

A HISTORY AND ASSESSMENT OF JONATHAN LARSON'S *RENT*

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ABSTRACT

This project, a graduate research thesis, intends to provide information and analysis of Jonathan Larson's 1996 musical *Rent*. It covers the life and works of Jonathan Larson, the production history of *Rent*, *Rent*'s 1896 operatic predecessor *La Bohème*, and the environmental context in which *Rent* was created. Additionally it analyzes the artistic merits of Larson's *Rent* through the use of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The purpose of this thesis is to provide contextual information for future productions of *Rent*, as well as an argument for *Rent*'s continued production and significance to theatrical history.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the UMKC Conservatory have examined a thesis titled “A History and Assessment of Jonathan Larson’s *Rent*,” presented by Geran Ramet, candidate for the Master of Arts Degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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INTRODUCTION

In the world of theatre there are multiple ways to measure success. A theatrical work can be judged as successful based on the length of time that it runs on Broadway or the West End, it can be judged based on the reviews that analyzed each production, or it can be judged based on how the work stands the test of time. Each one of these measurements of success is valid and valuable in creating an impression of whether or not a show was successful. Success, however, does not necessarily mean that a piece of theatre is inherently good. They are measurements of what the reception to the piece was at the time and today.

The idea of “good” theatre is extremely subjective, and almost impossible to define. Despite this, there are different questions that can be asked to determine an audience member’s personal reaction to whether or not a performance was “good”. Did they understand the story that was being told? Was it a story that needed to be told? Did they identify with any of the characters that were portrayed onstage, and did the characters progress and change throughout the course of the production? Were those characters different from each other, and did each of the characters have a part to play in the telling of the story? What was the play talking about on a higher level? What was the playwright trying to say with the themes that they put in their play? Did the music help elevate the emotional impact of the story, and did the visual aspects help support the story that was being told? All of these questions are questions that an audience member can ask to help create their opinion of the quality of a performance, but the greatest question that they can ask is how the piece of theatre personally affected them. How did the play make the audience

member feel? The primary goal of a piece of theatre is to tell a story, and in telling that story create an emotional reaction with the members of the audience that the story is being told to. Those reactions are what the theatre-maker strives for, and through the different elements that are present in a theatrical production they strive to create those emotions and reactions.

Throughout the history of theatre there are plays that fulfill the qualifications that would create the idea that they were successful, but that does not necessarily mean that the production was good. There are also plays that fulfill the qualifications that would create the idea that the play was good; however, that does not necessarily mean that the production was successful. In rare moments throughout theatrical history there are plays that fulfill both of these categories, being both good and successful in the history of their production. One of these plays is Jonathan Larson's 1996 rock-musical *Rent*. *Rent* took the world by storm after its 1996 debut, revolutionizing the modern musical and the business of Broadway theatre. Larson used the styles of popular music to tell an updated version of Giacomo Puccini's opera *La Bohème* (1896), and in doing so drew in younger audiences and revitalized Broadway. The original Broadway production was both financially successful and critically acclaimed, winning numerous awards including the Tony Award for Best Musical, the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Musical, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. This is reflection of the quality of the play and the performance, as it answers all of the previous questions and passes the test of quality in a theatrical performance.

This thesis will explore what *Rent* is, how it was made, and why it can be considered a high-quality play. As a foundation for the claim that *Rent* is high quality, Aristotle's guidelines for exemplary theatre written in his book *Poetics* (c. 335 BC) will be used. Aristotle's guidelines for excellent theatre include evaluating the plot, characters, themes, diction, music, and spectacle, as well as the structure and definition of genre that Aristotle valued in the Greek period. It will explore the story of *Rent* and the story behind how it was made, as well as its operatic inspiration *La Bohème*. Additionally it will examine how these elements were influenced by the time period when *Rent* was created, and how these elements resonate with audiences. This will show that *Rent* is a musical that is worthy of study and production in the modern age.

Chapter 1: WHAT IS *RENT*?

Jonathan Larson

Jonathan Larson was born February 4, 1960, in White Plains, New York, and from a young age he was exposed to music and the performing arts. He played tuba in his high school marching band, took formal piano lessons, and starred in White Plains High School productions such as *Fiddler on the Roof*. When later asked about who his favorite composers were he said, “Well, I loved Pete Townshend [of The Who] growing up, and I loved the old Police and Prince...he’s brilliant. I love Kurt Cobain [of Nirvana] and Liz Phair. Beatles. And in the theatre—Leonard Bernstein, Sondheim. I absolutely love them” (Istel).

After graduating from high school Larson received a four-year scholarship to Adelphi University in Garden City, New York, where he pursued acting and began composing music. Larson acted in numerous productions during his time at Adelphi, as well as composed music for student productions and the score for a musical adaptation of a Spanish epic poem titled *El Libro de Buen Amor* (1300), which was written by his mentor Jacques Burdick in 1973 (Herrington, p. 212). “[Larson] could notate his own music expertly, but he never considered himself a musician. “I am a songwriter,” he would say proudly, the term of choice for the likes of Porter, Berlin and Styne” (Tommasini). During this time Larson also came into contact with his idol Stephen Sondheim, with Larson occasionally sending Sondheim samples of his work for criticism and review. Sondheim became a strong supporter of Larson, writing multiple letters of recommendation for Larson to producers for many years.

Larson received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Adelphi in 1982, and then participated as a piano player for the summer stock program at The Barn Theatre in Augusta, Michigan. This allowed him to become a member of Actors' Equity Association, after which he moved to New York City, New York. His New York home was a loft in Lower Manhattan that lacked heat, a buzzer, and had a bathtub in the kitchen. This is where Larson would live until his death. He also worked as a waiter at the Moondance Diner for nine and a half years, working there on the weekends while he worked on composition and songwriting during the weekdays. Larson lived in near poverty, but he was happy.

Larson's New York career began with a futuristic rock musical called *Superbia* (1989) that mirrored the style and themes of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Larson originally intended *Superbia* to be a direct adaptation of Orwell's novel, but Orwell's estate did not grant him the permission to use it. *Superbia* was never fully produced, and the situation served as one of Larson's inspirations for the musical that would eventually be called *tick, tick... BOOM!* (1991). Originally envisioned as a "rock monologue" and later turned into a stage musical, *tick, tick... BOOM!* dealt with Larson's disappointment with the response that he received from *Superbia* and his feelings on aging and lack of success.

Playwright Billy Aronson, who wanted to write a musical version of Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*, came up with the original idea for *Rent*. He believed that Puccini's opera dealt with themes and characters that were still relevant for the modern era, and that those areas could be accentuated by placing the action in modern-day New York City. In 1989 Aronson was connected with Larson, who

created the title and changed the district location from the Upper West Side to downtown New York City. This would later be changed to Alphabet City in the East Village. Larson was thrilled with the idea and immediately envisioned what would become his masterpiece. Larson's concept for *Rent* then became "*Hair* for the 90's," and he wanted "to bring musical theater to the MTV generation" (Tommasini).

I [Larson] found different types of contemporary music for each character, so the hero [Roger] in *Rent* sings in a Kurt Cobain–esque style and the street transvestite sings like De La Soul. And there's a Tom Waits–esque character. The American musical has always been taking contemporary music and using it to tell a story. So I'm just trying to do that. We made a demo tape and everyone loved the concepts, loved the music—but when they read the accompanying libretto, they weren't too strong on it. So we just put it on hold. I loved the concept, but I didn't have a burning reason to go back to it. And then I did. Two years later a number of my friends, men and women, were finding out they were HIV-positive. I was devastated, and needed to do something. I decided to ask Billy if he would let me continue by myself, and he was very cool about it (Istel).

They agreed that if the show were to move to Broadway, Aronson would get credit for the original idea and some of the lyrics that they wrote together, as well as receiving a share in the proceeds. Larson's personal situations and connections directly influenced the writing and composing of what would become *Rent*. Many of the situations that plague the characters Mark and Roger are the same that plagued Larson. *Rent* also became Larson's response to the AIDS epidemic, as three of his

friends had died from the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, and one of his best friends from childhood was living with it at the time. Much of his anger at the situation was reflected in *tick, tick... BOOM!* but *Rent* was where he truly dealt with the reality of AIDS in an artistic and poetic manner.

By 1992 Larson was ready for *Rent* to be considered for workshops and future productions, working with James Nicola, artistic director of the New York Theater Workshop (NYTW). "What drew Jonathan and me together in a philosophical place was the belief in how tragic it was that pop music and theater music had gotten a divorce," Mr. Nicola said. "I felt he was the first composer I had run into who had the possibility of doing something about it" (Tommasini). Together they staged the first reading of *Rent* in March 1993, which didn't necessarily go as well as Larson might have hoped. While it was agreed by those that attended that the songs were the highlight of the production, it was also agreed that the plot and structure needed work. The first act was much longer than the second, despite the second act taking place over a longer period of time. This is still the case in the finished product, but the time difference has been significantly reduced. The workshop had promise however, and the problems of the workshop began to be addressed when Nicola hired director Michael Greif to help direct.

With the help of Greif, Larson was able to refine the story and structure of *Rent* so that it could be potentially produced. The first step for Larson was submitting his tapes and script for *Rent* for consideration to try and receive a Richard Rodgers Studio Production Award, which came with \$45,000. The chairman of the jury who would decide who received the award was Stephen Sondheim, a long

time admirer of Larson's work as well as his mentor. Larson received the award, which was used to finance a workshop presentation of *Rent*, the next step after the staged reading on the road to a full production. The workshop ran for three weeks in 1994, with a cast that included Anthony Rapp and Daphne Rubin-Vega, who would perform the roles of Mark and Mimi respectively from the workshop through to Broadway. The workshop helped Larson and the company determine what needed to change and what was still unclear. This resulted in some songs getting cut or changed, a process lasting from 1994 to 1996. In this time period the production garnered what would become the original Broadway cast of *Rent* and everything was set for an Off-Broadway preview on January 25, 1996.

However, Jonathan Larson would not live to see that evening. The morning of January 25, Larson died in his home from an aortic dissection, later believed to be caused by an undiagnosed case of Marfan syndrome. Larson had suffered some chest pains and dizziness, but when he went to see doctors they were not able to find anything out of the ordinary. They believed that his symptoms were caused by the stress of the opening of *Rent*; however, they were wrong. It was later discovered that if Larson had been properly diagnosed it would have been likely that Larson would have been able to be saved.

The preview that was scheduled for that day still happened. The company decided that it would best serve Larson's memory to perform it, although performed as more of a staged reading and sing-through as opposed to the full production. However, upon reaching the first-act finale, the energy of the song inspired the company to continue the performance as originally directed and as a full production.

Rent sold out its Off-Broadway run and moved to the Nederlander Theatre on Broadway April 29, 1996. *Rent* would become the eleventh-longest running production on Broadway, and the tenth musical as of March of 2020 with 5,123 performances from 1996 to 2008 when it closed. It won four Tony Awards including Best Musical, 6 Drama Desk Awards including Outstanding Musical, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

After Larson's death his family started the Jonathan Larson Performing Arts Foundation to assist up-and-coming artists monetarily, eventually creating the Jonathan Larson Grant. His work and notes were given to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and *Rent* has been performed in over 45 countries and 25 languages around the world. A film version of *Rent* was created in 2005 with much of the original cast, and other notable productions include the Hollywood Bowl starring Aaron Tveit as Roger and Neil Patrick Harris directing, and Fox's *Rent Live!* which was intended to be a live performance that would be broadcast to televisions across the country. From 1996 until today *Rent* has been Jonathan Larson's legacy, and his legacy is still intact.

Plot Summary

The musical *Rent* (1996), sometimes referred to as a "rock opera", is a story about a group of bohemian artists and friends struggling to get by in a world not designed for their artistic minds. The audience follows the lives of eight primary characters in their struggles to come to terms with mortality and disease, as well as artistic freedom and dreams. Mark serves as the narrator for the musical, often

breaking the fourth wall and talking directly to the audience, which is justified by his occupation of being a filmmaker.

Mark is attempting to create a documentary about the lives of people considered to be ordinary and living in poverty to discover their dreams and endeavors. Throughout the musical he is seen filming different sections of key moments, and at the end the audience gets to see the product of his work in the final number. Mark is roommates with Roger, a songwriter who has been diagnosed with Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), in a loft apartment in New York City with no heat.

Roger, a former singer and musician in a rock band, wants to write one last song to be his mark upon the world before he dies. During the course of the musical he meets and eventually falls in love with Mimi, a burlesque dancer who also has AIDS as well as an addiction to drugs. Mimi desires to live her life to the fullest, aiming to experience as many pleasures and sensations that she can before she dies of AIDS. Her diagnosis is not initially revealed to the audience or to Roger, as it happens onstage towards the end of the first act.

