

## ABSTRACT

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Despite its critical acclaim and commercial success, the hit musical *Rent* by Jonathan Larson has received scant attention in academic literature. The story of *Rent* has been told and retold in the popular media, but a look at Larson's own drafts, notes, and other personal writings adds another important and largely missing voice – Larson's own. In this study, I use the Jonathan Larson Collection, donated to the Library of Congress in 2004, to examine this seminal work and composer by tracing *Rent*'s development and documenting Larson's creative process. My analysis of material from the Larson Collection and the interviews of others involved in *Rent*'s development reveals the story of how this unconventional rock musical made it to the stage, highlighting the importance of vision, but also of revision and collaboration.

“OVER THE MOON”: THE CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF *RENT* BY  
JONATHAN LARSON

By

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## Preface

Although I cannot claim the status of *Rent*head – I do not know every word to “La Vie Bohème” by heart or have a website dedicated to the show – I admit to approaching this project as a fan as well as scholar. I was introduced to *Rent* as a teenager and had worn out my CD by the time I saw it on Broadway. This fall, I approached Larson’s work as an intern assisting in processing the Jonathan Larson Collection at the Library of Congress. I thus was fortunate to have the opportunity to see much of the collection before it was made available to the public. I also helped prepare materials for an exhibit displayed at the Library of Congress concert *American Creativity: The Composer-Lyricist, Jonathan Larson* in October 2006. During the pre-concert lecture, I listened to speakers who were involved in *Rent*’s development, and then I heard the original *Rent* band and professional musicians, including the original Mark (Anthony Rapp), perform Larson’s pieces. The concert included Larson’s earlier works and discarded or revised versions of *Rent* numbers as well as his best known hits. The roles of fan and intern cataloguing the Larson Collection have informed and enhanced my work as a scholar.

As I write this preface, the Larson Collection is only partially processed. Box numbers and folder numbers of the material have not yet been assigned in some cases and will almost certainly change in others; for that reason, I have not used them as descriptors in my citations. Instead, I give brief item identifications and, when possible, exact or approximate dates to describe source material from the Larson Collection.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank, first and foremost, Mark Horowitz, senior music specialist at the Library of Congress, for his guidance throughout this project. This work could not have been done without his support and expertise. Special thanks also to Nancy Kassak Diekmann of the Jonathan Larson Performing Arts Foundation and Jonathan Larson's family for granting permission to copy from the collection, answering questions, and providing a copy of Amy Asch's catalogue of Larson's works. I am also grateful for the kind and generous contributions of Tim Weil, who answered my questions about *Rent*'s music and score, and Judith Sebesta, who shared her work in a pinch.

My advisor, Dr. Richard King, has provided excellent advice and mentorship for this project as in all areas of my graduate study, and I thank him for his encouragement and assistance throughout this journey. Additionally, I am grateful for the fresh perspectives and insightful comments and questions of the other members of my thesis committee, Dr. Jonathan Dueck and Dr. Robert Provine. Finally, I appreciate the love and support of all my family and friends, and in particular, I thank two constant and unfailing editors, Heather Titrington and Josh Craft.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction: The Story of <i>Rent</i> .....	1
<i>Rent</i> 's Significance .....	2
Plot Synopsis.....	4
Review of the Literature .....	7
Research Methodology and the Jonathan Larson Collection.....	10
Chapter 2: <i>Bohème</i> : Early Drafts .....	13
Before <i>Rent</i> .....	13
The Aronson-Larson Collaboration .....	14
Chapter 3: <i>Rent</i> : New Directions .....	24
Influences: Personal and Political.....	24
Politics in Larson's Early Drafts of <i>Rent</i> .....	28
AIDS in Larson's Early Drafts of <i>Rent</i> .....	30
Characters .....	34
<i>La Bohème</i> : Departures and Allusions.....	37
Creative Process: Other Sources .....	40
Chapter 4: Collaborations: The New York Theatre Workshop Productions .....	46
Workshop and Revisions .....	48
Towards a Full Production.....	53
Music and Composition .....	57
Chapter 5: Post Mortem: To Broadway and Beyond.....	64
Appendices.....	70
Bibliography .....	73

## Chapter 1: Introduction: The Story of *Rent*

“It took my brother Jonnie fifteen years of really hard work to become an overnight sensation.”

- Julie Larson McCollum

The story of *Rent*'s composition illuminates the personal growth and struggles of one young, ambitious writer and composer of musical theatre. Examining the broader issues of the show's development illustrates how a musical, particularly an unconventional “rock musical,” gets to the stage. While this story has been told and retold in the popular media, in a coffee-table book with the script and interviews, in a documentary feature included with the recent film version, and on the websites of the diehard fans known as “*Rentheads*,” a look at Larson's own drafts, notes, and other personal writings adds another important and largely missing voice – Larson's own.

A fully staged production of *Rent* opened off-Broadway for preview performances at the New York Theatre Workshop on January 26, 1996.<sup>1</sup> Its composer, Jonathan Larson, had died the day before, early in the morning after the show's dress rehearsal, at the age of thirty-five. After Larson's many years of composing scores for musical theatre, including over six years of work on *Rent*, he did not live to see his success.<sup>2</sup> “I am the future of the American musical,” Larson often prophesied.<sup>3</sup> While he was unable

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<sup>1</sup> *Rent* had already been presented as a staged reading in 1993 and in a workshop in 1994, but Larson revised the show significantly between each performance.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Asch, compiler of a catalog of Larson's shows and scores, notes that Larson composed his first score, *El Libro de Buen Amor*, in 1979. Amy Asch, *Jonathan Larson: A Guide to His Songs, Shows and Scores* (New York: Finster and Lucy Music, c/o Jonathan Larson Performing Arts Foundation, 2001), 69.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; Anthony Rapp, *Without You: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and the Musical “Rent”* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 101; Kate Giel, ed. “*Rent*”: *Book, Music and Lyrics by Jonathan Larson*, interviews and text by Evelyn McDonnell with Kathy Silberger (New York: Rob Weisbach Books – William Morrow and Co, 1997), 15.

to completely fulfill that prophecy, most who have chronicled the history of musical theatre do see *Rent* as a major turning point.

### **Rent's Significance**

Perhaps Larson's greatest accomplishment was reviving the rock musical in the tradition of *Hair*. The music and attitudes of *Rent* are firmly grounded in rock music. While many post-*Hair* musicals of the 1960s through today have incorporated some aspects of rock or pop music, most have drawn on "oldies" for nostalgic elements of rock, like *Grease*, or have incorporated pop elements into what is still a firmly Broadway sound, such as *Les Misérables* and *The Phantom of the Opera*.<sup>4</sup> Many rock musical attempts have failed miserably, like Paul Simon's *The Capeman* or the 1973 flops *Dude* and *Via Galactica*. Writing a musical that successfully blends music, plot, lyrics, and staging is difficult in any style; merging rock and theatre has particular challenges. Larson recognized the challenges of using real beat-driven rock music to tell a story and insisted that his music use rock instrumentation and sound but with audible lyrics. With the help of engineer/arranger Steve Skinner and music director Tim Weil, he succeeded.

In "From *Hair* to *Rent*: is 'rock' a four-letter word on Broadway?", Scott Warfield claims that the application of rock when it is not needed and does not fit is often the reason for the failure of rock musicals.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, *Rent*'s rock idiom succeeds in part because it is the necessary language for the show's controversial, contemporary topics and themes. Loosely based on Puccini's *La Bohème*, *Rent* portrays the grittiness of the bohemian lifestyle. Larson speaks to the times; his motivations and work are

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<sup>4</sup> Scott Warfield, "From *Hair* to *Rent*: is 'rock' a four-letter word on Broadway?" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 232, 241, 244-245.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

contemporary and political. The primary theme, as in most musicals, is love, but *Rent*'s story is far from the traditional boy-meets-girl tale. *Rent* addresses drug abuse, poverty, homelessness, and, above all, AIDS. Its characters, updated from those in *La Bohème*, include a performance artist, a transvestite, and an "S&M dancer."<sup>6</sup> A rock-based sound, occasionally blended and mixed with other genres like the tango and gospel, is the natural choice for musically portraying *Rent*'s characters and its raw, youth-focused messages.

It was remarkable that *Rent*'s risqué themes and content sold on Broadway. As Scott Miller observes in *Rebels with Applause: Broadway's Groundbreaking Musicals*, ". . . Broadway audiences generally don't want to see musicals about overtly sexual gays and lesbians (although the desexualized varieties are okay) or S&M dancers, drug addicts, drag queens, or performance artists. And they certainly don't want to see these people have simulated sex onstage."<sup>7</sup> And yet, with *Rent*, they did.

Thanks to its rock influenced score and relevant themes, *Rent* attracted more of a youth audience than did other musicals of the eighties and nineties. Larson saw the declining interest of youth and young adults in musical theatre as his crisis to solve. He called *Rent* "a *Hair* for the '90s."<sup>8</sup> His father, Al Larson, states, "Jon had confidence that he was going to marry the MTV generation with theatre. That was his goal, and he was

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<sup>6</sup> Character descriptions from a script dated 9/12/95, Jonathan Larson Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress (hereafter "Larson Collection"). "S&M dancer" is never defined in the script, and the term is not found in scholarly articles about sadomasochism (see below). Larson used the term regularly to describe Mimi, however, and most literature about the show has adopted the description. Roger's line to Mimi about seeing her at the Cat Scratch Club, "They used to tie you up - . . . I didn't recognize you / Without the handcuffs" suggests that she takes the submissive role in sadomasochistic dancing. For further information on sadomasochism and its practices, see Martin S. Weinberg, Colin J. Williams, and Charles Moser, "The Social Constituents of Sadomasochism," *Social Problems* 31, no. 4 (1984): 379-89, and Thomas S. Weinberg, "Sadomasochism and the Social Sciences: A Review of the Sociological and Social Psychological Literature," *Journal of Homosexuality* 50, no.2/3 (2006): 17-40.

<sup>7</sup> Scott Miller, *Rebels with Applause: Broadway's Groundbreaking Musicals* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001), 191.

<sup>8</sup> Giel, 8.

confident that he could do it.”<sup>9</sup> Capturing the attention of a younger generation was one of *Rent*’s greatest successes. “With the graying of their audience, Broadway’s elders are desperate for something that hooks the young, so the youthful appeal of ‘Rent’ is one of several factors that is propelling the show uptown,” Peter Marks noted in the *New York Times* in February 1996, before *Rent* moved to Broadway.<sup>10</sup>

### **Plot Synopsis**

To trace Larson’s revisions, it is necessary to understand the plot of *Rent* in its final form. *Rent* opens on Christmas Eve in Mark Cohen and Roger Davis’s loft apartment in the Lower East Side of New York City. Mark, a documentary filmmaker, explains that he is beginning a new project, shooting without a script. Roger, a rock musician, tunes his guitar in hopes of writing “one great song.” They screen their calls, ignoring Mark’s mother’s voicemail but eagerly answering a call from their friend Tom Collins, who is calling from a pay phone downstairs. They throw down the key, but Collins is attacked by two thugs. As Mark and Roger wait for him, not realizing what has happened, they receive an unwelcome visit from their ex-friend and landlord, Benjamin Coffin III (Benny), who demands back rent from the past year. Benny issues an ultimatum as he exits – pay or be evicted. The power then goes out and Roger and Mark sing the show’s title number, questioning their lifestyles and wondering how they will pay the rent. The song’s interludes show Joanne Jefferson, the new lover of Mark’s ex-girlfriend Maureen Johnson, struggling to play the role of substitute production manager

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Marks, “Looking on Broadway for a Bohemian Home,” *New York Times*, 26 February 1996, C9, <http://proquest.umi.com>, accessed March 2007.

for Maureen's scheduled performance that evening. When Maureen calls Mark for help in fixing her equipment, he agrees to help out.

On the street, Angel Dumott Schunard interrupts his drumming on a plastic pickle tub to offer his assistance to Collins, who is recovering from being assaulted. They hit it off immediately. Back in the loft, Roger is singing "One Song Glory," about his dream of writing one great song "before the virus takes hold." (He is HIV-positive, as are Angel and Collins and, we learn later, Mimi.) Interrupted by a knock on the door, Roger meets his beautiful neighbor Mimi Marquez who asks him to light her candle in the ensuing duet. Sparks fly, but we also learn that Mimi is a drug addict.

Later, in the loft, Collins enters with food, firewood, and other "provisions." He then introduces Angel, who enters dressed in Santa drag, carrying twenty-dollar bills. Angel sings "Today 4 U," explaining how he came into his temporary wealth. Benny then returns, offering Mark and Roger an alternative to paying the rent – convince Maureen to cancel her protest. He sings "You'll See" about his plans for Cyberarts, a studio that will be funded by condos above it. His audience is not convinced – Mark leaves after Benny's exit to fix Maureen's equipment and save the protest. There he meets Joanne, Maureen's new girlfriend. They dance the "Tango: Maureen," singing about Maureen's charm and infidelities. Mark then joins Collins and Angel at an AIDS Life Support group meeting. (He is an observer who goes at Collins and Angel's invitation although he does not have AIDS.)

Meanwhile, Mimi asks Roger to take her "Out Tonight." He rejects her advances in "Another Day," and she counters by telling him there is "no day but today." Roger later reconsiders (after the song "Will I"), and leaves the loft to find Mimi.

On the street, when Mark receives a tongue-lashing from a homeless person he tried to help, he, Angel, and Collins break into “Santa Fe,” dreaming about escaping New York City and opening a restaurant out west. When Mark exits, Angel and Collins declare their love in “I’ll Cover You.”

“Christmas Bells” is a montage that takes place at the St. Mark’s bazaar. Collins and Angel look for a coat to replace the one that was stolen from Collins. Roger pulls Mimi away from the junkies following a drug dealer to apologize to her and invite her out to dinner with his friends. At the end of the scene, the group all head to the lot to see Maureen’s protest. Her performance piece, “Over the Moon,” immediately follows. Act I ends with a scene at the Life Café. In “La Vie Bohème,” the friends celebrate their art and bohemian lifestyles. In the midst of the dinner, Roger and Mimi discover during an AZT break that both are HIV-positive, and sing the romantic duet “I Should Tell You.” Joanne enters from the lot to tell the group that the protest was successful, and the celebrations continue, concluding Act I.

Act II opens with “Seasons of Love,” in which the entire cast stands downstage and sings to the audience, breaking the fourth wall. “How do you measure a year?” they ask, answering, “in love.” In “Happy New Year,” the group celebrates New Year’s Eve by trying to break into Mark and Roger’s padlocked apartment. Benny unexpectedly joins them, giving Mark and Roger a key and permission to return to the loft. He explains that Mimi visited him and intimates that they had a tryst. Mimi denies that anything happened. Roger is upset but eventually believes her. Still, at the end of the song she breaks her resolution to “giv[e] up her vices” and falls back on the comfort of heroin. Maureen and Joanne are also having problems and display them in “Take Me or

Leave Me.” Drugs and Roger’s suspicion of Benny continue to wear on Mimi and Roger’s relationship, and they sing about the growing distance in their relationship in “Without You.” “Contact” is the last straw for Maureen and Joanne, and for Roger and Mimi. Collins and Angel’s relationship ends as well when Angel dies.

