

# RENT

AUGUST 22 - 27

BOOK, MUSIC,  
& LYRICS by  
Jonathan Larson

## - THE STORY -

On Christmas Eve, aspiring filmmaker Mark and his musician roommate Roger are joined in their East Village loft by their friends Angel and Collins and their young neighbor Mimi. Much to the chagrin of their landlord Benny, the group attends an event hosted by performance artist Maureen and her girlfriend Joanne to protest Benny's plans to evict local artists and unhoused people for a real estate development. Maureen's demonstration inspires them to celebrate their Bohemian lifestyle and relationships, but the looming challenges of life threaten to jeopardize everything they hold dear. Over the next year, the friends continue to search for artistic inspiration and love while they wrestle with the devastating effects of the HIV/AIDS crisis, resolving that their collective purpose in life is to enjoy whatever time they may have together.

## - THE CHARACTERS -

**MARK COHEN:** An introspective, artsy young documentary filmmaker

**ROGER DAVIS:** A struggling musician grappling with his HIV diagnosis

**TOM COLLINS:** A anarchist professor and computer genius with HIV

**BENNY COFFIN III:** The landlord of Mark and Roger's building, who they view as a sellout

**MAUREEN JOHNSON:** A bold, flirtatious performance artist and activist who recently left Mark for Joanne

**JOANNE JEFFERSON:** A sensible, intelligent public interest lawyer

**MIMI MARQUEZ:** An optimistic young dancer battling addiction and HIV

**ANGEL DUMOTT SCHUNARD:** A vibrant, generous drag queen and street percussionist with HIV

# MAKING THE MUSICAL

## FROM CONCEPT TO CREATION

Beginning in 1845, Henri Murger began publishing a series of semi-autobiographical short stories about bohemian life in the Latin Quarter of Paris. Murger's stories were popular among literary circles, and gained wider recognition when he adapted them into a play called *La vie de bohème* and a novel entitled *Scènes de la vie de bohème*.

In 1893 Italian composer Giacomo Puccini and writers Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa began work on a four-act opera inspired by Murger's writings. The opera, simply called *La bohème*, debuted on February 1, 1896, to an enthusiastic audience and quickly eclipsed Puccini's earlier works in popularity. *La bohème* continued to entertain audiences well into the 1900s and began to take on a new life in 1988 when playwright Billy Aronson had the idea to adapt the opera into a contemporary musical.



Jonathan Larson, 1996-American Theatre magazine

Aronson's vision was to transpose the story of *La bohème* to the arts community in modern-day New York City, which he saw as having many similarities to 1840s Paris. He was not a songwriter, so his colleagues recommended he work with Jonathan Larson, an emerging composer in New York. Aronson and Larson worked together off and on for a few years, but the project struggled to take off, so the duo parted ways and Larson set out to finish it on his own. Larson spent the early 1990s developing the musical, working as a waiter to pay the bills while he chased his theatrical dreams. He set the show, now titled **RENT**, amid the bohemian community of Manhattan's East Village and incorporated elements of the HIV/AIDS crisis ravaging the city. Sonically, he sought to infuse the show with a gritty rock sound that would, in his words, "bring musical theater to the MTV generation."

In the spring of 1993, the first staged reading of **RENT** was held at the New York Theatre Workshop. It became apparent that the show had promise but needed a lot of work, so Larson spent the next year heavily revising his draft. At a subsequent workshop in 1994, producers Kevin McCollum and Jeffrey Seller were so impressed with the show that they agreed to fund a full production before they'd even seen the second act. While Larson continued to tighten his script, the production team set out to build a cast, which consisted of up-and-coming actors like Anthony Rapp and rock singers like Adam Pascal and Idina Menzel. **RENT** was set to have its proper debut at the New York Theatre Workshop on January 25, 1996, almost exactly 100 years after the premiere of *La bohème*.



RENT at New York Theatre Workshop in 1996. Photo by Joan Marcus

There was significant buzz leading up to the first performance of **RENT**, and then early in the morning of January 25, Jonathan Larson unexpectedly died due to an undiagnosed heart condition. The grief-stricken cast and crew rallied together to perform for an ecstatic crowd of Larson's friends and family that evening. The show quickly sold out for the entirety of its Off-Broadway run, and it soon moved to the Nederlander Theatre for its Broadway premiere that spring. The creative team opted not to revise the show as it moved on, preferring to present Larson's chaotic, innovative concept just as he left it. **RENT** became an immediate sensation, dazzling critics with its moving story and drawing in younger audiences with its youthful energy and contemporary sound. The show ran for 12 years on Broadway, winning four Tony Awards and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and spawning dozens of tours and international productions. While Jonathan Larson did not live to see **RENT** become a massive success, the show remains a snapshot of his artistry at a specific moment in time, destined to inspire audiences for generations to come.