Separately there is the story of Tom Collins and Angel, both with AIDS. Collins is a former roommate of Mark and Roger who left to teach Computer Age Philosophy at MIT. He is described by Mark as an “anarchist that once ran naked through the Parthenon” (Larson, pg. 14). This is shown in bits and pieces throughout the musical. Collins is paired with Angel, a drag queen who is known to bring out the best in everyone around him. The character uses different gender pronouns depending on whether he/she is in drag or not, so the Angel’s personal

pronoun will either change depending on what part of the story is being described or will be referred to by the pronoun “they”. Angel changes in and out of drag periodically throughout the action of the play, the detail of which will be described later.

Additional characters are Maureen, Joanne, and Benny. Benny is Mark and Roger’s ex-roommate who now owns their building and is attempting to clear out a community of homeless people next door in order to build a cyber-studio. Maureen is a performance artist; she is Joanne’s girlfriend and Mark’s ex-girlfriend who is protesting this eviction as her performance space is a part of the lot that is going to be made into the studio. She is a womanizer who consistently cheats on her partners and uses her sexuality to get what she wants from people. Maureen’s girlfriend is Joanne, a lawyer who tries to curb Maureen’s nature and tries to get her to be true to one person as opposed to many. During the course of the play Joanne becomes friends with Mark, having bonded over their shared experiences of dating Maureen.

The story begins on Christmas Eve with Mark setting the stage, describing himself, Roger, and their environment to the backdrop of filming his documentary (“Tune Up #1). They are soon almost visited by Collins, who is returning from MIT to teach at NYU, but he is mugged before they have a chance to reunite. Benny then calls to demand rent from Mark and Roger, despite having allegedly agreed to let the two live there for free, since they had previously been roommates together (“Tune Up #2). The group of artists reviles Benny because he married into a wealthy family and is now the person who is in charge of their building as opposed to being their friend. At the same time Joanne is preparing for one of Maureen’s performances

protesting the eviction of the homeless people in the lot next to Mark and Roger's. As she is a lawyer, she does not understand all of the technical aspects involved with setting up a stage, so Maureen calls Mark to help ("Rent"). Collins then meets Angel and they form a connection over their shared AIDS diagnosis, and Angel helps Collins dress the wounds that Collins received during his mugging ("You Okay Honey?"). Mark then goes to look for Collins, leaving Roger alone to write his song ("One Song Glory"). Roger is interrupted however by Mimi, who is interested in Roger upon learning that he is single. However Roger, being clean from drugs for approximately half of a year, does not approve of Mimi's drug use and rejects her ("Light My Candle"). Collins and Angel then meet up with Mark and Roger at their apartment ("Today 4 U"), where they also meet Benny who tries to persuade them to stop Maureen's protest in exchange for allowing them to live in their apartment for free. The group refuses, and splits up so that Mark can help Joanne with the protest, while Collins and Angel go to a life-support meeting for people dealing with AIDS, leaving Rogers alone again ("You'll See").

Mark and Joanne meet at the performance site and bond over both having dated Maureen and both knowing her promiscuous behavior ("Tango: Maureen"), while Mimi tries to seduce Roger again and is rejected ("Another Day"). After the life-support meeting, Collins and Angel fall in love and decide to be together ("I'll Cover You"), bonding over a dream of moving out of New York to open a restaurant in Santa Fe ("Santa Fe"). Roger then finds Mimi and apologizes for his behavior, realizing that he has to start living life as opposed to sitting around waiting to die; he invites her to a dinner party that the group is having after Maureen's

performance (“Christmas Bells”). Maureen has her performance (“Over the Moon”), then the entire group meets for dinner afterwards where they confront Benny for his role in the eviction of the homeless people. They then celebrate the life of the bohemian (“La Vie Bohème A”), while Roger and Mimi bond over the newly discovered revelation to each other that they both have AIDS (“I Should Tell You”). Joanne breaks up with Maureen due to Maureen’s cheating and there is a riot at the performance space due to Benny calling the police to move them out of the lot (“La Vie Bohème B”). This ends the first act.

The second act begins with the group trying to break into Mark and Roger’s apartment on New Years Eve, as Benny has padlocked the door. They succeed in breaking in, but Benny meets them there to try and make amends allegedly using Mimi as the inspiration due to a past relationship between the two of them, which causes Roger to become jealous (“Happy New Year”). The second act takes place over the course of a year as opposed to the single night that the first act took place over. Maureen and Joanne get back together then separate again (“Take Me or Leave Me”), and Mimi continues to use drugs behind Roger’s back (“Without You”). Additionally Angel’s health starts to deteriorate, eventually leading to his death (“I’ll Cover You (Reprise)”). Roger decides to leave New York after Angel’s funeral, leaving Mimi with Benny as her health starts to deteriorate. Mark takes a corporate job working for a tabloid news station, and Maureen and Joanne get back together again (“Goodbye Love”). Roger eventually returns to New York and Mark quits his job due to the lack of artistic liberty and freedom (“What You Own”). Mark finishes his film by Christmas Eve of the next year, and Collins returns after having gone

away to deal with Angel's death. Maureen and Joanne then find Mimi who is dying and bring her to the apartment ("Finale A"), where Roger gets to sing her the song that he has been writing before she apparently dies ("Your Eyes"). She returns to life, however, and the musical ends with Mark presenting his film of the artistic lifestyle and the power of friendship ("Finale B").

La Bohème

The story of *Rent* is based upon both the opera *La Bohème* (1896), composed by Giacomo Puccini with a libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, and the source material for *La Bohème: Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851) by Henri Murger. While *Scènes de la vie de bohème* is a collection of stories about the life of people following the artistic and Bohemian lifestyle, *La Bohème* creates the plot and characters that serve as the basis for the story that *Rent* tells. Characters, themes, and some plot points remain the same between the opera and the musical, such as the character Mimi and the scene in which she meets Roger and asks for him to "light my candle" (Larson, pg. 11). That scene is also present in the opera, being the first scene that Mimi and Roger's equivalent character, Rodolfo, have together. While the Mimi in Puccini's opera is not a stripper with AIDs and a drug addiction, there are similarities in plot points between the two characters. Mimi may not have AIDS in the opera, but she does have what is believed to be tuberculosis. Both of the Mimis fall in love with artists who express themselves with words, Roger being a songwriter and Rodolfo being a playwright, and both have near-death experiences due to their diseases. The key difference between the opera and the musical lies in the distinction between death and near death. In *Rent* Mimi does not die in the end,

she comes back to life and the audience is given a happy ending. However, this is not the case in *La Bohème*. In *La Bohème* Mimi dies, giving the opera a much more morose feeling at the end as opposed to the positive feelings that the audience can have at the end of *Rent*.

Another difference between the opera and the musical is the relationship between the characters of Marcello and Musetta as opposed to the relationships between Mark, Maureen, and Joanne. Marcello represents Mark, and Musetta represents Maureen, and in the opera Marcello and Musetta are involved with each other, in comparison to *Rent* in which the relationship between Mark and Maureen is already over and the relationship that Maureen is cultivating is that between her and Joanne, a character that is not present in the opera. The relationship that Maureen and Joanne have, however, is very similar to the relationship that Marcello and Musetta have, only with the genders changed. Both Joanne and Marcello deal with Musetta's flirtatious nature and the questions of faithfulness, only in the opera the relationship between Marcello and Musetta is not so explicitly defined. Maureen's inability to remain faithful to one person is more of a breach of trust than Musetta's because Maureen and Joanne are officially together. They have pledged only to see each other, and the breaking of that pledge serves as the basis for that storyline. In the opera, the nature of Marcello and Musetta's relationship is less explicit in their exclusivity. There is nothing in the opera that says that they are exclusive together or that Musetta's flirtatious nature breaks that promise. It is more implied that Marcello is one of Musetta's many admirers, but he is the one that

she is most partial to. This does not serve as a major plot point in the opera though, which spends more time on the relationship between Rudolfo and Mimi.

Another key difference between the opera and the musical is the importance of characters that are not the four key characters. Characters that are key figures in *Rent* -- such as Collins, Angel, and Benny -- are supporting and side characters in *La Bohème* with very little impact on the overall story that is being told. *Rent* would not be the emotional powerhouse of a musical that it is without the story of Collins and Angel, with Angel's death serving as a pivotal moment in the entire story. The characters are present in the opera, but are reduced to a couple of lines or a scene at best. The most significant of these scenes is the scene in which the character representing Benny comes to collect the rent, which is very similar to the scene in the musical where Benny comes to do the same. However, the difference is that the landlord has no real connection to the group of artists and does not have dreams that relate to the group. He is simply there to collect the rent.

La Bohème has a more straightforward plot, as opposed to the many facets and storylines that are contained within *Rent*, which is even clear by comparison of their average runtimes. *La Bohème* generally is a two-hour opera, compared to *Rent* being approximately two and a half hours. Despite this seemingly insignificant time difference there is a great amount of material that *Rent* is able to create as opposed to *La Bohème* due to its pacing and ambition. There are entire significant plot points and character arcs that are not present in the musical: such as Collins' mugging, Mareen's protest regarding the homeless people, Benny's relationship with Mimi, and Roger's diagnosis of AIDS. While there is obvious inspiration and adaptation in

regard to *La Bohème's* influence on *Rent*, *Rent* is a completely different and unique experience and piece of art based upon storylines and intricacies that are not present in the opera.

In both works there are shared themes that permeate the plot and characters. The first theme is the theme of trying to survive as an artist in a world that puts more value into tangible things as opposed to art and words. Even though the profession of each character is different, the overarching feeling of being artists remains. Despite the fact that Roger is a songwriter and Rudolfo is a playwright, or Mark is a filmmaker and Marcello is a painter; they all share common issues and problems of the artistically minded. They all have to deal with the lack of financial security that comes with being an artist. Both pairs of individuals have no money due to not being able to monetize their work, as well as feeling that their work doesn't need to be monetized in order to have value. They also despise the idea of having jobs that don't explore their artistic mindsets and abilities, preferring to live in poverty over taking part in careers that they have no interest in. This is a theme that is discussed and shown at length, especially in *Rent*. From the titular track to the song "What You Own" in the second act, *Rent* discusses the value of being true to the artists that they are despite other forces telling them that it is impossible to maintain their lifestyles without giving in. Mark takes a job as a tabloid news reporter and hates every minute of it, eventually quitting due to the lack of artistic value that the current projects that he is working on have. The perseverance and stubbornness of the artists is the crutch that *Rent* leans on to drive its plot forward.

An additional theme that is shared between *La Bohème* and *Rent* is the theme of sickness and disease. Both pieces have storylines that are centered around characters that are afflicted with disease, and the plot revolves around the development of those diseases and the reactions of the other characters around them. Mimi in the opera has what is believed to be tuberculosis, while Mimi in the musical as well as Roger, Collins, and Angel all have AIDS. While *Rent* may have increased the number of characters that are afflicted with disease, the theme of disease is just as important for both pieces. One of the reasons that Rodolfo spurns Mimi is because he perceives her to be weak from her disease and does not want to watch her condition deteriorate. This eventually does happen and leads to her death, a line that *Rent* chooses not to cross. Instead *Rent* kills Angel, a supporting character whose death is almost equal in importance to the plot as Mimi's death in *La Bohème*. Angel's death is a key moment of character development for every main character in the production, creating grief and tension as well as bringing other problems to the forefront in songs like "Halloween" and "Goodbye Love." In *Rent* the theme of disease cannot be described better than Mimi's last line in "Goodbye Love": "Goodbye love, hello disease" (Larson, pg. 66). This shows that disease has taken over the body and soul of Mimi, destroying her ability to love based on her apparent weakness due to her disease. While in the opera it is not as overtly spoken, these themes are also present in the way that Rodolfo talks about Mimi in the third act, before he realizes that she has overheard everything that he had been saying.

The theme of disease is present throughout the duration of *Rent*, with the overarching knowledge of AIDS getting in the way of Roger and Mimi's relationship,

as well as being present in the ensemble with songs like “Life Support” and “Will I” covering both positive and negative feelings in regards to living with disease. From “Life Support:” “There’s only us. There’s only this... Forget regret or life is yours to miss. No other road. No other way. No day but today” (Larson, pgs. 21-22). This shows the more positive outlook that some of the characters such as Collins and Angel try to have in regard to their illness. However, this is overshadowed by the reality of impending death, shown in “Will I”, with the company singing “Will I lose my dignity, will someone care? Will I wake tomorrow from this nightmare?” (Larson, pg. 25). The more positive outlook on the disease is not present in *La Bohème*, which keeps the action focused on the negativity surrounding disease and the inevitability of losing someone to disease. There is where a key difference between the two lie, culminating in the decision to make Mimi in *Rent* live as opposed to the Mimi in *La Bohème* who dies. In *Rent*, Jonathan Larson is talking about learning to live through hardships and disease, while Puccini is talking about the grief that is involved with losing someone in this way.

