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Somewhat Informed: Zodrow's Performing Arts Column; Why I Love and Hate "Rent."

Andru Zodrow, News Editor

In 1996, the musical "Rent" premiered Off-Broadway in New York, but the playwright was not able to watch his work staged. Jonathan Larson tragically died the night before the opening performance. However, this did not stop "Rent" from becoming an instant sensation. By the end of 1996, Larson had posthumously won a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, Best Musical at the Tony awards, and "Rent" had moved to Broadway. Many of its original cast members, Idina Menzel, Taye Diggs and Anthony Rapp would go on to have fruitful careers in Hollywood and on Broadway. The show was a cultural titan until well into the new millennium.

There are few theater kids that do not adore "Rent" with passion, which is understandable given the subject matter. The show centers around starving artists Mark and Roger as their friend group struggles with the AIDS epidemic, poverty, addiction and loss. For every kid who dreams of sitting in the middle of a diverse group of thespians in New York's East Village, while in reality preparing for their midwestern high school's fourth production of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," "Rent" approximates a daydream. Despite the show's dark subject matter, there is an undeniably alluring quality to the lives of Rent's characters. They are fierce and independent—artists with integrity.

However, this is also the issue with "Rent." The show resides in an alternate universe in which the AIDS epidemic can be solved by a few upbeat musical numbers and white film students who choose not to listen to 'the man' or call their parents. These characters are considered heroes rather than arrogant.

"Rent" is the perfect theater kid show because it does not demand reflection upon institutions, just strong emotions. This is where "Rent" diverges from a structurally similar musical, "Les Miserables." While not perfect, "Les Miserables" is a musical that manages to preserve the message of its source material: a lack of empathy for the disenfranchised within the dominant cultural structure that destroys the lives of the poor. "Rent" does not point to the Reagan administration's willing negligence in ignoring the AIDS epidemic, and does not even seriously address homophobia.

The lack of critical reflection on the causes of pain that the cast suffers from is stark. Mark and Roger, the proxy characters for the audience, dance around the stage with vague philosophical problems about commercializing art—ironic considering that "Rent" would go on to be one of the most commercially successful musicals of all time and spawn a 2005 film adaptation. While Roger deals with AIDS, his illness becomes a mechanism by which the plot reaches a crescendo in its final song, a second rendition of "Seasons of Love."—

Roger never grapples with a lack of access to care and spends his days writing a song to be remembered by, which is a romantic notion, but not one that reflects the horrifying reality of dying from an incurable disease.

With all of this being said, there is still greater reason as to why "Rent" is beloved by millions. Jonathan Larson's play was the first majorly successful play on Broadway to feature a primarily queer cast. While "The Boys in the Band" and "Angels in America" came before it, the fact is that, for the vast majority of Americans, there had never been anything quite like "Rent" before. For many gay, bisexual, lesbian and transgender theater fans, "Rent" was the first time that the characters on stage looked and acted like them. The theater community has always been enriched by the significant presence of LGBTQ+ individuals, but until "Rent," the stage was not reflectant of this.

From a modern perspective, "Rent" fumbles in almost every way. The portrayal of bisexuals as sexually promiscuous and uncommitted is problematic, it is unsure of how to handle its single transgender character and the AIDS crisis is not adequately handled. However, and despite its flaws, it was a start. It would be difficult to find a play that has premiered on Broadway in the past ten years that has not featured some form of LGBTQ+ representation. There is an increasingly large body of dramatic work dedicated to LGBTQ+ stories specifically.

This is the mixed legacy of "Rent." The show focuses on the privileged problems of its straight protagonists while treating the far greater issues of its queer ones as fillers. It is a show for theater kids—bombastic, fun and mind-numbingly unaware. However, it also skyrocketed the careers of several huge stars, set the precedent for stories about the LGBTQ+ community to succeed in mainstream media and made a generation of young people feel more comfortable in their own skin.

I struggle to reconcile these two sides to "Rent." The plot has not aged well, and the message is muddled. Yet, I cannot help but adore songs like "Seasons of Love" and "What You Own." Even with a mediocre film adaptation frustratingly lacking social commentary as two of its most lasting legacies, "Rent" still stands as a musical with value because of the progress it made for queer theater.

There are many shows better than "Rent" written not just about the LGBTQ+ community, but also by the LGBTQ+ community. Nevertheless, "Rent" paved the way for these superior shows, which is cause for gratitude. While many hail it as sacred and others condemn it as terrible, "Rent" will always be a little bit of both, and it lit the candle for LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream theater.