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Final paper

The lights dim, the theatre goes quiet. On stage, a door opens and out walks a young blonde man in a leather jacket. As the crowd in the theatre cheers, he picks up an electric guitar waiting for him and strums the opening chords to “Muzetta’s Waltz” as again the audience cheers. This is *Rent*, the Broadway smash hit that ran from 1994 through 2008. This show has been compared to *Hair* because of its “stunning impact on the theatrical world” (Everett and Laird, 2008, 247). This paper is divided into two parts. The first will examine the story behind the musical, its off-Broadway production, its Broadway production, the movie, and the aftermath of the show. The second part will discuss the impact of the show, why the show was a success, how the show did not work and finally, the last section will briefly look at some different experiences, including my own. In many ways *Rent* was not supposed to work but it somehow managed to change the cultural landscape for many young Americans as well as the theatre world.

*Part 1: Behind the Music*

The story of *Rent* begins long before it ever saw a Broadway stage. It’s a story of tragedy and triumph and one that needs to be shared. Its composer, lyricist, and writer, Jonathan Larson, grew up in a middle class household. From an early age, Jonathan had a strong sense of social commitment (Barnatham, Columbus, and De Niro, 2005). His family said longtime friend, Matthew O’Grady, “were open” (Barnatham, Columbus, and De Niro, 2005). Growing up, Jonathan took a strong interest in music as well as the stage. He would eventually attend Adelphi University where his mantra became similar to that of his mentor: “Kelfi”, which, on a note meant “first I honor life and with it my life in theatre; Make the familiar, unfamiliar and less is more” These themes would later become variations in Jonathan’s musical career (Barnatham, Columbus, and De Niro, 2005). When Jonathan finished college he moved to New York City and started writing. He would tell everybody he could that he was the future of musical theatre. He really disliked the big spectacle musicals of the late 1980s and wanted to bring the MTV generation to the theatre (Barnatham, Columbus, and De Niro, 2005). While he did write other shows, *Rent* would Jonathan’s biggest production.

The plot of *Rent* is taken from Puccini’s *La Bohem*é. Billy Aronson, in the late 1980s had started taking Puccini’s opera and adapting it to a musical. He was stuck, so someone suggested that he collaborate with Jonathan. However, “*Rent* is not an updated *La Bohem*é or an adaptation; it’s a response to it” (Millar, 2001, 187). Miller (2001) writes that “while *Bohem*é is tragic, *Rent* is joyous. While *Bohem*é’s bohemian world is romantic and poetic, the world of *Rent* is tough, gritty, angry, and real” (187). “Larson followed the lead of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s early musicals by telling a story that directly addresses important social issues and problems” (Miller, 2001, 194).

The title of the show, *Rent* is something that Jonathan wanted to have different meanings for different people. The standard definition of “rent” is money that you pay towards something, like an apartment (Miller, 2001, 183). Jonathan’s favorite meaning of the word is that it can mean “to be torn” (Miller, 2001, 184). Miller (2001) writes that “the characters in this show are torn between conflicting desires—between comfort and idealism, between love and dignity, between anger and pain, between the fear of intimacy and the fear of not getting hurt” (184). It is these characters that make up the plot of *Rent*.

In *Rent* there are eight major characters and a handful of minor ones. There is Mark, who is a filmmaker and his roommate Roger, who is a musician. Mark and Roger used to live with three other people: Maureen, a performance artist and Mark’s former girlfriend, Collins (Tom Collins), a philosopher, and Benny, who is now their landlord. Maureen has dumped Mark and is going out with a lawyer named Joanne. Roger’s love interest, Mimi, lives downstairs and works as a dancer in a club. Lastly, there is Angel, who is a drag queen drummer. Connecting with Jonathan’s theme of life, Roger, Collins, Angel, and Mimi all have AIDS. Those who do not have AIDS are “living in the shadow of AIDS” (Steyn, 1997, 207). “This show’s message about AIDS became more central and personal” when Aronson gave full control of the show to Jonathan (Titrington, 2007, 24).