While both pieces have similar characters, plot, and themes; the way that each piece goes about conveying those aspects is radically different. While the opera tends to focus on a handful of characters and takes a more pessimistic view in regard to the theme of disease, *Rent* expands the number of characters that are present as well as gives a more hopeful tone to the ending and overall action of the piece. This allows *Rent* to impact its viewers in a more positive manner and to give them hope towards the future as opposed to the pessimistic outlook on disease that is held by *La Bohème*. This is shown most clearly when the company of *Rent* sings in

“La Vie Bohème B,” “to people living with...not dying from disease” (Larson, pg. 45). This shows the attitude that *Rent* has towards people with AIDS is in contrast to *La Bohème’s* seeming viewpoint that there is nothing to be done after a diagnosis and that is the end of life.

Production History

Rent has had a long lifespan around the world, with productions taking place in over 45 countries and translated into 25 languages in its lifetime so far. The earliest that *Rent* can be traced is the first staged reading at the 150-seat New York Theatre Workshop in March 1993. That reading led to a workshop the following year from October 27 to November 6, 1994, which was then turned into a full production running from January 26 to March 31, 1996. The original cast members for this run included Anthony Rapp as Mark, Adam Pascal as Roger, Daphne Rubin-Vega as Mimi, Jesse L. Martin as Collins, Wilson Jermaine Heredia as Angel, Idina Menzel as Maureen, Fredi Walker as Joanne, and Taye Diggs as Benny. Due to *Rent’s* enormous popularity the production was moved to the 1,232-seat Nederlander Theatre, with previews beginning April 16 and opening on April 29, 1996. Most of the cast for the Off-Broadway production moved to Broadway with the show.

On Broadway, *Rent* was able to maintain the momentum that had been built with the New York Theatre Workshop production, selling out every performance for the first 113 weeks of its Broadway engagement. The production was also financially successful, grossing \$456,244 in its first week of previews with an average ticket price of \$49.90, and grossing \$274,248,128 over the span of the 12 years that it was open (“Production Gross”). While most of the tickets for *Rent* were

sold conventionally there were a number of front-row tickets for every performance that were not sold to the general public. These tickets were held and sold in a lottery fashion the day of the performance. Prospective audience members would stand in line outside the theatre, often overnight, to buy a “lottery ticket” at a price significantly reduced compared to the average cost of tickets. Before the performance, the box office would draw lottery numbers, and the individuals who had drawn that number on their lottery ticket were able to get front-row seats for a heavily discounted price. This idea helped create a lottery-style system that exists for some productions and some theaters to this day. The production closed September 7, 2008 with 5,123 performances, making it currently the 11th longest-running show on Broadway and the 10th longest running musical (“Longest-Running Shows on Broadway”).

Other notable productions of *Rent* in the United States include the Reunion Concert in 2006, the Hollywood Bowl in 2010, the Off-Broadway production in 2011, and the FOX Live Televised Production *Rent: Live* in 2019. Taking place while the Broadway production was still open, on April 24, 2006 the original Broadway cast reunited at the Nederlander Theatre for a one-night engagement where they performed *Rent* for charity. The production raised over 2 million dollars for the Jonathan Larson Performing Arts Foundation, Friends In Deed and New York Theatre Workshop. Former cast members from throughout the years later came onto the stage to perform the song “Seasons of Love” at the finale of the production, celebrating the 10-year anniversary of the musical. A similar type of production took place in Los Angeles, California from August 6 to August 8, 2010, at the 17,500-

seat Hollywood Bowl. This production's strength and marketing came from the star power of the people involved; with Neil Patrick Harris directing, Skylar Astin playing Mark, Aaron Tveit as Roger, Vanessa Hudgens as Mimi, Wayne Brady as Collins, and Tracie Thoms as Joanne. This did not save the production from sound and lighting malfunctions however, as well as the difficulty of staging the musical in a venue designed for concerts (McNulty).

Later on August 11, 2011, with previews starting July 14, 2011, *Rent* was revived Off-Broadway at the 500-seat New World Stages Stage I Theater. However, that production would not be the runaway success that its predecessor was, as it ran for only a year, closing September 9, 2012. While the script did not change for this production, the direction and staging of the production were completely different from its predecessor Off-Broadway and on Broadway, despite having the same director Michael Grief. Ben Brantley of the New York Times stated as part of his review that, "this "Rent" feels neither close enough to nor different enough from the original to warrant revisiting. It is visually busier than its prototype, with jittery new choreography (by Larry Keigwin) and slapdash mood-and place-defining projections (by Peter Nigrini). It also ... sounds both louder and less coherent than it did before, with the careful contrapuntal strains of Larson's score sometimes collapsing into one dissonant blur" (Brantley). Cast members for this production included Adam Chanler-Berat as Mark, Nicholas Christopher as Collins, MJ Rodriguez as Angel, and Annaleigh Ashford as Maureen.

The latest notable production of *Rent* was the FOX Live Televised Production *Rent: Live* that took place on January 27, 2019. This was supposed to be a

production that took place with a studio audience at Fox Studios that would be broadcast live on the FOX network throughout the country. However, during the final dress rehearsal the actor playing Roger, Brennin Hunt, broke his foot. The production was restaged to adjust for Hunt performing in a wheelchair, but FOX made the decision to air footage of the dress rehearsal the night before at the appointed time of the production. The studio audience was able to see the production live, but television audiences were only able to see the final 15 minutes of the production and the encore finale that featured the original Broadway cast live. As such, the performance that was aired on the television network was not fully polished and the camerawork was not intended to be the finished product. Aisha Harris asks for her New York Times review: “How do you measure three hours of chaotic visuals and middling audio most of us were never meant to hear?” (Harris). Despite these setbacks the performances of the cast were generally favorably received, with many audience members wishing that they had been able to see a more polished performance that was not marred with injury. Other notable cast members for this production were Jordan Fisher as Mark, Tinashe as Mimi, Vanessa Hudgens as Maureen, and Mario as Benny.

From its appearance on the Broadway stage to the present day, *Rent* has had numerous tours throughout the years. The first of these tours was known as the “Angel Tour” and ran from November 5, 1996 to September 5, 1999, starting in Boston, Massachusetts and ending in San Francisco, California. The Angel Tour had 13 stops across the country with an average of approximately 77 days per stop at an average seat capacity of 2,000. Members of the Angel cast included Luther Creek as

Mark, Carrie Hamilton as Maureen, and Kristoffer Cusick as Angel. Additionally members of the original Broadway cast joined the tour for select dates, with Anthony Rapp reprising his role as Mark during the Chicago stop, and Daphne Rubin-Vega reprising her role as Mimi during the Los Angeles stop. (*Rent Tour: Angel*).

Simultaneously there was a second touring production of *Rent* called the “Benny Tour” that ran from July 1, 1997, to July 15, 2001, starting in La Jolla, California and ending in San Francisco, California. While the Angel Tour focused on prolonged engagements in larger theaters, the Benny Tour moved more often and focused on smaller theaters across the country. To compare the two tours that happened almost simultaneously: the Angel Tour had 13 stops over a time period of 34 months, as opposed to the Benny Tour that had 128 stops in 46 months. The Benny Tour generally alternated between 6-day and 13-day engagements with a select few exceptions, and took place in theaters that ranged from approximately 1,500 seats to 4,500 seats in size. Aside from the scope of this tour, the Benny Tour is also notable for being the tour that starred Neil Patrick Harris as Mark. Harris would later go on to direct *Rent* at the Hollywood Bowl, as mentioned earlier. Other notable actors on this tour include Wilson Cruz as Angel, and D’Monroe as Benny. (*Rent Tour: Benny*).

Various tours of *Rent* took place throughout the country from 2001 to 2008, with cast members including Aaron Tveit (who would later play Roger in the Hollywood Bowl production), Ava Gaudet, Declan Bennett, Rebecca Naomi Jones, Constantine Maroulis, Dan Rosenbaum, Heinz Winckler, Anwar Robinson, Christine

Dwyer and Karen Olivio. The next individual tour of note was the national tour that came to be known as the Mark Tour that took place from January 06, 2009 in Cleveland, Ohio to February 07, 2010 in Sacramento, California. This tour had 37 stops that continued the trend of either 6 or 13-day engagements in similar theater sizes as the Benny Tour. Another notable aspect of this production was its cast, which included original Broadway actors Adam Pascal as Roger, Anthony Rapp as Mark, and Gwen Stewart as the “Seasons of Love” soloist. It also included Michael McElroy as Collins, the same role that he played on the closing night of the production’s original Broadway run (*Rent Tour: Mark*). The most recent touring production of *Rent* is the 20th-anniversary non-Equity production that began in Dallas, Texas on September 20, 2016, and is scheduled to close May 10, 2020, in San Diego, California (“Rent Touring - Tickets and Discounts.”).

Lynn Thomson Lawsuit and Sarah Schulman

In July 1997 a question of authorship arose in the form of a lawsuit against the Larson Estate. Lynn Thomson was a dramaturg for *Rent* during the time period preceding the Off-Broadway production. She was hired by the New York Theatre Workshop to assist Jonathan Larson in clarifying points in the script that were not clear, as well as editing for conciseness. Thomson alleged that she “collaborated with Larson on 9 percent of the lyrics and 48 percent of the recitative-style libretto” (Lefkowitz). If this statement were true, she would have been entitled to significantly more compensation than she received and the ability to alter any future production of *Rent* by withholding her sections of the script from being able to be performed. Thomson believed that her contributions to *Rent* entitled her to co-

author status, a status worth close to \$250 million according to court papers (McKinley). At the time of the trial Thomson had been paid approximately \$10,000 for her contributions, with her initial contract with the New York Theatre Workshop being for \$2,000.

During the process of the trial it was made clear that Jonathan Larson had never indicated in any form that there were any co-authors for *Rent*. In many cases and instances he had stated that he was the sole author, and that *Rent* was his creation. The only exception to that position was Billy Aronson, who came up with the original concept and assisted with additional lyrics. Aronson is credited as such in the programs of *Rent*, while Thomson is credited as dramaturg. The role of a dramaturg is a complicated one, as a dramaturg is a multi-faceted position that is difficult to define. Generally a dramaturg assists the playwright with confusing or out of place sections of the play and provides feedback to help create a clearer vision. At times the dramaturg gives notes to actors (although this is rare), collaborates with the director, and provides overall guidance and assistance to the production. This does not include the title of co-author. To paraphrase the argument of the court, if an author of a novel sends a manuscript to his or her editor and the editor makes minor changes, that editor is not entitled to co-author status. A similar view was taken in the court case. Additionally Thomson was unable to recall specific lyrics that she wrote that were present in the finished script of *Rent*. Thomson lost the court case, but after an appeal the matter was settled out of court (United States Court of Appeals).

Additionally there was an additional question of authorship that regarded author Sarah Schulman. In 1984 Schulman wrote a novel entitled *People in Trouble*, which shared many of the same themes and character types as *Rent*. As summarized by a writer for the Chicago Tribune, “A self-involved East Village performance artist dumps her male lover for a lesbian social activist, leaving the guy in a funk, and creates a performance piece that targets an avaricious landlord and causes a riot. All around them, people are dying of AIDS and neglect. Their best buds, a gay male couple in which one of the guys is HIV positive, is eventually consumed by the disease. His death adds new meaning to the lives of the survivors, who are redeemed by love” (Obejas). Schulman was not aware of Larson or *Rent* until she later went to review *Rent* for The New York Press, and “didn't see the similarities with her own work until it was pointed out to her by a friend” (Obejas). A colleague of Schulman's, Michael Korie, had also said that Larson was aware of Schulman's work, although he does not go so far as to say that Larson plagiarized it. He believed that while Larson had probably read *People in Trouble* and taken some inspiration from it, someone cannot plagiarize an idea. The names of the characters were different as well as the setting, and *Rent* had too many autobiographical elements for it to be truly plagiarized. As such, Schulman never pursued legal action. Instead she wrote a critique of modern theatre entitled, *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America* where “she argues that *Rent* is emblematic of a broader trend in queer narratives being appropriated, capitalized upon, and sanitized by straight white America” (Romano). Attorneys and representatives of the Larson

estate alleged that they had no knowledge of Schulman, and the conflict essentially died with *Stagestruck*.

Criticism

While the purpose of this thesis is to argue the merits of *Rent*, it is necessary to acknowledge the criticism that exists in regards to Larson's plot and treatment of gay culture and the AIDS epidemic. It has been noted throughout the history of criticism of *Rent* that one of its main drawbacks is the plot, which some people view to be overly complicated or messy. In the first review in the New York Times for the production at the New York Theatre Workshop it was said, "I think "Rent" is a lot of things: brash, brilliant, sweet, canny and messy for starters. Messy enough to make you crazy at times (too long on plot, too short on musical resources), and rich enough (it has passion, principles and daring) to send you home believing you've experienced something like a catharsis" (Jefferson). It seemed that while the score and ambition of the piece were things to be applauded, at times some people believed that there were too many things happening at the same time. Some people also thought that the themes and style of *Rent* was shallow, flitting from one genre to another in order to appeal to as many people as it could. A later review for The Tech at MIT said,

Rent's main weakness is that it tries too hard to be too many things. *Hair* and *La Boheme* are just for starters; *Rent* is first and foremost Larson's attempt to portray the counter-culture of his peers in East Village. The result is a multi-cultural, multi-racial, and multi-sexual blend (hetero, homo, bi, and trans all

fit in nicely), with enough anti-establishment sentiments, AIDS, and drugs to give it the necessary doomsday feel.

