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NO DAY BUT TODAY:
THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IMPACTS OF *RENT*

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction
at Western Kentucky University

By

Emily Lancaster

December 2021

CE/T Committee:

Dr. Ted Hovet

Dr. Nikolai Endres

Ms. Lindsey Houchin

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ABSTRACT

No Day but Today: The Social and Cultural Impact of Rent addresses how Jonathan Larson's musical changed the theater industry and the lives of those living in the shadows. *Rent* gave struggling artists, drag queens, and those suffering from HIV/AIDS a voice during a time in which they were being pushed aside and disposed of by the mainstream media. Larson's untimely death the night before his Off-Broadway premiere did not allow him to see his masterpiece soar, but the message of love that his show promotes is still being spread across the world by anniversary tours and interviews with original cast members in remembrance of Larson. Using in-depth analysis of *Rent* and interviews from those closest to Larson, current cast members, and those involved in HIV/AIDS awareness, this project is an in-depth focus on the life of Larson and the show that changed the lives of many.

This is dedicated to all of those who have ever felt less than because of who and how they love. For those who, like Jonathan, want to spread the message of love through art, compassion, and friendship.

This is also for my Uncle Bobby. I see you in these pages.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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VITA

EDUCATION

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY May 2022
B.A. in English (Literature Concentration)
Honors CE/T: *No Day but Today: The Social and Cultural Impacts of Rent*

Signature School, Evansville, IN May 2018

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Talisman
Web Writing Co-Editor April 2020 – Present
Magazine Writing Co-Editor April 2019 – April 2020

AWARDS AND HONORS

Faculty Undergraduate-Student Engagement Grant Recipient, December 2019
Honors Development Grant Recipient, May 2019 and September 2019

PRESENTATIONS

Lancaster, Emily (2021, April.) *Connection in an Isolating Age: The Cultural Impacts of Rent*. Presentation given at the WKU Student Research Conference. Bowling Green, KY.

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“In these dangerous times where the world is ripping apart at the seams, we can learn from those who stare death in the face every day by reaching out to each other and bonding as a community, rather than hiding from the terrors of life.”

Jonathan Larson

New York City

1996

LIGHT MY CANDLE

When I first heard “Seasons of Love,” the ballad that uses its melody and lyrics to express feelings of love and connection, as a young child in theatre, I had no idea what show it was attached to, let alone the plot or the historical context behind its creation. Years later, I finally watched the film version of *Rent* and fell into endless curiosity surrounding the show and the mind behind the piece. Unfortunately, there was not much I was able to find, especially considering Jonathan was unable to continue work on this musical or any others. I felt there was nothing I could do to combat this lack of information and thought nothing more of it until I was 18 years-old in my small dorm room, and a song from the show randomly came through my computer’s speakers. The next day I went to a favorite professor of mine and asked if there was any way that I could begin an in-depth research project surrounding the social and cultural impacts of Jonathan’s musical. Little did I know then that this musical would come to mean more to me than I ever thought possible.

A week-long trip to Washington D.C.’s Library of Congress to study the Jonathan Larson Papers in June 2019 allowed me access to documents, photos, and handwritten scribbles that I figured were locked away in an attic somewhere. Five months later, I was sitting backstage, behind the stage manager of the national touring company of the show for its 25th anniversary, watching that same emotional ballad I had heard all those years ago; the memory for me still feels surreal. However, I did not pitch this project as just a way for me to learn about Jonathan Larson and the show for my own benefit. When I

realized there was a stark lack of scholarly resources, information, and analysis surrounding how *Rent* was able to connect various communities together, I wanted to help bring them back into the light, just like Jonathan worked so hard to do. His story is for everyone as it emphasizes what it truly means to be human and the complex emotions and situations that come with living. Specifically, Larson's *Rent* utilizes the form of musical theater to address discrimination, personal struggle, and the power of relationships.

TUNE UP #1

Setting: New York City, 1996

The company of *Rent* has just finished its final dress rehearsal the night before the Off-Broadway previews is set to begin. Jonathan Larson was sitting in the box office in the Minetta Lane Theater giving an interview to Anthony Tommasini, a New York Times music critic, regarding the production and future of his bohemian masterpiece. Even though he had been rushed to the emergency room less than 72 hours prior, for the second time in one week, he was working harder than ever on the musical that had been his sole focus for the previous seven years. Larson left the theatre around midnight, thrilled for the day to come and for his message to finally grace the Manhattan stages.

Less than two hours later, he was dead (Tommasini “Seven Year Odyssey”). However, his rock opera bloomed into one of the biggest phenomenon’s that the theatre has ever seen and continues to pass on messages of love, community, and diversity throughout the world. After a sold-out two-week stint Off-Broadway, the show was moved to a Broadway stage on April 29, 1996, being nominated for ten Tony Awards for that year and taking home four: Best Book of a Musical, Best Original Score, Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical, and Best Musical (Lunden “13,150,080 Minutes). The Broadway production closed on November 7, 2008, 12 years after its original premiere, but not before many touring productions kicked off. There have been various North American tours and international productions, as well as commercialized

ones such as at the Hollywood Bowl in 2010 and *Rent: LIVE!* in 2019. The production is currently on its 25th Anniversary: Farewell Tour that began in 2019 and resumed in October 2021, following a hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Feighan “25 Years of ‘Rent’”). An abridged version of the show was created in 2007 specifically for school productions as well (Milzoff “‘Rent’: The Oral History”).

Rent premiered Off-Broadway on January 26, 1996, amid an HIV/AIDS stricken society—very similar to the COVID-19 pandemic and opioid epidemic that have each worked their way into many communities worldwide. This show shocked audiences with clever lyrics, a variety of complex characters, and a storyline that depicted the lives of many living in New York’s East Village. Jonathan Larson himself lived, worked, and wrote in this neighborhood and sought to bring audiences along on a journey of self-discovery, love, and acceptance. Larson’s work emphasizes how brutal and beautiful life can be no matter what community or environment one is a part of. He addresses topics such as homophobia and addiction in a world in which various alternative lifestyles and challenges of discrimination were often scorned and pushed aside. Not only did Larson premiere a musical in the middle of an international AIDS crisis, but he had personal influences and characters diagnosed with the disease and, seemingly, living on borrowed time (Jonathan Larson Papers). *Rent* brings audiences along on a very real journey through the perspective of those living “outside of the mainstream” and those who, for so long, lived within the shadows.