At Angel’s memorial, his friends pay tribute to him in song. Outside the church, however, conflict continues. The couples continue to quarrel, and Mark and Roger also argue. Maureen and Joanne reconcile, but Roger, despite seeing that Mimi is getting sick, leaves town. After his exit, Benny agrees to pay to send Mimi to a rehabilitation clinic. Roger and Mark fight their respective demons in “What You Own,” eventually finding renewed inspiration for their song and film. Roger realizes that Mimi is his muse and returns to New York, but he cannot find Mimi. In the finale, Maureen and Joanne bring Mimi to Mark and Roger’s loft after finding her in a park. She nearly dies, but Roger’s song revives her and the company concludes the show singing “no day but today.”

### **Review of the Literature**

Perhaps because of *Rent*’s relatively recent history and because relevant archival material has only very recently been made available to the public, little serious academic literature on the musical exists.<sup>11</sup> Scholars outside of musicology have produced the most in depth and serious analysis of *Rent*. A theatre thesis by Gretchen Haley considers *Rent* and its accompanying legal battle between dramaturg Lynn Thomson and the Larson estate as an example of a turning point for dramaturgy. The *Thomson v. Larson* case was

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<sup>11</sup> Regarding her experience publishing an article on *Rent*, Judith Sebesta reports that many journals rejected her article because the show was not “worthy of study” (personal communication, 10 April 2007). This bias, if widespread among editors of scholarly journals, may be another reason for the scarcity of literature on *Rent*.

seen as “a split between dramaturgs and playwrights,” Haley argues; it called into question the definition and current function of the dramaturg.<sup>12</sup> David Román’s book *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* and an English dissertation by David J. Sorrells examine *Rent* as a major example of AIDS in dramatic literature.<sup>13</sup> An article by Judith Sebesta titled “Of Fire, Death, and Desire: Transgression and Carnival in Jonathan Larson’s *Rent*” provides the most focused scholarly analysis of the show. It answers criticisms that Larson failed to accurately represent AIDS, homosexuality, and counterculture, then presenting *Rent* as an example of carnival, as described by Mikhail Bakhtin, and arguing that *Rent* “deserves considerably more credit as a transgressive piece of musical theatre than it has been given.”<sup>14</sup>

Analysis of *Rent*’s music, composition, and significance in the musical theatre canon is generally lacking. A chapter by Scott Warfield on rock musicals in the *Cambridge Companion to the Musical* devotes a couple of pages to *Rent*. Many mentions of the show in scholarly surveys of musical theatre are even more brief, pointing to *Rent* as a successor of the rock musical *Hair* or as a musical dealing with unconventional topics like AIDS and homosexuality, but without adding any depth to our understanding of *Rent* or its significance. Scott Miller, a director as well as a writer, has provided a strong analysis of “Why It Shouldn’t Have Worked” in his fifteen pages on

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<sup>12</sup> Gretchen Haley, “Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility: *Rent* and the Historical Moment of the Dramaturg(e) in American Theatre” (MA Thesis, University of Colorado, Boulder, 2000). *Thomson v. Larson* went to court in 1997 after Jonathan Larson’s death; Thomson and Larson’s heirs eventually settled out of court.

<sup>13</sup> David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*, *Unnatural Acts: Theorizing the Performative* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998); David J. Sorrells, “The Evolution of AIDS as Subject Matter in Select American Dramas” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Texas, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Judith Sebesta, “Of Fire, Death, and Desire: Transgression and Carnival in Jonathan Larson’s *Rent*,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 16, no. 4 (2006): 419-38.

*Rent* in *Rebels with Applause: Broadway's Groundbreaking Musicals*.<sup>15</sup> The ethnomusicologist Elizabeth Wollman's recent book *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, from 'Hair' to 'Hedwig'* has compensated for the cursory coverage generally given the rock musical with an in-depth history interspersed with analysis of related issues such as "authenticity" and "economics and marketing."<sup>16</sup> Although it still has fewer than ten pages devoted to *Rent*, her analysis of the show and of the history, aesthetics, and economic forces behind the rock musical add much to our understanding of a problematic and understudied genre. Still, Wollman's book notwithstanding, *Rent* has rarely been discussed in the academic literature in any depth.

Media coverage, on the other hand, is quite extensive and worth viewing. The *New York Times* offers articles on some of Larson's pre-*Rent* work and covers *Rent*'s off-Broadway and Broadway career thoroughly. The publicity is not restricted, however, to the home of Broadway. Such national publications as *Newsweek* and *Time* reviewed the show and ran cover stories once it became clear how big *Rent* was. The gay and lesbian press also took note, with several articles in publications like the *Advocate*. As *Rent* began touring across the U.S. and worldwide, city newspapers also reviewed the production. *Rolling Stone*, which acknowledges musicals begrudgingly if at all, at least reported on *Rent* and then reviewed it, albeit negatively.<sup>17</sup> The drama of Larson's untimely death certainly helped increase the media hype; in fact, most articles about *Rent*

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<sup>15</sup> Miller, 189-92.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth L. Wollman, *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, from "Hair" to "Hedwig"* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Patti O'Brien, "Rent Strikes," *Rolling Stone*, 16 May 1996, 54-58; Mark Kemp, "Performance," *Rolling Stone*, 27 June 1996, 59. For a discussion of the conflict between rock and musical theatre, see Wollman, *The Theatre Will Rock*, Interlude 1, "Rock 'Authenticity' and the Reception of the Staged Rock Musical," 24-41.

open with that story. It is difficult not to see, and perhaps for reporters difficult not to exploit, the ironic parallels between Larson's masterwork and his own fate.

Most detailed studies of the show come from non-academic sources. The 1997 book edited by Kate Giel containing approximately eighty pages of interviews and text as well as *Rent's* libretto, with interviews and text by Evelyn McDonnell with Katherine Silberger, is an invaluable source for the show's history and Jonathan Larson's biography. A documentary entitled *No Day But Today: The Story of 'Rent'* provides similar information in a collage of interviews. Amy Asch, who prepared Larson's papers and belongings for the Library of Congress, also wrote a detailed catalog of his songs, shows, and scores. The Larson estate participated in the production of the above sources, and they provide a mostly positive view of *Rent* and Jonathan Larson. There are a few sources, however, that have censured the show. Sarah Schulman, for instance, criticizes *Rent's* portrayal of AIDS and homosexuality in her book *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America* but with the added underlying but pronounced goal of proving that Larson stole plot material from one of her novels.<sup>18</sup> Judith Sebesta responds to Schulman's claims and some of the most common criticisms of *Rent* convincingly in her article of 2006, discussed above.

### **Research Methodology and the Jonathan Larson Collection**

I approach the compositional history of *Rent* largely through Larson's own voice as documented in the Jonathan Larson Collection, housed in the Music Division of the

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<sup>18</sup> Sarah Schulman, *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). Schulman states that although she believed Larson plagiarized her ideas, "convinced [she] could not win legally, [she] decided not to pursue the matter through the courts," 38. Larson did own *People in Trouble*, the novel in question, however I have not seen anything else in the Larson Collection in the Library of Congress that explicitly supports Schulman's case.

Library of Congress. Sometimes it is literally through Larson's own voice, for he left many recordings of songs from *Rent* in which he sings some or all of the parts. Larson's thoughts regarding *Rent* and his creative process are also evident in his extensive notes, script drafts, and other items such as newspaper clippings and even a few photographs. Mark Horowitz, senior music specialist at the Library of Congress, commented to the *Washington Post*, "It's a surprisingly rich collection for someone who died so young. I've never seen anyone who wrote down his thoughts as much as he did. There's just so much of the person there, what he was thinking and feeling about things."<sup>19</sup>

Because Larson worked on *Rent* in the late eighties and nineties and used the technology of the time, the collection is unusual. Much of the material is typewritten, some printed from his computer after his death. Amy Asch, who helped collect and then wrote a catalog of Larson's work, discusses the process of dating Larson's songs: "For works after 1988, we often could pull up the 'last date modified' from the computer disks where Jon stored his backups."<sup>20</sup> In this way, the computer age offers a benefit to archivists, but it also presents challenges. Because of Larson's early death, he "is the first of a younger cadre of Broadway songwriters to have his manuscripts, letters and other materials preserved at the library," and archivists and researchers working with his collection face new difficulties, such as retrieving and studying material from disks and computers.<sup>21</sup> The rock idiom compounds this issue. There is, to my knowledge, no

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Marks, "Rent Creator Gets His Due; Jonathan Larson's Papers Join Library of Congress Archives," *Washington Post*, 25 Oct 2006, C1, <http://proquest.umi.com>, accessed April 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Asch, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Horowitz mentioned the issue of dealing with computer files in his Pre-Concert Lecture for the Library of Congress's *American Creativity: The Composer-Lyricist, Jonathan Larson* Concert, 23 October 2006. He also mentioned that the collection was delivered to the Library of Congress with about 600 recordings. Approximately 200 are Larson's personal collection of commercial recordings; the rest are private recordings of his own works, although with much duplication (personal communication, 1 May 2007).

extant full score of *Rent*.<sup>22</sup> This is typical of rock music, but less so for musicals. Instead, there are parts for *Rent*'s rock band, many pages of piano-vocal score, and recordings spanning various stages of *Rent*'s development.

While much of the Larson Collection consists of computer printouts, Larson seemed to prefer to jot his thoughts down on notebook paper before typing draft script. There are pages of written script with poor handwriting and often no character designations for who is speaking or singing. Larson will often write only a few lines on a page, but there are reams of paper with his notes. Nevertheless, in combination, his notes, drafts and scripts, scores, and recordings, along with published interviews with Larson and his friends and colleagues, media coverage, and other secondary sources together provide a full understanding of *Rent*'s development from 1989-1996.

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<sup>22</sup> The Larson Collection does not have a full score and Tim Weil, music director of *Rent*, has said, "As for a full score in the traditional sense, I'm pretty sure there isn't one." Personal communication, 12 April 2007.

## Chapter 2: *Boheme*:<sup>23</sup> Early Drafts

### Before *Rent*

In the years before Larson started work on *Rent*, he had achieved small successes but no hit major enough for him to consider quitting his day job. *Superbia*, a futuristic musical evolving in part from earlier work on a musical version of *1984*, occupied him starting in 1985, but after the 1989 Village Gate performance produced by Larson and friend Victoria Leacock, it became evident that the show would go no further.<sup>24</sup> He had also worked on various other types of projects, including material for children's storybook cassette tapes, scores for modern dance shows, and songs for various cabaret shows.<sup>25</sup> An autograph daily schedule, handwritten around 1985, indicates a disciplined and dedicated composer; Larson carved out several hours per day to write music, working as a waiter only enough to pay the bills.<sup>26</sup> Friends like Jonathan Burkhart and Eddie Rosenstein corroborate this characterization. According to Burkhart and Rosenstein, Larson was reluctant to take commercial work and never sought it, preferring to save time for his own ideas. "The problem with easy money is that it is never easy," Rosenstein reports Larson saying.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Larson spelled the script title *Boheme* without the *accent grave* on the first "e" of "Boheme."

<sup>24</sup> Leacock remarked, "We were two thousand dollars in debt, and nothing came of it. So Jonathan gave up on *Superbia*. They were always saying it was too big, there were too many people in it, it was too expensive to do." Anthony Tommasini reported in a *New York Times* article that *Superbia* "was too big, too negative; no producer was ready to take it on." Giel, 18; Anthony Tommasini, "The Seven-Year Odyssey That Led to 'Rent,'" *New York Times*, 17 Mar 1996, H7, <http://proquest.umi.com>, accessed March 2007.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, Larson scored story episodes on cassette for *American Tail* (1986), *Blinkins* (1986), *Sweet Valley Twins* (1987), and *Land before Time* (1988). He scored modern dance shows including *Garden Party* (1987) and *Venus & Other Myths* (1989). He also wrote music for several cabaret shows at Adelphi University, including *One Big Happy Family* (1985), *Emote Control* (1986), and *Prostate of the Union* (1987). Asch, 73-74.

<sup>26</sup> Larson Collection.

<sup>27</sup> Giel, 14.

Although Larson had no breakthrough, commercially successful shows before *Rent*, he did receive some recognition. While still a student at Adelphi, Larson wrote a letter to Stephen Sondheim, who then invited Larson to meet.<sup>28</sup> Sondheim inspired Larson to pursue composing above acting and proved to be a long-term mentor, inviting Larson to rehearsals for *Into the Woods* and attending some of Larson's productions.<sup>29</sup> Larson was accepted into an ASCAP workshop to present works-in-progress and other similar programs, eventually doing a workshop on *Rent*.<sup>30</sup> He also won a Richard Rodgers grant in 1988 and a Stephen Sondheim Award in 1989.

### **The Aronson-Larson Collaboration**

In 1989, Billy Aronson contacted Jonathan Larson about an idea for a new musical. Larson loved Aronson's proposal for a show based on Puccini's opera *La Bohème*.<sup>31</sup> Aronson's vision was a reworking of the plot with characters who would be emotionally inhibited, unable to deal with their feelings, rather than emotionally expressive, as in the original.<sup>32</sup> Aronson and Larson decided the characters would have AIDS rather than tuberculosis. From the beginning, Larson had a particular vision and goals of his own. Aronson describes their first meeting: "We were both in the Village at that time, and we met on his roof. I had a choice of plastic crate or wood. Right off the bat, [Larson] said, 'It's time for a new *Hair*.'"<sup>33</sup>

Aronson and Larson closely modeled early drafts of their musical on the plot of *La Bohème*. Most settings, like the first scene's setting of the artists' lodgings on

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<sup>28</sup> Amy Asch with Maggie Lally, "Jonathan Larson Rocks Broadway," in *The Playwright's Muse*, ed. Joan Herrington (New York: Routledge, 2002), 215.

<sup>29</sup> Asch, 73.

<sup>30</sup> Asch with Lally, 216.

<sup>31</sup> Giel, 18.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Christmas Eve, remain the same. Mimi is still introduced when she visits her neighbors for light – in *La Bohème* to light her candle, in Aronson and Larson’s draft to borrow a light bulb. Mimi and Ralph (Rodolfo in *La Bohème*)<sup>34</sup> sing “résumé arias” as in the opera.<sup>35</sup> Cornell, like his namesake Colline, sings a farewell to his coat in the final scene. The ending also remains the same in early drafts – Mimi dies.<sup>36</sup>

Aronson and Larson each had specific and often differing ideas of how to update the opera. They changed the setting and title at Larson’s urging. According to Billy Aronson, “[Larson] wanted the East Village. I tend not to write about a generation or a neighborhood. He wanted *Rent* to be the title. I didn’t know what to call it. I said that it didn’t seem to work on enough levels, and he reminded me that *Rent* also means torn apart.”<sup>37</sup> The emphasis of the alterations, for Aronson, concerned how the characters would deal with their situations. “Where I differed from *La Bohème*,” Aronson explained in an interview, “was that the characters were so eloquent about their feelings. I wanted, in part because of the way I write, to take the plot but have things be so overwhelming and peculiar that they have trouble speaking, that it be hard to express tenderness.”<sup>38</sup> The lyrics of “I Should Tell You,” a song from the Aronson-Larson collaboration that remained in the script throughout its many revisions, displays the awkwardness of Aronson’s characters as they attempt to begin a romantic relationship. While Larson would make many characters, like Angel, more emotionally communicative, the Rodolfo/Ralph/Roger character continued to manifest Aronson’s vision.