Even the score is careful in not leaving out any trends. There are songs to all contemporary beats, be it rock, funk, soul, or gospel. Again, much of the material sounds familiar. And that's not to deny the existence of a few catchy melodies like "Seasons of Love" and "Will I?," but from a musical point of view the tunes are hardly original. In the end, this ambitious cocktail of social misery and youthful strive becomes a cliché-ridden and bland musical, romanticizing the life-style of present-day Manhattan bohemia.

While the story is both shallow and inflated, the way it's told is remarkably brisk. And it's precisely the explosive energy of the production that is its biggest selling point. *Rent* is the first musical for the MTV generation, and it's a truly post-modern ride: fast-paced, loud, and furious (Oliveczky).

Another point of criticism that exists for *Rent* is the treatment of gay culture and the AIDS epidemic of the late 1980s and 1990s. Larson was personally influenced by the AIDS epidemic, with many of his friends having AIDS and some of them dying from it. However some people believed that Larson's portrayal of the gay community, especially in relation to the straight community, in regards to the AIDS epidemic was not entirely truthful. One criticism that was stated was that in framing the plot primarily through the eyes of Mark, a straight character that does not have AIDS, and Roger, a straight character that does have AIDS, it incorrectly portrays the impact of AIDS in both the gay and straight communities. "'In `Rent' -- straight people are the heroes of the AIDS crisis, which is just not true," says [Sarah]

Schulman, who was a member of ACT UP, the AIDS activist group, for seven years. "In `Rent,' straight people never have to deal with the guilt of having abandoned gay people during the AIDS crisis"" (Obejas). In a later critique of the film version of *Rent* it was said, "Rent... requires you to stop thinking about the history of AIDS and only feel ... nothing in particular. Rent is so unconcerned about the realities of the epidemic that it should be called AIDS: The Musical. It offers no more than a banal set of lines like 'No Day But Today' and asks us to love people with AIDS" (Nair).

Additionally there are criticisms in regards to stereotypes and representation of the gay community.

Maureen, the feisty bisexual heartthrob who is both Mark's ex and Joanne's girlfriend, is a personification of several negative stereotypes about bisexual folks. Her character is defined by her overt sexuality, trouble with monogamy and emotional manipulation — all traits assigned to bisexual people by people who don't understand bisexuality...The gaslighting and manipulation Mark and Joanne describe in [Tango: Maureen] are not distinguished from Maureen's bisexuality. These abusive tendencies are conflated with bisexuality rather than distinguishing between the two (Holtz).

While these criticisms are legitimate and have carried over to the present day for some people, there is a general consensus that *Rent* was influential and a step in the right direction at the time that it premiered. Some people believe that it should stay in its time period, and others believe that it is important to this day. The latter is what will be discussed in this thesis.

Chapter 2: THE 1990s

Introduction

Rent is a musical that is a product of the American 1990s. Although the original conception and the beginnings of the project happened in 1988, most of the writing and production of *Rent* was done in the 1990s. As such, the culture and current events of the 1990s influenced the creation and reception of *Rent*. Jonathan Larson took the basis of Giacomo Puccini's 1895 opera *La Bohème* and updated it to appeal to a modern audience, and in doing so created a hugely successful and critically acclaimed piece of theatre. By merging *La Bohème* with the culture and current events of the 1990s, Larson was able to tap into what needed to be talked about at the time in a way that was unrivaled.

The United States was a distinctly different place by the end of the 1990s from what it had been at the dawn of the decade. Politically, it had been a volatile decade and changed how many regarded the American political system. Cynicism towards the process was certainly nothing new, but in the 1990s that cynicism reached a new peak. Likewise, the technological innovations of the decade changed the world and how many regarded it. The coming of a new millennium led many to believe that the country was on a kind of threshold, and that the 1990s were a gateway to a new world (Oxoby, pg. 22).

While *Rent* is not an overtly political play, there are elements that could be taken as political statements. The primary political element that *Rent* has is its stance in regards to the AIDS epidemic. Larson does not write about what the government or

medical science are doing in regards to AIDS, as he is primarily focused on conveying a sense of peace and acceptance to those who have already acquired it. However, these references and situations can be viewed as a political statement on the times and situations that the American people of the 1990s were dealing with. In addition to using the AIDS epidemic as a vehicle for updating *La Bohème*, Larson uses other elements of the 1990s to help convey his message and give the play a particular style that appealed to the younger generations of audience members that attended *Rent*. Two of these elements are the AIDS epidemic and the music of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

AIDS

One of the key aspects of the 1980s and 1990s that influenced *Rent* was the AIDS epidemic. “In 1993, an estimated 750,000 persons in the United States were infected with HIV, with approximately 40,000 new infections occurring each year. By 1996, another approach to estimating HIV incidence and prevalence yielded an estimate of 41,000 new HIV infections annually, with between 700,000 to 800,000 prevalent HIV infections” (Cates). It is important to note that the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is the virus that causes the disease known as AIDS. Most people in the 1980s and 1990s knew someone who either had AIDS or who had died from AIDS. In the early days of the outbreak, playwright and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual) activist Larry Kramer said that he had 20 friends who had lost their lives from AIDS in an 18-month period. (CNN, 2016). That is more than one person per month who lost their life to AIDS, and those statistics would come to get much scarier. In 1985 roughly 130,000 people were annually

infected with AIDS, and “as of 2016, about 675,000 people have died of HIV/AIDS in the U.S. since the beginning of the HIV epidemic” (Center for Disease Control and Prevention).

There are multiple ways to contract HIV, the first being through sexual intercourse. This method is primarily found in homosexual relationships, but is known to occur in heterosexual relationships as well (CDC). Additionally it can be transferred through blood. This is caused when a person who has contracted HIV shares blood with another person, whether it is through a donation or through the use of shared needles. This explains why hemophiliacs and drug users have historically been groups that have been targeted by the AIDS epidemic. If someone who does not know that they have AIDS donates blood to a blood bank, which then goes to people who are in need of blood transfusions, then those people that are receiving the transfusions are susceptible to the HIV virus. Similarly if drug users are sharing needles for drugs such as heroin, those people are then at risk for blood contamination and AIDS.

This frequency and mortality is shown throughout the duration of *Rent*. Mimi, Roger, Collins, and Angel all have AIDS, as do many of the characters that the ensemble portrays such as members of the homeless population in “Christmas Bells.” While it is never said how each member of the cast got AIDS, it can be inferred that Angel and Collins acquired it through homosexual sexual encounters, and Roger and Mimi acquired it through drugs. It is never stated that Collins and Angel used drugs, but the pace at which their relationship developed can be indicative of their lifestyle, therefore assuming that they have had multiple sexual

partners that may have been the reason that they have AIDS. However that is speculation and conjecture as nothing is said on the matter in the script. Mimi and Roger however are both stated to be drug users, so it can be inferred that shared needles is where they acquired their diseases. Roger is the character that has the most specificity in how he contracted HIV, with a line by Mark saying “his girlfriend April left a note saying “we’ve got AIDS” before slitting her wrists in the bathroom” (Larson, pg. 9). While that doesn’t solidify that shared drug use was the reason they had AIDS, it can be assumed that either that or sexual contact was the reason in that case.

The idea of living with AIDS is one that *Rent* is centered on. As equally as being about living the life of the bohemian and finding yourself as an artist, it is about living with the cards that have been dealt and learning how to be okay with the inevitable. Roger’s character arc is defined by his tendency to lock himself away and deal with his mortality by himself, and how he doesn’t want to hurt anyone else by being a part of their lives when he is going to die at any point. He goes from someone who does not leave the house and wallows in self-pity, to someone who loves just as strong and as pure as everyone else and contributes to the happiness of the people around him. He achieves this by coming to accept that even though he is dying, there are still people who want to enjoy his company and who are there for him. This is shown by the other characters that have AIDS, particularly Angel and Collins. Angel and Collins do not let their disease define who they are, having completely unique and interesting personality traits outside of the fact that they are dying from a disease. AIDS is something that they have, not what they are. They

show this by living their normal lifestyles, if a little faster than what we would think is normal. They live by the mantra “no day but today,” living each day as if it could be their last. This creates a joy that is rarely seen in everyday life, and a joy that resonates throughout the musical and cuts through the drama of the other characters.

While Jonathan Larson did not have AIDS, he was greatly affected by it. He had multiple friends that had passed away due to AIDS, and one of his best friends from childhood had AIDS (Nelson, 2006). Therefore when choosing to update *La Bohème* he decided that AIDS was the best way to update the disease that attempts to kill Mimi, and adding other characters that do succumb to the illness to drive home the magnitude of the epidemic and the idea that many people that a person might know could be suffering from AIDS.

Music

The music of the 1990s continued the trend of growing creativity and modern musical exploration that can be dated at least to the 1950s. Every year musical artists push the boundaries of what is possible, both musically and in the recording studio. With advances in technology, musical artists are able to create new genres of music that would not have been imaginable a few years earlier. The greatest comparison that can be made regarding those ideas is to compare the music that we have in the present day to the music of the 1950s. Most of the popular music of the 2010s is reliant on artificial sounds made on a computer. Computers such as the kinds that are available to the public now did not exist in the 1950s, showing that time and technological advances guide musical boundaries. The 1950s saw the

rise of Rock and Roll as well as electric instruments, which then inspired what would become the British Invasion, which in turn influenced almost every form of music that exists today.

The rise in electric sound is what concerns the musical path that eventually leads to *Rent*. Using the latest technologies available to them, artists such as Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley in the 1950s championed the use of electric guitars. This influenced bands in the United Kingdom such as The Beatles, who pushed the boundaries of what was possible with music. Their use of steady and straightforward rhythm, particularly in the drums, was an enormous influence on genres of music that would later become Rock and Pop. This influence can also be seen in *Rent*. Most of the songs in *Rent* have a steady beat and a strong sense of rhythm, as opposed to some other musicals that tend to slow down and speed up songs intermittently throughout the piece. While *Rent* does not abstain from tempo changes, those changes are generally done by introducing the next song, as opposed to changing the tempo in the middle of the song. That style can be traced back to The Beatles. The 1960s started a rise in creativity that is present in music to the present day. What concerns *Rent* however is the popular music of the 1980s and 1990s.

The late 1970s and 1980s saw synthesized music take over the popular sphere, as well as the evolution of Rock music into what became known as Metal music. Synthesized music is music that heavily features the use of a synthesizer, an electronic instrument similar to a piano. However, the sound that comes from a synthesizer is completely electronic, as opposed to the sound of a piano, which is caused by hammers hitting strings and the strings vibrating. The use of the

synthesizer started in the late 1960s, but was used more extensively during the 1980s. Reliance upon the synthesizer and using rhythm techniques and ideas that dated back to The Beatles and the 1960s, the 1980s created a new version of pop music that was unique and different from anything that had been heard before. This version of pop music was straightforward and simple compared to some of the more progressive kinds of music that came out in the late 1960s and the 1970s, but that served to its advantage, as the simplicity allowed listeners to identify and recognize the different songs that came out and the different elements that were used to create those songs. This kind of music would end up inspiring Jonathan Larson as he wrote *Rent*, using the format and some of the instruments championed by popular music of the 1980s to create the music for *Rent*.

Rock music in the 1980s consisted primarily of Punk Rock and Metal. Bands like Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, The Ramones, and The Clash that emerged in the late 1960s and the 1970s paved the way for the energy and passion that consumes Rock music to go even further than had previously been explored. Bands experimented with intentional distortion and feedback on their amplifiers, and angry youth responding to the war in Vietnam and discontent in Britain gave rise to new forms of the always-rebellious Rock and Roll. The difference between Punk Rock and Metal is a difference of musicality and theme. They both generally value fast-paced songs with heavy emphasis on the drums and guitars; however, the two genres varied based on how those instruments were being played. Metal music generally focused on separate guitar notes played at fast intervals and in a variety of different ways. Metal music became defined by the catchy “riffs” (musical patterns)

that guitarists would make, making the music as important as the vocalist. Metal music also tended to deal with darker themes lyrically than other forms of music. Metal dealt with issues such as death and addiction, whereas pop music would generally deal with heartbreak or more positive themes.

Punk Rock is similar to Metal, but also vastly different. Punk Rock does not value musicality as much as it values energy. Punk Rock is based on repetitive patterns and repeated notes, as compared to Metal's more varied approach. It was not uncommon for Punk music to have songs that contained only four chords, something that wasn't present in the Metal genre. Additionally, the quality of the vocals were not as important as the energy of the vocalist. Punk singers were not necessarily "good" singers, but they could work an audience and serve as a vehicle for the energy that the musicians were creating. Punk music also dealt with different themes from Metal or Pop. Punk lyrics were generally political in nature, having a reactionary nature to whatever political event was happening at the time. Punk music served as a voice for a rebellious youth full of pent up energy and dissatisfaction with the way the government was run (both American and British). All of these elements would later come to influence the music of *Rent*.