“Seasons of Love” is the emotional ballad that leads the characters, and the audience, into the second act. This number is important as it almost acts as a continuation of the intermission as, during the song, every single cast member is lined up horizontally

across the stage, looking out to the audience; there is no movement away from the spotlights they are each stood in aside from clapping or little, personal gestures. The song is meant to act as an ode to a year and how one spends it as the cast frequently asks, “how do you measure a year in the life?” and answers in various “units” (all lyrics taken from the 1997 published version of Larson’s *Rent*) Additionally, the song begins with: “525,600 minutes, 525,000 moments so dear” this is the exact number of minutes that occur in one year, or 365 days. By quantifying the number of minutes, it makes the year feel shorter, thus emphasizing that is important how one spends a year. Since the timeline of the show begins and ends on December 24, 9 p.m., as stated in “Tune Up #1,” “Seasons of Love” is reminding the audience that what happens in a year really matters. The cast references measuring life in various, uncommon units such as: daylight, cups of coffee, times that you cry, and laughter, as it is these things that we remember from a year, not just minutes passing by. However, the main purpose of the song is to promote, instead of measuring in these simple things, we should look back a year and “remember the love” that was shared and spread and the connections that were made instead of small, miniscule items or situations. This is a message that Jonathan himself fully embraced and lived by as so many of his friends were in similar situations as

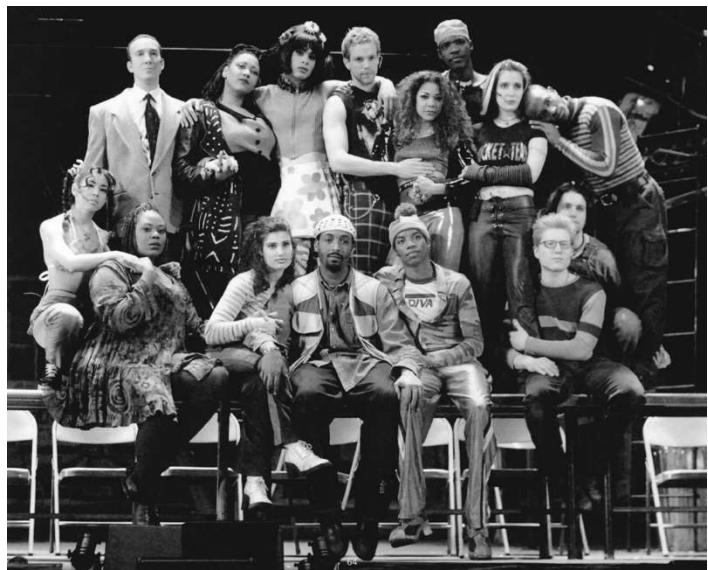


Figure 1: Original cast of *Rent* in 1996 (Viagas Audio Exclusive)

those in the show, it was living in love and experiences with those friends that inspired him.

ONE SONG GLORY

Setting: White Plains, New York

Jonathan was convinced that he was going to change the face of American musical theatre from a young age—a feat that he accomplished, yet sadly did not live to see. Jonathan Larson was born on February 4, 1960, to his parents, Allen and Nanette, and has a younger sister, Julie. He spent his school years bouncing between drama clubs and music lessons as, according to Julie, he wanted to know as much as he could about music and always be in it. Jonathan quickly picked up playing the piano and, as he grew up in a musical-loving household, began performing in local productions. Julie Larson McCollum recalls her brother having such intense passion for music and creating that was unparalleled by those around them.

“Jonny was supposed to do a book report in the second grade and refused to just write the report,” Julie said in an interview. “He ended up making a film for the report and I think that is when we all knew he was something special.”

Additionally, she describes their childhood as almost idyllic as their family was very close. The Larson’s had an appreciation for all forms of the arts that was passed along to their children. Julie said that her parents were truly non-judgmental and supported her and her brother throughout many endeavors. Their mother, Nanette, took her kids to many musicals during their childhood including classics such as *Hair* and *Fiddler on the Roof*—a production that Jonathan would eventually star in during his years at White Plains High School. Julie remembers how her brother could simply command a

stage and was always acting or performing, even in their home. She stated how “nothing made them [her parents] happier than watching Jonathan act.”



Figure 2: (from left to right) Jonathan's sister, Julie Larson, and his parents, Nanette and Allan Larson (Asch 20 Years After *Rent*)

The Larson’s made their home in New York while the rest of their family was spread everywhere from Chicago to Palo Alto; seeing cousins and other family members was rare and close friends or classmates became family. As Julie explained, it was these same friends and the connections that would eventually lead Jonathan to create his most popular pieces of work. One of the largest messages within *Rent* is the idea that family does not have to be solely based in blood and that we are able to create our own families from the people around us. As Jonathan understood within his own personal life, he wanted there to be various lyrics and situations throughout the musical that convey this message. One subtle example is during “Happy New Year B,” a song that takes place directly following the clock striking midnight into the new year, a transformative moment for the characters, especially those who did not believe they would make it to the next year due to their disease. A small fight breaks out during this song and, to remedy the fight and calm down the group, Angel proposes a resolution and promotes an apology. Collins declares that they should always remain friends even “though [they] may have

their disputes/this family tree's got deep roots/friendship is thicker than blood." Joanne, Maureen, and Mark all jump in with these last three comments, seemingly to remind those who are fighting that their chosen family is worth fighting for. Additionally, in "Voice Mail #5, almost all the characters are getting calls from their parents asking where they are as none of them have been heard from due to their deepening hardships, addictions, and trials—they are more focused on repairing and dealing with their own chosen family than the blood they were born into.

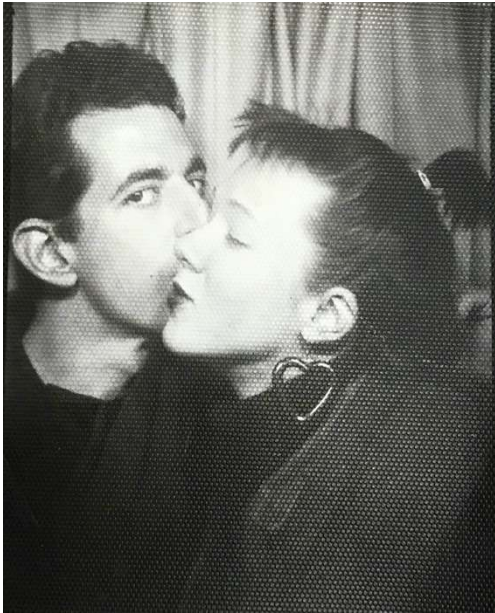


Figure 3: Jonathan and Victoria Leacock, his best friend (Jonathan Larson Papers Library of Congress)

Setting: Lower Manhattan, New York City, 1980's

Though Jonathan's pursuits at New York's Adelphi University were initially focused in acting, he began composing. His inspiration came from his love of musical theatre, but also the ambiance of Elton John, The Beatles, and Billy Joel, according to his sister, Julie. His first compositions were not immediate hits but did make it onto the Adelphi stage. Jonathan composed for small student productions, or cabarets, prior to eventually being able to compose for department head Jacques Burdick's musical *Libro de Buen Amor*. Burdick became one of Jonathan's first mentors and helped him hone his craft throughout the rest of his college career (Jonathan Larson Papers). Following graduating from college with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in acting, Jonathan made his way to the Barn Theatre in Augusta, Michigan. He was the Rehearsal Shed pianist for the 1980 and 1981 season and

performed in six different productions during his time as a Bernie. This led to Jonathan earning an Equity Card through the Actors' Equity Association, thus becoming even more passionate about creating and composing music (Asch *20 Years After Rent*). Jonathan moved to a fifth-floor apartment in Lower Manhattan, following this job, with two roommates and began work as a waiter at the Moondance Diner. He was surrounded by friends that had and would continue to have a strong impact on Jonathan's personal life, and his professional endeavors. His family was worried for their son but supported his career goals and strong ambition. Allen Larson remembered the harsh living conditions yet joyous nature of Jonathan's early life in NYC—an image mirrored in the environment that his beloved characters would inhabit.

