid, but no guarantee) but also by the swarm of celebrities who have clamored for tickets: Michelle Pfeifer, Sylvester Stallone, Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise, Mel Gibson, Ralph Fiennes... name your own biggie. Last week, on opening night, 21 TV crews, many from overseas, swarmed the Nederlander Theatre to shoot the 15 youthful cast members in euphoric shock under salvos of cheers. Supermogul David Geffen of the new DreamWorks team paid just under a million dollars to record the original-cast album. Pop artists who've expressed interest in recording songs from the 33-number score include Whitney Houston, Toni Braxton and Boyz II Men. A bidding scrimmage has started for the movie rights among such Hollywood heavies as Warner Brothers, Danny DeVito's Jersey Films, Fox 2000 and Columbia.

The asking price is \$3 million, but bonuses for length of run, the Pulitzer Prize (which "RENT" has already won), various Tony and critics' awards could jack the price up to \$3.75 million. Despite these stupefying numbers, the young producers, Jeffrey Seller, 31, and Kevin McCollum, 34, and their associate, moneyman Allan S. Gordon, know that they're not home free.

"There's no such thing in New York," says Seller. "Our company has mostly done tours. If you sell 8,000 seats a week in Cleveland, you did a great job. Never having done a Broadway show, the idea that you have to sell 450,000 seats a year is daunting.

" Major Broadway players like the Shubert Organization and Jujamcyn Theaters, which lost out to the Nederlander in the feverish grab for " RENT," would love to be daunted like these Broadway tyros. Rocco Landesman, Jujamcyn's president, says he's " crushed" at not getting " RENT." He predicts the show will be a " crossover success; it will attract an ethnically diverse audience, people who are not normally theatergoers." " RENT" has a \$67.

50 top ticket price, but the producers have reserved the first two rows at \$20 and are tagging mezzanine seats at a " bargain" \$30." " RENT" has a lot riding on its shoulders," says producer Jim Freyberg, whose " Big" has just opened. " I desperately hope it works. If it's successful, we're going to get more daring shows on Broadway.

If it's not, we're going to get more revivals." This is interesting, coming from a competitor whose own show, based on the popular Tom Hanks movie about a 13-year-old boy who wakes up one day in the body of a 30-year-old man, could be said to represent the less daring sector of Broadway. " If I really wanted to make money I'd go to Wall Street and invest money," says Seller.

" I came to Broadway because I was excited by the question ' Can you challenge the mainstream? Can you reinvent the mainstream from inside the mainstream?'" Says McCollum: " It would be disingenuous to say we don't hope to make money with ' RENT.' But I'm here