The 1990s saw these genres evolve and sometimes meld together in ways that people wouldn't expect. Musical artists in the 1990s continued the paths and directions that their predecessors in the 1970s and 1980s started, adapting them for the current time period and the youthful Generation X (the generation after the Baby Boomers of the 1960s). Artists of the 1990s did not want to be the same as the artists that came before them, so they adapted different musical genres and

techniques and changed them in a way that was new and interesting. An example of this is the creation of what is known as “grunge” music. Born in Seattle, Washington it took elements of punk and metal and created an new genre of music that was dark and brooding, without necessarily the speed and musicality of its predecessors.

In the 1980s, the American indie underground was probably at its peak. The punk explosion of the late 1970s, which saw the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and the Ramones capture the imaginations of hundreds of thousands of restless kids, was being explored and processed through a second generation of bands that were touring in vans, sleeping on floors, and getting drunk with their fans in a sort of underground socialist society of rock. . . . This branch of the eighties indie movement took their cues from punk rock but added elements of metal and subtracted the punk speed and structure (Anderson, pgs. 11-12).

The genre of 1990s music that reflects the most music in *Rent* would be the genre of “Pop Rock.” Pop Rock takes elements from both pop music and rock music and creates a mixture of the two that is more accessible to the general public. Pop artists liked the guitar sounds that were associated with rock music, and wanted to bring them into the popular world. These artists, such as Alanis Morissette, Green Day, and Oasis, while different in their approach to Pop Rock embody what the spirit of Pop Rock is. This is music that uses the types of vocal melodies and harmonies that are generally associated with pop music and mixes that with the guitars and drum beats that are generally associated with rock music. Drum beats that are consistent

and drive the music forward, while allowing for musical and vocal variations. This idea fits with *Rent* perfectly.

The music of *Rent* is varied, with different scenes and different characters evoking different genres and eras of music such as those mentioned earlier. *Rent* is generally considered to be a “rock musical,” but the music in *Rent* does not confine itself to one genre. That being said, the genre of music that is rock music is the genre that *Rent* uses the most and draws the most inspiration from, so the title of being a “rock musical” is not entirely misleading. The orchestrations and music of *Rent* is performed by a rock band. The pit consists of a drummer, an electric bassist, a guitarist who uses both electric and acoustic guitars, and a conductor who plays the keyboard. These instruments are those that would be found in the majority of rock music, with the keyboard being an exception in some cases. There are subgenres of rock music that use a keyboard, however the keyboard is more generally used in pop and disco music. The inclusion of a keyboard differentiates the music of *Rent* from being a purely “rock” musical, and how it better aligns with the genre of “pop rock.”

Rent begins with a monologue from Mark describing their living situation and the social context of which the play will be performed, but after that most of the dialogue in *Rent* is sung-through. As such, there is generally musical accompaniment that helps keep the sung-through sections on rhythm and on key, and these sections are generally inspired by rock music. Most of the music of *Rent* heavily features the electric guitar, an instrument that is even shown onstage and is one of the first things that the audience knows about the character of Roger (the fact that he plays

the guitar). Additionally, the music of *Rent* always has a steady beat and the feeling of progressing and moving forward, a feeling that is often used and replicated in rock music. The drums and guitar create a driving force that pushes the action forward, as well as keeping in the emotional mood of the play. Many of the rock elements that are used in *Rent* are used in songs when characters are angry or passionate about something, which allows the music to fit the action exceptionally well.

Despite the apparent frequency in which Larson uses “rock” music, *Rent* does not use rock elements of music exclusively. In writing the music for *Rent*, Larson took inspiration from many different genres of music that he heard growing up and in the popular music of the time that *Rent* was written. The other primary genre of music that Larson uses aside from rock is “pop” music. The vocal melodies and harmonies that are used in *Rent* are generally “pop” melodies, and the way that the music is arranged the voice is the most prevalent instrument heard. In pop music the emphasis is on the singer, or “pop star,” such as Michael Jackson or Prince. Larson uses this concept because the lyrics and dialogue are how the audience experiences the story. This is also true of gospel music, which Larson also uses in songs such as “Seasons of Love” and “I’ll Cover You (Reprise).” Gospel music is music that is generally religious in nature that puts emphasis on the soulful qualities of the voice, generally paired with a slower tempo and a chorus of people. Larson uses elements of this style in sections of the musical that he wants to have great emotional impact, such as after Angel’s death. By drawing from the world of pop music, where the voice is arguably the most important part, as well as rock and

gospel music, where the emotion and message is arguably the most important part, Larson created musical that is simultaneously easy to be understood, catchy, and serves the emotional impact of the play.

Chapter 3: ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS*

Introduction

In theatre and in life there are no concrete ways to define what is “good” and what is “bad”. What may be considered as high quality work to one person might be considered low quality to another. There is no right and wrong answer, and as such there are a limited number of ways in objectively evaluating a work’s quality. One of these ways is to use Aristotle’s *Poetics* (c. 335 BC) as a guideline for the elements that define “good” works that would come to be defined as theatre. *Poetics* is the earliest surviving work of dramatic theory, and the window through which the modern reader can see what the early Greek dramatists were striving for. Early Greek theatre was monumental in its influence on almost every form of theatre that the world knows today, with theatre throughout history either following its mandates or rebelling against them. This thesis will regard the *Poetics* as a positive piece of dramatic theory, as these treatises and guidelines created dramatic work that has lasted, and is still being performed, thousands of years after their initial creation.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle covers various different topics and definitions that are relevant to poetry, literature, and the dramatic arts. The work was intended to cover all of the dramatic arts and literature, however the second part, which covers the genre of Comedy, has yet to be found. What the world has recovered is in regards to tragedy, the earliest known form of what the world now considers to be drama. He defines tragedy as “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the

several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (Aristotle, pg. 10). This distinguishes tragedy from other forms of literature and poetry by stating that tragedy (and theatre in general) is presented to its audience as if the story were taking place in real time and shown to the audience through the eyes of its characters. Aristotle posits that the dramatic arts should not be narrated by a third person entity, but should take place in the moment and in front of the audience. According to Aristotle theatre should not talk about what is happening in the story, it should show what is happening in the story. Narration is a defining characteristic of poetry, and third person narration is a general characteristic of literature.

Rent both adheres to and challenges this standard, as it does have a narrator of sorts but that narrator is a part of the story. Mark is used to comment on the action of the play and to provide context to the story elements that are taking place off stage. His spoken dialogue with the audience at the beginning of the play sets the scene with some background information about the characters and description of the apartment that they live in. This is generally necessary as seemingly the general consensus among designers who undertake this play is that the apartment’s details are not readily apparent on the stage. The choices that designers make in regards to the apartment are based on the fact that there are multiple scene changes that happen, and the apartment needs to be able to come on and off stage easily. Any details that are left from the apartment that are left onstage for scenes that take place outdoors or in other locations would confuse the audience in a play that is

already occasionally hard to follow. Mark's narration at the beginning then becomes necessary to show the audience the apartment not through their eyes but through their imagination, which also sets the tone for the entire production.

Mark narrates and comments on the action of the play throughout its entirety, both actively taking a part in the story and serving as an outside observer. As he is a part of the story, this adheres to Aristotle's theory that narration is a tool best used by poetry and literature. However, Mark does narrate what happens between the scenes. During the first act he is used to allow the audience to know the locations that the characters travel to, from the apartment to the empty lot that hosts Maureen's performance. In the second act he is used to bridge the gap between the different months and periods of time, as the second act takes place over the course of a year. This is in contrast to Aristotle's theory about narration, showing that *Rent* is not a musical that stays within the lines and theories that precede it. Jonathan Larson used existing modes and structures to a degree, but he was also rebelling against some of the rules and restrictions that were previously present.

Plot

An additional aspect of Aristotle's *Poetics* that has been influential and valuable to theatre history is his identification and ordering of the necessary elements to have good theatre. These elements and order include plot, characters, thought (often interpreted as theme), diction, music, and spectacle. The plot is the story itself and the events that drive the action forward. The plot deals with what happens in the play. He argues that a good plot requires reversal and forward

momentum. The action of the play should be heading towards something, or a climactic moment, and the plot should involve events that cause characters to change and evolve over the course of the play. Characters that are initially good can experience a reversal of fortune (peripeteia) and be brought down, or characters that were initially bad should be brought to goodness. While that concept does bleed into the character element that Aristotle values after plot, he argues that the plot itself is what causes these changes and reversals. He also says that the best plays have recognitions and revelations, sometimes for good and sometimes for bad.

Rent's plot is unusual in that it does not necessarily have an ending event that the characters are striving to reach. There is no villain to overcome, no evil to defeat. It doesn't have a problem that needs to be solved that gets solved at the end. *Rent* is about the characters and the plot centers upon those characters and their interactions with each other. These key moments in the plot include when characters meet each other for the first time, or when there is a change in their relationship. For example, there is the scene in which Mimi and Roger meet for the first time ("Light My Candle"). This scene begins what will become one of the relationships that *Rent* revolves around. There is foreshadowing present, as the topic of Mimi's drug use is brought up, and there is the beginning of an interesting dynamic that will turn into love by the end of the play. Another meeting scene would be between Mark and Joanne ("Tango: Maureen"), and while the relationship does not turn into one of love, it does turn into a strong friendship for the rest of the play.

Each character has aspirations and dreams, two of which become realized by the final scene of the play. Roger gets to write his song, and Mark gets to finish his

film. These are the closest that *Rent* gets to having a climax that consists of concrete obstacles and goals that can be completed for a sense of satisfaction at the end of the play. For the rest of the characters, as well as Roger, their individual goals are to be happy and to survive. The climax that the characters are driving towards is death, and the differentiation between them is how long each of the characters has before they have to face that eventuality. This feeling of impending inevitability causes the characters to choose how they want to spend the time that they have, and who they want to spend that time with.

Rent has one death and another near-death that serve as climaxes to the piece, and after the completion of the play upon reflection it becomes obvious that those moments are what the play was heading towards the whole time. Angel's death is an obvious turning point in the action of the play, and it drives home the overall theme of enjoying what time each individual has because they might not have as long as might be expected. It is something that is somewhat unexpected if solely looking at the tone of the first act. Angel is the character that is most filled with light and hope, as well as the most energetic and lively. This creates the opportunity for the reversal of fortune that happens in the second act. At the beginning of the second act Angel is just the same as ever: energetic and encouraging. However as the act progresses it becomes apparent that Angel is getting sicker, and the possibility of death becomes an eventuality. This event serves as a mini-climax for the play, especially paired with the music and symbolism that accompanies that moment in the song "Contact." The music is written for Angel to be able to extemporize and improvise, with it generally being a moment that actors

who play Angel use to showcase their upper register and high range with the use of falsetto. The music builds to an epic high note, then drops as the other characters and audience realizes the significance of what had just occurred. The play then immediately goes into Angel's funeral and the aftermath of Angel's death, changing the tone for the remainder of the play.

The actual climax of the play happens with Mimi's near-death towards the end of the play. This is an event that has been foreshadowed throughout the play with many references made by Mimi about how life is short and there is "no day but today," so it does not necessarily come as a surprise to the audience that she is dying. Additionally those members of the audience that were familiar with *La Bohème* knew that in that opera the character of Mimi dies. Most of the events of the play and particularly the second act lead up to the moment where Roger is singing his song to Mimi in an attempt to keep her alive. The audience has followed this journey and relationship throughout the play, and that journey now may be coming to a close. Roger has finally achieved what he wanted, one last song, only to potentially lose the inspiration and love that he found along the way. This is paired with Mimi's story of being addicted to drugs and dealing with AIDS, and what appears to be the end of her struggles and journey with Roger as well as the rest of the group. This is the moment that the audience has been simultaneously waiting for and dreading. This is also the moment that shatters their expectations in a shocking reversal that became one of the show's signature talking points. Mimi miraculously comes back to life and is able to share a happy ending with the rest of the company, citing Angel telling her from heaven to "turn around girlfriend and listen to that

boy's song" (Larson, pg. 72). Mimi's recovery leads into the final song where the audience also gets to see Mark's film, and the play ends happily. These are specific events that take the audience on the journey that is *Rent*, with aspects that reflect what Aristotle considered to be an excellent plot.

Character

The second of Aristotle's elements of good theatre is "character," both serving as the characters in the play itself and the moral values of each of the characters. He argues that characters should be consistent and appropriate, with good values and morals winning out in the end. When Aristotle says that he believes characters should be consistent, it is believed that he means that characters should be true to who they are and not radically shift their personalities unless affected by the plot. Characters should not be one way or believe something in one scene, then be the complete opposite in the next without something happening to make it so. It is also considered to be good if the choices that the characters make reflect their morals and personality. An example used is that if a character is afraid of blood then that character should not be a soldier, or vice versa in that if there was a soldier character it would be confusing to the audience if that character were afraid of blood unless it is a plot point in the story.