# JONATHAN LARSON'S LEGACY

RENT was Jonathan Larson's sole work to receive a high-profile production prior to his death, but it is far from the only thing he created. In the years leading up to RENT's Off-Broadway debut, Larson worked on many additional projects to various levels of completion, including musicals, films and dance pieces. With the Larson family's blessing, some of these have been completed by additional composers, while others remain untouched. Take a look at some of Larson's other compositions and the ways that his artistry continues to entertain and inspire audiences and actors today:



## *Saved!- An Immoral Musical on the Moral Majority*

SAVED! was one of Larson's first musicals, co-written with his classmate David Glenn Armstrong while they were students at Adelphi University. The cabaret-style show was originally performed at Adelphi under its original title SACRIMMORALINORITY in 1981. After graduating in 1982, the duo staged it in a four-week Off-Broadway showcase with its updated title.

## *Superbia*

SUPERBIA began in 1982 as an adaptation of George Orwell's novel 1984. When Larson was unable to obtain the rights to Orwell's novel, he decided to repurpose the material he had developed into an original sci-fi musical set in a dystopian future dominated by cameras and screens. Larson hosted several developmental workshops of SUPERBIA during the 1980s, heavily reworking the songs and story between each one. Still, no version of the show ever received a fully-staged production.

## *Tick, Tick... Boom!*

Larson began this project as a rock-based musical monologue titled BOHO DAYS, which focused on his frustrations with trying to get his work produced. He performed the show under its revised title at several small theatres in New York City while also developing **RENT**. After Larson's death, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright David Auburn reworked the monologue into a three-person show with a more focused plot. This semi-biographical version of TICK, TICK... BOOM! received wide praise during its Off-Broadway debut, has been produced in over a dozen languages, and was the basis for a 2021 film adaptation.

## *J.P. Morgan Saves the Nation*

Playwright Jeffrey M. Jones recruited Larson to write music for his story about finance mogul J.P. Morgan's impact on the American economy, particularly as he attempted to prevent a financial collapse during the panic of 1907. Larson's score was an eclectic medley of ragtime, showtunes and rock. The show was originally staged outdoors on Wall Street, in direct view of the Morgan Guaranty Trust Company building.

## *The Jonathan Larson Project*

This week-long concert series, spearheaded by theatre producer and historian Jennifer Ashley Tepper, included a collection of Larson's unheard songs. Pulling from early drafts of SUPERBIA and **RENT**, as well as Larson's other compositions and personal notebooks, the concert gave audiences a rare opportunity to hear more of Larson's unique creative voice. A recording of these performances was released in 2019.

## *Jonathan Larson Grants*

Since 1996, awards have been granted annually in Larson's memory to support up-and-coming theatre composers as they develop their work. Notable recipients include Amanda Green, Pasek & Paul, Shaina Taub and Michael R. Jackson.

# WORD SCRAMBLE

Unscramble these words from **RENT**, and use the circled letters from the answer to solve the final puzzle!

1.	<b>EALNG</b>	○	_____	_____	_____	_____
2.	<b>YBNEN</b>	○	_____	_____	_____	○
3.	<b>OEBMHAI</b>		○	_____	_____	_____
4.	<b>ANLDEC</b>				○	_____
5.	<b>AKRM</b>		○	_____	_____	
6.	<b>NEUREMA</b>			○	_____	_____
7.	<b>EINCRYWYOKT</b>	○	_____	_____	_____	_____
8.	<b>PSTOERT</b>				○	_____
9.	<b>GOERR</b>		○	_____	_____	
10.	<b>ODSUIT</b>		○		○	_____

**FINAL** \_\_\_\_\_

**ANSWERS:** 1. ANGEL; 2. BENNY; 3. BOHEMIA; 4. CANDLE; 5. MARK; 6. MAUREEN; 7. NEW YORK CITY; 8. PROTEST; 9. ROGER; 10. STUDIO; FINAL. NO DAY BUT TODAY

## - THINK ABOUT IT -

- **RENT** is heavily influenced by the plot of *La bohème* but makes some significant changes to update the story. Read a synopsis of *La bohème* - how are the two shows similar, and how are they unique? If you were writing a modern version of **RENT**, how might you update it more?
- Mark uses his filmmaking as a way to process the events happening around him. How have your hobbies or creative activities helped you make sense of the world?
- The Oxford Dictionary defines "bohemian" as "socially unconventional in an artistic way." How do the people, places and things listed in the song "La Vie Boheme" fit into that definition? What are some items or activities that you could consider bohemian today?
- The characters in **RENT** who are suffering from HIV/AIDS face a lot of hopelessness and rejection but find comfort with their friends and the Life Group. Why do you think there was such a negative perception of people experiencing this illness at the time? Research the changing attitudes about HIV/AIDS-how have things changed?