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285 Research proposal

**Proposal**

In the title song from *Rent*, one of the characters, Mark, asks “How do you leave the past behind”? (Rent, 2008). This question has been asked before of many things but yet to be asked of a musical. *Rent*, a Broadway smash hit that ran from 1994 through 2008, that has been compared to *Hair* because of its “stunning impact on the theatrical world” (Everett and Laird, 2008, 247). This research proposal is asking the question: how much of an impact did *Rent* have on young adults who came of age when the show ran? Specifically, it would look at how the show impacted minority groups such as gays as well as women. This paper will look at several things in order to give the reader some knowledge as to why this study will benefit others. First, the paper will define definitions needed for a better understanding in this paper; why the musical *Rent* is so important and why it should be studied; a brief literature review; what the next steps in the research process could be; and finally a conclusion to tie the paper together.

**Definitions**

Before this paper goes on, it is import to know a couple of definitions. The first is the term “coming of age”. This means, those who were the ages of thirteen to eighteen when *Rent* was on Broadway. This term is used because that time period is crucial in developing and learning one’s identity. The second definition is that of musical theatre. Generally speaking, musical theatre means both comedic and plays using music to tell the story. In the case of *Rent* it is hard to tell in to which category it falls. As John Clum (1999) writes “musical comedy is a genre involving comedy, song, and dance that treats its subject matter through the lenses of burlesque, parody, or satire” (11). *Rent* does not fall into this category, though it does treat some subjects in this way (in the case of former roommate Benny). Clum (1999) also states that the two most important people in a musical comedy are that of the composer and lyricist (12) and in the case of a musical play, the director (16). In *Rent*’s case. The composer and lyricist, for the most part were one person, Jonathan Larson and the director, Michael Greif, does not factor into this research proposal.

**Why *Rent* is important**

“Cast member Adam Pascal remarked that the musical *Rent* ‘doesn’t speak for a generation, it speaks to a generation’” (Nogee, 2011, 6). The music was such a large part of why this show appealed to both those in the theatre business and those not. The combinations of many different genres attracted people to the show. Salzman (2000) suggests that one of the reasons that *Rent* worked was that the music in the show has an “almost invariably about the energy and personality of the performer and often dependent on improvisation” (20) even if there is no improv in *Rent*. The styles of the show built on Larson’s [the lyricist/writer] influences as well as his knowledge of musical theatre. There are influences of Sondheim, rock, soul, pop, and other styles (Steyn, 1997). Titrington (2007) writes in her master’s thesis that *Rent*’s rock idiom success [is due] in part because it is the necessary language for the show’s controversial, contemporary topics and themes” (2). It is with that background in rock music that *Rent* was able to capture some of the largest youth audiences in the late 1990s (Titrington, 2007).

It was not just the music that drew people to *Rent*, the characters did as well. “All of the characters are unflinching real, a point underscored by their ordinary clothing and an industrial grey set” (Everett and Laird, 2008, 248) and everybody can find something in any one of them. Larson made his characters “sympathetic and even attractive by focusing on how they lived with their diseases and problems, rather than on their dying” (Everett and Laird, 2008, 248). One of the main reasons that people relate to the characters is that they not only represent a period in American history but there is also a group mentality. The family comes together, the family breaks apart (Jones, 2003 and Miller, 2001). Another reason that people relate to the characters is that, they take after real people. Eddie Rosenstein, a friend of Larson’s said that “I think the characters seem organic—like they really would exist—because of the nuances. The nuances are there because he worked so hard [on the character plots]” (McDonnell and Silberger, 1997, 13). An additional reason that those who saw the show knew someone with AIDS and that those in the show that had the disease reflected this (Sorrells, 2000). Lastly, when the show became able to do by armature productions, there is a note that lets the producers change the names of the people in the Life Support group. Most of the time they are changed to the names of cast members’ friends or families who have died. This changing allowed the show to connect to the community that it is playing in.

Renee Elise Goldsberry says that “almost every line in the show is about a goodbye, being so eminent that you have to embrace it” (Heyman and Bozymowski, 2008). The show also gives life and acknowledges “’otherness, glorifying artists and counterculture as necessary to a healthy civilization” (McDonnell and Silberger, 1997, 6). Another theme presented in the show is that Larson did not solely focus on the negative aspects of AIDS, “instead, his characters meet, fall in love, and fight’” (Sorrells, 2000, 178), showing that just because a person may have something wrong in their lives, that it is still possible the love of one’s life. Lastly, the show, as briefly mentioned earlier, expresses the need for community (Sorrells, 2000). At the end of the show, the women explain that, while they are living their life, those who have passed before them are not forgotten and will live on in memory. As the women sing this, they turn towards the audience which as Sorrells (2000) implies, “the audience is as much of a part of the community as the actors on stage are” (186-187). Also, the last line in the show implores “the audience to become active in loving everyone regardless of stereotypes, or socio-economic background, or ethnic heritage “ (Sorrells, 2000, 187).