Aristotle also believed that any change in opinion or personality should be apparent due to the events that happen in the story, not at random or without explanation. If a foolish character were to suddenly become incredibly smart it would have to be explained in the plot, otherwise the audience would be confused and taken out of the action. Additionally Aristotle thought that good values and

morals should be the winning traits in any play. He argued that audiences do not want to see evil triumph over good, or characters getting away with profiting on misery. These characters may exist in the play, but the morally right characters that are opposed to them should be the characters that win the moral battle. In exceptional plays audiences are able to see bits of themselves in the characters onstage, and having the “good” characters win in the end reinforces that behavior in the audience.

The characters in *Rent* are the heart of the play, and their personalities and defining traits uphold Aristotle’s standards of moral good. They may take actions that do not reflect this over the course of the play, but by the end of the play events have happened that allowed them to blossom into the persons they truly are. These revelations and changes create characters that effectively represent what Aristotle would define as “good morals,” and those changes are the driving force of the action of *Rent*. Each event that happens in *Rent* is designed to change one or more of its characters, keeping true with Aristotle’s ideas that character growth should be based on the events of the plot. Each scene and song in *Rent* moves the characters forward, with events that flow naturally from one to the other in order to eventually create characters that the audience identifies with and wants to see succeed. All of the characters change over the course of the play, but the character that changes the most is Roger.

At the beginning of *Rent*, Roger is in a dark place. He had been diagnosed with AIDS after his girlfriend committed suicide, and he was shutting himself out from the rest of the world in his grief. The audience finds out later that at one point

he was also addicted to drugs, although that is an issue that had been resolved prior to the beginning action of the play. This creates an opportunity for the action of the plot to bring him back to the outside world, both physically and emotionally. With the introduction of the character Mimi, Roger's world is forever changed. At first, Roger is not receptive to Mimi's advances due to his negative self-image and the presence of his disease. In their first scene together ("Light My Candle") he is visibly uncomfortable with how open she is, as well as with her drug use, and in their second scene together ("Another Day") he explicitly rejects her. He cites her drug use as a primary factor, although truly it is his own struggles and insecurities that hold him back. These events and inciting incidents plant the seeds for character progression and the beginning of the change that Roger goes through during the course of the play. Roger later has a change of heart upon reflecting on the nature of his life and whether he is going to spend the rest of it locked away from everyone who might care about him ("Will I"). This physically gets him out of the house in order to apologize to Mimi for his behavior and attend Maureen's performance and after-party. During his apology to Mimi he is confronted by his former drug dealer, whom he rebukes saying, "you didn't miss me, you won't miss her. You'll never lack for customers" (Larson, pg. 32). His ability to stand up for himself and others, especially against a person that once had so much power over him shows a sign of the beginning of change in Roger's life and personality.

The next event that happens in Roger's life that sparks a major change in him is the after-party of Maureen's performance. Throughout the night he is distant towards Mimi and lost in his own world. When Mimi confronts him about it, he

asserts that he is trying, but he is interrupted by the sound of an alarm for them both to take their medication for AIDS (AZT). He realizes that the common ground and similar situations that the two of them share could be the foundation for a future relationship. This realization shows him that he is not alone in his suffering and situation, and allowing Mimi into his life forever alters the trajectory of his future. The alarm going off and the song afterward (“I Should Tell You”) is another concrete event that shapes a major change in the character, another moment that Aristotle would have been proud of. They close the act with a kiss.

The second act both tears apart and reunites the relationship between Roger and Mimi spanning the length of a year as opposed to the single day that the first act spanned. There are different events and revelations that happen throughout the act that cause Roger to lose trust in Mimi, which is detrimental to his self-esteem and trust in general as this was a person that he opened up to and risked his heart for. The first of these revelations is when Roger finds out that Mimi had an affair with Benny, and that she had gone to see Benny in order to try to get Roger and Mark back into their apartment. He does not believe Mimi’s assertion that nothing sexual happened, as he is still wary of trusting others. He later forgives her for this, but the primary source of conflict between the two of them is Mimi’s drug use. This aspect of her character is something that Roger cannot live with and eventually leads to their separation.

After their separation the next big event in the lives of Roger and every character is the death of Angel. To Roger, Angel represented what living with AIDS could look like. Angel was a free spirit, who did not let their diagnosis change who

they were or how they acted in the world. Most of all it did not stop Angel from being happy, which is ultimately what Roger was looking for. He believed that he could be happy with Mimi because she understood the struggles that he was going through, and that they could live with those struggles together. Angel's death is a very concrete event that reminds Roger about the finality of his AIDS diagnosis, and creates a drive in him to achieve his goals before he dies. His primary goal has been to write a song, and he believed that in order to do that he had to move away from New York and the vestiges of his old life. Because of Angel's death and Mimi apparently spending more time with Benny, he moved to Santa Fe. Upon realizing that Mimi would be the inspiration for this song, however, he moved back.

The last event that happens in *Rent* that shapes Roger's life is when Mimi almost dies. He realizes that Mimi was "the song all along" (Larson pg. 72) and that living without her would leave Roger a broken person again. Luckily, that does not happen. The near-death of Mimi finalizes the idea of valuing the time that every person has with other people while they are alive and being thankful for the people around them. The sheltered-and-brooding Roger that the audience saw at the beginning of the play is not the Roger that they see at the end of it. At the end of *Rent*, Roger is open to letting people in and sharing his fears and feelings with not only Mimi but with the group. Each event that took place over the course of the play shaped the trajectory of his life, and the changes in his character. This is why Roger's reversal does not feel rushed or sudden, it happens naturally throughout the course of the play. The audience can track each event that happens to Roger and how it affected him in order to end up being the person that he is by the end of the play.

Jonathan Larson wrote his characters and their arcs in a way that allowed them to be able to change and grow in a way that feels organic and natural. In doing this, he stayed true to Aristotle's teachings of good character development.

Thought

The third of Aristotle's elements of drama is "thought," which is also sometimes translated as "theme." This concept refers to multiple aspects of plays and productions, primarily the effect that a production has on the people it is being performed to as well as what the play is talking about in general. Every play should aim to elicit some emotion from its audience. Whether that emotion is sadness, joy, anger, or fear, every play has its purpose and the author needs to be a master at creating moments throughout their plot that creates these emotions for the audience. This is different from the plot and character sections, as those sections deal directly with the play and the characters that inhabit the play. The character section mentioned the moral standing of characters and how audiences prefer characters that they can identify with and root for due to their higher morals, but what this section focuses on is the emotional impact on the audience. "Under Thought is included every effect which has to be produced by speech, the subdivisions being – proof and refutation; the excitation of the feelings, such as pity, fear, anger, and the like; the suggestion of importance and the like" (Aristotle, pg. 37).

The "thought" element also deals with what the play is saying about the world and universal truths. Through the plot and characters the audience sees a story being told, but what the playwright is saying about the actual world is a key

element to understanding the impact of a particular piece of theatre. There exists plays that serve only as mindless entertainment, and they serve a purpose just as much as plays with higher meaning do. Most of the plays that survive and still are produced today however deal with higher meanings and truths than what is just on the surface. What the playwright is trying to say is shown through what elements and character traits triumph in the end, as well as what plot points and events happened throughout the play that led the characters to that point. The playwright creates plot points and events in order to serve as a vehicle for what they are trying to say about the world, which is Aristotle's idea of "thought."

Throughout the production the audience is taken on a journey of emotions as well as subconsciously becoming aware of the struggles and culture of different types of individuals. In regards to emotional impact, one of *Rent's* most prevalent aspects is Larson's ability to change tone and keep the audience engaged emotionally. At the beginning of the production the audience might feel confused or overwhelmed as there are a lot of characters that are introduced very quickly. However, this sense of confusion eases and is overtaken by an emotion of excitement with the song "Rent." At the time there were few musicals that contained actual "rock" music, and the presence of this high-energy form of sound creates building excitement and anticipation as the show progresses. As the audience learns about the different characters and their struggles, they can be subject to a variety of emotions regarding each of the individual characters. They might feel sadness for Roger's plight against AIDS and loneliness, they might feel outrage over Benny's insistence on collecting rent from his former friends, or they might feel anticipation

as Angel and Collins start to fall in love. They could be experiencing each of these emotions separately, or all at the same time, and that is one of the aspects of *Rent* that make it so effective at creating memorable moments accompanied by emotional investment.

From the beginning of the play the audience has an emotional attachment to each of the eight characters. Those attachments and how the audience feels about the characters evolve and change over the course of the two acts, as well as how the audience feels about the tone of the production. One of the prime examples of emotional impact in *Rent* is the character of Angel. Angel's introduction into the story is somewhat nonchalant, as he is introduced as a street performer with a kind heart who is willing to help another person in need. He helps Collins get cleaned up after Collins is mugged, before then being introduced to the group. This group introduction is vastly different from the introduction that the audience got, as this is the first time that the audience gets to see Angel in full drag. Collins then refers to Angel by the pronoun "she," changing the way that the audience looks at her and how they feel about her. Then she performs a dance number, "Today 4 U," in full drag and high heels, creating one of the most joyous and most energetic atmospheres in *Rent*. This mood is later altered when Benny arrives to attempt to get the group to cancel Maureen's protest, which changes the audience's perception of Benny from a one-dimensional manager character to an ex-friend who is trying to pursue a dream in a different manner.

Angel continues to bring energy and joy throughout the play, with the next notable scene of hers being "Life Support" and "Will I" with the rest of the majority

of the cast. These songs and scenes bring a much more serious tone to the play and to Angel's character. These songs highlight the threat and eventuality of death that foreshadows Angel's fate. This can create for the audience a sense of dread, but also a sense of hope as the characters accept their faith and pledge to not let their disease define the rest of their lives. The next scene for Angel is Collins's song "Santa Fe," through which she gets to know Collins' hopes and aspirations better, which then leads to the moment that the audience has been waiting for: "I'll Cover You." This is the song in which Angel and Collins affirm their love for each other in a heartwarming moment that can fill the audience with positive emotion. *Rent* earns every emotional payoff by allowing the relationships between the characters and each moment to slowly build until it reaches a climax. The relationship between Angel and Collins had been hinted at and under the surface for most of the play thus far, so the affirmation of that relationship in "I'll Cover You" creates in the audience a sense of relief and joy that these two characters get to be happy together.

This happiness stays constant throughout the rest of the first act, with the attention of the audience focused primarily on Mimi and Roger's relationship. There is a moment in "Christmas Bells" where they go shopping and we see more of Angel's giving personality, but that moment does not necessarily create any new emotions for the audience. The next change in emotional impact that involves Angel paves the way for the first emotional climax of *Rent* itself. After the opening of the second act the audience sees that Angel is starting to get sicker, traditionally costumed in hospital garb as opposed to the drag costumes. The song "Without You" is sung by Mimi and Roger primarily regarding their relationship, but the action

onstage focuses on Angel and Collins. Later, the play goes into a symbolic orgy entitled “Contact” that is meant to symbolize the dangers and raw emotions present when dealing with sex, especially regarding those with AIDS. This is also the last song where we see Angel alive. In the traditional staging Angel breaks free from a sheet that covers the main cast and is clothed in all white, with a spotlight backlighting Angel giving him an almost heavenly image. He proceeds to improvise and belt high notes in a partial reprise of “Today 4 U.” The music builds to an especially high note, Angel drops down, and it is revealed that he died.

There is a range of potential emotions regarding the death of Angel that the audience could go through. During the ensemble section of “Contact” they may feel uncomfortable, which then could make way for a sense of awe in regards to the notes that Angel is singing and the technical spectacle that they are witnessing. This is followed by the sudden shock revealing that Angel passed away, which then could lead to an overwhelming sadness that pervades throughout the rest of the play. The other scenes of the second act that lead up to this moment do not invoke the emotion of grief, nor do they hint that grief is an emotion that the audience could feel while watching this play. They may have felt frustration and sadness with Mimi, Roger, Joanne, and Maureen when they have breakup scenes, but after Angel’s death the audience’s emotions could turn to the overwhelming stage of sadness that is grief. After “Contact” the action shifts to Angel’s funeral, and members of the core group individually recounting stories of Angel before the rest of the ensemble in a rare moment of spoken monologues that contrasts with the generally sung-through nature of the rest of the play. This builds up to Collins’s eulogy, which is a slower

tempo and more gospel-like reprise of “I’ll Cover You.” This song is the epitome of the emotion of grief that audiences are generally experiencing. After this reprise the emotions turn into anger, as the plot shifts back to Mimi and Roger’s relationship, as well as Joanne and Maureen’s relationship.