The show begins on Christmas Eve with Mark and Roger trying to figure out how they are going to stay warm. Many situations through the show using examples from Jonathan’s personal experience, such as when Collins sings “throw down the keys” in Tune Up 2As Collins sings “Throw down the keys” (Tune up #2), this is from Jonathan living in a 5th walk-up. As the story continues, Benny shows up and demands rent money from Mark and Roger, which turns into a fight. Also during this time, Collins is waiting for the keys but they never arrive and he gets attacked. While he is down on the ground, Angel hears him and comes to rescue him. They both learn they have the AIDS virus. Meanwhile, back at the apartment, Roger is contemplating his life and wanting to leave a mark on the musical world (“One Song Glory”). As he is finishing, he meets Mimi and there is an instant connection but Roger is fearful (“Light My Candle”) of how a relationship with a heroin addict would affect him, as he is a recovering one. Mark returns to the apartment and then suddenly Collins bursts in and brings Angel with him to celebrate Christmas (“Today 4 U”).

The night continues and Mark is called back to where Joanne is helping Maureen set up her protest (to protest Benny and his father-in-law clearing away the homeless). There Mark meets Joanne for the first time and they struggle with their issues concerning Maureen (“Tango: Maureen”). Mark then meets up with Collins and Angel to head to a life support meeting, which was a large part of Jonathan’s life (McDonnell and Silberger, 1997). As the meeting continues upstage, the focus turns to Mimi, performing “Out Tonight” at her apartment. As she continues to sing, she makes her way to Roger to sing “Another Day” which marks one of the anthems of the show. Mark, Collins, and Angel leave the life support talking about moving out of New York City (“Santa Fe”). Mark then leaves the two lovers alone where they sing their love song, “I’ll Cover You”. Finally the group meets up at Maureen’s performance (“Over the Moon”) where she starts a riot with the homeless and the cast split up. Each finally make their way to the Life Café (which, is a real café in New York City) to celebrate (“La Vie Boheme A”). At the end, a bunch of beepers go off telling those who are HIV positive to take their AZT. Mimi and Roger both take theirs and notice each other doing so. This brings them into their “love” duet and the awkwardness of new love (“I Should Tell You”). As Mimi and Roger leave the Café, the rest of the cast sings of more anarchy (“La Vie Boheme B”), closing the first act with “LA VIE BOHEME!”

Act two opens with the cast in the future and where they sing “Seasons of Love”. This song, according to notes writing by Jonathan, was being sung at Angel’s funeral (McDonnell and Silberger, 1997). We then revert back to “present” time with it being New Year’s Eve. We find out that Benny has locked the group out of their apartment and they resort to breaking down the door and squatting (“Happy New Year A”). During this process, we find out that the footage Mark had filmed of the riot has landed him a job (“Voice Mail #3”). As jubilation ensue, in walks Benny and picks a fight with Roger about Mimi coming to see him (“Happy New Year B”). The year moves forward and we wind up watching Maureen rehearse with Joanne, where their different ideas about boundaries culminates in a fight (“Take me or Leave Me”) (Rudetsky, 2005). As the group starts to fracture, Roger finds out that Mimi is back to using and she and Roger break up (“Without You”). During this time, Collins is trying to comfort Angel, who is dying and does eventually die (“Contact”). At his funeral the characters try to find what Angel had and how much she changed their world as well as Collins sings a heartbreaking tribute (“I’ll Cover You (Reprise)”). The group heads to the cemetery where Mark tries to figure out what he feels and where he is going (“Halloween”). The final straw for this group is the jealousy of Benny by Roger and while Mimi leaves, Maureen and Joanne fight and then apologize. Mark and Roger get in another fight about him leaving, Mimi overhears and Roger leaves. Mimi wants to get clean but does not have money, which Benny offers to pay for (“Goodbye Love”).