“It looked like it hadn't been sanitized in 50 years. It was the kind of place that my father, a Russian, Jewish immigrant would have lived in when he came here in 1900,” Allen said. “But he loved his life. He was not a dilettante sitting there saying ‘Dad send me money because I am writing the next great American opus’” (Asch *20 Years After Rent*).

Jonathan had a multitude of roommates throughout his time in New York and each of them agreed that Jonathan was always involved with music any chance he got...also that they lived in a “shithole.” Jonathan Burkhart was Jonathan's roommate and best friend during those bohemian years in New York and, many years later, saw his apartment with Jonathan come to life on stages across the world, according to an interview he did with *Playbill*. The set of the show does not change throughout the performance as each aspect of the design can act as multiple things. While the whole set is meant to mirror a disheveled apartment in the East Village, there are platforms meant

to act as Mimi's balcony, the life support meeting spot, and the entrance to Mark and Roger's home. Additionally, metal pipes are contorted and organized so that it can double as a "Christmas tree" that Angel made, but also a steeple during "Halloween" before transitioning back to the entrance to their apartment in the very next scene, "Goodbye Love." Jonathan likely helped come up with this choice, not only to pay homage to his own apartment and all the different elements it became for him, but also to emphasize that one does not need much in order to be creative and happy, like himself and his characters.

"We literally had one extension cord that snaked all the way through the apartment," Burkhart said. "There was no heat except from the oven, and the shower *was* in the kitchen, and the floors were all fucked up. The toilet was in its own room, and the floorboards were so rotten that certain boards you stepped on, like pieces of wood, would come out. It was a mess, but you know what I remember — I think I paid \$125 a month rent my first six months. This is 1984, and I think the rent went up to like \$150 and [then] \$200, and I think it was \$200 for a long time. It was cheap — fucking cheap — [even] back then! Mind you, it was a shithole" (Gioia *The Creation of Rent*)



Figure 4: Set Design of *Rent* (*Rent On Broadway*)

Jonathan did have one thing that many aspiring composers and actors did not have: a working relationship with Stephen Sondheim—one of the most prominent composers and lyricists of 20th century musical theatre.

Sondheim became active in major Broadway productions beginning in 1957 and continued that run well into the 1980s. While he is well-known for his own original productions, such as *Company* (1970) and *Follies* (1971), his name is most often combined with Leonard Bernstein or Richard Rogers. Bernstein acted as lyricist for Sondheim’s *West Side Story* (1957) and *Candide* (1974) while Rogers accompanied him on *Do I Hear a Waltz* (1965). Over the course of his career, he was met with the highest of praise and received various Tony Awards, but also hesitation and concern from theatre critics. According to PBS, his “talent derived from his ability to cross genres of music and theater to offer Broadway audiences works of remarkable craft on unexpected subjects that challenged and testing the form of the American musical” (“Stephen Sondheim”).

Sondheim explored many controversial and unique subjects that had rarely graced the Broadway stage; things such as: marriage and relationships, madness, and the human condition, and one Jonathan took to heart, issues on contemporary life. It was during his studies at Adelphi, Jonathan wrote a letter expressing his admiration of the famous composer, which, among other papers and files, has been preserved in the Jonathan Larson Papers in the Library of Congress. Following Sondheim's response, Jonathan became his mentee, thus starting a working relationship that Jonathan admired. Many around Jonathan considered him a disciple as he followed nearly every piece of advice that Sondheim gave to him, including changing his focus from acting to composing. It is likely that, had this connection not been made or Jonathan not having exposure to Sondheim and his work, *Rent* may not have existed at all.

Between 1983-1988, Jonathan balanced writing and composing with waiting tables and trying to pitch ideas to possible producers and directors. One of his first, fleshed out works was *Superbia*, a futuristic retelling of George Orwell's classic novel, *1984*. Despite the receiving a developed workshop and praise from theatre lovers, no producer wanted to pick it up. Many claimed that the production itself was too large and too pessimistic for the Broadway scene at the time. Jonathan's closest college friend, Victoria Leacock, served as the producer for these performances and continues to be involved with his work all these years later (Gioia "Jonathan Larson's Unheard Songs").

Following *Superbia*'s run, Jonathan was frustrated that he still was waiting tables for a living instead of working on Broadway's newest hit. This did not deter him from beginning work on another production, one that, to many, was seen as a response to the AIDS epidemic that had begun to dominate many of the nation's news outlets, doctor's

offices, and bloodstreams. This piece went through a series of changes, beginning as *30/90*, later *tick, tick...BOOM!*, is an autobiographical piece about rejection and heartache. Jonathan performed this production on his own in 1990 in workshops and off-Broadway at the Village Gate in Greenwich Village, the Second Stage Theatre, and, finally, in the Upper West Side (Tommasini “Seven-Year Odyssey). This piece tells the story of an angry man on his 30th birthday, complaining about his broken-down ambitions and turning 30 in the 1990s. However, it is revealed towards the end of the musical that the biggest stressor for the main character was the fact that his best friend was HIV-positive; a reality that Jonathan himself was, unfortunately, familiar with.

Jonathan was the most dedicated to writing and composing, caring little that him and Burkhart were living paycheck to paycheck in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Despite this, Burkhart recalls that they would go out each weekend to theatre or gallery openings, but Jonathan would promptly retreat to his keyboard to write. Additionally, he would always run his newest thoughts and creations by his roommate and, if New York was asleep, Jonathan would call his sister on the west coast (McCollum Larson).

While Jonathan himself had big ambitions, complex plotlines, and the talent to create Broadway’s newest phenomenon on his own, it would be his introduction to Billy Aronson that changed the course of his legacy.

SANTA FE

Setting: Hell's Kitchen to West Village, New York City, 1983

Aronson found himself in the Big Apple in 1983 following graduating from Yale University. He lived in Hell's Kitchen and spent his free time at Lincoln Center watching as many operas as he could; Giacomo Puccini's *La Boheme* became a quick favorite. Aronson began considering writing his own production, one that would give audiences of a younger generation the same grit that Puccini's original work portrays.

"I had this idea for a *Boheme* for now—for our generation that had sort of a 'noise' and [that] captured the un-*Bohemeness* of it: not sweet and not luscious," Aronson said in an interview with *Playbill* (Gioia "The Creation of *Rent*").

Aronson was associated with Playwrights Horizon, a theater Off-Broadway specifically dedicated to the development of productions by new playwrights, composers, and lyricists. He believed that, through this organization, he would be able to find someone to help him create a work that would transcend the stage. Ira Weitzman was the director of musical theatre at the time and recommended Aronson two possible composers—one of which was Jonathan (Gioia "The Creation of *Rent*").

Jonathan's special spot for meetings was up the fire escape and onto the roof of his apartment building in the West Village (Gioia "The Creation of *Rent*"). Though many collaborations are short-lived, Aronson and Jonathan were able to understand what each other wanted fairly quickly. Jonathan's goal was to bring the rock-n-roll feel of the MTV generation to the Broadway stage while Aronson wanted references to Puccini's work to

stand out in a more traditional way. However, they were able to merge their ideas into a few first songs.

