

# From The Director

**W**hen I first saw RENT 14 years ago, I knew we would one day be producing this rock opera that shares so many characteristics with Austin – a youthful bohemian culture populated with musicians, artists and creative types who are trying to hang onto their soul while growing up, and struggling to keep the gentrification out of the cool parts of the city.

But another aspect of RENT resonated with me in an ever deeper, more personal way. I will always associate this musical with John Whisenhunt, the man for whom ZACH's arena stage is named, even though he never saw the show. By 1991 when I came to work at ZACH, John had been on the Board of Directors for a dozen years and his passion as an audience member, advocate and supporter was unparalleled. Like actor Martin Burke's portrayal of the "Man in the Chair" in *The Drowsy Chaperone*, John had an enthusiasm for theatre that was contagious! We always joked back then that if there was a curtain going up in Texas, John could be found in the audience.



John died unexpectedly of AIDS to the shock of many of his colleagues and friends because he kept his illness private. A tragic end to a wonderful soul, who I found myself grieving shortly thereafter in the audience of a Broadway theatre throughout the performance of RENT. I made a vow that I would do what I could through ZACH to raise awareness and keep other beloved friends, audience members and ZACH artists from feeling the stigma, loneliness and hopelessness that John felt at the end. Since that time, our actors have collected contributions after performances for our friends at AIDS Services of Austin (ASA) who respond to HIV by providing services that enhance the health and well-being of individuals and the community in the face of this evolving epidemic.

Since 1996 ZACH's audience has generously contributed over \$150,000 to ASA. After this performance of RENT, our cast will be collecting your contributions in the lobby for ASA's Lee Manford Fund which provides the resources to ensure professional leadership retention and the longer term sustainability of the agency. Thanks to the Texas Commission on the Arts, there are HIV prevention educational materials available in our lobby and on the ZACH website, and we will be providing access to RENT performances for low-income individuals living with the disease. ZACH will also facilitate post-show discussions with our cast, and representatives from ASA, Project Transitions, ALLGO and Out Youth.

There are beloved HIV+ actors, musicians, designers and audience members at ZACH today, and like the characters sing in "La Vie Boheme," we toast to those "LIVING with, not dying from disease." No Day But Today.

– Dave Steakley