The fall moves into winter as Roger and Mark try to figure out what they want (“What You Own”). Roger figures his song out and rushes back to New York to reunite with Mark. They discover that Mimi unwell when Maureen Joanne bring her back to their apartment (“Finale A”). Roger sings his “song” to her to tell her that he truly loves her (“Your Eyes”). It is Roger’s song that awakens her and she realizes that living is better than dying. The cast also realize this and close the show singing “No day but today” (“Finale B”).

Jonathan took full control over *Rent* in 1991 and started revising the script including the tone to be more positive, upbeat, and about life (Titrington, 2007, 24). Jonathan took Puccini’s themes and changed them to fit 1990s in New York City. In *La Bohem*é, the killer is tuberculosis, in Rent; it is Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or AIDS (Steyn, 1997, 207). The disease was a large part of Jonathan’s life including “a legion of friends and colleagues died terrible deaths, left a lasting impression on all who were part of show business” (Kenrick, 2008, 344). In 1992, he noted “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 and C) In our desensitized culture, the ones grappling with life-and-death issues often live more fully than members of the so-called ‘mainstream’” (McDonnell Silberger, 1997, 21).

The first reading of Rent was done in June of 1993 at the New York Theatre Workshop (Miller, 2001, 184). Then in 1994, after receiving a $45,000 Richard Rodgers Development Grant, there was another workshop at the New York theatre Workshop (Everett and Laird, 2008, 247). In this workshop, things were still scattered but “by the last weekend, tickets were sold out” (Titrington, 2007, 53). Things, however, were about to change. Jonathan had not been feeling well during the tech rehearsals and had gone to several ER clinics, which had diagnosed him with both the flu and a stomach virus. During the last rehearsal before opening night, Jonathan collapsed at the back of the theatre. He claimed it was only stress and the rehearsal went on. Jonathan would go on to give an interview with the New York Times and one of the things he said was that “the more involved I got, the less I cared about being true to Puccini” (Titrington, 2007, 21). This interview would be the last Jonathan would ever give. After the interview Jonathan and his team decided to meet tomorrow to go over the last rehearsal. Jonathan left the theater and went to his apartment. He then “put on a pot of water on the stove for tea, collapsed and died alone on the floor of his apartment” (McDonnell and Silberger, 1997, 6). The cause of his death would later be determined a ruptured aortic aneurysm and the possibility that Jonathan had Marfan’s syndrome of which aortic aneurysm are causes of death. Due to the tragedy surrounding Jonathan’s death and the fact that the show would open on the anniversary of *La Bohem*é, some thought that the issue of AIDS was overshadowed (Sorrells, 2000), however Jonathan’s tragic death and the circumstances surrounding it, helped in the experiences around the show (Kenrick, 2008).

Once the news of Jonathan’s death became known to the cast and crew, a decision had to be made on whether to continue the show. The company that produced *Rent* would have encouraged Jonathan to make further changes to the show had he lived (Kenrick, 2008) and producing a show, even at the workshop level is not cheap. The budget for the show was only $20,000 (McDonnell and Silberger, 1997). However, because Jonathan’s family was coming in and the actors felt it was important to continue Jonathan’s story and vision, the show went on. The cast began the show sitting down but by the time they hit “La Vie Boheme”, they could not sit anymore. The celebration that was scene on stage was started because of Jonathan’s death and celebrating his life, described original cast member Rodney Hicks (Heyman and Bozymowski, 2008). The show would go on to be a success and the show got the news that they would be transferring to Broadway. The original Mimi, Daphne Rubin-Vega said about the transfer, “we didn’t want to go to Broadway to become Broadway stars; we went to kick the motherfuckin’ doors of Broadway open, because it’s old-school and stodgy. We were invited and that was cool” (Miller, 2001, 185).