“I Should Tell You,” “Santa Fe,” and what would become the title of the show, “Rent” was created by the duo (Gioia “The Creation of *Rent*). Not only would these staple songs remain in the show permanently, but they would be crucial for the storyline as well as the audiences view of certain characters. “Rent,” the leading number in the show, establishes the grungy, desperate undertones of the show by breaking into what can only be described as a rock concert as characters dive deep into the society they are currently living in. Characters are throwing various items all over the stage, banging their heads, while running and dancing intensely, mimicking the rock n’ roll feel of concerts and MTV music videos. “Santa Fe” goes in the completely opposite direction as characters fantasize about leaving their urban life behind and escaping to Santa Fe; this song is a dreamy and groovy, almost psychedelic look at a dream Aronson and his friends would often consider themselves.

Despite each man throwing in \$300 to develop a cassette tape filled with demos sung by Roger Bart, a friend of Jonathan’s, Aronson was hesitant to continue with the project. There was no guarantee that any of the work they had completed would reap financial profits and, after a mutual break, Aronson decided to step away from the project after Jonathan chose to continue (Gioia “The Creation of *Rent*).

Jonathan had told a friend of his on a road trip that he wanted to push forward with *Rent* without Aronson’s assistance. Jonathan was encouraged to write a letter clearly stating his case to Aronson, promising him credit and compensation if a finalized version of the show ever materialized; conditions that Aronson quickly agreed to. From this point

on, all the lyrics and most of the composition would be credited to Jonathan alone (Gioia “The Creation of *Rent*”).

Setting: New York Theatre Workshop, 1992

While Jonathan was looking for a production team willing to take a chance on him and his show, James C. Nicola and the New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW) were looking for a piece to establish their company’s new status in the New York theater world (Gioia “The Creation of *Rent*”). They specifically were looking for a story that they believed would resonate well with the East Village, welcoming audiences, and creators to indulge in their services.

Jonathan inquired with the production manager at the time, George Xenos, about what he needed to do to get *Rent* on the NYTW radar. A few days later, Nicola was listening to Jonathan’s voice accompanied by his electric piano, singing the tentative score of his show on a cassette player.

“It was pretty clear from that first listen to the tape that this was exactly what we were looking for—a project about the East Village, about the young folks that were living here at the time and about so much more,” Nicola said. “And it was written by this incredibly talented young composer, lyricist and book writer” (Gioia “The Creation of *Rent*”).

Rent became the first fully staged production that the NYTW had ever produced at its debut in 1993. However, it was the initial reading of Jonathan’s show that was responsible for bringing producers willing to take a chance on the show on board.

Jeffrey Seller was instantly in awe of Jonathan’s talent and captivated by the storyline. Fellow producer Kevin McCollum accompanied Seller to the next reading,

featuring original director Michael Greif and other cast members, such as Anthony Rapp and Daphne Rubin-Vega, who would eventually make their way to the Broadway stage.

“I turned to Jeffrey, we were in the third row, and I said, ‘That’s the best piece of musical storytelling I’ve ever heard,’” McCollum said of “Light My Candle.” “I knew exactly who those people were, and I was rooting for them. Immediately” (Gioia “The Creation of *Rent*).

Seller, McCollum, Greif, and various existing actors continued to work with Larson and the show throughout all the readings and productions prior to the 1996 Off-Broadway premiere. Over the course of those three years, actors came and went, a new producer and casting director joined the team, and Jonathan ripped through pages of rewrites and updates before solidifying what audiences would see that January evening.

Jonathan had a good grasp on what kind of message he wanted to convey to his audiences throughout his writing process, however, in the same way he needed to understand his circumstances and surroundings to create his story, I needed to understand his background and circumstances to analyze and understand his work. It was crucial for me to go through the Jonathan Larson Papers and interview those closest to him and the show. Similar to how one would use author experiences and biographies to analyze a novel or poem, I needed to look into Jonathan’s own history and relationships to properly analyze and discuss his show, especially considering it was these connections that inspired the musical as a whole.

INTERMISSION I

Though Aronson wanted to create a more modern version of Puccini's original storyline in *La Boheme*, Jonathan wanted his show to have undertones of the opera, not simply replicate it for an urban audience. To understand how Jonathan merged *La Boheme* in with his own ideals, one must understand the foundation behind his inspiration.

Rent PART I

La Boheme premiered on February 1, 1896, at the Teatro Regio in Turin, Italy (*La Boheme*). Puccini initially was not interested in taking on a project based on the ideals of the bohemian lifestyle, and it was not until Puccini realized that composer, and rival, Ruggero Leoncavallo had made progress on his own version that Puccini decided to start working. Each composer was involved in telling the press about their ideas and were in a battle as to whose would have more success in the end.

Many were not expecting Puccini to develop an opera with the ideals and storyline that *La Boheme* portrays due to his previous works containing darker and more intensive subject matter, however many were captivated by the end result. Additionally, this was not an opera of his own design. *La Boheme* is based on *Scenes of Bohemian Life* by Henri Murger, a series of short stories that loosely relate to one another. Like Jonathan struggling to create the framework for *Rent*, Puccini and his team struggled to create a seamless storyline between the characters. Puccini worked with two librettists to solidify a storyline that he could compose his opera around, however he often made intensive and desperate demands. Various rewrites and replacements later, the show was able to premiere in 1896.

Critics were shocked at the pleasant and melodic melodies and sections from this new opera, but this did not deter the public from falling in love with the tragic and urban characters. Additionally, each of these revisions were crucial in *Rent*'s creation over a century later. Just a little over a year after its premiere, *La Boheme* spread to many cities

up and down the Italian peninsula, captivating audiences all over the country. As of the 2019-2020 Met Opera season, *La Boheme* is the most performed production in Met history. As New York acts as the setting for *Rent* due to the political and social tensions that Jonathan wanted to explore in his story, Puccini did the exact same thing with his work (metopera.org).

Setting: Alphabet City, East Village, New York

As already established, Jonathan's musical could be described and analyzed in a myriad of ways, but knowing its basic offers additional context for more in-depth to this rebellious work. For simplicity and a starting point, here is the official statement from *Playbill* summarizing *Rent* (*Playbill* "Rent" Official Program).

"Jonathan Larson's Pulitzer Prize winning rock musical retelling of the "La Boheme" story...relocated to AIDS-era East Village, New York. A penniless songwriter's love for a young woman grows even as illness begins to consumer her. The poet Rodolfo us now punk rocker Roger. Tubercular Mimi is now an AIDS-infected danger at an S&M nightclub. Painter Marcello is now aspiring filmmaker Mark Cohen, and so forth. The ending is transformed from the opera, but the theme of love striving to endure beyond all obstacles remains" (*Playbill*)

This summary emphasizes Jonathan's use of *La Boheme*, however does not particularly discuss the variety of characters, outside Mimi, Roger, and Mark and how the musical provides not only a poignant commentary on AIDS, but a love letter to the human condition and connection.