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<sup>34</sup> Appendix 2 is a table of character names showing the various names used for the same character.

<sup>35</sup> *Bohème* script and outline Act I, Larson Collection.

<sup>36</sup> *Bohème* script dated 9/22/89, Larson Collection.

<sup>37</sup> Giel, 19.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

The earliest known drafts of *Rent*, then called *Boheme*, in the Library of Congress's Jonathan Larson Collection are from the Aronson-Larson collaboration. In the documentary *No Day But Today: The Story of 'Rent,'* Aronson says that Larson started composing songs for the fifteen pages of lyrics that Aronson had written, and by the winter of 1989, they had three songs finished.<sup>39</sup> Two drafts survive in the Jonathan Larson Collection from around the same time. An eleven page pre-lyric draft of Act I is undated, but probably originated before or in 1989.<sup>40</sup> A full draft of both acts, forty-two pages with lyrics, is dated September 22, 1989.<sup>41</sup> Both demonstrate striking differences from later versions of *Rent*. The lead male characters are Mark, a painter, and Ralph, a poet in one draft and playwright in another, very similar to Puccini's painter Marcello and poet Rodolfo.<sup>42</sup> Mimi stays Mimi, but her profession gradually changes. In one draft she is an artist and embroiderer who "embroider[s] sunsets onto pillow cases." An annotation, presumably Larson's, comments in the margins, "Can we do better?"<sup>43</sup> Mimi then becomes a sculptor before Larson takes over the project and completely changes the Puccini character. The Musetta character, a singer, is Isabella or Suzanne in these drafts. Colline the philosopher becomes Cornell. Schaunard, a musician, becomes Shaun. These three characters keep the same occupations at least initially. Benoit, the landlord, becomes Mr. Wine. The homeless, initially with character names such as "Liar" and "Schizoid" also play a significant role in the script. Larson would later take more

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<sup>39</sup> *No Day But Today: The Story of 'Rent'* (Los Angeles: Automat Pictures, 2006), DVD.

<sup>40</sup> *Boheme* Act I script, Larson Collection.

<sup>41</sup> *Boheme* script dated 9/22/89, Larson Collection. Aronson reports in *Rent: Book, Music and Lyrics by Jonathan Larson* that he wrote the first draft from July through September 1989 (Giel, 19); this is probably the draft to which he refers.

<sup>42</sup> *Boheme* script dated 9/22/89, Larson Collection.

<sup>43</sup> *Boheme* Act I script, Larson Collection.

liberties in the ways he updates *La Bohème*, radically changing the characters' names and professions and occasionally altering their personalities.

Only three songs from this draft survive to *Rent*'s final version in any recognizable form: "Rent," "Santa Fe," and "I Should Tell You."<sup>44</sup> The lyrics of the title song, however, were heavily revised later. This early version, "a lively kvetch,"<sup>45</sup> depicts the darkness of the lead characters' situation. The show opens with these two verses of "Rent":

MARK:  
If I threw my body  
Out the window  
Brain all splattered  
Guts all steaming  
In the snow  
I wouldn't have to  
Finish painting  
Paintings no one  
Wants to show

Rent!

RALPH:  
If I studied something  
Paid a salary  
Wouldn't have to  
Do the shit I  
Do for cash  
My guts all steaming  
Fuck this dreaming  
Dense new dramas  
For the trash

These suicidal musings remained in "Rent" through its first performance as a staged reading in 1992. Whether because of the lyrics' weakness, the dark cynicism placed

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<sup>44</sup> *Bohème* script dated 9/22/89, Larson Collection.

<sup>45</sup> *Bohème* Act I outline, Larson Collection.

conspicuously at the show's opening, or, more likely, both, the lyrics were eventually rewritten.

Financial documents show that Larson recorded "Santa Fe" and "Rent" on December 21, 1989 and "I Should Tell You" on January 16, 1990.<sup>46</sup> Since few of the *Rent* recordings in the Larson Collection are labeled with dates and none from those years, it is unclear whether these are contained in the collection and, if so, which they are. Still, the groupings of songs on various cassettes and reels helps date them to approximate time periods. Early recordings of those initial three songs of *Rent* sound distinctively eighties, but structurally the music is easily recognizable from the Broadway cast album. The low production quality, often with one voice singing all the vocals (probably Larson's own), may be as reflective of Larson's limited finances and musical resources as it is of the intended aesthetic. Nevertheless, with a compositional period spanning decades, a progression from the heavily synthesized sound of the eighties to the grunge sound of the nineties is evident, particularly in the many recordings of the show's title song.<sup>47</sup>

Along with poverty and the Bohemian lifestyle, there is a hint of the threat of AIDS as a theme in these early drafts, though it is not fully developed and is incorporated to varying degrees in different versions. In one exchange, Mimi and Ralph disclose their potential exposure to disease:

MIMI: I should tell you that the last guy I went out with was bisexual. So were the two before him.

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<sup>46</sup> Bill/receipt for recording "Santa Fe" and "Rent" on 12/21/89 and "I Should Tell You" on 1/16/90, Larson Collection.

<sup>47</sup> Recordings; Jonathan Larson Collection; Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division; Library of Congress.

I've only gone out with three men as long as I've been in New York. . . but there you have it.

I don't have herpes, that's the good news!

RALPH: We're all at risk in this apartment, too. One roommate slept with a dozen men in art school, and about six dozen women since. Another worked in a shelter for the dying homeless. Another roommate and I used to share syringes to give ourselves allergy shots. And we've all gone out with women who've gone out with men who've gone out with men.

MIMI: We'll take precautions.

RALPH: We won't exchange fluids.

MIMI: None.

They kiss.<sup>48</sup>

A synopsis of an early draft explains, "Mimi and Ralph embrace, awkwardly, terrified. Now that they've found each other their entire abominable New York lifestyles seem wonderful. But before exchanging saliva they must try to figure out how safe the other is – how many people have you slept with, etc. So they're simultaneously letting down and putting up barriers."<sup>49</sup> In this telling, the characters do not seem to know their HIV status, only their potential exposure to the disease. They seem irresponsible, or at least naïve. Drugs are also noticeably absent; exposure to the disease by syringe is from allergy shots. When Larson returns to the script, drugs become a key topic and AIDS becomes a more central theme with a more focused, personal message about the disease and its "victims."

Aronson and Larson use many novel structural elements in the earliest drafts of *Rent*. The September 22, 1989 script, for instance, features a voiceover giving lines of synopsis. In later drafts Mark, as a documentary filmmaker, provides similar explanatory

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<sup>48</sup> *Bohème* Act I script, Larson Collection.

<sup>49</sup> Act I Synopsis ca. 1989, Larson Collection.

comments as he films various scenes. The roommates screen their calls, and answering machine messages appear often in the 1989 script; the later versions of *Rent* employ these voice messages even more extensively. Early drafts of *Rent* also feature a “Waiting for Death Ballet.”<sup>50</sup> Various types of dance scenes were included in most drafts of *Rent*, and Larson did not discard the idea until late in the show’s development.

A script dated 1990 shows the progression of Aronson and Larson’s ideas with revisions and newly added songs. Although some positive progress is made – for example, they cut a rather uninspired epilogue from the 1989 script – there are also weaknesses. All of the songs added for this script, most of them modeled closely on *La Bohème*, were eventually cut. Some of the lyrics, even of songs kept in the show, are cringe-worthy. Larson later revised, for instance, these lines in “I Should Tell You”:

MIMI:  
Thrown about  
crunching  
inside the sea

RALPH:  
Moaning out  
munching  
on destiny<sup>51</sup>

Aronson and Larson had no problem creating rhyme, but their imagery and word choice leave much to be desired.

The Aronson-Larson collaboration fizzled after several scenes and songs were drafted, and the two artists took up other projects. In part, they were simply at a standstill with the material, and according to Aronson, “weren’t sure what to do next.”<sup>52</sup> Different ideas for the show’s direction would have made further collaboration difficult. In

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<sup>50</sup> *Bohème* script dated 9/22/89, Larson Collection.

<sup>51</sup> *Rent* script dated 1990, Larson Collection.

<sup>52</sup> Giel, 20.

addition, although Aronson and Larson “passed around a tape and script and tried to get theaters to bite,” they had no success.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Aronson admits that both he and Larson were inexperienced as collaborators and had problems communicating and making decisions together.<sup>54</sup> “The process was bumpy,” he states on his website.<sup>55</sup> Larson’s difficulties with collaboration would become a theme and roadblock in *Rent*’s development. Still, most sources claim the two separated on friendly terms,<sup>56</sup> and Larson always credited Aronson’s work in *Rent*.

In 1991, with Aronson’s consent, Larson continued his work on *Rent* alone. Larson explored ways to update or change *La Bohème* in extensive notes and drafts. He read Henri Murger’s *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* (1846), the source of Puccini’s *La Bohème*, taking extensive notes.<sup>57</sup> “Who are Rodolpho [*sic*] and Mimi today,” he asks on one scrap of paper. He continues, “Mimi has an unlit candle/She drops something on the floor.”<sup>58</sup> In the final version of *Rent*, the item Mimi drops is her stash of heroin. The plot outline of *La Bohème* remains, but the changes in details drastically change the result. “The more involved I got, the less I cared about being true to Puccini,” Larson said in an interview with the *New York Times* after the final dress rehearsal of *Rent* on the eve of his death.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Billy Aronson, "Musicals," *Billy Aronson*, <http://www.billyaronson.com/musicals.php> (accessed 27 March 2007).

<sup>54</sup> Giel, 20.

<sup>55</sup> Billy Aronson, "Musicals," <http://www.billyaronson.com/musicals.php>.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, *Asch with Lally*, 220.

<sup>57</sup> Notes, Larson Collection.

<sup>58</sup> Card of notes, undated, Larson Collection.

<sup>59</sup> Anthony Tommasini, “A Composer’s Death Echoes in His Musical,” *New York Times*, 11 Feb 1996, H5, <http://proquest.umi.com>, accessed March 2007.

Larson seemed to recognize early on that he was facing a challenge in merging two disparate genres. Above his notes on “Rodolpho and Mimi today,” he wrote the following:

2 Cardinal Sins  
rock and roll among serious opera aficionados/refined ears  
bohème<sup>60</sup>

The challenge of a rock musical based on *La Bohème* would be to find an audience. The typical audiences for *La Bohème* would probably have little interest in rock music; conversely, typical rock audiences would have little interest in opera and probably little knowledge of it and would therefore miss the allusions and parallels to *La Bohème*. Musical theatre has another type of typical audience and expectations, and previous success in merging rock and musical theatre had been rare.<sup>61</sup> Merging rock, musical theatre, and Romantic opera? Unheard of.

According to Billy Aronson, this challenge of blending highbrow and lowbrow forms had initially attracted Larson to the project.<sup>62</sup> *New York Times* critic Anthony Tommasini has said about *Rent*, “Jonathan was trying to do something very difficult: he was trying to combine the tradition of Broadway – the song tradition, the words and music tradition, where words really matter – with rock. Words don’t carry in rock; rock is visceral, organic. It’s a hard thing to combine; he did it as well as I can imagine it being done.”<sup>63</sup>

The challenges that arose in the earliest stages of *Rent*, including the questions of how much material to take from Puccini’s *La Bohème*, which themes to incorporate, and

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<sup>60</sup> Card of notes, undated, Larson Collection.

<sup>61</sup> See for further discussion Warfield, “From *Hair* to *Rent*: is ‘rock’ a four-letter word on Broadway?” and Wollman, *The Theatre Will Rock*.

<sup>62</sup> Giel, 18.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

how to tackle difficult topics like AIDS, as well as Larson's struggles with collaboration and with combining rock and Broadway styles, would continue to shape the show's development through Larson's final performance in 1996 and beyond.

## Chapter 3: *Rent*: New Directions

“. . . I said to Jonathan, ‘I think you’re going to change the American musical theater.’ And he whispered, ‘I know,’ and smiled really big.”  
-Gilles Chiasson<sup>64</sup>

The tone of *Rent* began to change in 1991 when the project became Jonathan Larson’s alone. He made the story more upbeat, positive, and hopeful, and the show’s message about AIDS became more central and personal. As the sole writer of the music, lyrics, and book, Larson was now free to put his philosophies, evident in his notes and brainstorming, into *Rent*. The connection to *La Bohème* continued to grow more tenuous as the plot became more Larson’s own. The result was a show that was promising but also “so full of ideas, so full of everything Jonathan Larson wanted to say, that no one could make heads or tails of it.”<sup>65</sup>

### **Influences: Personal and Political**

One impetus for returning to the show for Larson was learning that several of his friends were HIV-positive. He had learned in 1987 that a childhood friend, Matthew O’Grady, was HIV-positive. By the early nineties, three more of Larson’s friends had contracted the disease.<sup>66</sup> Larson began attending Friends In Deed, a support group for people affected by AIDS and other life-threatening illnesses, with O’Grady.<sup>67</sup> Their attitudes towards dealing with disease influenced Larson’s views and thus also *Rent*. O’Grady reports, “I definitely picked up from Friends in Deed that you don’t have to

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<sup>64</sup> Giel, 28.

<sup>65</sup> Miller, 190.

<sup>66</sup> Giel, 20-21.

<sup>67</sup> The name “Freinds in Deed” [*sic*] and the organization’s address appear in Larson’s notes, probably from before or around early 1992. Notes, Larson Collection.

choose fear. My life may not be as long as I want it to be, but it's a really good life. Jonathan saw me evolving towards that."<sup>68</sup> According to cast member Anthony Rapp, who played Mark in the Off-Broadway, Broadway, and film productions, Larson told the cast, "I just responded to how [Friends In Deed] viewed life and death and illness and all of it. And so it's really informed what I've written. I wrote the Life Support scene as an attempt to capture what goes on at Friends In Deed."<sup>69</sup>

Upon deciding to make AIDS a key topic in *Rent*, and perhaps also because his friends were now HIV-positive, Larson did his homework on the disease. He read, for instance, Susan Sontag's book containing the essays *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, highlighting and annotating his copy and taking notes for *Rent*.<sup>70</sup> He also copied information about AIDS and its treatment and cut out media articles about the epidemic.

Larson's notes and numerous newspaper clippings, especially those from 1991-93, show his concern for the topics he writes about: homosexuality, homelessness, politics, and poverty as well as AIDS. His friend Matthew O'Grady said of Larson, "I'll never forget it: it was like we were on the edge of an exploding society. In addition to being musically talented, he was a pop sociologist. He loved tracking social and political trends. He had a very strongly developed political ideology. He really kept up with current events and their sociological implications."<sup>71</sup> His collection of books and articles as well as his personal notes bear this observation out. Larson clipped and saved, for example, "The Search for Romance in the Shadow of AIDS," an article by Mireya

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<sup>68</sup> Giel, 20.

