

The word on the street

Rent, composed by 35-year-old Jonathan Larson, is a Tony- and Pulitzer Prize-winning rock opera, based on Puccini's opera "La Bohème." *Rent* opened in New York City on the 29th of April, 1996 at the Nederlander Theater.

"At last, a show that lives up to its hype! *Rent* is theatre at its best: passionate, exuberant, uplifting, and joyous. Author Jonathan Larson, who died tragically of an aortic aneurism on the day of the show's first dress rehearsal, presents panoramically a year in the life of a dozen or so East Villagers. Faced with the squalor of a squatter's existence and the ravages of HIV, these incredible young heroes and heroines somehow build family and community with passion and style. Larson had an enormous amount on his mind and in his heart, and as a result *Rent* is imperfect, but only because it so brims and rocks with excess enthusiasms and energy. *Rent* features the best theatre score in years – maybe decades – and has a winning and wonderful cast. I love this show: it's an absolute must-see." – Martin Denton, *New York*, Oct. 27, 1999

"The musical has something romantic, seductive and consoling to sing about – of how love can sometimes come out of the blue and rescue you from despair . . . Jonathan Larson's plangent, medium soft-rock music, with elements of soul, gospel and blues, and simple, eloquent lyrics, is finely gauged to convey the regret and distress of these young people who wait to die from AIDS. What do you do when you find yourself in the difficult happiness of reciprocated love, with too little time to enjoy it? The songs of these people's brief time together are searing, beautiful and fearstained laments . . ." – *The London Evening Standard*

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A Playgoer's Guide to



By Jonathan Larson

A New Kind of Musical

Rent deals with politics, hardly traditional for a Broadway musical. Not only that, it raises the red-flag issue of AIDS. Such things were not to be brought up during a public show!

Not only that, Larson's show used rock music. This made going to see the performance a little bit more challenging for those accustomed to the normal family oriented night of Broadway. Also, critics reprimanded Larson for being lazy, using repetitive rock beats, and also for using the same song in more than one spot. However, a proper definition of rock opera will help better understand Larson's motivations for this kind of musical approach. A rock opera or rock musical is a musical production in the form of an opera in a modern rock and roll style rather than more traditional forms. It differs from conventional rock and roll music, which is often a song that is unlinked in plot or story with other songs, but overlaps considerably with concept album, song cycle, or rock musical. More recent developments include metal opera and rap opera.

Larson was not the only one critics attacked for this approach to musical performances. The same treatment was given the release of *Jesus Christ Superstar* which contained rock music written by Andrew Lloyd Webber. However, disapproval was not universal. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, had this to say about it: "*Rent* is sensational! With a huge heart and a couple of ideas about young people finding connection in a disconnected time, this musical explodes with life."

Jonathan Larson

Rent provides the opportunity to see what life was like for Jonathan Larson. There are many parallels between Larson's life and what he ended up writing into the script. The original idea that brought about the creation of *Rent* came from Billy Aronson. Aronson was a Yale-trained playwright, who wanted to turn the Puccini opera *La Bohème* into a musical. Aronson is known for such works as *Beavis and Butt-Head*, *Courage the Cowardly Dog* and *Carmen Sandiego* as well as *Light Years*, *The Art Room*.

Together Larson and Aronson wrote three songs before splitting on the project and *Rent* was put on the back burner for a while.

However, circumstances would not let Larson leave *Rent* unfinished. In 1991 three of Larson's friends were diagnosed with AIDS and he resumed working. He returned alone to the completion of *Rent* with Aronson's blessing. Larson lived on the edge of poverty and turned to working as a waiter to survive much in the same manner that his characters in *Rent* are trying to survive. Larson lived a Bohemian life downtown in a scruffy loft that had a bathtub in the kitchen. For a while, he and his roommates kept an illegal, wood burning stove.

AIDS affected Larson's friends and drove him to complete *Rent*. Many of the characters in *Rent* have AIDS themselves. Another part of *Rent* that coincides with Larson's life is that in the play Mark's girlfriend leaves him for another woman. Larson dated a dancer for four years who sometimes left him for other men and finally left him for another woman. Through *Rent* we are given a window to see how life is for the poor and starving artist just waiting for a break to be able to pull ahead of the game.

Larson received his break in 1994 with a \$45,000 Richard Rodgers grant for *Rent* and the help of New York Theatre Workshop and *Rent* the musical was given life.

Rent is scheduled to be made into a movie, directed by Chris Columbus, and to be released in 2005 with much of the original cast playing in their designated roles.



Bohemian

Throughout the production you will hear the actors make comments and references to "Being Bohemian." This stems from the play's roots as an adaptation of a magazine article written by Henry Murger titled *La Bohème*. But just what does it mean to be "Bohemian"?

The original definition for Bohemian was used to designate inhabitants of the former kingdom of Bohemia, located in the modern day Czech Republic. Today, for the Czech speaker, the word Bohemian is still often synonymous with the word Czech, although its prevailing use tends to be in old-fashioned or poetic contexts, especially in light of the profound influence of the imported secondary meaning of the word (see below). In general, people refer to themselves as Czechs and not Bohemians for these reasons.

In the 15th century, King Zikmund of Bohemia ejected all Roma (gypsies) from Bohemia; they fled to France. Here many of them would become writers or artists or simply strike out to live non-traditional lives. By the 19th century people living these sort of lifestyles in France, no matter their ethnic background, were called Bohemians.

La Bohème

La Bohème is an often-adapted story first appearing in Henry Murger's magazine articles in the early 1800s. These were turned into a play, *La Vie de Bohème*, in 1849, and later were compiled into the book *Scenes de la Vie de Bohème* (Paris, 1851). It has also been made into several operatic versions, the most famous of them by Giacomo Puccini.

The story includes a group of friends in the Bohemian artistic subculture of France; the group is poor, and some of its female members work as courtesans. This creates complicated situations when one of these characters, suffering from tuberculosis, must balance survival against romantic love. A movie, *Moulin Rouge*, was also loosely based on this plot; it was directed by Baz Luhrmann, who had previously directed a wildly successful Australian production of Puccini's opera which opened on Broadway in 2002. [from the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*]



Giacomo Puccini