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## 20th anniversary tour of 'Rent' part of Marshall Artists Series

By DAVE LAVENDER

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Courtesy of Carol Rosegg Kaleb Wells stars as Roger Davis in the "Rent: 20th Anniversary Tour." The national tour of the sr Broadway musical makes its way to the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center in Huntington on Thursday, Nov. 10, as part of t Marshall Artists Series.

For the past few years, singer and actor Kaleb Wells had been sailing the seas with Norweigan Cruise Lines, rocking the stage with the 1980s hair band musical "Rock of Ages."



Now back on dry land, Wells has been plying deeper musical waters. In his first national tour he is playing Roger, one of the leads in the iconic and groundbreaking 1996 Broadway musical "Rent," which is celebrating its 20th year with a national tour that stops by the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 10, as the Marshall Artists Series continues its 80th season.

This will be the first time the national tour of "Rent" has been at the Artists Series since November 2001.



A few tickets remain. Tickets are \$94.95, \$78.90, \$68.20 and \$61.78 at the Marshall Artists Series Box Office, open noon to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, by calling 304-696-6656 or online at [Ticketmaster.com](https://www.ticketmaster.com).

Out since August, the 20th anniversary tour has been selling out most stops and making a powerful impact as the young 20-something actors share the late Jonathan Larson's street-stamped, rocked-up masterpiece of theater that sums up the struggles of artists in love and life and the beauty in friends in such sing-a-long songs as "Seasons of Love," "Light My Candle," "I'll Cover You" and "Goodbye Love."

"The tour is pretty young. We started in August, but it is starting to rev up, and it gets deeper and deeper every single night, and the audience informs the story," Wells said of "Rent," which won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 1996. "My first jobs I worked on the cruise ships, and it is a very different lifestyle. The entertainment is kind of a side product whereas with a touring show like this with such rich fans people are coming to hear the message. I think that is an important distinction. It is a fun show, but it is a hard and emotionally tough show. The hope is that it inspires and brings hope and that is cathartic."



Inspired by Puccini's opera "La bohème," "Rent," for which Larson won the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, tells the moving, heartbreaking and ultimately uplifting story of young, impoverished New York artists who were seeking to make their way in the world, longing to connect and trying to survive the looming specter of AIDS at a time when contracting it was a death sentence.

While telling a story of a year in the lives of the seven artists struggling to follow their dreams without selling out, "Rent" contains an inspiring message of joy and hope in the face of fear. This timeless celebration of friendship and creativity reminds us to measure our lives with the only thing that truly matters - love.

Although Larson died of an aortic aneurysm a few weeks before the musical's Broadway premiere, his time-stamped, hearts out, portrayal of that wild bunch of friends of all races and personalities has stood the test of time as "Rent" ran for 12 years on Broadway, spawned several national tours and numerous foreign productions, and in 2005 was made into a film featuring most of the original cast members.

For the 20th anniversary tour, key members of the original creative team reunited to freshen up the show and share it so a new generation to discover why the show is so special and why it continues to have a profound effect on audiences.

"I think every fan will be very happy to see that the show stays very true to the original and that a lot of the original creative team was very influential in this process of not necessarily making a new production of the show, but because it has been 20 years, bringing a modern perspective to a period piece that takes place in a very specific time," Wells said. "We have the unusual task of telling a story that we didn't live through, so in that we feel almost as historians studying a period of time and diving into that reality that although the world is a different place it has not changed as much as we think."

Wells said one thing that hasn't changed is the power of the story about how much good friends matter in times of joy and shared sorrow.

"I think what is so interesting about this show is that it is very much about family - not necessarily your immediate family or mom or dad - but the family you choose throughout your life and the family that finds you," Wells said. "I think that is the joy of doing this show every night is that you look at your phone and you see a lot of terrible things happening all over the world and then you get to see so much good in people and everyone seems to get the show."



Wells, whose mom is a huge "Rent"-head that raised him on the album, said growing up with the show and now tasked with the heavy mission of performing the powerful show nightly has changed his personal outlook on life.

"I think it kind of opens your eyes that if I were to die tomorrow would I be proud of what I accomplished and would I have wasted time or accepted every opportunity that I can?" Wells said. "I think doing this show across the country for different kinds of people with different histories and backgrounds can open your eyes too. Talking to people who see the show we get a lot of different kind of people. We have talked to young teenagers who are unsure about figuring out themselves, and we have talked to people who have lost loved ones and people who have been HIV positive for the last 20 or 30 years. It is amazing to hear those stories in relation to the show you have just given to them. That is the thing, we all struggle but no one's struggle is the same as anyone else's, and no one thinks about things the same way you do, but that is OK. We don't have to experience the same things to understand each other."

Wells said for he and the company one of the most powerful stops of the tour was in North Carolina where they set up for an entire week. The performance was months after a long list of artists that included everyone from Ringo Starr to Bruce Springsteen canceling their shows and corporations refusing to do business with North Carolina for its banning of local LGBT nondiscrimination ordinances and requirement that transgender people use public bathrooms that match their birth certificates.

"I saw the stop and I was like, 'Really?' - for a whole week, and all of the artists were boycotting and not going there, but it was one of our best houses. The people were in need of this show, and it was (a) message they weren't getting," Wells said. "I felt like the last thing performers should have done is not perform there because theater and music is healing. I saw people who had no idea what it was about, and they were changed. The show deals with artists and the gay culture and AIDS and homelessness, but it is not about being gay - it is a show about people dealing with the situation they have been given. The interesting thing about the show is that we were all too young to experience it or come from a different part of the society than a lot of the people in the show, but you still see yourself in two or more of the characters."

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