<sup>69</sup> Rapp, 109.

<sup>70</sup> *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* by Susan Sontag, Larson Collection.

<sup>71</sup> Giel, 17.

Navarro in the October 10, 1991 edition of the *New York Times*, which discusses the problems the HIV-positive encounter when looking for love.<sup>72</sup> “A key question for HIV-positive people – most of whom are between the ages of 25 and 44 – is when and how to disclose their infection to someone in whom they are romantically interested. For some the decision is even harder, because they are also forced to disclose intravenous drug use or bisexuality,” Navarro writes.<sup>73</sup> Larson was already grappling with the issue of how his characters would disclose exposure to HIV, and this theme became more central in the plot during the revisions of this period. Navarro’s article describes HIV-positive singles responding in various ways as they search for and build romantic relationships. Many continue to seek love and romance with other HIV-positive partners or HIV-negative partners who are willing to live with their lover’s status. One woman is quoted as saying, “I view HIV as a challenge, and not as the end of my life.” Her fiancé, also HIV-positive, states, “We live now. We don’t wait.”<sup>74</sup> Their situation and attitudes aptly describe Collins and Angel’s relationship in *Rent*.

Only ten days after saving the Navarro article, Larson clipped another *New York Times* article by Evelyn Nieves titled “Squatters in City Buildings Face Eviction by the Landlord,” which begins, “Until recently, New York’s strategy for dealing with squatters in dozens of city-owned buildings has been to look the other way unless they were endangering themselves or others, or unless the city wanted the building back.”<sup>75</sup> Nieves goes on to explain that the policy had recently changed and the city was now evicting

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<sup>72</sup> Mireya Navarro, “The Search for Romance in the Shadow of AIDS,” *New York Times*, 10 Oct 1991, A1, clipping in the Larson Collection. Also accessed via <http://proquest.umi.com>, April 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Evelyn Nieves, “Squatters in City Buildings Face Eviction by the Landlord,” *New York Times*, 20 Oct 1991, E16, clipping in the Larson Collection. Also accessed via <http://proquest.umi.com>, April 2007.

squatters, the largest community of which were on the Lower East Side. In *Rent*, Mark and Roger face a similar situation. They have been living in an industrial loft without paying rent by informal agreement with the building's owner, their ex-friend Benny. When Benny demands back rent, they face being evicted, but still proclaim in the show's first number that they will not pay last year's, this year's, or even next year's rent. Understanding the local dynamics of squatting makes Mark and Roger's situation, in which they believe they should be exempt indefinitely from paying rent, slightly less of a suspension of disbelief. The politics and issues of New York City in the late eighties and early nineties provided Larson with his setting and topics for *Rent*. Reading his favorite local daily paper, the *New York Times*, was part of his creative and compositional process.

A third article informing *Rent*, from February 10, 1992 by Eric Bogosian, addresses funding decisions of the National Endowment for the Arts, calling their choice to cut funding to Franklin Furnace, an experimental arts center, "censorship." The editorial, titled "Un-American Activities," compares the N.E.A.'s actions to the House Un-American Activities Committee shutting down the W.P.A. theatre program in the Communism scare of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>76</sup> Larson drew directly on early nineties anti-N.E.A. sentiment in *Rent* drafts of the time. In a page of character descriptions, probably from 1993, Larson called Maureen Johnson (the Musetta-based character), "one of the 'N.E.A. seven' – censored performance artist."<sup>77</sup> The "N.E.A. four" scandal, in which top N.E.A. officials denied grants to four controversial performance artists after the N.E.A. theatre panel had recommended them, occurred in June 1990. The four artists

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<sup>76</sup> Eric Bogosian, "Un-American Activities," *New York Times*, 10 Feb 1992, A17, clipping in the Larson Collection. Also accessed via <http://proquest.umi.com>, April 2007.

<sup>77</sup> Character list ca. 1993, Larson Collection.

successfully argued in court afterwards that the decisions were made on a political basis.<sup>78</sup> In the introduction of the show-stopping number “La Vie Bohème,” in which the artists of *Rent* joyfully defend their unconventional lifestyles, Larson wrote:

COLLINS: Congressman Otam A. DeSnofla!  
-Here??

MAUREEN: The enemy of the N.E.A. –  
We’ll stay<sup>79</sup>

The politicized N.E.A. decisions in the early 1990s show how a specific story became fodder for the characters of Maureen and Congressman Otam A. DeSnofla in *Rent*.

### **Politics in Larson’s Early Drafts of *Rent***

In his treatment of the N.E.A. and arts censorship as well as many other current issues, Larson made his political views known in his writing. As *Rent* progressed, one of his challenges was to present both sides of an issue or at least to avoid appearing dogmatic. Director Michael Greif later commented, “There was a bit of a tendency to be self-loving on the part of Roger and Mark. There was a lot of material in ‘La Vie Bohème’ which I found to be dangerously self-congratulatory.”<sup>80</sup> Some of the specific political references in *Rent* were later cut, perhaps to avoid offending audiences, or perhaps simply to make the show more universal and less tied to New York City in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Scenes with a character later cut from the script, Congressman Otam A. DeSnofla, mentioned above, demonstrate one way in which Larson incorporated political elements in *Rent*. The odd name Otam A. DeSnofla is actually “Alfonse D’Amato” spelled backwards. Elected to the U.S. Senate from New

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<sup>78</sup> Barbara Gamarekian, “Arts Agency Denies 4 Grants Suggested by Advisory Panel,” *New York Times*, 30 June 1990, 1, <http://proquest.umi.com>, accessed April 2007.

<sup>79</sup> Script ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

<sup>80</sup> Giel, 25.

York in 1980, Republican Alfonse D'Amato served until 1999. While Larson did not seem to write much about the real life figure, he made his views on D'Amato clear through the DeSnofla character in *Rent*. In a character list, Larson wrote of Congressman DeSnofla that he “makes Jesse Helms seem like Mario Cuomo.”<sup>81</sup> In comparing Jesse Helms, often considered a far-right wing conservative, to Mario Cuomo, popular among liberal Democrats, Larson essentially told the reader that DeSnofla is a radical conservative. Larson further characterized DeSnofla and revealed his own political opinions in this preface to “La Vie Bohème”:

DESNOFLA: People will remember tonight  
As the night when  
Congressman Otam A. DeSnofla declared war –  
On those unAmerican, homeless, culturally elite,  
Diseased, homosexual, deviant lifestyle, single-  
Mothered – baby killing welfare queens –

MARK: You lump them all under one umbrella

DESNOFLA: It's the same demographic, fella  
Hey – we beat the commies (no sweat)  
Gotta have somebody to blame  
We have found the enemy  
And she has a name  
America, America – recall this night with pride  
The night Bohemia died!<sup>82</sup>

Larson's critique did not stop at the Senatorial level. In handwritten notes, probably lyric sketches or brainstorming for the song “Christmas Bells,” Larson wrote, “Is Ronald Reagan having a leaner Christmas this year?” He continued:

Christmas Past – the ghost of R.R.  
Present –  
Future – New Tokyo<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Character list ca. 1993, Larson Collection.

<sup>82</sup> Script ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

<sup>83</sup> Notes ca. 1992, Larson Collection. Larson's intended meaning of “Future – New Tokyo” remains obscure.

Larson's early ideas for *Rent*, as evidenced by scenes and concepts like those described above, were overtly and currently political.

### **AIDS in Larson's Early Drafts of *Rent***

The result of Larson's extensive research and indirect personal experience with HIV and AIDS is an emphasis in *Rent* on living fully in spite of illness. Whether spurred by the Navarro article discussed above, by a deepened awareness of the disease through his friends' experience, or by attending Friends In Deed, Larson approached the theme of AIDS more directly in these drafts than in previous scripts. He wrote more explicit scenes, for instance, in which his characters share their own or learn of others' HIV status. Almost all of his characters in these early versions of *Rent* are HIV-positive. In some drafts, the status of each character is revealed in "La Vie Bohème" when their beepers and alarms sound reminding them to take their medications. The revelatory moment is of particular significance for Roger and Mimi, who are exploring romance but tentatively.

COLLINS: AZT break.

(HE downs his pill with wine.)

ANOTHER BEEPER. ANGEL descends and takes his medication.

MORE BEEPERS – MAUREEN is helped down by MARK – who hands her a glass of water. SHE downs her pill. THEY embrace.

ANOTHER BEEPER – ROGER gets down and takes his pill, leaving MIMI alone on the table.

ANOTHER BEEPER!! – MIMI quietly gets down and takes hers.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Script ca. 1993, Larson Collection.

In experimenting with this scene, Larson at one point added the names of various HIV and AIDS drugs with characters taking different medications. He eventually made the scene more clearly crucial to Roger and Mimi's relationship, using it as an introduction to their duet "I Should Tell You."

Larson's representation of AIDS in the 1991-93 drafts is often graphic and can even appear to be callous. He later cut this verse in "La Vie Bohème," for example:

ROGER, MAUREEN, AND COLLINS:  
CBGBS, De la soul, tabouli, body fluids,  
K.S. lesions, spotty lungs, transfusions,  
silence equals death,  
Baudriard, Derrida, Berthold Brecht, Dekooning [*sic*]  
Cannibus sativa, camel lights,  
Carmen Miranda, nirvana<sup>85</sup>

Here Larson confronted the stark realities of AIDS, however the verse's celebratory delivery seems inappropriate for the images of K.S. lesions and transfusions. Was he, furthermore, drawing some kind of comparison between body fluids and tabouli? Perhaps Larson cut the more graphic language to make the show more audience friendly, but he also had to carefully balance treating AIDS as part of life without being flippant. Another line from a later draft (1994) shows that striking this balance continued to be a challenge. In a song demonstrating conflict between Mark and Roger, Mark calls Roger, "Mr. 'Negative 'cause he's HIV positive,'"<sup>86</sup> a line that could easily come across as insensitive given that it is delivered by a protagonist. Still, the writing process involves trial and error, and Larson was bravely grappling with material and topics rarely, if ever, addressed in musicals. He would undergo critique and continue revisions in the next phase of *Rent*'s development as he worked with the New York Theatre Workshop.

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<sup>85</sup> Script ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

<sup>86</sup> Script dated 10/15/94, Larson Collection.

*Rent* portrays some of the difficulties of life with HIV and AIDS, but it also delivers a strong positive message about accepting and living with disease. “No Day But Today” has become almost a motto for the show, and Larson stressed that philosophy throughout all the many revisions. For example, Mimi sings to Roger in “Another Day”:

MIMI: Your anger’s real  
But just beware  
It’s a waste to feel  
That fate’s unfair

There’s no such thing  
As tragedy  
I can’t resent  
What’s meant to be<sup>87</sup>

Her strong dose of ‘everything happens for a reason’ thinking leaves it unclear whether she believes that HIV and AIDS are included among things that are “meant to be” and therefore not tragic. The bridge of the song delivers one of its main messages before Roger and Mimi’s separate verses are reprised in counterpoint:<sup>88</sup>

I can’t control  
My destiny  
I trust my soul  
My only goal  
Is just – to be

Here, Larson’s *carpe diem* message comes through clearly. A song in Act 2 gives an even clearer message about AIDS. Sung by a minor character, this song does not need to delineate character but can articulate the overall theme of the show. A 1993 version of the song, called “Love the Pain,” includes these lines:

It’s not – how much sand is left in the hour glass  
It’s how many grains you’ve held up to the light

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<sup>87</sup> Script ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

<sup>88</sup> My discussion of the music draws upon the Broadway version because drafts of the score for each script are not available. It appears likely, however, from looking at the written verses, that the structure of this song changed little if at all.

It's not the money in the bank it's the love in the hearts  
Of the people you know

It's not the candles on the cake – it's friends who care  
Not the quantity [*sic*] of years  
But quality of the memories in your brain

It's not easy – not too late – but it's time  
To finally find how to love the pain<sup>89</sup>

In a sketch for the song, Larson jotted down these thoughts: “You can truly live a lifetime in a day – / Or you can never truly live a day in your life,” and “It's not how much time you have but how much have you done with your time.”<sup>90</sup> This message was integrated early on into “Love the Pain.” When that song was cut, a similar idea was expressed through the song that later became the show's best known number, “Seasons of Love.”

In his notes of 1992, Larson articulated his concept for *Rent* fully in terms of AIDS, stating, “Inspired, in part, by Susan Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, the aim is to quash the already clichéd ‘AIDS victim’ stereotypes and point out that A. People with AIDS can live full lives; B. AIDS affects everyone – not just homosexuals and drug abusers; C. In our desensitized culture, the ones grappling with life-and-death issues often live more fully than members of the so-called ‘mainstream.’” Living fully in spite of AIDS is expressed in the songs discussed above and in all of Larson's scripts.

Larson's ideas about living with AIDS also undoubtedly came in part from his time at Friends In Deed.<sup>91</sup> The support group in *Rent* is modeled after theirs. The Friends In Deed website articulates the function of their large group meetings:

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<sup>89</sup> 1993 Staged Reading Script, Larson Collection. Sketches of this song date to 1992 at least.

<sup>90</sup> Notes and sketches ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

<sup>91</sup> Giel, 20.

It's about hearing and speaking the truth and living life in the moment. At the Big Group, we have the opportunity to express our emotions by sharing our feelings and experiences. We begin to recognize that we're not alone on this journey and that it's possible to have a life of quality, no matter how challenging the circumstances.<sup>92</sup>

Larson adopted this philosophy along with Sontag's, and he even invited Friends In Deed cofounder Cynthia O'Neal to speak to the cast of the show in early 1996, only a few days before his death.<sup>93</sup> The Friends In Deed system of beliefs regarding AIDS and other life-threatening illness pervades *Rent*.

### **Characters**

Mimi and Roger, the characters based on *La Bohème*'s Mimi and Rodolfo, changed drastically as Larson reimagined and developed them. In an outline of March 4, 1992, Larson summarized the action within the song "Light My Candle" stating, "Mimi – the downstairs neighbor enters – looking for a candle to heat up her small stash of heroin. Roger is smitten, yet tries to stay clear for many mysterious reasons." Similarly, for the song "Out Tonight" Larson wrote, "The ultimate club girl, Mimi tries to convince Roger to go out." In the margins, Larson jotted "entice."<sup>94</sup> Mimi was no longer the shy seamstress of *La Bohème*, but a heroin addict and dancer at an S&M club. An earlier outline from January of the same year gives the story behind Mimi's new character: "a coat check girl in a nightclub – abused by her parents, she was on the street at age 14. (Has a sense of humor about it.) Yet when she shoots up, all's right with the world – she

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<sup>92</sup> Friends In Deed, "Our Story: The Big Group." *Friends In Deed*, <http://www.friendsindeed.org/> (accessed 8 April 2007).

<sup>93</sup> Giel, 21.