As previously mentioned, it was Jonathan's friends and his response to situations around him that inspired and fueled his work. Around the same time Jonathan was

bussing tables at the Moondance Diner and experimenting with his piano, thousands in America, and even more around the world, were suffering and dying from a newly discovered virus. Jonathan’s friends were becoming sicker and sicker with this disease, and it was when his childhood best friend Matthew O’Grady was diagnosed with the disease and, according to Julie, told to “get his affairs in order,” Jonathan realized he needed to channel his grief into his work (McCollum Larson).



Figure 5: Moondance Diner in the East Village before it went out of business (“Moondance Diner” Alchetron)

tick, tick...BOOM! was in response to learning this news, but he felt like he could not stop there. He wanted to create a whole show surrounding love in the time of a disease while emphasizing that family is those we choose, and no one should be outcast for who and how they love (McCollum Larson). When Jonathan began adapting *Rent*, he was going to life support groups with various friends diagnosed with the disease and felt like integrating, not only his experience as an artist struggling to survive the city, but those who were considered out of the mainstream by traditional society; it was rare that

creatives like Jonathan and those struggling with AIDS or discrimination were able to find themselves represented anywhere, let alone on a Broadway stage. It is crucial to understand who the characters are and what they represent, not only in the musical, but to Jonathan himself. The following is a list of each main character, their role in the musical, and what they signify within the message of the show itself (Larson, *Jonathan Rent*).

Mark Cohen, aspiring filmmaker, is modeled after Puccini's Marcello. Many assume that Mark asks as a substitute for Jonathan in the story as he is constantly feeling on the outskirts of his friends and could be considered the "normal" one with the least number of troubles. He is internally struggling with his fear of being alone after the inevitable death of his friends while grappling with a career in filmmaking. Additionally, he fears that he will never live up to the ambitions or goals that he has set for himself.

Mark's roommate Roger Davis, Puccini's Rodolfo, is both an ex-drug addict and ex-band member. He found out he was HIV-positive through his girlfriend and, soon after, she slit her wrists leaving Roger feeling guilty, heartbroken, and hesitant to love again. He was told that he, statistically, has a limited number of months left and wants to spend the time he has left writing one last, glorious song for the world by which to remember him.



Figure 6: (from left to right) Anthony Rapp as Mark and Adam Pascal as Roger in 1996 (Gioia “The Rent Origin Story”).

Benjamin (Benny) Coffin III used to be Roger and Mark’s final roommate, however, supposedly no longer subscribes to their bohemian ideals after getting married to a wealthy socialite. He wants to buy up buildings in the East Village, by proxy, condemning the struggling artists and “outcasts” to abandon their homes. Benny and Mimi had a six-month fling and continuously is debating with himself and the group who he truly wants to be and what ideals he wants to fall into.

Mimi Marquez is a confident yet terrified 19-year-old exotic dancer who is plagued with HIV. She uses the money she gets from her dancing to sustain her drug habits and feels an instant connection with Roger—feelings he is hesitant to return in fear of losing yet another lover. Mimi is close with everyone in their small group yet goes through her own trials and tribulations while holding onto her confidence and self-worth.

Tom Collins is one of Mark, Benny, and Roger’s lifelong friends. He is a professor at NYU who wishes to follow his bohemian ideals all the way to Santa Fe and leave his corporate life behind. Despite being HIV-positive, it does not play as large of a role in his character storyline, instead choosing to look to love and experiences to make

what time he has left beautiful. He quickly falls for Angel and stays by her, and his friends, through breakups, deaths, and evictions.

Angel Dumott Schunard, considered the heart and soul of the show by many, is an HIV-positive drag queen and musician who uses her talents and charm to lighten up the East Village. She is aware of her disease and attends life support meetings, as do many of the other characters, to give her support to others and come to terms with her own illness. Angel falls heavy and hard for Collins and is integrated quickly into the friend group. Everyone is in awe of her generosity and optimistic outlook despite each situation.

Maureen Johnson is a radical activist and Mark's ex-girlfriend. She cheated on him a multitude of times and left Mark for her current girlfriend Joanne. She is passionate about the performing arts and hosts many protests to try to save the community center. Her and Joanne fight often, despite their passionate love for each other, due to Maureen's outspoken passions and hesitancy to be tamed by societal standards. Despite her flaws, she is loyal to her friends and defends them fiercely.

Joanne Johnson, like Mark, holds an interesting place in the group as the resident Harvard graduate and lawyer. She was introduced to the group after becoming Maureen's girlfriend and, though she is initially hesitant about many, especially Mark, she warms up eventually and seamlessly blends. She uses her law degree and lawyer status to try to help the friends and the population in the East Village not lose their homes. She confidently stands up for herself throughout the show and takes care of those around her. It is obvious, even during their fights, that she has an undying love for Maureen and will always help her.

Each of these characters come from a multitude of backgrounds to represent the diversity of people, not just in the East Village, but of those around the country living with addictions and diseases. The underlying message of family and diversity shines through this unique cast of characters, emphasizing to audiences that love and equality transcends anything—a message Jonathan firmly lived and believed. This message comes through during “Happy New Year,” a number that comes at the top of the second act when the characters are celebrating the start of a new year. Each of them are happy and looking towards the future, but also, they are all content with being together no matter the circumstances. During this song, they are attempting to break back into their apartment building as they have been locked out but feel as though it is important to celebrate the beginning of a new year in the place, they call home while being together. Angel and Collins come dressed up as James Bond characters while Roger and Mimi are visibly showing their adoration for each other and respect for Mark as a friend; Mimi is even stating that she wants to go back to school and “give up her vices.” Though it is implied at the beginning that Joanne will not be showing up due to a fight with Maureen, she appears and the two make up and Maureen realizes that Mark, her ex-boyfriend, and Joanne have become friends, something she would not have considered at the start of the show. Each interaction throughout this number is optimistic and happy, feelings that are rare for this group of friends. These happy moments also translate into the heartbreaking tragedies of the musical, because it is on those moments that they all come together just as they did in celebration.

OUT TONIGHT

Not only did *Rent* impact the personal and professional life of actors, choreographers, musicians, and theatre workers all over New York City, its message and storyline would have a dramatic impact on the theatre industry for years to come—Jonathan's ultimate dream. Though he would not be alive to see it, Jonathan's musical would change the course of musical theatre, not just via the rock-n-roll band he brought on stage, but also with the powerful message of love and acceptance.

Often in interviews or pitch meetings, Jonathan would say he wanted to combine the MTV generation and hard rock feel to musicals that sounded more traditional and operatic, especially considering many musicals being produced at the time came from his mentor, Stephen Sondheim (Tommasini "Seven-Year Odyssey). Jonathan wanted to implement the grungy feel of 1990s East Village New York with the theatricality of musical theatre and, while he was able to do that with his lyrics and composition, he had help from a group of people at the NYTW to bring it to life into the show that we know now. Tim Weil was the original Music Supervisor on the show and worked closely with the original cast and production team (Tommasini "Seven-Year Odyssey). A music supervisor is responsible for the whole music department that operates within a show. It is crucial that they work with the director, composer, and producers in order to instruct and put together a team of musicians that will sound the show.