The last moment of emotional impact in *Rent* that involves Angel is the end, when Mimi almost passes away from sickness as well. After the music builds and the audience members that are familiar with Puccini’s *La Bohème* hear the familiar musical motif associated with Mimi’s death, the play has the potential to again leave the audience with a sense of grief. Suddenly, Mimi returns to life, claiming that she met Angel in heaven who encouraged her to “turn around girlfriend and listen to that boy’s song” (Larson, pg. 72). This creates the potential for the emotion of relief and joy that can be maintained through the last number and to the end of the show. With each of these moments and more throughout the production, *Rent* attempts to take the audience on an emotional rollercoaster. Larson takes each character and each major plot point of each character’s life and creates an emotional moment for the audience. All of these moments accumulate throughout the production until the build to the finale, where the audience can feel emotionally weary, but joyous and triumphant. These are the emotions that are to be desired when attending a theatrical production, and the script and score of *Rent* allow the potential for these emotions to thrive.

Rent also exhibits Aristotle’s idea of “thought” through its themes. Jonathan Larson wanted to tell a story about the people around him and the issues of the time, and he did so by using familiar types of music as well as a somewhat familiar

basic plot line to bring his message to a wider audience. First, he wanted to talk about the AIDS epidemic. Larson knew a number of people who had AIDS, and the majority of those people that he knew with that disease died from it. Larson lived in the time when an AIDS diagnosis was a death sentence, and he wanted to bring that issue to the forefront of the audience's minds through his writing and characters. Half of the lead characters in *Rent* have AIDS and are dealing with their diagnosis and life as part of their character arcs. Larson wanted to bring hope to the people who were suffering from AIDS by creating characters that lived their lives to the fullest despite the diagnosis (Angel, Collins, and Mimi), as well as allowing other characters to work through processing their emotions and circumstances to get to that point (Roger). This shows the audience that it is okay to be confused and hurt, and that it is okay to feel lost and hopeless. Roger's character arc is defined by how he feels about his diagnosis, and how much he lets other people in because of his diagnosis. At the beginning of the play he is hesitant to let other people into his life because he knows that he might not be living for very much longer. This is representative of how a number of people in the audience felt at the time, and the lessons that Roger learns resonate with those audience members especially. Roger learns to let other people in so that they may help ease the burden of his sadness and fear, and he learns to live every day to the fullest like his other friends. This is a theme that is echoed many times throughout the play, and the primary theme that *Rent* tries to get across to the audience.

Roger's character arc also ties in with the theme of hope, another theme that *Rent* exemplifies throughout the play. Most of the characters in *Rent* encourage

Roger and the other members of their group to remain hopeful despite the issues and fear that they were feeling. Roger had given up hope, so a primary plot point for the play is the other characters trying to get Roger to have hope again. This is eventually achieved after Mimi's near-death experience, allowing him to have hope that he can be happy in the future. Happiness was not something that Roger thought was ever going to be possible after his diagnosis, but he was proven wrong. Despite the fear of impending death, he ends the play feeling hopeful about the future. Larson wanted the audience to learn this lesson as well as Roger.

During the AIDS epidemic a lot of people had lost hope. There were not very many treatment options available at the time for AIDS recipients, and the treatments that were available only truly served to slow down the process. Advances in medical science were not happening fast enough, and people were dying. The combination of these elements made AIDS recipients skeptical about the future, and a lot of them lost hope. Larson wanted to give hope to these people, by showing them that even though death is coming that does not mean that life has to be meaningless. Larson wanted to show them that even though they have AIDS, what life they have left can still be enjoyed and celebrated. He does this through Roger's character arc, and with the overall message and motif of the play "no day but today."

An additional theme that *Rent* has is the theme of acceptance. This theme is interestingly handled in *Rent*, partially due to the fact that it generally isn't referenced explicitly at all. Five out of the eight lead characters in *Rent* are persons of color, and four out of those eight are gay or lesbian. Any issue in regards to race is

not mentioned at all in the script, an oddity at the time as most scripts that prominently featured characters of color have their race be a part of the plot. Larson breaks from this pattern by using people of color, but not seeing them as people of color. The things that are happening to these people could happen to anyone, and everyone can be represented on the stage. He also breaks from tradition in the fact that he creates two interracial couples, and does not refer to the fact that either is an interracial couple throughout the script. Generally when there exists an interracial couple in a play, that fact is commented upon by either the couple themselves or people around them. Larson defies this precedent by not mentioning anything about it at all. This was a new level of inclusion that brought people of color even closer to the theatrical arts by being able to see themselves represented on stage without being overtly commented upon.

This is also true of the gay and lesbian couples. Larson never defines or shows gay and lesbian couples to be out of the ordinary, and like his treatment of race this created a new level of inclusion for the gay community. Similar to the treatment of race in theatre, if a show were to have a gay or lesbian character then that character would be singled out and their sexual orientation would be commented on. This is generally not the case in *Rent*. There are a handful of rare moments where sexual orientation is mentioned, but it is far less than other musicals and plays of the time and even today. The level of inclusion that Larson champions in *Rent* is shown through how he does not treat sexual orientation as something that is strange or out of the ordinary. Angel and Collins never have to explicitly state their sexuality, they fall in love as any couple would. By not treating

this as strange, it affirms the belief that homosexual couples are just as real and important as heterosexual couples. The gay relationship between Angel and Collins is treated the same way as the lesbian relationship between Maureen and Joanne, which is also treated the same way as the straight relationship between Mimi and Roger. Treating these things the same way is a statement that all of these relationships are equal, and they should be in the real world as well. This highlights the theme of acceptance that *Rent* showcases, by not showcasing it at all.

Diction

The fourth element of drama that Aristotle recognizes is that of “diction,” or the dialogue in a piece. Aristotle’s idea of diction is that dialogue or speeches spoken by characters onstage should reflect the character that is speaking. Each character should have lines that would only make sense for that character to say, not due to the plot or the specific events that are happening to that character, but due to the style of the dialogue and the way that the character speaks. Lines that could be said by any number of characters in the play are not lines of quality, and do not reflect Aristotle’s idea of diction. Good dialogue should reflect the character that is speaking, both in terms of representing themselves and furthering the action of the plot. Dialogue is the primary vehicle in which the audience is able to experience the story that is being told. A playwright must recognize this and use that dialogue to progress the action of the play, while simultaneously keeping in mind which characters are speaking and which characters are driving the plot forward. Aristotle’s ideas of plot and character are good in theory, but in order to achieve those ideas in actuality relies on the dialogue.

Dialogue and monologues also serve as the windows into which the audience sees each of the characters that are present in a play. Unlike a novel, the audience is not able to know what the characters are thinking. In theatre most moments that define a particular character are expressed through speech, otherwise known as dialogue or monologues. These lines and words dictate what the audience knows about the characters, and each one of those lines should reflect the character that is speaking them. Through the lines the audience is able to see the moral qualities of the characters, as well as the rationale behind the actions that they take. The audience is also able to tell the background of each of the characters through the lines that are spoken. Characters that were brought up in the upper class should talk differently than characters that were brought up in the lower class. Almost everything that the audience needs to know about a character is learned through the lines that they say, with the exception of moments that are shown through physical action. As such, the words that are spoken and lines that are written can be considered one of the most important parts about a play. A piece of theatre may have a great plot with interesting characters and themes, but if the dialogue is lacking quality then the audience is not able to experience that story to its fullest potential.

In *Rent* there is very little dialogue in the typical sense of the word: spoken interactions between two characters. However, there is sung-through dialogue that happens throughout the piece. This can be considered dialogue and falls under the category of “diction,” even though technically it is not spoken. The characters that inhabit the world of *Rent* are extremely unique and different from each other, and

their diction reflects that. No two characters in *Rent* sound exactly the same, and none of the songs that are a part of *Rent* could be sung by another character. Every song and every moment in *Rent* reflects moments that are happening in the lives of the characters, and the way that they use language to convey the different emotions and thoughts that are happening set them apart from each other. Mark has a completely different style of “speaking” than Maureen, who then has a different style from Roger.

A general quality of Mark’s speech and songs that differentiate him from other characters is the pace and steady rhythm that he maintains throughout his speeches. Mark sings fast but with a steady progression of words, something that is different than other fast communicators such as Maureen. In songs like “La Vie Bohème” he sets the tone and the pace for the fastest song in the entire musical. His part may start slow, but he gradually builds up-tempo until he has guided the ensemble into a frenzy of artistic statements and references sung almost as fast as possible. Despite the eventual speed of the song, Mark sings in a steady and deliberate tone that allows for clarity and foundation in a song that can be considered to be one of Jonathan Larson’s most famous songs. Mark is the constant support for the group of friends, and he is a rare constant in the otherwise unpredictable lives of every other character. He helps each character find their way in the different events of life, and is there to support each character throughout the struggles that they endure. It is only fitting then that the way Mark sings and speaks reflect this quality about him.

Similar to Mark in speed but differing in rhythm and stability is Maureen. Maureen is a fast thinker and a character that says whatever comes to her mind, which is a lot. Her pattern of speech is less steady than Mark's, preferring a constantly shifting tempo of a series of fast-sung words contrasted with slower sections. This reflects her thought process, and highlights the idea that she is an unreliable character. She is a performance artist that frequently thinks in metaphors and higher meanings, and conveys these ideas as quickly as she can when the inspiration strikes her. An example of this is during her performance. While it is obvious that the performance has been rehearsed in the context of the play, the way that it is written allows Maureen to have faster moments of frenzied inspiration paired with the slower and more deliberate sections where she is trying to drive home her message ("Over the Moon"). Additionally she has a fiery temper and passionate personality that often puts her in conflict with the characters around her. She is quick to anger, as seen in the prelude to "Take Me Or Leave Me," and she is seen as a character that has constant strong emotions. She is also a character that is not satisfied easily, constantly changing romantic partners whenever she feels like. She cheats on Mark before the start of the play with Joanne, then cheats on Joanne during the course of "La Vie Bohème," highlighting her unreliability and faithlessness. These elements of her personality can be heard in the way that she sings and speaks, which is the essence of Aristotle's idea of "diction".

Both of these characters and the way that they communicate are in contrast to Roger. Roger's lines and music are generally much slower and much more deliberate compared to Mark's, and the rhythm and pace of his delivery is not

always as consistent as Mark. Roger is a much darker character than Mark and Maureen, and his problems can be considered much more serious than that of those two characters. Roger has to come to terms with the fact that he has a life-threatening disease, and his character arc is based on his feelings toward this fact. He is a dejected character who has had thrown at him some of the worst that life has to offer, and the way that he speaks and sings reflects that. His songs typically have a slower tempo, with his first solo song being a ballad (“One Song Glory”). Additionally when he is talking to other characters he generally only says the bare minimum necessary, preferring to be by himself and left alone to his misery. He does have emotional moments and at times he allows himself to feel, but that is generally in contrast to how he typically acts. In most of his dialogue his speech is slow and methodical, rarely giving anyone around him any information that might be able to hurt him. In his moments of great emotion, however, his voice is powerful and deliberate as he belts musical high notes. Roger speaks and sings in a way that only he could, and that is the essence of the idea of “diction.”

Music

The fifth element of theatre mentioned in Aristotle’s *Poetics* is the element of music. There are multiple ways to interpret this element in regards to the type of theatre that Aristotle was able to see, and these different interpretations can evolve into three primary ways to cover plays and musicals in the modern era. The first of these interpretations is the role that music and musical instruments play in the telling of a story. Music has a way of creating emotional reactions and resonance in a way that is almost impossible to do through spoken word alone. The audience can

feel invested in a story and the words and dialogue that characters are speaking, but it is the music that truly transports them into the emotional world of the piece.

Whether it is triumphant major-key music that symbolizes the hero's triumph over the antagonist, or sad minor-key music that symbolizes the character's emotional state at their lowest points, the music is what takes the audience into the mindset of the character and the mindset of the play.

Music adds emotional weight to any scene or performance of which it is a part. In addition to this, musical motifs can be used to help tell the story and remind the audience of different aspects of the story that have already been told. Musical motifs are bits of music that are similar or the same that are used in different contexts throughout the performance. Generally this is a musical melody of some sort that is associated with a particular character, but this is not always the case. Another use of musical motifs is to draw attention to parallels that are happening in a particular section of a piece to something that happened earlier. An example of this is towards the beginning and towards the end of the musical *Les Misérables* (1980). In the police inspector Javert's final scene, the melody that he sings towards the end of the second act is the same melody that the escaped convict Valjean sang earlier towards the beginning of the first act. Both characters were facing moral dilemmas that ultimately resulted in fundamentally changing who they were, and using the same melody draws attention to the fact that these two opposite characters end up sharing some common ground at the end. While the scene would have still been impactful if a different melody was used, using the same melody adds

another layer to the musical that would not have been possible if it weren't for the music.

A second interpretation of Aristotle's theme of music is one that ties in to the previously mentioned element of "diction". This interpretation regards the musicality of the language; or the rhythm and flow that is associated with patterns of speech and writing. Speeches and scenes that take place in theatre should have a sense of musicality to them, whether it is consciously exploited or not. The way that the character speaks and sounds can be tied to a sense of the musical whether the piece of theatre is a musical or not. Words should have rhythm, and characters identify their inner selves and characterization by how strictly they adhere to these rhythms. An example of this was mentioned earlier when talking about the difference between the ways that Mark speaks as compared to Maureen.