<sup>94</sup> Outline dated 3/4/92, Larson Collection.

sees flowers everywhere.”<sup>95</sup> Larson would continue to develop Mimi’s story, but her character has remained essentially the same.

While Aronson and Larson’s “Ralph,” like Rodolfo, is eager to make Mimi’s acquaintance, wooing her from the start, Larson’s “Roger” is hesitant to enter into any kind of relationship.<sup>96</sup> Of the two of them, Mimi is far more forward. In Larson’s story, like Mimi, Roger had been a drug addict, but he had recovered. Larson briefly considered making Roger a writer of musicals, but chose instead to make Roger a rock singer, a change from Ralph’s professions of poet and playwright that works well for the character’s chosen style of music. Roger’s character continues to find difficulty expressing emotion, a holdover from Aronson’s ideas for the show. In part, he has trouble dealing with his disease and with his past. In one draft, he refuses to go out to a “Life Support” meeting with his friends:

ROGER: Hugging, holding hands  
Hearing sickbed sob stories  
And getting in touch with my inner child  
Isn’t going to save my immune system

MARK: How do you know? He’s in denial –

COLLINS: Maybe he’s just lonely, scared and horny  
Like the rest of us  
Maybe you’d meet someone at a meeting

ROGER: Yeah – right  
A nice girl from next door, who’s got AIDS<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Outline dated 1/23/92, Larson Collection.

<sup>96</sup> Larson adopts the name Roger for the character previously named “Rodolpho” [*sic*] and Ralph sometime between January 23 and March 4, 1992. Outline dated 1/23/92 and outline dated 3/4/92, Larson Collection.

<sup>97</sup> Script ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

Roger's last line adds a touch of irony; he is about to meet Mimi, who is his neighbor in the same building and HIV-positive. Despite his attraction to her, he continues to resist the relationship though, telling Mark, "You can't have a love life / If you've got AIDS."<sup>98</sup>

Many of Larson's adjustments from *La Bohème* are closely related to *Rent*'s theme of AIDS. While only Mimi is disease-stricken in *La Bohème*, all of the characters in early drafts of *Rent* must deal with either infection with or susceptibility to HIV. Mark, for example, has not been diagnosed with HIV but deals with fear of the disease by refusing to be tested. He knows that he has been exposed to HIV: his former girlfriend Maureen is HIV-positive, and after he tells her, "You were right about Trojans" she responds, "You hate safe sex!"<sup>99</sup> Their relationship ends under the strain of dealing with the difficulties of her diagnosis. Later in the same song, "You Were Right," eventually cut from the show, they speak frankly about their former relationship:

MARK: Why'd you leave?

MAUREEN: You couldn't deal  
When I revealed  
I was HIV

MARK: You shut me out  
You'd scream and shout  
If I showed sympathy<sup>100</sup>

Both seem to have struggled with the news.

The show opens after Mark and Maureen's relationship has ended. In a scene early in Act 1, he shows his fear about his own disease status:

MARK: But first – there's a ten o'clock meeting  
At 'Life Support'

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<sup>98</sup> Script pages ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

<sup>99</sup> Script ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

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COLLINS: I didn't know you were positive

ROGER: He's not

MARK: I probably am  
I just haven't been tested  
Plus – all my friends are  
We might as well all be  
Life's terminal one way or the other

ROGER: He's so okay with death –  
So why don't you take the test?

MARK: We all do what's right for us

Mark seems to be scared to be HIV-positive and at the same time frightened not to be because all his friends are. Both Mark and Roger are unable to deal with their respective fear of HIV and diseased status.

### **La Bohème: Departures and Allusions**

One of the most significant ways in which Larson departed from the plot of *La Bohème* is in the final “famous bedside death scene,” as Larson described it in an outline dated March 4, 1992. He decided that, although Mimi nearly dies, she will live. Cast member Gilles Chiasson reports, “Jonathan and I had a whole discussion about why Mimi didn't die. He was adamant. He said, ‘It's a play about life, not about death.’”<sup>101</sup> In a nod to Puccini, it is the solo Roger has been working on, the theme from “Quando me'n vo,” popularly known as “Musetta's Waltz,” that stirs Mimi from her deathbed. Larson's notes contain the following handwritten remarks, presumably about Roger and Mimi:

Is “creating a solo guitar piece in honor of his deceased lover –

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<sup>101</sup> Giel, 21.

It bears a strong resemblance musically to the melody line of Musetta's famous aria in Puccini.

He always gets it wrong –

[Word unclear] he plays it – people comment –  
Mimi – says – “sounds derivative”

finally – after she ‘dies’ he plays his solo – she gets up in bed and hasn't died – she knows the tune – the theme song from ‘Moonstruck’<sup>102</sup>

Mimi would not recognize the tune from Puccini's opera, but she does recognize it from the 1987 film *Moonstruck* featuring Cher. Larson later revised the show's ending slightly, but Mimi still comes back to life and Roger's solo continues to resemble “Musetta's Waltz.” In the final version of *Rent*, Roger brings Mimi back to consciousness by playing a song he has written for her, and the show ends with the “Musetta's Waltz” theme played on electric guitar to swelling accompaniment and Roger crying Mimi's name.

Although the themes and detailed plot of *La Bohème* no longer drive *Rent*, evident in the show's changed ending, Larson left in plenty of allusions to the source inspiring his work. For example, Mark's work in progress, a “video poem,” is called “The Parting of the Red Sea,” an allusion to Marcello's painting “The Crossing of the Red Sea.”<sup>103</sup> The reference was later removed.

Larson often updated the details of *La Bohème* in clever ways. In the scene in which Rodolfo and Mimi meet in *La Bohème*, she knocks on his door because her candle has gone out. She accidentally drops her key during the encounter, and when Rodolfo finds it, he slips it into his pocket, prolonging her departure for awhile longer. In

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<sup>102</sup> Larson's handwritten notes ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

<sup>103</sup> Script pages ca. 1992, Larson Collection; Giacomo Puccini, *Seven Puccini Librettos*, trans. William Weaver (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 9.

Larson's parallel scene, Mimi searches "for a candle to heat up her small stash of heroin."<sup>104</sup> Scott Miller, director and author of *Rebels with Applause: Broadway's Groundbreaking Musicals* makes the case that Larson translated Mimi's "key" to a "kilo" of heroin, saying, "In *Bohème*, Mimi comes back the second time because she lost her key on Rodolfo's floor when she fainted. In *Rent*, Mimi comes back the second time also because she lost her key, but it's a different kind of key – a kilo of cocaine. (*Key* is drug users' slang for *kilo*.)"<sup>105</sup> Roger still hides the object she drops, but here it is to keep her from using the heroin. According to one outline, "He secretly hides her stash, but she finds it in his pocket."<sup>106</sup> He has recently overcome his own addiction and disapproves of her habit.

When Larson revised Aronson's script, he brought the explanation of how Angel (Schaunard) has come into some cash closer to the story in *La Bohème*. In the opera, a frustrated neighbor hires Schaunard to kill a loud parrot with his music. In Aronson's script, "Shaun" (Schaunard, Angel) simply "receive[s] an unexpected tip from an office party on Wall Street at which he played guitar."<sup>107</sup> In Larson's scripts, a lady in a limousine hires Angel to kill her neighbor's dog by playing his drums, a bizarre story altered only slightly from Puccini's original.<sup>108</sup> In another comic moment later in *Rent*, the audience learns that the dog Angel killed was Benny's. Even as Larson veered from *La Bohème* in themes, plot, and even character, he returned to the opera and its source, Henri Murger's *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* for plot details. Some are cut in the revision process, but many remain, adding a level of humor for those in the know.

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<sup>104</sup> Outline dated 1/23/92, Larson Collection.

<sup>105</sup> Miller, 187.

<sup>106</sup> Script ca. 1993, Larson Collection.

<sup>107</sup> *Bohème* script dated 9/22/89, Larson Collection.

<sup>108</sup> Script pages ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

## Creative Process: Other Sources

In addition to drawing inspiration from current events, his reading, and *La Bohème*, Larson also drew ideas from some odd places as well as from musical theatre traditions and his own day-to-day experience. In handwritten notes, probably from 1992, Larson wrote the following:

Hey diddle diddle  
the cat and the fiddle  
the cow jumped over the moon  
the ----- laughed to see such a site [*sic*] &  
the dish ran away w/the spoon<sup>109</sup>

Larson incorporated this nursery rhyme into the song “Over the Moon,” earlier titled “Politics,” in which Maureen “presents her political performance piece at a rally to fight evicting the homeless from the Lot.”<sup>110</sup> Her performance piece describes a dream in which Elsie the cow tells her the “Only thing to do is / Jump over the moon.” The piece protests Benny’s plans to start a cyberstudio, and he becomes the little dog that Larson forgot when writing the rhyme in his notes. An excerpt from the text of Maureen’s piece reads:

MAUREEN: Then a little bulldog entered. His name (we have learned) was Benny. And although he once had principles, he abandoned them to live as a lapdog to a wealthy daughter of the revolution. “That’s bull,” he said. “Ever since the cat took up the fiddle, that cow’s been jumpy. And the dish and spoon were evicted from the table – and eloped. . . She’s had trouble with that milk and the moon ever since. Maybe it’s a female thing, ‘cause who’d want to leave Cyberland anyway? . . . Walls ain’t so bad. The dish and the spoon for instance. They were down on their luck – knocked on my doghouse door. I said, ‘Not in my backyard, utensils! Go back to China! The only way out – is up.’” Elsie whispered to me, “A leap of faith. Still thirsty?” she asked. Parched. “Have some milk.” I lowered myself beneath her swollen udder and sucked the sweetest milk I’d ever tasted.”

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<sup>109</sup> Notes ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

<sup>110</sup> Outline ca. 1993, Larson Collection.

(MAUREEN makes a slurping, sucking sound.)

“Climb on board,” she said. And as a harvest moon rose over Cyberland, we reared back and sprang into a gallop. Leaping out of orbit!”<sup>111</sup>

The piece ends with Maureen asking the audience to moo with her. The scene characterizes Maureen and depicts the performance art of the time with some affectionate humor.<sup>112</sup> Michael Greif comments, “It was very important to me that it seemed like bad performance, but with all the best intentions. She hasn’t found out who she is as a performer yet. . . . Maureen chooses to emulate Laurie Anderson and Diamanda Galas. I think she has good taste.”<sup>113</sup>

In some ways, Maureen’s performance piece “Over the Moon” in *Rent* is analogous to Musetta’s entrance aria “Quando me’n vo” in *La Bohème*. Both serve a similar function in revealing Musetta’s and Maureen’s flair for the dramatic. Larson did not use material from Musetta’s aria in Maureen’s performance piece, however. Bits and pieces of that scene in Act 2 of *La Bohème* instead can be found later in *Rent*, in “La Vie Bohème” and “Take Me or Leave Me.”

While *Rent* broke many of the conventions of musical theatre, it was not because Larson was unaware of them. He was well-schooled in the history of the musical, and he drew upon its traditions in *Rent*, often subtly. One page of Larson’s notes for “La Vie Bohème,” for instance, is headed “Officer Krupke.”<sup>114</sup> Perhaps this song from *West Side Story* inspired the café scene in *Rent*; as the juveniles in *West Side Story* mimic

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<sup>111</sup> Giel, 100-1, song 22.

<sup>112</sup> One of Larson’s more novel musings applies here: in notes from around 1992 he wrote, “Jesus was a performance artist.” Script pages with notes ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

<sup>113</sup> Giel, 44.

<sup>114</sup> Notes ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

explaining themselves to authority figures, the bohemians in *Rent* explain themselves to a powerful antagonist figure. In one draft, the bohemians say to Otam A. DeSnofla, “Take pity Mr. Senator on the low life scum you see before you / there are no twelve step programs for artists.”<sup>115</sup> Musical theatre classics clearly influenced Larson’s compositional process even though the effect is not always evident in the final product.

It has already been noted that Sondheim was a mentor of sorts to Larson, and Larson was a great fan of his. Larson’s song “Sunday” from the show *tick, tick. . . BOOM!* lightheartedly pays homage to Sondheim’s *Sunday in the Park with George*. In *Rent*, Larson mentions Sondheim in “La Vie Bohème,” a “list song” in the tradition of numbers like “You’re the Top” by Cole Porter, “My Favorite Things” by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, and “Hashish” by Gerome Ragni, James Rado, and Galt MacDermott.<sup>116</sup>

The latter song is from *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (1967-68), the first ‘rock musical’ and the show to which *Rent* is most often compared. Like *Hair*, *Rent* used unconventional staging, a cast that was the “real thing” (i.e., mostly untrained in musical theatre), a rock band placed onstage, a variety of popular music styles, and lyrics on social and political issues.<sup>117</sup> The shows have also played similar roles in their respective times; both reach out to young and diverse audiences.<sup>118</sup> The similarities are

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> For additional discussion of “Hashish” as a list-song and *Hair* as a collection of list-songs, see Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 160-61.

<sup>117</sup> For discussion of these elements in *Hair*, see Wollman, 46-54.

<sup>118</sup> *Hair* seems to have succeeded in reaching those audiences, at least to some extent. Wollman (54) discusses the make-up of *Hair*’s audience. While statistical evidence is unavailable, it is generally acknowledged that *Rent* has successfully attracted younger audiences. Special twenty dollar seats in the front of the theatre have encouraged youthful and diverse audiences. The existence of young, fanatic *Rent*heads, mentioned in Chapter 1, attest to the show’s impact on youth. Whether the show has successfully attracted diversity in terms of race or social class is more difficult to determine.

not coincidental: Larson purportedly told Aronson at their first meeting, “It’s time for a new *Hair*.”<sup>119</sup> From all he has written and said, it seems Larson intended to shake up the musical theatre establishment just as *Hair* did.

During the early years of Larson’s work on *Rent*, he also was writing and performing *tick, tick. . . BOOM!*, an essentially autobiographical rock monologue. *Rent* too has many autobiographical elements. The large-scale themes that related to events in Larson’s life, like his friends’ HIV diagnoses, have been discussed above, but many of the details of Larson’s life made it into *Rent* as well. During a living room read-through, Larson’s HIV-positive friend Gordon objected to the message about AIDS in *Rent*, claiming it was too upbeat in its “all that matters is love” approach, and his specific criticisms were incorporated into the scene “Life Support.” Larson named the character Gordon for the real life person he represents.<sup>120</sup> Even everyday habits were incorporated into the script. Anthony Rapp recalls Larson tossing down the keys for Rapp to get into the apartment on one visit; in *Rent*, Mark throws the key down to Collins.<sup>121</sup> Jonathan Burkhart says, “In *Rent*, [Mark] talks about riding his bike past the three-piece suits. We did that all the time. Sometimes [Larson would] call me and say, ‘That’s it, we’re not doing anything today, we’re going to the Hamptons.’”<sup>122</sup>

Larson was familiar with the bohemian lifestyle. This unconventional life of the artist, stereotypically without material reward, is a main theme of his source, Puccini’s *La Bohème*.<sup>123</sup> He struggled to pay the bills and find time for his writing and composition,

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<sup>119</sup> Giel, 18.