While Weil is not a part of the current touring company of *Rent*, he still acts on arrangements for any adaptations and adjustments that need to be made, for example:

adapting the show and music to FOX's *Rent: LIVE!*, Paul O'Keefe acted as the Associate Music Supervisor for the second half of the tour as well as the primary guitar player, both on acoustic and electric, and the organ player for parts of the show. O'Keefe is one of the few people on this 25th anniversary tour who can tie his connection to the show back to the early 1990s—before *Rent* was developed (O'Keefe).

O'Keefe remembers telling Weil that, after hearing the sounds of *Rent* for the first time two decades ago, he believed it to be a kind of “fresh air for the theatre” as it was more modern and a change from the “jukebox musicals” he had been used to seeing. Jukebox musicals are categorized as shows, either on stage or on screen, that use previously released popular songs as the musical backing instead of original pieces written for the plotline (O'Keefe). This would include musicals such as *Mamma Mia!*, *American Idiot*, and *Moulin Rouge!*. O'Keefe loves musicals that he considers to be more “Golden Age” such as *The Music Man* but felt that *Rent* tackled theatre in a completely new and unique way due to the style of music and the messages throughout the storyline.



Figure 7: 25th Anniversary cast of *Rent* (Boyle Production Photos)

For example, the first major song in the show, aptly entitled “Rent,” comes after three fairly soft and dialogue heavy “songs” and transports both the audience and the company into a rock concert. The melody is powerful and electric, and everyone is singing and dancing almost as if they are at a nightclub, however it is the lyrics that bring the message of the show together. The beginning lines alert the audience to how the characters feel like “life’s getting more like fiction each day,” implying that what used to be a harsh reality is feeling fictional, shallow, and made up. Especially considering Mark is trying to create a screenplay based on his reality, like how Jonathan was writing a musical that mirrored parts of his own, aspects of that lifestyle are beginning to feel dull and forced. On top of that, Roger is struggling with writing songs, another callback to Jonathan’s own reality, admitting that he has lost “the power [he] once had to ignite the air.” Both Mark and Roger are beginning to feel hopeless in their own artistic pursuits and, on top of that, facing eviction. The audience is also first introduced to the idea that the main characters have “some life [they] have chosen” alluding to all the struggles of rent and morale that they are facing throughout the piece. Mark is terrified of selling out, a prominent theme in the plot, and line reveals that they have chosen some of their hardships on their own as they could have, potentially, been more comfortable. One of the most important aspects of this song is using the word “rent,” not only referencing that the characters are broke and must find a way to pay rent, but also as it can mean “a split in a party, group, or organization,” according to Merriam-Webster. These factors together are the reason for the naming of the show, due to their presence and the realizations the characters have around them.

Kristoffer Diaz was the screenwriter for FOX's *Rent: LIVE!* and has a long history with the show (Diaz). His first experience with the show was in 1996 when he saw it Off-Broadway, and claims it changed his life. Like how Jonathan referenced *Hair!*, Diaz said that he thinks each generation has its musical; he believes that, before my generation had *Hamilton*, his had *Rent*.

He remembers when the show was selling out shows Off-Broadway and its eventual transfer to the Great White Way, the cast appearing on the cover of Newsweek is considered a pinnacle point in its history. Additionally, Diaz remembers swarms of crowds huddling outside the Minetta Lane Theater, trying to get tickets, or craving to hear some of the show as, for some, this was the closest they would ever get to even listening to or seeing the show.

“The show was a mystery to a lot of folks as it was not accessible yet to so many in any format,” Diaz said. “Jonathan’s passing made it even more mysterious because no one knows what else it could have been” (Diaz).



Figure 8: Original cast on-stage (Hernandez Photo Recall)

Some who were able to see it on stage or listen to it for the first time thought that it was wonderful and refreshing while others were perplexed and stunned. As any Broadway production with an accompanying film, many are first exposed to theatre via a musical film; this was the case for many of the current and former cast members and crew.

Josh Tavares, who played Angel Dumott Schunard in the 25th anniversary cast, thought the show was weird and confusing the first time he saw it (Tavares). As he grew up in Hawaii, there was little time for flying to NYC to see a grunge, rock musical, so he was first introduced via the 2005 film. At first, he was confused, he said, constantly wondering “who are these people? What is happening?” and finally concluding that he thought it was weird. Having not been introduced to the hardships of the East Village or the vast LGBTQ community itself, combined with not hearing the whispers of the epidemic, he was confused and startled by drag queens and the bohemian lifestyle. It was not until Tavares began studying musical theatre while living in New York City many years later that he believes he came to fully appreciate the piece and the message it portrays; because of this and his own personal journey, playing Angel became a dream of his. Specifically, the AIDS epidemic was something that he was not truly aware of until witnessing it within the show—much like many other audience members.

INTERMISSION II: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AIDS EPIDEMIC

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is a virus that can attack the body's immune system that, if severe enough and left untreated, can lead to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) ("HIV"). Most commonly, HIV is transmitted via sexual intercourse or if needles, syringes, or other drug injection devices are shared, both are referenced and prevalent to the show's plotline. HIV itself was a mystery disease, causing mysterious deaths until proper research and identification in the 1980s. During the 1970s, various doctors were dispatched by the World Health Organization (WHO) to try to identify and contain a contagious, fatal new disease in Africa (Shilts 5). What would come to be known as the Ebola virus had already ripped through 53% of the people that it infected and, not long after, a new disease would be discovered and dominate bloodstreams all, not just in Africa, but all over the United States. Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) was a form of an aggressive lung infection primarily impacting gay men, often accompanied with Kaposi Sarcoma (KS)—a new, intense form of cancer. Eventually, the combination of these two diseases would be integrated into medical journals, newspaper headlines, and tabloids alike. Due to its prevalence in gay men alone, it soon was given the name "gay man's cancer," thus contaminating a whole society into pushing those in the LGBTQ community further away. This sort of name first appeared in 1981 in the *Bay Area Reporter*, a weekly newsletter for the gay and lesbian community, the same day that an article was published in *The New York Times* entitled "Rare Cancer Seen in 41

Homosexuals.” Eventually, it would be these two cities, as well as Los Angeles, that would see exponential increases in infection (“Timeline of HIV/AIDS”).