The show moved to the Nederlander Theater, was chosen “because of it is on the edges of the theatre district and was a bit run down” (Titrington, 2007, 67-68). It was also chosen because it is a smaller theater being only the 18th largest theatre on Broadway, thus giving the audiences a more personal feel. It also differs in that the stage settings seem crazy and minimal. The theatre had “peeling lime green paint, cracked mirrors, shards of ceramic plates and discolored bulbs in the dingy chandeliers” (Nogee, 2011, 2). *Rent* opened to critical acclaim on April 28, 1996. Hoffman (2001) writes that “the Broadway opening was hailed as a new beginning for musical theatre” (364). The PR machine for *RENT* changed its tag line when it saw how much excitement the rush was getting and who the people in that line where. It was changed so that *RENT* was called “the musical for people who hate musicals” (Mordden, 2004, 258). “One of the key features of the Broadway-transfer of *Rent* was the production team’s insistence on maintaining both the show’s early aesthetic and its accessibility to less affluent theatregoers” (Sollecito, 2010). The show immediately attracted generation X because it showed off a different cast of “confused, self-pitying characters as a realistic reflection of their time” (Kenrick, 2008, 364). Not only did it attract different theatre audiences, the show did something that no other show has done before. Because the show wanted to honor Jonathan and his memory of a struggling artist, the first two rows were only twenty dollars (Miller, 2001, 186). These tickets would go into what is called rush or lottery tickets. Mordden (2004) said that “like many a smash [hit], it added something new to the experience of theatergoing: rush tickets for *Rent*-heads” (258). The *New York Times* said it was an “exhilarating, landmark rock opera” and “it shimmers with hope for the future of the American musical” (Miller, 2001, 185). During one day, as the cast was rehearsing, a film crew showed up and they all knew something was going on. The producer Kevin McCullum then announced that Jonathan had was the Pulitzer Prize posthumously (Miller, 2001, 185). This would not be the last award than *Rent* or the cast would be awarded. The show was nominated for ten Tony Awards, winning four (Miller, 2001) as well as a multitude of other major theatre awards such as the Obie, Outer Critics, and Drama League awards.

*Rent* would continue to run and be a success on Broadway. There would be a 5th and 10th year anniversary concert with original cast members; the show would launch Broadway careers of many actors and movie stars (Idina Menzel and Taye Diggs, to name just two of the original cast members). Many well-known actors and actresses would join the cast over the years including Neil Patrick Harris, Joey Fatone, Drew Lachey, and Frenchie Davis. The show finally decided to close June 1, 2008, though because of fan support they pushed the date back to September 7, 2008. For the final performance, Jonathan’s parents, as well as, many former cast members came to see the show (Heyman and Bozymowski, 2008). The final performance was filmed and shown in movie theatres across the country. It was titled *Rent: Filmed Live on Broadway*. In total, *Rent* would have 5,123 performances (Metzler, 2011), making it the 7th longest running show on Broadway.

According to Taye Diggs in an interview, “there was talk of it [a movie] six or seven years ago” (Rudetsky, 2005). In 2005, with the help of Sony Entertainment, Chris Columbus made a movie version of the show. Chris Columbus wanted to do the movie to honor the show that had happened stage (Barnatham, Columbus, and De Niro, 2005). However, the movie had both good and bad points. Columbus paid tribute to Jonathan by having Mark ride around the city on a bicycle (something Jonathan would do) (Barnatham, Columbus, and De Niro, 2005). The movie allowed the riot to actually happen as well as a full-out dance scene for “Tango: Maureen”, two things that could not happened on a small stage. Columbus also used filming locations (NYC for the most part) to open up the musical to a larger “stage” so to speak. The duet between Collins and Angel was moved to a sunny street in Manhattan, Roger’s theme was moved to his rooftop with the New York skyline surrounding him, Mimi’s “Out Tonight” was filmed at a Cat Scratch club and on the way back to her apartment and to Roger’s window, and when Roger leaves after Angel’s funeral, in the movie he heads to Santa Fe which was filmed there. “Columbus thus maximizes the possibilities that film offers, and through creative editing and location shooting, creates a world far larger than any Broadway stage” (Everett and Laird, 2008, 369).