<sup>120</sup> Giel 21, 88, song 13.

<sup>121</sup> Rapp, 99; Giel, 71, song 3.

<sup>122</sup> Giel, 12.

<sup>123</sup> According to Merriam Webster online, a Bohemian is, by one definition, “a person (as a writer or an artist) living an unconventional life usually in a colony with others.” *Merriam Webster Online* (2007), s.v. “Bohemian,” <http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/bohemian>. My description of the bohemian

working a few days a week as a waiter at the Moondance Diner to make ends meet.

Larson was white and from the suburbs, but he did experience firsthand the difficulties of life as an artist in New York City, and he celebrates that life in his work. “*Rent* . . . exalts ‘Otherness,’ glorifying artists and counterculture as necessary to a healthy civilization,” Larson wrote in 1992.<sup>124</sup> His personal belief in his work and its importance sustained him through years of financial hardship and artistic frustration.

The next few years of collaboration with the New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW) would challenge his patience and his work. Larson’s *Rent* was too “full of ideas” to be effective; it lacked direction. The construction of “La Vie Bohème” shows this problem in microcosm. Like most of *Rent*, the song started out with too many ideas and abstractions. Some typed notes on “La Vie Bohème” from around 1992 seem to be the product of a brainstorming session, perhaps even an exercise in free association. “TV=EVIL,” Larson wrote on one line; “We’re the only living creatures who do pay rent” on another. He made a list with words and concepts ranging from “giving birth” and “being a child forever” to “Picasso” and “Ginsberg.” In the course of the scene sketch, the characters question and define Bohemia, develop relationships, debate the possibility of love at first sight, and conduct a salon.<sup>125</sup> Larson’s brainstorming produced much creative, valuable material, but he often had trouble cutting ideas in order to focus his plot. This would be his challenge as he reworked the show several times during productions with the NYTW, but the collaborations and support available there would

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lifestyle is taken from this and several other definitions of the noun and adjective forms that highlight unconventionality and, occasionally, the stereotype of sacrificing monetary reward for art.

<sup>124</sup> Giel, 6.

<sup>125</sup> Notes and sketches ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

also provide Larson with the opportunity to see his work performed in a reading and workshop and the hope of a fully-realized production of *Rent*.

## Chapter 4: Collaborations: The New York Theatre Workshop Productions

“It was a huge monster tamed over time.”  
--cast member Gilles Chiasson about *Rent*

In the summer of 1992 when he rode his bicycle past a theatre under renovation in the East Village, Larson discovered the New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW). He had been looking for a theatre to produce *Rent*, so he returned to drop off the show’s materials, and because it was the off-season, artistic director Jim Nicola looked at them fairly quickly.<sup>126</sup> Nicola liked what he saw; the show would be an ambitious undertaking for NYTW, an off-Broadway theatre committed to supporting artists through all stages of their work, and it was the sort of innovative piece they were looking for.<sup>127</sup> Nicola explains, “The real bond occurred over the idea of popular music in the theater. Musical theater had stayed in a particular style and form while popular music has progressed. I thought that this composer had the potential to write music which would fulfill the integrity of the pop song and the integrity of the theater song. The song that stuck in my head was ‘Light My Candle.’”<sup>128</sup> The show’s setting was also fortuitous; NYTW was eager to produce “material representative of the community” in their new neighborhood.<sup>129</sup>

By fall 1992, NYTW was working with Larson on *Rent*, and Larson did a staged reading of the show on June 17, 1993 “to lure investors.”<sup>130</sup> According to a copy of the staged reading script, a narrator of sorts opened the evening by explaining that the show

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<sup>126</sup> Giel, 22.

<sup>127</sup> For more information on NYTW, see “About Us,” NYTW, <http://www.nytw.org/about.asp> (accessed April 2007).

<sup>128</sup> Giel, 22.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

was “a very loose reading” of the opera. The actors were on book, and a narrator described the scene and action. The accompaniment was taped. The setting was, then, far from ideal. Larson described his optimal conditions in the show’s introduction, writing:

Ideally, RENT will be performed with a full orchestra as well as a complete rock band. Also – and this is obviously not a reflection on our cast – the actual company will be multi-cultural. The settings, costumes, and lighting should reflect a “downtown” rather than slick “Broadway” aesthetic. For instance, Choreography should be more Modern rather than jazz, etc. The Sound Design is more important to the texture of the play than actual sets. Since the style of the piece is an operatic collage, the transitions between scenes will flow cinematically.<sup>131</sup>

Larson’s “collage” idea was not unprecedented. *Hair*, for instance, was also only loosely plot-driven and there have also been several other “concept musicals” or “fragmented musicals.”<sup>132</sup> The “operatic collage” concept applied to *Rent*, however, clearly did not work.

The staged reading displayed all the promise and problems of Larson’s work since his split with Aronson in 1991. Producer Jeffrey Seller, who had been impressed with *Tick, Tick. . . BOOM!* and was eagerly watching Larson’s progress, remembers, “It started off with a great number, ‘Rent,’ but turned into this endless collage of songs. It made no narrative sense whatsoever.”<sup>133</sup> “There were a lot of plotlines and problems,” NYTW assistant director Martha Banta notes. “A lot of it was politically incorrect, out of Jonathan’s naïveté.”<sup>134</sup> Nicola recalls, “The strongest response from the artistic community here was that you can’t put actors onstage and use them as a chorus of cute

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<sup>131</sup> Excerpt narration and script ca. 1993, Larson Collection.

<sup>132</sup> Wollman, 46; John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2003), 269-291.

<sup>133</sup> Giel, 22.

<sup>134</sup> For example, Larson eventually cut the line “When you’re a home for flies” about the homeless and Collins’s line “Playing Anne Frank with your landlord? / Better have some Stoli!” Excerpt narration and script ca. 1992-93 and “Rent Revisions: To Do” undated, Larson Collection.

homeless people. It's demeaning, it's insulting. At first [Larson] was defensive. Which was a pattern with him. Then he would go away, quietly think about it and realize what he could take from it."<sup>135</sup> Despite the harsh criticism, many agreed that the show, particularly its music, had promise. Larson was a talented songwriter but was weaker as a playwright and lyricist.<sup>136</sup> He had great ideas and great songs early on, but he would need to rework the show's story and lyrics.

Even Larson's closest friends testify that he had difficulty collaborating.<sup>137</sup> Someone handwrote on the last page of a tape operation book almost certainly used for the 1993 staged reading, "OFF / REWIND / TAPES / TO ORIG. REELS / GO HAVE A BEER."<sup>138</sup> This captures (along with a fun, celebratory spirit) the immense feelings of relief and accomplishment after a performance; it is difficult after putting years of work into a piece to learn that it still needs much more work. In addition, NYTW initially could not promise to fund *Rent* and Larson distrusted them.<sup>139</sup> His relationships and collaborations with the people he worked with at NYTW, however, would prove essential to *Rent*'s success.

### **Workshop and Revisions**

In 1994, Larson received a \$45,000 Richard Rodgers Development Grant to cover partially the costs of a workshop on *Rent*. Nicola notes that NYTW was a good environment for Larson and his work because they were "not just a producing entity," but

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<sup>135</sup> Giel, 23.

<sup>136</sup> According to Gretchen Haley (9-20), James Nicola encouraged Larson to hire a playwright, but Larson refused.

<sup>137</sup> See, for example, Eddie Rubenstein's comments in Giel, 17.

<sup>138</sup> "Tape op. Book" ca. 1992-93, Larson Collection.

<sup>139</sup> Giel, 23.

provided support for artists. Larson would be part of a community there.<sup>140</sup> In his new artistic home, Larson revised *Rent* from the staged reading version, working with NYTW staff and director Michael Greif toward a workshop production that would be staged in October 1994.

“To Do” lists of revisions show Larson reworked structure and lyrics to focus the plot and characterizations. “Rewrite A LITTLE BIZ. include Benny’s cynicism about their bohemian choices, set up of Walmart gentrification, Maureen’s rally, their ex-  
friendship,” Larson included on one of his lists.<sup>141</sup> In his revisions, Larson forwent some of the high-level political commentary and instead focused on local issues with a more immediate impact on his characters, like gentrification. To this end, he cut the character of Senator Otam A. DeSnofla and inserted a “Mallmart Man,” later to become “the Man from the Home Office of Blockbuster, Inc.” Larson worked on defining Benny’s role as the antagonist and former friend of the group, making him a more multi-dimensional character.

While Larson made parts of the script less overtly political, *Rent* continued to confront difficult issues. One outline describes the song “Valentine’s Day”: “In Roger’s bed – Mimi wants to play S & M games, but Roger backs off – She explains where she acquired [*sic*] her taste for tough love / He can’t take it and leaves her.”<sup>142</sup> One of Larson’s character bios for Mimi reveals her backstory: she was abused, physically and sexually, by her stepfather as a child.<sup>143</sup> The song is catchy and upbeat, starkly

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>141</sup> “Rent Revisions: To Do” ca. 1994, Larson Collection.

<sup>142</sup> Outline ca. 1992-93, Larson Collection.

<sup>143</sup> Character bio, undated, Larson Collection.

contrasting with the dark content.<sup>144</sup> The song's lyrics in 1994 included the following verses and chorus:

MIMI: You know I like to play rough  
Baby lock the handcuff  
The scar won't be tough to erase  
The scar won't be tough to erase

[Chorus:] Beat me til I'm black and blue and grey  
Draw a little heart, draw a little arrow  
Draw a little blood  
V-V-V Valentine's Day

All the others loved to make me cry  
You want to save me from myself  
Good luck – you're the first one to try

ROGER: Good bye

MIMI: I love you cause you try

.....

And I feel like a fool but I'm so used to cruel  
That I doubt I'll be cool til I'm dead  
I doubt I'll be cool til I'm dead

[Chorus]<sup>145</sup>

In drafts through 1994, Larson addressed the complex and discomfiting issues of abuse and deviant sexual behavior, in particular sadomasochism. Because it was not cut immediately after the 1993 staged reading, “Valentine’s Day” apparently was not too upsetting for audiences. While the song contains controversial and weighty material, it is more likely that Larson cut “Valentine’s Day” because he was unable to devote space in the show to framing, developing, and resolving this issue and its role in Roger and Mimi’s relationship.

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<sup>144</sup> *Rent* Act 2 ©92 recording; Jonathan Larson Collection; Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division; Library of Congress.

<sup>145</sup> Script pages ca. 1994, Larson Collection.

A major focus of Larson's revisions after both the 1993 and 1994 productions was the lesbian characters of *Rent*. It became clear that Larson needed to work on the characters of Maureen and Joanne and the relationship between them. ". . . there were a lot of dyke issues," Michael Greif reports. "It was my point of view that they were the characters Jonathan had the most distance from, or the least handle on."<sup>146</sup> A girlfriend of Larson's had left him for a woman, and Larson wrote this element of his personal experience into the script of *Rent*, with Maureen leaving Mark for Joanne. The love triangle still followed the plot of *La Bohème* in that Maureen (Musetta) eventually went back to Mark (Marcello). In *Rent*, however, it "c[ame] across as wishful thinking on a straight man's part."<sup>147</sup> A lesbian friend of Larson's talked to him about the unauthentic aspects of Maureen and Joanne's characters, saying he "needed a little kick in the butt."<sup>148</sup> Larson responded; his revision to-do list includes several items related to Maureen and Joanne, such as "Restart FEMALE TO FEMALE, add Maureen's sincere love for Joanne Set up her rationale for doing the performance."<sup>149</sup>

The 1993 NYTW reading of *Rent* included a duet for Maureen and Joanne called "Female to Female" and two duets for Maureen and Mark, "Male to Female" and "You Were Right." These songs, especially "You Were Right," developed Maureen and Mark's relationship more than it did Maureen and Joanne's. "You Were Right" was musically and lyrically strong; it even included a line referencing *La Bohème*: "You were

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<sup>146</sup> Giel, 24.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> "Rent Revisions: To Do" ca. 1994, Larson Collection.

right about Puccini.”<sup>150</sup> Nevertheless, in a script dated September 1, 1994, Larson took the song “You Were Right” out of its scene and inserted the note:

***NEW GREAT SONG: “YOU’LL GET OVER IT”***

(as in – He sings – “This lesbianism is a phase – like girls and horses – SHE sings – “You’ll get over (me)”<sup>151</sup>

In the new song, Maureen needs Mark’s help with the electronic equipment for her performance. He takes the opportunity to try to convince her that she will want him back. Larson also rewrote other scenes with Mark, Maureen, and Joanne in this draft, making Mark’s romantic efforts with Maureen entirely futile.

In the workshop process, Larson’s cast also contributed to his work with characterization. Shelley Dickinson, who played Joanne in the 1994 workshop, recalls:

[Larson] made Maureen seem bitchy, period. . . . Joanne seemed like she was nothing better than a lapdog. . . . During the workshop, they would give me changes. One change had to do with making [Joanne] even more a ‘slave’ to Maureen. I hated that it made her weak. I told them that. At one point Jonathan looked at Michael and said, “She’s right. Let’s leave it the way it is.”<sup>152</sup>

Larson decided not to make whatever small change he and Greif were contemplating, and he also began to give Joanne and Maureen more depth and make them more likable. Larson’s process of experimentation yielded many changes, some more successful than others. In one misguided attempt, Larson wrote a song called “Love of My Life” for Maureen and Joanne with lyrics like the following:

JOANNE: You’re the cockroach in my jam  
You’re the hepatitis in my clam  
You’re the extra ten pounds on my scale  
You’re the letterbomb in my mail  
You’re the splinter on my pinkie

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<sup>150</sup> Script pages ca. 1992, Larson Collection.

<sup>151</sup> Script dated 9/1/94, Larson Collection.

<sup>152</sup> Giel, 24-25.

You're a diaper with a stinky<sup>153</sup>

Fortunately, Larson cut this song and went back to the drawing board.

### **Towards a Full Production**

Anthony Rapp described the 1994 workshop saying, “It was such a mess, but the response was so strong. All of us had such an amazing time.”<sup>154</sup> The show was successful in many ways – by the last weekend, tickets were sold out, and Jeffrey Seller, Kevin McCollum, and Allan Gordon decided after seeing the workshop to produce *Rent* – but as Rapp said, it still needed work. A full production was planned for 1995, and Larson got back to work on revisions.

Larson received some very specific feedback after the workshop from colleagues and from audience response cards that were handed out to the show's viewers. One card from the November 3, 1994 performance complimented the cast and “Boheme” number, but also said, “Main theme cloudy. Tried to cover too much. ‘Plot’ thin, trite theme has been exhausted before.” That card is stapled to another, and Larson has handwritten notes all over the back including “Steve S.” and a phone number.<sup>155</sup> It is possible that the card is Stephen Sondheim's. Sondheim did see the show, and he gave Larson feedback. Nearby in the Larson Collection is an unsigned typed letter from Larson to Sondheim dated December 8, 1994, which contains a wealth of information about Sondheim's opinions of the show's problems, Larson's reactions to those opinions, and Larson's vision of the show and ideas for future directions. It also reveals something of Larson's relationship with Sondheim.