Many physicians were in San Francisco at the time for a conference and some had been informed of a strange new disease moving amongst men. Dr. David Astrow appeared in town during the same week as the Freedom Parade, one of the city’s first known celebrations of Pride, and realized just how many people were at risk—not just there, but all over the country. He found that all gay men had a one-in-five chance of developing Hepatitis B within 12 months of stepping off the bus into an “urban gay scene,” such as San Francisco, and within five years, infection became a virtual certainty (Shilts 18). Dr. Dan Williams, a physician who was openly gay in New York City, saw a patient with Hep. B who also had purple splotches on his arms and chest and confused, referred him to Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center for testing. Eventually, physicians anonymously began writing about “Patient Zero,” a gay man named Gaëtan Dugas who supposedly brought AIDS from Haiti or Africa to the States; this was later disproven. By the end of 1981, there were already 337 reported cases and, out of that number, 130 were dead. Over the course of the next 15 years, thousands more were diagnosed with, and killed by this disease. In the 1980s, the lifespan for someone following an AIDS diagnosis was approximately one year; however, azidothymidine (AZT) was beginning to be prescribed to patients. There are various instances throughout the show that Jonathan referenced AZT, the first drug approved by the FDA to treat this deadly disease, however audiences also see the adverse and tragic effects of the treatment and the disease itself. Though there are various other drugs and treatments presently, HIV and AIDS still have no cure. Additionally, discrimination skyrocketed, and people were

isolated on the streets or in support groups. 1990 saw the death of Ryan White, a teenager from Indiana who was diagnosed with AIDS following a blood transfusion. Actor Rock Hudson publicly announced his AIDS diagnosis in 1985, he died that same year of AIDS-related complications (“Timeline of HIV/AIDS”). He was one of the first mainstream celebrities to announce a diagnosis, encouraging the lessening of the stigma and isolation many were facing. HIV/AIDS is a major part of *Rent*’s plotline and understanding the background of it, as well as its current standing, allows for a deeper understanding of the show, and the lifestyle of those who lived and died with the disease, and those currently suffering from it. Today, there are various forms of treatment that lengthen the lifespan of those with HIV/AIDS and lessen the symptoms of the disease and its ability to reproduce and spread—a luxury that many of Jonathan’s beloved friends and characters were not given.

TODAY 4 U

Angel's "Today 4 U" is one of Tavares' favorite parts, not just to perform, but in the piece in general (Tavares). This number is Angel's big introduction as a drag queen, but also allows audience members to get a true sense of her character's traits, passions, and backgrounds—not just the fact that she is HIV/AIDS-positive. The characters learn that Angel is generous, funny, and willing to help anyone with anything, as noted both in the song and later when she tries to help Collins replace his stolen coat. Collins and Angel quickly begin a relationship following this number, but also are considered the heart and light of an otherwise beautifully tragic piece. They are the only couple who do not visually fight or break-up, but by "Take Me or Leave Me," AIDS has taken over Angel and we see a true, caring, and loving view of their relationship. Tavares believes that both the confident and passionate view of Angel that viewers get in her introductory number combined with the vulnerable and fragile view of her in later numbers truly emphasizes the toll that the disease can take on the person themselves but also the people around them.

Additionally, while Angel is dying, it can be remembered from "Tune Up #3," the sixth number in the show, that Roger is also AIDS-positive and still living a relatively normal life. Mark reminds Roger, during this early number, to take his AZT before turning to the audience and stating that Roger's girlfriend April left him a note saying they were positive prior to slitting her wrist in a bathroom; this gives the audience a look into Roger's perspective that shape many of his decisions and actions throughout the

piece. Especially following Angel's death, he is reminded of April and how, though it was not complications from the disease that killed her, but the diagnosis itself. He has now witnessed two people that he loves die from AIDS while others in the group, such as Mimi, still are apparently facing an inevitable and tragic demise.

Yz Jasa moved from the Philippines to Singapore to Guam before being introduced, again via the movie, to Jonathan's revolutionary work. They said they were immediately captivated by the storyline and the message (Jasa).

"It really had an impact on my life. It was really interesting to be introduced to the characters and who they were for the first time," Jasa said. "I was introduced to the AIDS crisis and gay people and lesbians, and it all was really cool."

Jonathan's sister Julie, and their family, is incredibly proud of Jonathan's show, but remembers being torn about how to feel once the show premiered and was receiving top praise (McCollum Larson).

"He died right before all his visions came true," Julie said. "We [family] were thrown into the best moment of my brother's professional life, but the worst moments of ours—it was such an emotional complex" (McCollum Larson).

Though he "believed in his heart that it would happen one day," Jonathan could not have imagined the type of reaction that his musical would generate, not just in the theatre community, but for those "outside the mainstream" as well.

Location: Manhattan, NYC: Friends In Deed

Ali Gertz died in 1992, Gordon Rogers and Pam Shaw died in 1995, Angel dies in the second act of *Rent*, and Matthew O'Grady is still alive and well (McCollum Larson).

There is very little that all these people have all have in common, but there are three

standout things that they all have in common: they could be considered complete strangers to history, Jonathan knew each of them closely, and all of them have, or had, AIDS.

While all of this was happening around him, Jonathan was writing and producing *Rent*, taking real-life experiences that he was going through as well as situations he saw in the city, and implementing them throughout his story.



Figure 9: Ali Gertz (Jonathan Larson Papers, Library of Congress)

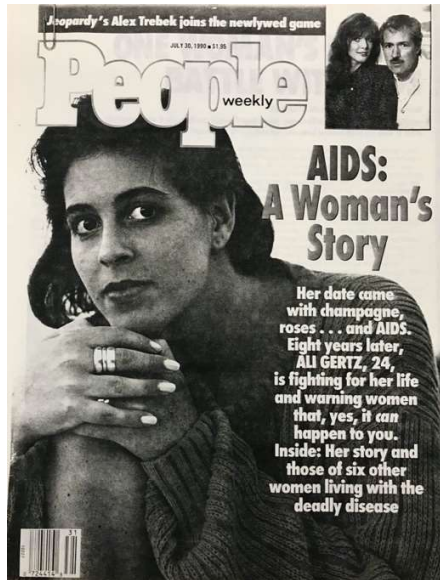


Figure 10: Ali Gertz on the cover of *People* (Jonathan Larson Papers, Library of Congress)

O’Keefe, who was playing in the band for the show at the time, felt like *Rent* took on bigger issues than what musicals had taken on in past productions as they dealt with real life tragedies and hardships that were happening within multiple different communities as it was happening, such as the AIDS epidemic (O’Keefe). Additionally, many people in the company referred to *Rent* as a “period piece”—any piece of work whose value is placed in a specific point in history—not because it takes place during the regency era, but because the story takes place in such a niche environment and time.

“It’s a period piece that takes place in a very specific time and people who have seen it then can come back and show their family or their friends like ‘hey I saw this 20 years ago,’” Tavares said. “I think that that’s because the core value of it is love and acceptance and tolerance and all those things that people are always going to need to be reminded that’s important” (Tavares).

At the time of its premiere, and still in many places around the globe, each of the issues that is addressed in Jonathan’s show were destroying lives and communities.

O'Keefe remembers audience members standing up during the exit music sobbing and holding the people around them, sometimes complete strangers, but united through the message and storyline Jonathan had created (O'Keefe).