On the flip side, in the movie the timeline differs rather widely (Everett and Laird, 2008) and it does not jive with some of the lyrics in the show that tie the show to the time period. Another problem is that “much of the show’s cynicism—and some of its music—was cut” (Everett and Laird, 2008, 334). Everett and Laird (2008) also note that “almost all of the linking material, underscoring, and recitative-like sung dialogue either became spoken dialogue (over silence) or was removed” (334). All of these changes changed show the show felt, especially to fans of the show. It did made many scenes awkward and not as gritty as the stage show (Everett and Laird, 2008, 334).

*Rent* allowed new talent to come to Broadway and allowed new sounds into theatre such as opera, country, and rock and “broke unwritten rules about narrative, plot, and character” (Hoffman, 2011). The show did go to other places outside the US, it has been in 44 different countries and produced in 24 different languages but this will be discussed later. There were several National Tours. To end this story of *Rent*’s journey, the show is being revived and hopes to be opened in June of 2011. Many fans feel that it is too soon for a revival but it can be both good and bad. It gives actors work but what does it mean for innovation? (The Times, They, 2006, 4). Time will only tell.

*Part II: The Impact*

Many things from *Rent* came to have an impact on different levels and many things made it successful. The first of these reasons is the music. “The production is unique in that it does not adhere to the standards of a traditional Broadway musical” (Nogee, 2011, 2). Jonathan did the “near impossibly [*sic*] by successfully blending two [rock/pop and Broadway] without emasculating either, creating a kind of Broadway fusion rock that satisfied both audiences” (Miller, 2001, 190). With the music, the attitudes in the show are very much rock, even if some of the settings are not (Mordden, 2004). “Cast member Adam Pascal remarked that the musical… ‘doesn’t speak for a generation, it speaks to a generation’” (Nogee, 2011, 6). Music was such a large part of why this show worked both off-Broadway and Broadway. Salzman (2000) suggests that one of the reasons that *Rent* worked was that the music in the show has what pop music is, 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 Jonathan’s influences as well as his knowledge of musical theatre. There are influences of Sondheim, rock, soul, pop, and other styles (Steyn, 1997). Not only did the music bring in the younger generation but the singers who were singing did as well (Kanner, 2008). 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*, it was the characters. “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 finds something in any one of them. Jonathan 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 Jonathan’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). Jonathan based many of the character traits on him (subconsciously) and his friends. One of his ex-girlfriends said that Jonathan was a lot like Angel in many ways, romantic and loving (McDonnell and Silberger). While loosely based on characters in *La Bohem*é, Jonathan wrote only the traits of friends into them but rock stars as well. For example Maureen’s character was patterned after Liz Phair and Natalie Merchant; Roger after Kurt Cobian and Eddie Vedder. In Mark, Jonathan compared him to Bruce Springsteen, Paul Simon, and Michael Stipe, and finally for Mimi, Jonathan likened her to Sinead O’Connor (Titrington, 2007, 62). An additional reason that those who saw the show knows 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 that have died.

Another reason that *Rent* has become a success and influence on theatre culture is its plot. Now granted, because of Jonathan’s death, the plot and timeline do have some holes in them. However, the overall themes of the show are what make it such a powerful show. “*Rent* has become a means of rebelling vicariously, even for kids who are anything but rebels” (Clum, 1999, 273), which the youth who grew up on *Rent* see it as a way to rebel against their parent’s version of Broadway, including some theatre directors, refer to the “undergraduates who came of age during the Bill Clinton presidency as ‘The *Rent* Generation’ owing to their powerful identification with the show, its themes…” (Metzler, 2011, para. 5). Jonathan wanted *Rent* to be about live and living live to the fullness and it shows in the play. 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 Jonathan 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 you may have something wrong with you, that you can still meet the love of your 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). It is this last reason that I feel, so many people gravitate towards the show.