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<sup>153</sup> Script dated 9/12/95, Larson Collection.

<sup>154</sup> Giel, 28.

<sup>155</sup> “New York Theatre Workshop Audience Response Card, 1994,” Larson Collection.

Larson writes to Sondheim:

After sifting through the notes I made when we spoke, the main themes of your critique appear to be that A. I haven't been clear in my thesis – which should be demonstrated through the main story. B. There are too many storylines which take away focus from what you think is the main plot – ROGER and MIMI. C. I should abandon making the majority of the principles HIV+, as it numbs the audience when they should feel something. D. rather than 'otherness', RENT should be about 'Love and Art' and 'how love survives'.<sup>156</sup>

The primary problems from previous drafts, such as the lack of a cohesive plot and clear thesis, had not disappeared by 1994. According to Larson's notes and memory,

Sondheim raised the issue of how AIDS was portrayed, suggesting that fewer characters be HIV-positive. Roger, Mimi, Maureen, Collins, and Angel had all been HIV-positive in Larson's scripts to this point, and in early scripts, Mark thought he might be.

According to Larson, "Regarding the AIDS aspect of the show, I wanted to write against the now cliché 'tragic' story (see 'Falsettos') of AIDS which I feel reinforces the idea that PWA's [People with AIDS] are less than 'normal'. Instead, I chose to make almost everyone HIV-positive to show them simply living their lives."<sup>157</sup>

Sondheim's advice to make fewer characters HIV-positive was echoed, however, by at least one other commenter who asked why Maureen must be infected with HIV. In the end, Larson took their advice and chose not to make Maureen HIV-positive. Four HIV-positive main characters remained. As Scott Miller points out, this was unprecedented,<sup>158</sup> but it still strikes a balance between depicting HIV as a part of what can be a normal, fulfilling life and desensitizing the audience to the seriousness of AIDS.

Larson also addressed Sondheim's suggestion about changing the theme of the work from "otherness" to "love and art" and "how love survives."

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<sup>156</sup> Jonathan Larson, letter to Stephen Sondheim, 8 December 1994, Larson Collection.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Miller, 197.

When I said that I wanted to ‘celebrate otherness’, what I meant was celebrate ‘counterculture’ (a loaded word these days!) And although as you pointed out, I’m not depicting dwarves or ugly people etc., I don’t see those groups being vilified by the Right. I do see homeless, drug users, HIV+ people, homosexuals and liberals lumped into this one demographic ‘them’ – who have replaced the Communists as the Right’s fear-poster boys. My aim is to humanize and celebrate this kind of ‘otherness’ so that although the audience may be put off by some of these characters at first, they come to care about them since their love stories are universal.<sup>159</sup>

Larson shows here that his political aims for *Rent* were still very much intact, even after removing some of the more overtly political material. Greif explains that they wanted to create characters who were, “[n]ot a group of smug, obnoxious, above-it artists, but instead young, struggling, sometimes obnoxious, sometimes endearing, but always very human people who are subject to lots and lots of extremes of every kind.<sup>160</sup> This was one of the remarkable successes of the show, that audiences who often were not part of the “counterculture” came to care about characters who may have been, on the surface, quite unlike them.

Larson acknowledged in his letter that there were still problems to address. One continued to be Maureen and Joanne’s relationship. “(True, your point that JOANNE’s jealousy is a red herring. It used to be that Mark and Maureen did in fact get back together for a time, and when I cut that out, I neglected to resolve Joanne’s jealousy),” Larson wrote to Sondheim.<sup>161</sup> He also acknowledged that he needed to better define the show’s drama and theme, writing, “One thing I said to someone who was more of a traditionalist like yourself was that I was going for a messy, explosive reflection of bohemia, a la HAIR. (which I seem to recall you don’t like) But I was reminded that even HAIR has a concise dramatic question – ‘will Claude go to War?’ – at best my

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<sup>159</sup> Jonathan Larson, letter to Stephen Sondheim, 8 December 1994, Larson Collection.

<sup>160</sup> Giel, 25.

<sup>161</sup> Jonathan Larson, letter to Stephen Sondheim, 8 December 1994, Larson Collection.

question is – ‘will ROGER open up and feel something?’”<sup>162</sup> Even after the 1994 workshop production, clarity was a major problem for *Rent*. There were too many loose ends. Jim Nicola recounts that he challenged Larson to compose a sentence to describe *Rent*’s whole story.<sup>163</sup> “It didn’t have to be simple,” Nicola explains, but Larson’s notes show him struggling to choose a theme to embrace the many aspects of *Rent* and capture its essence in only a few words.

In the post-workshop revisions, Larson received additional help. The New York Theatre Workshop hired Lynn Thomson as dramaturg in May 1995 to assist Larson in his revisions for *Rent*. According to Gretchen Haley, however, there was some confusion over Thomson’s role, whether she was hired to help Larson or convince him to make certain changes.<sup>164</sup> Later, after Larson’s death and the show’s success, there would be a lawsuit over whether Thomson was actually an author. Whatever Thomson’s exact role, the collaboration was a success. Eddie Rosenstein reports of Greif and Thomson, “Michael was a real boon to [Jonathan], and Lynn was a blessing. She just started smacking him around and making him change shit. And he was thrilled.”<sup>165</sup> Jeffrey Seller and Jim Nicola also testify to her helpfulness and Larson’s high opinion of her. Thomson helped Larson with storytelling, and he wrote and revised music to fit the new demands of the script.

By all accounts, the fall of 1995 was a low point for Larson. The fate of the show hung in the balance as Larson experimented with new approaches to the story of *Rent*. Larson made great strides in many of his revisions; the weaker suicidal lyrics of “Rent,”

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Giel, 24.

<sup>164</sup> Haley, 9-20.

<sup>165</sup> Giel, 30.

for example, were rewritten into a stronger introduction for the show. By September of 1995, however, the script was still not complete. Nicola recalls, “It was a scary time,” also remembering that they had seen the famously bad “Love of My Life” discussed above. By late October, Larson had completed a set of revisions and totally restructured the show. A draft dated September 12, 1995 shows that the new version opened on Halloween at Angel’s memorial service with “a small professional documentary film crew” and Mark, who thinks back to Christmas Eve last year. The story is then told as a flashback.<sup>166</sup> NYTW and *Rent*’s other producers agreed that this approach still did not entirely work, and Larson was instructed to rewrite yet again.

Friends and collaborators recall Larson’s frustration and discouragement during this time. When Larson asked for advice, Sondheim instructed him to make the best of things and learn to collaborate. Sondheim reports, “He called me back a few days later and said, ‘Well, you were right. I’m learning to collaborate.’”<sup>167</sup> With what was perhaps his greatest stumbling block removed or at least contained, Larson returned to work with Greif and others and culled some of the best material from the many drafts to create a cohesive story with some of “the lightness” of earlier drafts restored.<sup>168</sup> “The rewrites were so much better,” Anthony Rapp remembers, “and to see that transformation – it seemed like something had cracked open.”<sup>169</sup>

### **Music and Composition**

Larson’s strongest skill in writing for theatre was his ability to craft original, relevant, and memorable music. The Larson Collection contains little written music from

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<sup>166</sup> Script pages ca. 1994-95 and script dated 9/12/95, Larson Collection.

<sup>167</sup> Giel, 33.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

*Rent*'s early stages; the first significant scores are from 1994 and 1995. Of the written music available before 1994, most seem to be vocal lines only. Larson's recordings are more helpful; although many are undated, there are some dated 1992, and some almost certainly were recorded earlier than that. Still, it is difficult to know what the music sounded like or how Larson composed. The testimony of friends and collaborators provides perhaps the best explanation of how Larson wrote music. Evelyn McDonnell and Kathy Silberger report:

Changing musical theatre was easier said than done. . . . Larson had trouble even putting together a musical system with which to compose. One day, Jonathan Burkhart asked Larson, as a favor, to drive to a music store in New Jersey and pick up something for him. Ever-obliging, Larson did, and discovered the 'something' was a state-of-the-art keyboard to replace his rinky-dink Casio. With that, a digital processor and a computer, Burkhart says, 'he could produce any sound in the world.'<sup>170</sup>

The ability to orchestrate the music he imagined and to test its effectiveness was a perpetual challenge for Larson, especially because of the type of music he wrote. The sounds of rock and popular music styles are not easily captured on a piano. In Larson's early recordings of *Rent*, a synthesizer imitates the various instruments Larson had in mind, but the music still falls flat without a live band.

*Rent*'s orchestration changed several times. At one point, Larson thought the music could be played entirely by computers.<sup>171</sup> By the time of the NYTW performances in 1993, Larson imagined a full orchestra and rock band. As late as 1995, he wrote that "[i]deally, RENT should be performed with a full orchestra as well as a complete rock band. If necessary, synthesizers can fill in string and brass sounds. The sound mix

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 28.

should blend the best worlds of live rock concerts with Broadway sound.”<sup>172</sup> As his wording implies, however, he was not working under ideal conditions, and according to several lists his band consisted of:

- one drummer
- one keyboard
- one bass
- one lead guitar
- one keys/rhythm guitar<sup>173</sup>

*Rent* never got the full orchestra Larson at least originally had in mind; it went to Broadway with a five-piece band:

- Conductor, Piano, Synthesizers: Tim Weil
- Bass: Steve Mack
- Guitars: Kenny Brescia
- Drums and percussion: Jeff Potter
- Keyboards, Guitars: Daniel A. Weiss<sup>174</sup>

Synthesizers fill in for brass, strings, and any other instruments. This has the disadvantage of making the music sound more “canned” and reminiscent of the seventies and eighties, but it means the entire “orchestra” can play onstage with the cast, giving the show a touch of rock concert atmosphere. In addition, placing the band onstage helps visually characterize Roger as a rock singer. It also, of course, saves money.

Broadway composers have often not orchestrated their own work. Larson had help from two key individuals with the realization of his musical ideas. Steve Skinner, arranger and engineer, owned a recording studio where Larson recorded demos of his early work.<sup>175</sup> Skinner became the *de facto* arranger by assisting Larson. Skinner recalls:

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<sup>172</sup> Script dated 9/12/95, Larson Collection.

<sup>173</sup> “RENT: RANDOM NOTES as of 4/25/94,” Larson Collection.

<sup>174</sup> Listing from the original Broadway performance, Giel, 66.

<sup>175</sup> Jonathan Burkhart reports that Skinner did about 95 percent of Larson’s recording for ten to twelve years. *Ibid.*, 15.

He would put together basic arrangements and bring the disc in here to me, and I would elaborate on the arrangement. He would bring his musical intuition and I would bring my music degree. I'm sure he heard those chords in his head and worked by trial and error. My job was to help make up for his lack of musical training. He would describe to me, say, a particular drumbeat that he wanted, and I would add a technically sophisticated thing to his intuitive approach, and they complemented each other. I think it was a good marriage.<sup>176</sup>

Thus Larson's music developed by collaboration all along, with Skinner helping him to compensate for his lack of technological equipment and orchestration know-how.

Later in *Rent*'s development, Tim Weil became an important musical collaborator. He had been the audition pianist for the 1994 workshop production, and in remarks in the concert program to a Jonathan Larson tribute at the Library of Congress, director Michael Greif recalls Larson "leaning over during auditions. . . and whispering how great he thought the audition pianist was, and right then getting the idea that Tim Weil should be his Music Director."<sup>177</sup> Skinner, Weil and Larson all shared a love for both theatre music and rock and pop music. Weil recalls discussing with Larson the problems of merging those styles:

What Jonathan liked about musical theatre was that songs there reveal character and push the plot forward, as opposed to "How do I feel?" That's very passive. Songs being active was a compelling idea to both of us, and we wanted to learn how to master that. We also knew that there was an inherent problem in pop music, that once you start putting in the backbeat, it evens everything out, and there is nothing dramatic in that. If you have enough lyrics and enough theatricality and enough stuff to push that through, the beat becomes secondary. We were both talking about how to marry that stuff peacefully.<sup>178</sup>

Larson, with the help of his collaborators, did achieve a style that was both theatrical, advancing plot and character, and rock-based. He worked from the model of typical rock song form with verse, chorus, and bridge, even following tonal expectations such as

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Michael Greif, "Michael Greif, Director, RENT," *American Creativity: The Composer-Lyricist Jonathan Larson* (The Library of Congress, 2006), 9.

<sup>178</sup> Giel, 28.

making the bridge a perfect fourth higher than the verse and chorus. “Take Me or Leave Me,” the last song Larson wrote for the show (and the last before he died), demonstrates this typical form. The song’s variation is not in form, but in who is singing what.

“Take Me or Leave Me”

<u>Section</u>	<u>Singer</u>
Intro	Instrumental
Verse	Maureen
Chorus	Maureen
Verse	Maureen
Chorus	Maureen
Bridge	Maureen
Verse	Joanne
Chorus	Joanne with Maureen interjecting
Bridge	Both
Chorus	Both
Coda	Both

Larson illustrates character and advances plot here working within popular song form. Maureen, who has had the upper hand in the relationship and can be somewhat selfish, takes the entire first half of the song by herself, claiming that Joanne should “take [her] for what [she is].” When Joanne expresses the same sentiment in the third verse, she gets only a few lines to sing solo before Maureen starts interjecting, calling Joanne “a control freak” and spouting other criticisms. Unable to reconcile, they finish by shouting simultaneously, “Guess I’m leavin’ / I’m gone!” Within the course of the song, Maureen and Joanne give their respective viewpoints, fight, and break-up. The form of the piece is repetitive, but the action is not. Other songs use a more varied form, inserting recitative-like interludes or altering the number of beats, lines, or verses from the standard.

In the “Musical Notes” to his script of September 12, 1995, Larson stated, “Lyrics should be able to be heard at all times – BUT that in no way negates the need to ‘feel’ the

drums, bass and electric guitars.”<sup>179</sup> Musically, Larson achieved clarity of lyrics and overcame the static quality of a steady beat largely by layering elements. Often, his songs start with an unaccompanied riff before the vocalist enters and percussion and other instruments or layers are added gradually. “One Song Glory” builds slowly in this way. Other songs, like “You’ll See,” begin with a recitative-like section and build from that. By constructing songs slowly and beginning them without percussion, Larson can build musically and dramatically without making it difficult to hear the singers. These techniques create the sound that is a mixture of theatrical and popular styles.

Popular and rock music inspired Larson’s characters and songs. He often had particular popular music artists in mind as he composed the music of *Rent*. At the top of a sketch for the rhythm of the song “You Were Right,” for example, he wrote, “Liz Phair – strummed guit. [guitar]”<sup>180</sup> Liz Phair is given as the example for Maureen’s character in the casting call of 1994 along with Natalie Merchant. In handwritten notes and in the casting call, Larson linked Roger with Kurt Cobain and Eddie Vedder. The casting notes say, “rocker should be able to sing in a ‘grunge’ style.”<sup>181</sup> Mark is linked to Springsteen and Paul Simon in the casting call and Michael Stipe in Larson’s notes. The change can probably be attributed to Anthony Rapp, who auditioned for the 1994 *Rent* workshop with R.E.M.’s “Losing My Religion.”<sup>182</sup> Sinéad O’Connor and the lead singer for Sonic Youth are the examples given for Mimi. The “rock singer/actors” were instructed to audition with “either a current rock song – or something from JESUS CHRIST

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<sup>179</sup> Script dated 9/12/95, Larson Collection.