**Why Study *Rent***

*Rent* takes the audience on a ride through love, death, drugs, poverty, homeless, and disease (Titrington, 2007). These are all things that people can relate to. Another reason is, unlike a lot of musical theatre shows, *Rent* is somewhat unique to America and provides an unique perspective into a specific point in American history. Yes, other countries around the world have AIDS/HIV, poverty, homosexuality, but *Rent* and the music behind it was written as a way of American life and a period in American history. Clum (1999) says that “it’s interesting that the British, who are used to more sophisticated representations of class politics, didn’t get *Rent*” (273). When interviewed by Seth Rudetsky (n.d.) and asked why *Rent* did not do well in London, original cast member Adam Pascal (who transferred with the production) says that the people did not get the show and he thought the show was too American. Anton Luitingh (2008) was part of the South African cast as well as the co-producer with Anthony Rapp saw two parts to why *Rent* did not work:

“Firstly, RENT is a truly American piece of theatre, in fact it is a truly New York piece of theatre. Many of its references pertain to a culture that we as South Africans find difficult to comprehend and contextualise [*sic*]. Secondly, a point which most critics fail to take into account, RENT like Les Miserables or Phantom of the Opera, is a period piece. It is set in the late 80’s, early 90’s. Many of the ‘controversial’ issues it raises are perhaps not controversial anymore, and are thus perceived as being dated or irrelevant as they do not necessarily relate to the current climate within our country today” (Luitingh, 2008).

People have asked, “So why not make it relevant to the country that show is in”, for example like Sesame street did in South Africa. Luitingh (2008) responded with that “*Rent* is a period piece and needs to be performed as such”.

**Literature Review**

There are thousands of pages out there that have been written both about musical theatre and about *Rent.* The following are just a sampling of these pages. After the conclusion, an appendix will be provided with more resources.

The first book that should be consulted is *Our musicals, Ourselves* by John Bush Jones, which is an important book for musical theatre research as it covers musicals from a social history standpoint from the beginning of the American musical to nineties. John Bush Jones has both a background in theatre and in speech. His background has also included being part of the “Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival” (Libraries, B., U., 2005).

One of the main reasons this book is important is, as stated, as a look into the background of musical theatre. Jones writes that this book was put together to focus “almost exclusively on shows that in some way spoke to the issues, achievements, and, often, the anxieties of their particular era” (2). There is no question that for many years, musicals provided the masses with a way to look at issues and this book helps provide context for those issue.

Another reason this book is important, is that Jones’s book has an entire chapter devoted to “new voices” (Jones, 2003, pp. 331) in musical theatre. This includes women’s issues, homosexuality, and the changes that came about to musical theatre in the late nineties. Lastly, in this book’s section on *Rent*, Jones does come criticizing of the show which is a good contrast to many of the books that praise it. Jones recognizes that one of the reasons *Rent* worked well with many audiences is because “everything is personal and part of the stories” (Jones, 2003, pp. 350) resonate with a part of everybody. Another reason that Jones (2003) puts out there is that “Larson lets his characters’ stories tell themselves, without comment or judgment” (350), thus allowing audience members to possibly understand that there is one place (musical theatre) that will not judge them.

The second book that is important in the study of *Rent* is John M. Clum’s book, *Something for the boys*. This work is one that should be read when studying gay culture and musical theatre. While not exactly scholarly as the author explains in the overture (Clum, 1999, p. 1), it does provide a valued resource for gay culture in musical theatre from the end of World War II through the mid-1990s. The author’s field work and impressions focus “on what happens in the audience as well as what happens on stage” (Clum, 1999, p. 1). Unlike Stacey Wolf’s book, that focuses on women, Clum’s book focuses on not just the performers but the audience, the costumes, the lyricist, and the composer, and how they all relate to gay culture. One of Clum’s main focuses in this book is to show that there is a sub-culture within the theatre and the entire book is showing how this has evolved. He also discusses the connection to a younger audience and one of the shows that worked was *Rent*, the fact that “it wears its heart on its sleeve” (Clum, 1999, 17).Clum also specifically mentions another reason why *Rent* had the impact and was able to connect to those outside the musical theatre family was in the way that it was presented and that, at its base, the performers and characters are what the audience connects to (Clum, 1999, 190).

A major section in Clum’s book discusses AIDS/HIV and how this impacted not only gay culture but musical theatre as well. Clum (1999) writes that Larson’s show was one of the ways that Broadway dealt with AIDS (269). In addition two other musicals, *Rent* put a group of young Americans on stage that were struggling to find themselves in the face of the crises (among others). Clum does have some criticisms about the show as well, such as romanticizing drug use (272), but there are minor to his discussion of what *Rent* did for musical theatre (272). Lastly, Clum (1999) makes a point that *Rent* is truly an American show and something that takes a small point in American history and pushes to the forefront (273).