There are many other reasons the show has attracted so many people. One is that *Rent* is different than many musicals. It is not your typical “boy meets girl, they fall in love, tragedy strikes, and they over-come said tragedy and live happily ever after”. No, *Rent* takes the audience on a ride through love, death, drugs, poverty, homeless, and disease (Titrington, 2007). Another reason is that the show was a success was that the first two rows of seats could be bought for twenty dollars. *Rent* was the first show to do this and ever since then shows across Broadway have done lottery seats. It is one thing see to see the movie but “there’s a lot to be gained from taking a seat in the audience” (Expansive Ticket exact a price, 2007, 4). Lyricist Lyn Ahrens says that *Rent* “did not change Broadway dramatically” but “it did alter what people think a musical can be” (Hoffman, 2001). She also said that *Rent* “opened a door” (Hoffman, 2001) and open a door it did. It is hard to prove but without *Rent* smash musical hits like *Wicked*, *In the Heights*, *Spring Awakening*, *Next to Normal*, *Jekyll & Hyde*, and *The Scarlet Pimpernel* might not have happened (Miller, 2001). Not to mention, many of these shows had characters of different races and backgrounds and according to the Theatre League, this helps in diversifying audiences as well (Zoglin, 2008). As the documentary, *Rent: The Final Days on Broadway* starts, you see the young people walking into the theatre. It just shows that some of the things that Jonathan wanted for musical theatre did come true (Heyman and Bozymowski, 2008).

So why should not *Rent* been so successful? According to Miller (2001), *Rent* did not break totally new ground. It used stage, skill and a foundation that worked (192-193). Along with that, “this staging [Broadway], the obtrusive lip microphones, emphasizing that these are performers not characters, seem designed to pre-empt any discussion of the show’s deficiencies as drama” (Steyn, 1997, 209). Many had issues with the characters. Clum (1999) 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). 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.

The material is also an issue with *Rent*. Many people considered Jonathan’s views of the homeless “naïve and borderline offensive” (Miller, 2001, 190-191). Also, unfortunately for a variety of reason, most Broadway audiences do not want to see musicals about overtly sexual gays and lesbians or S&M dancers, drug addicts, drag queens, or performance artists. (Miller, 2001). People also questioned why the two main characters, Mark and Roger, are both white and straight, even though the rest of the cast is diverse (Miller, 2001). One more issue that people had with the show was the staging. The set of *Rent* is very non-traditional and there are only tables, chairs, a place for the band and junk sculpture (Miller, 2001) and that “director Michael Greif was criticized for his staging, which often looked random or even nonexistent” (Miller, 2001, 196).

The show should not have lasted for as long as it did. Ruth Nogee (2011) writes that because most of Jonathan’s material is from 1994 that it is no longer current and therefore not relevant (4). Steyn, (1997) also says that “Larson doesn’t produce a single original thought—on sex, AIDS, poverty, American capitalism” (209). In terms of the business side of the show, *Rent* did not change a whole lot. “Broadway continues to do robust business; total attendance climbed 2.7% last year, to a record high of 12.3 million. But the vast majority of hit musicals since *Rent* still earn their money the old-fashioned way: by catering to comfortably middlebrow, middle-aged audiences” (Zoglin, 2008, 66).

Looking at *Rent* around the world, it did not do well. One place that *Rent* did not do well as England. 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. Kenrick (2008) has similar thoughts and that the British people were “less susceptible to the poignant publicity surrounding the author’s death” (364). London was not the only place *Rent* did not work as well as expected, South Africa for example (Luitingh, 2008). 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”. It would be impossible to perform a show like *Miss Saigon*, updating it to modern times. The main problem is context but there is another problem with taking a show around the world. It is expansive. International presenters now may pay $200,000 in advance to stage a big U.S. production (Gamerman, 2010). For shows that deal with pop culture, like *Avenue Q* or *Rent*, “there’s the thorny question of conveying humor and pop culture references and trying to gauge what audiences will respond to in different cultures” (Gamerman, 2010).