<sup>180</sup> Notes ca. 1994, Larson Collection.

<sup>181</sup> Notes ca. 1995, Larson Collection; “Casting call, summer 1994,” Asch, 9.

<sup>182</sup> Rapp, 4.

SUPERSTAR, HAIR or TOMMY.”<sup>183</sup> It seems that although Larson included many styles in *Rent*'s score, he wanted his cast to sing in a rock style.

Larson showed his musical and thematic intentions for three songs, “Right Brain” (later “One Song Glory”), “Light My Candle,” and “Will I . . . ?” in an “explanation of excerpts” probably from around 1994. Of “Right Brain,” he wrote, “Musically, the contemporary ‘grunge’ style defines Roger’s lost, angry character. Thematically, Roger’s wanderlust is established.” About “Light My Candle,” Larson noted that “The deliberately distorted rhythmic elements reflect the dreamy feeling of attraction and/or being doped up. Also, anyone familiar with Puccini’s version of this scene should get a kick out of the references to the moon, etc.” The composer called “Will I . . . ?” “an example of the more traditional scope of the score.”<sup>184</sup> His descriptions show that Larson consciously sought to incorporate current musical styles, draw from *La Bohème*, and link music with character and theme.

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<sup>183</sup> “Casting call, summer 1994,” Asch, 9.

<sup>184</sup> “Explanation of excerpts” ca. 1994, Larson Collection.

## Chapter 5: Post Mortem: To Broadway and Beyond

The cast for the 1996 NYTW full production of *Rent* remembers the beginning of rehearsals in December of 1995 fondly. Larson invited them all to the Peasant Feast, a tradition he began in 1985 of an annual holiday potluck. He started it with his roommate of the time Ann Egan, who explains, “You’d invite everyone, from close friends and people in the neighborhood to someone you’d just met on the way home from the supermarket.”<sup>185</sup> A decade after the tradition’s beginning and the night before rehearsals began, Larson invited the cast of *Rent*. Anthony Rapp describes the evening:

Jonathan gave a beautiful toast. Very shy. “This is the best thing that ever happened to me.” He was crying, and it was really, really touching. “This is a show about my friends, so you’re all playing my friends.”<sup>186</sup>

Only a couple of months earlier, Larson had quit his job at the Moondance Diner. He believed that his career was finally taking off. He had matured as an artist throughout the process of *Rent*’s development and seemed to have some realization of and pride in that personal growth, despite its difficulty. Stephen Sondheim recalls:

The last time I spoke to [Jonathan] was in December. He was learning how to swallow his artistic pride and collaborate. He felt mixed about the show because of the compromises he’d made. He felt pleased with himself for growing up. He sounded the way any author does in the middle of rehearsals: “This is terrible, this is wonderful, I’m ashamed of it, isn’t it great?”<sup>187</sup>

Larson also turned in his one-sentence description of *Rent* in December. “*Rent* is about a community celebrating life, in the face of death and AIDS, at the turn of the century,” he wrote.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Giel, 14.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

In January, *Rent* was performed as a read-through for the producers and the New York Theatre Workshop, and technical rehearsals began on January 21<sup>st</sup>. Larson went twice during “tech week” to the emergency room of two different hospitals, complaining of chest pain. Each time, he was misdiagnosed, first said to have food poisoning, then a virus, and he was sent home.

The show’s scheduled opening was coincidentally but fortuitously timed with the hundredth anniversary of the first performance of *La Bohème*. Anthony Tommasini, a *New York Times* writer, came to the final dress rehearsal interested in discussing the show in an article about “how young people continually see themselves in this opera of struggling bohemian artists in Paris in the 1800s.”<sup>189</sup> Tommasini interviewed Larson after the show, unaware that Larson had for years clipped articles from the paper for inspiration and dreamed about someday “get[ting] [his] *New York Times* interview.”<sup>190</sup> Looking back, Tommasini says, “I told him how strong I thought the material was, and I think I paid him the compliment of taking the show very, very seriously.”<sup>191</sup> Between the *New York Times* interview and the full house and standing ovation, the evening was a great success.

Because it was late by the time Larson finished his interview, the production team agreed to meet over breakfast to discuss problems in the show.<sup>192</sup> Larson went home from the theatre, put on a pot of tea in the early hours of the morning, and suddenly suffered a ruptured aortic aneurysm. He died within minutes; his roommate found him at

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 51.

3:30 AM.<sup>193</sup> It is believed that the aneurysm was caused by Marfan Syndrome, a connective tissue disorder.

The cast and production team of *Rent* phoned one another with the news and gathered at NYTW throughout the day.<sup>194</sup> A preview had been scheduled for that evening, Thursday, January 25, but instead, the cast performed a concert-style sing-through for Larson's family and friends. Previews began instead the next day. While previews are generally a time for making alterations based on audience responses, the creative team was left alone without the show's creator to decide what he would have done. The story of *Rent*'s development, however, was not over; Greif, Nicola, Weil, and Thomson tried to make sure Larson's voice continued to be represented. Rapp called the continued work on the play, "a terrible game of second-guessing."<sup>195</sup> Without Larson's notes to describe this period and changes to the show, I rely on interviews with the cast and production team. Cast member Gwen Stewart has said, "I remember Michael [Greif] saying that he had to say to himself, 'Okay, I know this is something I would push Jonathan for, but he wouldn't go for it, so I'm not going to do that.' [Michael Greif and Lynn Thomson and Jim Nicola] looked through [Larson's] notes, what he might have said at any given moment."<sup>196</sup>

Director Michael Greif describes his perspective on the preview and alteration period:

From the time of Jonathan's death to the opening, I was operating with a more focused sense of urgency . . . because I really wanted to succeed for him. We proceeded with a lot of knowledge of Jonathan's intentions and a lot of experience discussing and collaborating and arguing with him about various

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 51-2.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

things, with a lot of consideration and care. Because Jonathan is not here to argue with, I need to include his argument in my argument.

Essentially what we did in those two and a half weeks was cut from the first act. We did internal trims within songs and lost maybe ten minutes, maybe more. We lost a verse and a chorus of 'What You Own' in the second act. And we futzed a lot with the ending. One change was that stage directions and character descriptions Jonathan had written – for example, when he describes Mark and Roger's apartment – were given to Mark as dialogue. Before he died, those narrative moments were not in the script. They were in the workshop we did a year ago. We determined they helped in storytelling, and so they were reintroduced. I believe that after seeing a couple of previews Jonathan would have consented and agreed that they were helpful.<sup>197</sup>

The changes that the creative team made were, all in all, conservative. Cutting length from a show is often necessary. Other changes involved reintroducing material previously cut, not adding new ideas, songs, or scenes. The show thus still had an unfinished quality. After two weeks of previews, however, *Rent* opened on February 13 to critical and commercial success. Perhaps it is a form of justification in hindsight since the show could not be further perfected, but several have suggested that the show's rough edges add to its appeal. Cast member Daphne Rubin-Vega explains, "It's really textured and overflowing with information, for better and for worse. Part of what makes *Rent* beautiful is its roughness. It's just like living on the Lower East Side: There's a lot of shit going on. It's messy. Good."<sup>198</sup> External observers have agreed. Scott Miller notes:

. . . [Larson] never finished the show. For many musicals, the preview period is when the most important work gets done, and Larson died before previews began. Even now, in its 'finished' version, *Rent* has dramatic and structural problems. Is it better for its roughness and imperfection, more accessible, more loveable for its flaws? Quite possibly.<sup>199</sup>

Audiences and critics certainly seem to think so. *Rent* opened on Broadway on April 29 at the Nederlander Theatre, a venue chosen because it is on the edges of the theatre

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Miller, 191.

district and was a bit run down, in keeping with *Rent*'s aesthetic. The show has garnered myriad positive reviews, including two by Ben Brantley in Larson's beloved *New York Times*.<sup>200</sup> In 1996, it won Tony Awards for Best Musical, Best Book, and Best Score, and Wilson Jermaine Heredia won the award for Best Featured Actor in a Musical for his portrayal of Angel. *Rent* also won New York Drama Critics Circle, Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, Drama League, Theatre World, and Obie Awards, as well as the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Now in its eleventh year, *Rent* is currently the seventh-longest running show on Broadway. It has played in at least twenty countries, including China, New Zealand, and Slovakia. On November 23, 2005, a movie with most of the original Broadway cast reprising their roles was released.

The Library of Congress requested and was given Larson's papers and celebrated the composer in a concert in October 2006. Julie Larson McCollum, Jonathan's sister, wrote in the concert notes:

Jon truly was a dreamer. And he dreamed big. But even so, I honestly don't think he could have foreseen how big the realization of his impossible dream would become. He certainly imagined winning Tony awards, but when my parents and I found ourselves accepting awards on his behalf at four different ceremonies within one twenty-four-hour period, I remember thinking that even Jon would have been blown away. While he always dreamed of having a show on Broadway, there were insecure moments before RENT opened at the New York Theatre Workshop when he confessed to me that he was just hoping the show would have enough momentum to last through its six-week run. The Pulitzer Prize? An improbable fantasy, for sure. Recognition by the Library of Congress? Unbelievable!

It is easy to forget that *Rent* took more than six years of work, countless scripts and revisions, and the support of many collaborators. *Rent*'s creation and development is the

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<sup>200</sup> Off-Broadway review: Ben Brantley, "Rock Opera A la 'Bohème' and 'Hair,'" *New York Times*, 14 Feb 1996, C11, <http://proquest.umi.com>, accessed April 2007; Broadway review: Ben Brantley, "Enter Singing: Young, Hopeful And Taking On The Big Time," *New York Times*, 30 Apr 1996, C13, <http://proquest.umi.com>, accessed April 2007.

story of Larson's dreams and his insecurities, illustrating one composer and show's path to Broadway success.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1 Jonathan Larson: *Rent* Timeline<sup>201</sup>

1896	Premiere of <i>La Bohème</i> by Giacomo Puccini
1960	<b>Larson born Feb. 4<sup>th</sup></b>
1982	Larson graduates from Adelphi University
1988	<i>Superbia</i> wins a Richard Rodgers Development Grant
	12/19/88      Staged reading of <i>Superbia</i> at Playwrights Horizon
1989	Larson and Billy Aronson begin work on a musical based on <i>La Bohème</i>
	9/11/89      Rock-concert of <i>Superbia</i> at The Village Gate
	9/22/89      Early draft of <i>Bohème</i> by Aronson & Larson
1990	Script of musical based on <i>La Bohème</i> is titled <i>Rent</i> Larson writes and performs <i>Boho Days</i> <sup>202</sup>
	9/6-9/9/90      Larson performs <i>Boho Days</i> at the Second Stage Theatre
1991	Larson returns to <i>Rent</i> alone with Aronson's consent
	11/18 & 11/25/91      Larson performs <i>tick,tick. . . BOOM!</i> at The Village Gate
	12/20/91      Last major reading of <i>Superbia</i> , at the Public Theater
1992	Larson submits <i>Rent</i> to the New York Theatre Workshop
	12/4/92      Larson performs <i>tick,tick. . . BOOM!</i> at NYTW
1993	Staged reading of <i>Rent</i> at NYTW
	4/19/93      Larson performs <i>tick,tick. . . BOOM!</i> at NYTW
	6/17/93      Staged reading of <i>Rent</i> at NYTW

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<sup>201</sup> Many of the specific dates are from Asch's catalog of Larson's work.

<sup>202</sup> Other titles: *30/90* and *tick,tick. . . BOOM!*

- 1994 Larson wins \$45,000 Richard Rodgers grant  
Film shoot and editing of *Away We Go!*
- Summer Casting call for *Rent*  
October NYTW two-week workshop of *Rent*
- 1995 Larson writes music for *J.P. Morgan Saves the Nation*  
Larson presents a new draft of *Rent* in October, then continues rewriting
- 6/95 & 7/95 Performances of *J.P. Morgan Saves the Nation*  
10/21/95 Larson quits his job as a waiter at the Moondance Diner
- 1996 NYTW full production of *Rent*  
*Rent* and Larson win Pulitzer Prize for Drama and four Tony Awards  
“Seasons of Love” performed at the Democratic National Convention
- 1/24/96 Final dress rehearsal of *Rent*  
Larson interviewed by Anthony Tommasini of the *New York Times*
- 1/25/96 **Larson dies** in the early hours of the morning  
Sing-through performance of *Rent* for Larson’s family and friends
- 1/26/96 Preview performances of *Rent* begin at NYTW  
2/3/96 Memorial service for Jonathan Larson at the Minetta Lane Theatre
- 2/13/96 Official opening of *Rent*  
4/9/96 Larson and *Rent* win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama  
4/16/96 Preview performances of *Rent* begin on Broadway at the Nederlander Theatre
- 4/29/96 *Rent* opens on Broadway at the Nederlander  
6/2/96 *Rent* wins the Tony Awards for Best Musical, Best Score, Best Book of a Musical. Wilson Jermaine Heredia (Angel) wins Best Featured Actor in a Musical
- 2001 A revised *tick,tick. . . BOOM!* opens off-Broadway
- 2005 Film version of *Rent*
- 2006 Jonathan Larson Concert at the Library of Congress

**Appendix 2**  
**List of Character Names**

<b>Final Name</b>	<b>Original <i>La Bohème</i> Character Name</b>	<b>Others Used (Prior to Broadway version)</b>
Angel Dumott Schunard (Angel)	Schaunard	Shaun
April <sup>203</sup>		Michelle, Jenny
Benjamin Coffin III (Benny)	Benoit	Whiner, Mr. Wine
Tom Collins (Collins)	Colline	Cornell
Joanne Jefferson	Alcindoro	Martin, Alexis, Joanne Strudwick, Maureen
Mark Cohen	Marcello	
Maureen Johnson	Musetta	Isabella, Suzanne
Mimi Marquez	Mimi	Amy
	Parpignol	Parpignol <sup>204</sup>
Roger Davis	Rodolfo	Ralph

**Cut Characters**

<b>Character</b>	<b>Description</b>
Mrs. Chance	Homeless; “high priestess in the church of the holy pavement” <sup>205</sup>
Congressman Otam A. DeSnofla	Antagonist, much of his part is taken over by Benny and his collaborators
Dogman	Homeless; “Mrs. Chance’s disciple” <sup>206</sup>
Parpignol	Drug dealer
Rudy Ramirez	Homeless; “the best squeegee man north of Houston Street” <sup>207</sup>

<sup>203</sup> April is only mentioned; she is not an actual cast member.

<sup>204</sup> Parpignol is a toy vendor in *La Bohème* and is made a drug dealer in *Rent*. The drug dealer is not given a name in *Rent*’s final version.

<sup>205</sup> Character list ca. 1993, Larson Collection.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

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