As mentioned Clum (1999) does has issues with the music, including that the character who dies is the most flamboyantly gay (272). Clum (1999) has also critized the show because the actors who play the gay characters (in the original cast) are straight, while the man playing a straight character is openly gay (this was Anthony Rapp who played Mark) (Clum, 1999, 273). There were others who critized that AIDS is actually overlooked in *Rent* (Clum, 1999).

There are several dissenters in the literature review about *Rent*. One of these is Stacey Wolf. In her book *A Problem like Maria* delves into gender on the American musical stage, focusing on four big musical stars, Ethel Merman, Barbara Streisand, Mary Martin, and Julie Andrews. Wolf’s book looks at how each of these women played a role in developing gender and sexual “types” on Broadway. Wolf’s background is in theatre and according to the University of Michigan Press website (2011), she is Associate Professor of Theater at the University of Texas at Austin.

The problem with this book is how it relates to young women and the overall tone of the book. Wolf’s (2005) opening paragraph asks “how someone can be a feminist and also be an ardent fan of musicals” (vii). This state is one that is very contradictory and inflammatory. Just because a women is feminist does not mean they cannot be a fan of musical theatre and vice versa. They are two separate things and should not be used together. Each woman that Wolf discusses had a long and successful career on Broadway and to use this book to study how young women view Broadway or even musical theatre is not a good choice. Many young women growing up idolized these women (and still do) and even though they chose to play characters that may be gay or have undertones of them, does not lead scholarly ideas that women will connect with these characters.

Another issue in studying the show is that many people in the business think it failed. One of these is Ruth Nogee (2011) writes that because most of Jonathan Larson’s material is from 1994, the show is no longer current and therefore not relevant (4). In order to combat this, it is important to look at the show from Jones’s way in that this musical gives a social history of a moment in time (1994 through 1997, roughly) and how that affected people.

Yet another big discussion of the show and why it failed is Miller (2001), who explains that rock musicals usually do not succeed because the true voice of rock is not Broadway (190). According to Miller (190) the “lyrics have to tell a story, to advanced [the] plot and character” (190) which rock does not do. Many people considered Jonathan’s views of the homeless “naïve and borderline offensive” (Miller, 2001, 190-191). Scott Miller does however; know his theatre as he, at the time of the book printing (2001) was the “artistic director of New Line Theatre in St. Louis Missouri” (back of the book). He has other books and has written for the stage as well. From reading Miller’s (2001) section on *Rent*’s legacy, the feeling is that Miller hates the show. He writes “certainly, it will ruin the voices of a generation of singers” (197). He says this because of the way the show was cast in the beginning. Miller did not seem to do his research in that out of the original cast; only Adam Pascal had no theatre training or musical theatre vocal training. This myth was populated by the mainstream media and Miller does not seem to go beyond it. Miller (2011) also writes that in his opinion *Rent* has changed Broadway (198) but he does not do a good job backing up his theory.

Lastly, Steyn, (1997) also says that “Larson doesn’t produce a single original thought—on sex, AIDS, poverty, American capitalism” (209). Others, including Jones, did point this out. But what Steyn fails to see is that Larson’s thoughts where capturing a point in history, both of the US and musical theatre culture, not on producing any new thoughts.

**The Next Step**

The next step in this research would be to conduct interviews. This has briefly been done via a qualitative research with a small group of women aging from 23-28, who became teenagers when *Rent* was on Broadway. The women in this small study had at least one theatrical experience. One woman, Megan, a 23 year old dog groomer, told said that *Rent* pointed her toward an interest in political science and social injustice (Megan, 2011).

In order to continue this research larger groups would need to be done. Also, not only more females, but other groups like gays, transgendered, and other ethnicities. It could also be researched whether those groups in different areas and how their perceptions of the show affected them if they were not able to see the show live.

**Conclusion**

Many musicals have proved to be an influence on American culture. Due to the fact that *Rent* is a newer show, it remains to be seen whether or not the show influenced an entire subset of people. One thing is true, music, no matter what type, has a strong effect on us. By listening to it releases dopamine and this can be an analgesic (Conger and Ervin, 2011). This research proposal looked at what an experiment might be in order to study what affected *Rent* has had on a certain population(s). It also looked at definitions needed to understand the literature behind the story and following this, why *Rent* is important to study, as well as a review of literature already out there. Finally, this paper looked at what, if any research has been done and what a future experiment or qualitative research might look like.

**Appendix A**

Here a list resources of other literature concerning *Rent*.

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