*Rent* has “touched a nerve of a generation who may never have come to the theatre” (Barnatham, Columbus, and De Niro, 2005). The experiences of the fans, cast, and crew of *Rent* have affected many lives. Jay Wilkenson, a member of the last (at the time) Broadway cast, said that “anybody who sees the show and who does the show becomes a better person” (Heyman and Bozymowski, 2008) as well as cast mate Adam Kantor who said that “the show means so much to people” (Heyman and Bozymowski, 2008). Even one of the producers of *Rent* Jeffrey Sellers, said that he “gave *Rent* a lot but I also know how much it gave to me” (Heyman and Bozymowski, 2008). There are so many messages that cast and crew said, but it is also the fans that play a pivotal role in *Rent*.

Since it opened in 1996 on Broadway, thousands of fans and celebrities have left a message on walls, doors, and ceilings outside the Nederlander Theatre (Kelley, 2008). There was an alley that became known as “Autograph Alley” (Kelley, 2008). Fans became part of this when they would “stage door” and finally moved the messages out front. “The graffiti includes testimony to the life-changing powers of the show” (Kelley, 2008). Kevin McCullum, one of the producers of *Rent* says that the wall outside the theatre was a way to acknowledge the gift they had just received as well as have a shrine that paid tribute to the Loss of Jonathan. (Heyman and Bozymowski, 2008). There are messages of hope, love, loss, regret, and just simply “Thank you”. The manager of the lotto, Mr. Curry said that “I don’t think it would work on any other show. There’s a rebellious thing in the show” (Kelley, 2008). Sadly, as the next show moved into the Nederlander Theatre, the wall was painted over.

I asked a friend of mine, Tracey Knouff, who is 25, about her experiences with the show, specifically looking at how the show has changed her. When I asked her that question she told me:

I actually cannot think of a single thing that has changed my life in the way Rent has. I wouldn't have gone to New York City for that first time in 2006 if not for Rent, and I've gone back many times since then. I've traveled to different parts of the country in order to see this show on tour (I've seen Rent in a dozen different cities).

But what really made the difference for me are the friends that I've made through it. Often times, my family made me feel silly for being this invested in a show and going to the lengths I did to see it, but I had found my own group of friends who felt the way I did about the show. Going to a tour stop or a trip to NYC wasn't just about seeing Rent, it was about meeting with my friends (many of whom don't live especially close to me). Without this show, these are people I may have never met. Even now that the show has closed and we're not going to tour spots, and I haven't been to NYC in two years due to lack of funds, I'm still in contact with them. It went beyond just common interest in theatre. This show has been the foundation for many of my real life friendships (Knouff, 2011).

As the world moves forward at an ever increasing pace and with so many dangers lurking. *Rent* is a show that people can listen to and gleam a great deal from. This paper looked into the story of the show, its success, its pitfalls, and the experiences of the fans. Those who learn about the show and the tragic (and preventable) death of Jonathan, come to appreciate the show even more. Just weeks before he died, Jonathan wrote on his computer:

“In these dangerous times, where it seems the world is ripping apart at the seams, we can all learn how to survive from those who stare death squarely in the face every day and [we] should reach out to each other and bond as a community, rather than hide from the terrors of life at the end of the millennium” (Miller, 2001, 183)

The true legacy of *Rent* will be ever so hard to comprehend but the influence of the show has forever changed musical theater (Kramer, 2008) and as Allen Gordon put it, “it’s something that will hopefully keep generating inspiration for years to come” (Heyman and Bozymowski, 2008).

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