A third interpretation of the idea of music is the role of the Chorus. During Aristotle's time, the Chorus was a group of people that generally spoke in unison. These people often represented a group of people that are affected by the actions of the main characters, such as the common people or the nobles of a particular city. Their job was to provide an entity that the audience could identify with among the stories of heroes and gods. The chorus represented the audience, and audiences generally enjoy having some sort of representation on stage. Another use of the Chorus was to provide commentary on the action of the play. Generally in poetic verse they comment on the main characters and their flaws, as well as the situations that are taking place and what their effect will be. The Chorus and an actor's relationship to the Chorus is what started modern theatre, so its importance cannot

be understated. While modern theatre does not use a Chorus in the sense of the Greek version of the word, in most musicals there exists an ensemble that sometimes serve a similar purpose. These are characters that by themselves have no real impact to the overall story, but as a group represent a group of people that are impacted by the effects of the story. They also use similar tropes as the Greek Chorus such as singing and moving in unison, and sometimes providing commentary on the action and characters of the play. The degree in which they have a role in the story varies from musical to musical, however in most musicals they are a significant and essential part to making the overall production come together coherently.

Each of these interpretations can be used when describing the element of music in *Rent*. The second of these interpretations regarding the musicality of the language has already been discussed; however, the other two interpretations are very present and will be discussed here. The first of these interpretations is the emotional impact of music on a piece of theatre and how the music helps tell the story itself. As *Rent* is a sung-through musical, music is essential in making *Rent* the piece of theatre that it is. A version of *Rent* that had no singing or music would have its emotional impact significantly lessened, as well as make the plot and characters less compelling.

The music in *Rent* keeps the momentum of the musical going forward, and it does not allow the musical to “stand still” for very long. This can help represent the idea that life keeps going despite the struggles and losses that happen. A person may want life to stop for a given reason, but it doesn’t, and that is reflected in the music

of *Rent*. Additionally the music helps differentiate the characters beyond what we are told about them in the story. Each character has different music and different musical styles that help set them apart from each other, and those music styles are present throughout the musical to help tie those characters into the story. An example of this is the difference between Roger's music and Collins's music. Most of Roger's music is in the rock style, with driving guitars and rhythmic drums that help support the aggression and emotion that Roger feels throughout the musical. Contrasting this is Collins, who generally has more of a pop feel to his music that has elements of soul and gospel. There is the same breadth of emotion for Collins, although his emotions revolve more around love and sadness as opposed to the anger and fear that Roger feels. The difference in their music helps differentiate their characters, which is present in every character in *Rent*.

Just as in *Les Misérables*, there are also musical motifs in *Rent*. The most prominent motif that is used is a melody from *La Bohème* that Roger plays throughout the musical. In *La Bohème* this melody is used during Mimi's death and at the height of the emotional climax of the piece, representing the sorrow and outpouring of emotions that are taking place in that moment. This is similar in Roger's case, although he does play this motif at different points throughout the musical. An interesting thing to note, however, is that he does not finish the full melody of the piece until Mimi's near-death. He starts to play it before "One Song Glory", but he makes a mistake and gives up out of frustration. A similar event happens during the song "La Vie Bohème" where Roger is asked by Mark to perform "a bittersweet, evocative song", but is interrupted when Mark says: "that doesn't

remind us of Musetta's Waltz" (referencing another piece of music from *La Bohème*) (Larson, pg. 42). This establishes that this melody acts as a sort of theme for Roger, and sets up the payoff at the end of the play where the melody is finally played in its entirety.

In addition to the eight main characters that primarily drive the story of *Rent*, there does exist an ensemble reminiscent of a Greek Chorus. The ensemble is present in the background of numerous scenes throughout the play, and generally comment on the state of the poor, or the state of those suffering from AIDS. They also are the characters that convey the message of the play as a whole, with the second act opener "Seasons of Love" being a prime example of that stating "525,600 minutes. 525,000 moments so dear. 525,600 minutes. How do you measure, measure a year. In daylights, and sunsets, in midnights and cups of coffee. In inches, in miles, in laughter and strife. In 525,600 minutes, how do you measure a year in the life? Measure in love... Seasons of love" (Larson, pg. 46). These lines represent the heart of one of the concepts Larson was trying to convey through the characters and plot of *Rent*. He tries to convey the idea that material things are not permanent and that measuring a life by those material things is inconsequential when looking at the bigger picture. Alternatively he argues that one should measure their lives in the people and the things that they love, as that love is what is the ultimately most important thing in life.

A difference between the concept of a Greek Chorus in its traditional sense compared to *Rent's* ensemble is that *Rent's* ensemble do occasionally have individual characters with names. These characters do not necessarily drive the plot

forward, but they serve to humanize the plight of the people that are talked about by the main characters, particularly Benny and Maureen. In particular there are characters of note that appear during the Life Support meeting that Angel, Collins, and Mark attend. Each of the ensemble members that are present in that moment are given names, and they introduce themselves to the group. Shortly after that introduction the leader of the group, Paul, has a conversation about the value of fear with a discouraged man with AIDS named Gordon. Giving these characters names gives them emotional weight, even though they do not have any real significance to the overall plot. Other characters of the ensemble that are given names or partial names are Alexi Darling who offers Mark a job at a cable network company in the second act, Mark's mother, Joanne's parents, and Benny's father-in-law. There are also moments where the individual characters don't necessarily matter and the ensemble does serve the purpose similar to that of a Greek Chorus, representing a group of people that comment on the action of the play and the world that the play takes place in. An example of this is during the song "Christmas Bells" which showcases the homeless population and their struggles with the authorities, drug addiction, and trying to make a living. All of these interpretations of Aristotle's concept of music are present in *Rent*, and heavily contribute to make *Rent* the piece of theatre that it is.

Spectacle

The sixth and final element of drama that Aristotle wrote about is "spectacle". Spectacle is in reference to any and all visual aspects of a piece of theatre ranging from the set, costumes, lights, and props. Aristotle does value this element below the

other elements, stating: “The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy... is felt even apart from representation and actors... the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet” (Aristotle, pg. 14). There is no consensus on whether Aristotle is considered to be correct in this respect, as the work of designers in a theatrical production are often just as important as any other aspect of the production. An argument can also be made that the technical elements that were available at the time of Aristotle’s writings were rudimentary in their artistic value due to the technology of the time, and as time passed the role of the designer became more prominent and more artistically minded. There is no way to tell what Aristotle would have thought about the artistic merit of the works of designers today, but there is some truth in the idea that the design of a piece is something separate from that which is written. However a playwright often does have references to setting and costume, so there is inherent value in the work of the designer in regards to the writing of the script.

The element of spectacle is the element that is most malleable and able to change, as every production of a piece of theatre is going to have different designers and different stages. A set design that may work for one theatre might be too big for another theatre, or the architecture of the building could provide challenges that other buildings don’t have. As such, it is difficult to examine the element of spectacle in regards to the artistic merit of a piece of theatre. However, it is possible to examine what is hinted at or explained in the script, and how that affects the overall

production. It is important to note that every production is going to be different, and it is not possible to definitively say what a production should look like. For the purpose of clarity and reference, the 2008 filmed production of *Rent*'s final performance on Broadway will be used. Many subsequent productions of *Rent* follow the guidelines and choices made by this production, although they are not the only choices that are possible with *Rent*'s script.

The element of spectacle is present in *Rent*, even if it is not as prominent as other similar Broadway productions. In a time period where Larson's predecessors were having chandeliers falling from above the heads of the audience and crashing onstage (*Phantom of the Opera*, 1986) or creating a rotating barricade made of chairs and everyday street objects for a battle scene with dozens of guns (*Les Misérables*, 1980), Larson decided to keep *Rent* somewhat minimalistic. He decided that the best way to tell the story that he was trying to tell with the characters that were going to tell it was to not distract the audience with an overabundance of scenery. The set is generally kept fairly bare, with tables and chairs being the most consistent thing that the audience sees onstage. Mark and Roger's apartment onstage is a table with paper posters adorning the back wall of the theater. This minimalism allows for multiple locations to be portrayed quickly, as the action of the piece is not slowed down by the presence of set changes. The different sets are shown as different configurations of that table and others, creating settings such as the Life Café at the end of the first act and creating the illusion of three separate locations on the same stage that happens during "Seasons of Love B" and "Without You". Keeping the set minimalistic allows for the audience to be able to make their

own connections and imaginations of what the setting looks like, and does not distract the audience from the action that is taking place at any given moment in the play.

The costumes are the technical element in *Rent* that most embody Aristotle's idea of spectacle, as they are generally a unique aspect of the technical design of *Rent*. Every character has a costume that suits their personality and style, including members of the ensemble. As the first act takes place over the course of one night, costume changes are minimal which allow the audience to analyze the choices that were made with the design and how each piece of clothing represents the character that is wearing it. Roger is dressed simply, with a simple dark-colored shirt and jeans. He is tattooed and has black nail polish, which shows his "rock star" personality as well as his "emo" style. Angel has multiple costumes that they wear that present their personality, as well as their gender identity at any given moment of the play. The first time that the audience sees Angel he is a street performer in a simple costume with a coat and hat. The next time that the audience sees Angel she is in a full drag costume with a red dress, platform heels, and a wig. This change shows the audience the different sides of Angel and the different kind of person that they identify themselves as: a male when dressed in street clothes, and a female when dressed in drag. These costume pieces help tell the story that Jonathan Larson is telling, and therefore have significant value in creating a piece of theatre. While spectacle is not as prevalent for a playwright as plot or character, it is present and necessary in order for an effective story to be told. *Rent* contains these elements of

spectacle that are necessary, and the use of spectacle helps guide and tell the story of *Rent* through visual aspects as well as the auditory aspects of speech and song.

CONCLUSION

When Jonathan Larson was writing *Rent*, he was a waiter living in an apartment with no heat and a bathtub in the kitchen. Little did he suspect that his work would come to inspire and change the lives of so many people both in and outside of the theatre community. Countless people have been a part of *Rent* productions in the 24 years that it has existed, and even more people have seen *Rent* throughout those years. The character roles that *Rent* exhibits have proved to be a challenge that actors and actresses strive to be able to have a chance to perform, and even to this day audiences are interested in attending new productions of *Rent*. *Rent* is a musical that has transcended the time period in which it was created to resonate with audiences spanning generations. The themes that *Rent* exemplifies have been an inspiration for people going through an AIDS diagnosis, battling addiction to drugs, or dealing with the grief of losing a loved one. When he created *Rent*, Larson created a musical that would touch countless people in ways that he could only imagine. It is not likely that Larson could have ever imagined the impact that his work would have upon the world.

Rent is an internationally-acclaimed piece of revolutionary theatre that has redefined the art of the musical and the business of Broadway. *Rent* brought an audience of the younger generations to the theatre, and every audience member that has had the privilege of seeing *Rent* throughout the years was changed due to the experience. Larson took the concept of the “rock musical” that was last seen in the 1960s and 1970s, and brought it to the 1990s in a way that would influence every musical that came after it in some way. Theatre was forever changed after the

creation of *Rent*, and *Rent* deserves its place in theatrical history. From its gripping plot, to its exquisitely crafted characters. From its timely and relevant themes, to the way that the words sound coming out of the mouths of the characters. From its electrifying music to its dazzling spectacle, *Rent* is a play that has stood the test of time and deserves to do so well into the future.

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VITA

Geran Ramet was born in Papillion, Nebraska on the 4th of April in 1995 and lived in the neighboring Omaha, Nebraska until 2018, after which he moved to Kansas City, Missouri. He graduated from Omaha Burke High School in 2013 and the University of Nebraska-Omaha in 2017. He started his theatrical career as a sound designer in 2010, mixing songs from different film scores to create atmospheric moods in Mary Zimmerman's stage adaptation of Homer's *The Odyssey* (2003) at Burke. In 2011 he started volunteering at the Omaha Community Playhouse, working on the scene change crew for their production of Frank Loesser's musical *Guys and Dolls* (1950). After working in several different departments at the Omaha Community Playhouse he was accepted into their Apprenticeship Program in 2012, from which he received a Certification of Apprenticeship in Technical Theatre with an emphasis in scenic carpentry in 2014. At this time he had also been accepted to attend the University of Nebraska-Omaha (U.N.O.) with a Regent's scholarship, where he pursued interests in directing and teaching. He made his directorial debut in 2016 with Diana Son's one-act play *The Moon Please* (2006), then his full-length debut in 2017 with Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things* (2001), both at U.N.O. After graduating from U.N.O. with a Bachelor's of Arts degree in Theatre with an Acting/Directing specialization, he worked as Assistant Director for numerous shows at the Rose Theatre, the Bellevue Little Theatre, and Nebraska Shakespeare. He was then accepted into the Master's of Arts in Theatre with emphasis in history and dramaturgy program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City with a Graduate Teaching Assistantship in 2018 and is expected to graduate in 2020.