

20 Years Later, RENT Resonates Through Timeless Themes

07/31/2016 08:47 pm ET
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When RENT opened in 1996, its glum stage reflected East Village settings mired in poverty, addiction, and disease. Twenty years later, luxury condos replace tenements, and foodies dine where squatters sought shelter. Suddenly, criticism suggesting gentrification rendered Rent irrelevant mirrors main character fears about progress.

Composer, [Jonathan Larson](#), wrote the show, in part, as a memorial to friends who died during the first wave of the AIDS epidemic. Rent is a snapshot of dismal Alphabet City living conditions in which drug dealers thrived on urban blight. Gentrification and AIDS survival rates have challenged Rent's relevance in the 21st century, but while the show might be of an era, it is not bound by era.

Rent has forged an indelible connection with fans through common themes and music as diverse as its characters. Although Larson wrote a show which reflects his experiences, his overarching messages elevate Rent from personal to universal.

Yet as with anything popular, detractors bear their fangs. [Caroline Framke of Vox Culture](#) writes Rent's relevance has withered because it "embodies the 90's." Framke argues, "its status as an important piece of art has devolved from musical wunderkind to frequent punchline." She goes on to suggest the soundtrack is too influenced by grunge music the short shelf-life of which traps the piece in a time capsule. Considering Rent grandfathered shows such as [Next to Normal](#) and [Spring Awakening](#), and served as an inspiration to Lin-

Manuel Miranda (*In the Heights* and *Hamilton*), it is hard to accept *Rent* as homeless within today's pop culture landscape.

Naysayers might also cite the extent to which [fewer lives than ever before are claimed by AIDS](#), but [Jonathan Larson](#) wrote the show to memorialize friends lost during the first wave of the syndrome he incorporated into his masterpiece as a modern day Tuberculosis.

If written today, characters stricken with HIV might not face so grim a fate. Characters who took only [azidothymidine \(AZT\)](#) would now take it in a "cocktail" as HIV becomes AZT resistant over time. It is possible imminent doom dilutes Larson's message to appreciate each moment, a motif strewn throughout *Rent*'s music.

Such perspective is short sighted when considering the extent to which *Rent* is about love, loss, and community. No matter the context, those themes are boundless. They were relevant to Rodolfo in [La Bohème](#), Larson's inspiration for *Rent*; remained so in *Rent*, and will be as long as human hearts beat.

Roger, a character originated by [Adam Pascal](#), is imprisoned by pain and isolation caused by his HIV status and the death of his love, April. Only when Roger accepts love from his makeshift family, and allows romance to permeate him again does he experience a renaissance of purpose and creativity. We relate to the dangers of isolation, and the extent to which we are revitalized when we permit ourselves to be fostered by community. Roger is saved when he opens himself to vulnerability created by risk of loss.



Original Broadway Cast of Rent in 1996

Fewer people may die from AIDS today, but what makes *Rent* timeless is the understood impact of loss, best depicted in the show through the death of Angel, soulmate of Tom Collins. Angel's death is an emotional apex as each audience member empathizes not only with grief, but with fear of dignity stripped by the indignity of disease.

Rent also posits the value of mindfulness. Larson implores us to not look far behind, or ahead. In mental health, focus on the past is associated with depression while worry about the future is connected to anxiety. Perhaps *Rent*

best personifies the value of mindfulness through the death of Jonathan Larson on the eve of previews. That he never savored the success of his master work implores us to appreciate every moment.

Perhaps none of Rent's themes resonates more than love as a minefield of peril and bliss as tumult within romantic love flavors the narrative. It is portrayed through Joanne and Maureen's struggle to accept each other's individuality, a concept familiar to any couple or couple's therapist. It is further displayed through Angel and Collins, who shelter each other from the ravages of AIDS; and through the complex romance of Roger and Mimi. When each lets the other in, Roger is reborn, and Mimi turns away from needles.

Decades after the curtain first raised at the Nederlander Theater, the cast remains connected. Adam Pascal tours frequently with [Anthony Rapp](#), as they will for a series of concerts later this year celebrating [20 Years of Friendship](#). Pascal also tours on occasion with original Mimi, [Daphne Rubin Vega](#), where the two rekindle chemistry through songs composed for Rent. Those tunes are always an emotional high point.

Rent will also be celebrated this year with a [20th Anniversary Tour](#) through several American cities, and a quick internet search reveals [current productions of the show are widespread](#).

Jonathan Larson composed a transcendent musical the notes of which touch anyone who has loved and lost. Those who have seen Rent, from theater dilettantes dragged on dates, to [Rentheads](#) who ritualized the daily ticket lottery, understand life is best measured by our connections to one another as our lives lose meaning without a community to give attestation.

Revivals, tours, and community theater productions ensure Larson's vision remains in public consciousness. There is also a commissioned [High School edition](#), ensuring his work lives through student artists who embrace the

notion, "*The Opposite of War Isn't Peace. It's Creation,*" an ideal sure to live in perpetuity.

Rent is not a dated punchline from a long gone era. On the contrary, it is a timeless musical whose themes of love, loss, and the value of community bridge generational gaps, and will continue to do so while it emphasizes the importance of individuality in a time when we continue to struggle to embrace diversity and acceptance.