HIV/AIDS and the stigma that was in place at the time is combined into a big number featuring the whole company at the end of the first act entitled "La Vie Boheme," a reference not only to unconventional bohemian lifestyle that the characters are living in this time period, but Puccini's opera that Jonathan was inspired by; thus, blending two time periods. This song follows Maureen's protest which, despite the massive turnout, big media moguls and businessmen, Benny, are still planning to take over the East Village neighborhood, eradicating the broke, artistic population that resides there. This song serves as a tribute to specific figures and props associated with life in the East Village, but also, some symbols and movements surrounding the AIDS epidemic, the LGBTQ community, and Jonathan himself. This number takes place in the Life Café in East Village's Alphabet City, a place Jonathan wrote a large portion of the musical. There are odes to Maya Angelou, poet and civil rights activist, and the Sex Pistols, a band primarily known for initiating the punk rock movement in the United Kingdom and promoting anarchism through their music, very similar to the calls for justice throughout this song. Most notably for Jonathan and the characters, there is a reference to Susan Sontag, an author and playwright who wrote *The Way We Live Now*, a text detailing the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. Stephen Sondheim is also praised, Jonathan's mentor and inspiration, therefore it makes sense that the characters would cheer to him, not just as Jonathan himself loved him, but due to the significant impact he made on the theatre world. Arguably, the most important declarations within "La Vie Boheme" are the ones

dedicated to highlighting those being discriminated against. Mark lifts his drink and boldly says “to being an *us* for once, instead of a *them*,” alluding to all the times that those in the LGBTQ community or those who have HIV/AIDS or have untraditional careers and paths are referred to as “other” or viewed as less than “traditional society.” One of the most impactful statements in the song references the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, otherwise known as ACTUP, an activist group formed in the 1980s dedicated to use their anger and passion to fight for AIDS awareness (“Timeline of HIV/AIDS”). This group was active during Jonathan’s time living in the East Village due to the intense presence of the disease in the community, but also remains active presently. This statement is directed towards Benny and the businessmen that are watching this scene happen in the café, but also towards the audience as a message to remember that AIDS is still currently impacting the lives of many people and that, just because it is not splashed across newspapers as much as it once was, there is still not a cure and that is worth fighting for. Additionally, Mark also cheers to “no shame, never playing the Fame Game,” emphasizing that there should not be any shame in how himself, any of his friends, or those in the East Village are living. Since Mark is so afraid of selling out and doing something solely for the want of fame and fortune, this point emphasizes that the characters and audience members should continue chasing passions and aspirations without shame and not just for the paycheck and notoriety that could come with success. Jonathan himself wanted to change the theatre industry, but his goal was to make it a more accepting atmosphere while also promoting a message of love and acceptance. He was happy living in his small East Village apartment if it meant he was happy.



Figure 11: The cast of the 25th Anniversary Tour in 2019 (Boyle Production Photos)

WHAT YOU OWN

Cody Jenkins plays Mark Cohen in the current touring company and, through various conversations, believes that his character represents Jonathan as his character does not have AIDS nor is he being directly discriminated against, as he is a straight, white male, but his friends were dealing with intense discrimination and the tragic results of the AIDS epidemic (Jenkins).

“Jonathan is Mark. Jonathan spent his life, a lot of the last years, going to funerals and seeing his friends while also trying to write and perform and go to work,” Jenkins said. “His chosen family needed him. He wasn’t dying of AIDS, gay, or of color. He was a straight, white man going to work day-to-day and his impact on the show is very large. He comes across as Mark and the constant desire to be fighting everything, but never focuses on himself. Jonathan put himself in this show, but far enough away that it is relatable” (Jenkins).



Figure 12: Cody Jenkins as Mark in the national tour (Boyle Production Photos)

At the time of *Rent*'s premiere, AIDS was considered a death sentence and being honest about a diagnosis or experience was social suicide. Many, such as Ali Gertz, believed they would never have another relationship due to the disease. Jonathan, like Mark, was friends with people who were members of various communities, but AIDS was heavily present in many of his relationships. At one point, Jonathan attended three funerals in one year, all of whom had been taken by the disease (McCollum Larson). He wanted to highlight the lives and experiences of those in diverse communities while also emphasizing that it was these same friends he lost, among others, who became his chosen family—just like Mark.

“It [the show] speaks to a generation going through unimaginable stuff,” Diaz said. “HIV devastated the art community in New York City and this show was able to build up strength through something beautiful” (Diaz).

Jonathan went with his friends, primarily Matthew O’Grady, to a life support group called Friends In Deed. This group was run and created by Cynthia (Cy) O’Neal and Mike Nichols for those suffering from any terminal illness, especially AIDS, to have

a place to call home and a chosen family. They formed pretty much as an indirect response to the AIDS crisis and felt it needed to be done, as they knew many friends dying of the disease, according to David Mickelberg. Friends In Deed provided people resources and advice, but also comfort and understanding (Mickelberg). The organization is no longer acting as Friends In Deed alone; the life support group is now called The Big Group and now offers various other segments and is volunteer-led. Mickelberg was diagnosed with HIV on July 19, 1993 and began attending support meetings the next day—28 years later, he assists Cy in coordinating meetings for the Big Group.

The song “Life Support” in the first act of the show is meant to represent this exact support group. Additionally, the attendees each state their names, all of which match the friends that Jonathan himself lost to AIDS. He was good friends with Cy and often talked with her about the disease itself, as well as what he could do for those he knew who were suffering. Because of this, Jonathan felt like it was a crucial point to make throughout his musical—it is our chosen family that helps us through the hardships. Presently, HIV and AIDS are much more manageable and, like O’Grady and Mickelberg, many live years longer than anyone would have expected when the disease was first discovered. Additionally, for some like Jasa, the show was, and continues to be, the first exposure many people get not only to the HIV/AIDS crisis, but the LGBTQ community itself.

“It [the show] just became really special. And also talking to people who went through the AIDS epidemic and lived through this extremely scary time and knew people that were like Mimi and Roger and Mark and all these other people. It's very surreal,” said Aiyana Smash, currently playing Mimi in the anniversary tour (Smash). “And it's

very special when somebody comes up to you, and they're just like, 'that was my friend,' or 'this touched me because I lived through this,' or 'I have AIDS,' 'I was a drug addict.' So, I think the show is so close to people's real lives and I didn't think about it that way at first. When I first went came in here, I was just like, 'Oh, it's just a show and the music's cool and I just want to feel like a rock star,' but I realized how special the show is and how much it means to so many people. And it really just fuels my performance and our performances every single night when we get on stage, and we look out at the audience. We're just like, this is the reason why we do this every single day" (Smash).

FINALE B

Rent has transcended the theatre industry in ways that Jonathan himself may never have dared to imagine. His story highlights incredibly diverse communities and fights to eradicate discrimination and stigma, no matter the circumstance or environment. Each and every person I had the honor of talking to for this research had an emotional connection to Jonathan's show, whether or not they connected with it immediately. The message of love and acceptance, with the emphasis on the fact that family are those who we choose, continues to grace stages all over the world but sticks with us long after the curtains have closed, and the stage door is locked; it continues long after Jonathan. His characters, inspired by his own friends and family, are inspirations to many. Unfortunately, the AIDS epidemic is far from over and this horrible disease still impacts thousands. Jonathan created his show for those living outside the mainstream and everyone who needed to find solace in the theatre and a chosen family. Because of that, he changed the face of musical theatre just like he always wanted. After the show's opening performance at the Minetta Lane Theater the day after Jonathan died, one man stood up and said a short sentence and, from that point on, it became tradition that every company of the show have this phrase written on a plaque and hung-up backstage. This simple declaration applauds Jonathan for all he has done, not just for theatre, but for millions of people: thank you Jonathan Larson.



Figure 13: Headshot of Jonathan Larson (Gioia “Original *Rent* Cast Members Remember”)

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