

As the Show Goes On...
(An Analysis of Mainstream Reaction to *Rent*)

As Hallie Flanagan, once the head of the Federal Theatre Project, put it, “Theatre, at its best, is always dangerous” (qtd. in Miller vii). Musical theater proves itself to be a forum for important issues, whether it is overt or implied—*Les Miserables* and *Ragtime* deal with social issues; *Carousel* and *Oklahoma* are about domestic violence; *Chicago* and *Anyone Can Whistle* enter the realm of political corruption. It not only dares to present dangerous subject matter, it brings them to the forefront of society’s consciousness.

One controversial subject matter that is closely tied to the domain of musicals is the gayness that circulates through it. Author John M. Clum declares, “Musicals were always gay. They always attracted a gay audience, and, at their best, even in times of a policed closet, they were created by gay men” (9). Throughout its history, the musical accommodated itself to the constant mainstream prejudice against the issue of homosexuality. It also simultaneously managed to reflect the changing styles of its closeted gay creators and earn the enthusiastic support of the gay men in the audience (Clum 2). Since the end of the golden era of the American musical (roughly at the end of World War I), there has been a gay liberation on, and behind, the theater stage (Clum 1). Specifically after the Stonewall rebellion, openly gay musicals have evolved and have become part of the repertoire of the American theater, commercial *and* fringe (Clum 10). Some would see the phenomenon of *Rent* in 1996 as the epitome of that, bringing the forbidden content of gayness to overwhelming commercial success, through an exploding

revival of Broadway rock music. Tracking the feedback the media has delivered over the years, it is encouraging to see that there has been a noteworthy growth of acceptance to a specific sense of what may be called “gay culture.” Just within the recent years, the media and general public have visibly taken steps away from their own narrow closets. The question now, however, is whether this “step” is equivalent to the actual mindset behind it—have the media and public actually become more tolerant? Or has the concern of what is politically correct become too great to challenge?

With the onset of the 1980s came a grave new era that sobered the party scene of the preceding decade of disco. America (particularly gay America) was faced with the devastating brutality of a virtually unknown epidemic. The gay community actively took on the alarming outbreak, acknowledging its dreadful effect on their own community. It was then that the theater once again utilized its medium as a means of communicating and discussing the imperative contemporary issues.

“We didn’t want to go to Broadway to become Broadway stars; we went to kick the motherfuckin’ doors of Broadway open, because it’s old-school and stodgy” (qtd. in Miller 185). *Rent* was a cultural phenomenon immediately after its 1996 opening, despite its dangerous edge and traditionally taboo content. It depicted a kind of bohemia ravaged by AIDS, focusing on a group of kids who were leading a fashionably dissident life in New York (Clum 269). Younger audiences finally had something to identify with; “a show that young people particularly can claim as their own,” David Roman, 38, USC English professor, says “The musical speaks to them of contemporary issues relevant to their lives, and the utopian feelings in the musical about the possibilities of love, friendship, community are very powerful” (qtd. in Pacheco F6). Through a brilliant

bridging of contemporary theater music and eclectic rock/pop, *Rent* narrates a modern sketch concerning sexuality, gayness, drugs and AIDS. Clum, speaking of his students, asks, “How could an ultraconservative Republican kid love a musical filled with dope addicts, lesbians, and drag queens, and whose villain is a yuppie real estate tycoon?” (273). For the younger generation, *Rent* has become a representation of rebellion, and a means of rebelling vicariously, even for those that are far from being rebels themselves. The fact that there are gay men, lesbian women, drag queens and a young lifestyle saturated by AIDS seems to communicate *in vogue* rather than *indecent*.

Along with overwhelming public approval, the media also embraced the bold themes of the musical, calling it an “exhilarating, landmark rock opera...[shimmering] with hope for the future of the American musical” (qtd. in Miller 185). *Time* magazine claimed it to be “the most exuberant and original American musical to come along this decade,” and was hailed “the best new musical since the 1950s” by the *Wall Street Journal* (qtd. in Miller 185). *Rent* went on to be nominated for ten Tony Awards, four of which it won, and a dozen more miscellaneous theater awards (Miller 185). The cast members were soon in such mainstream publications as *Newsweek*, *New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Harper’s Bazaar*. They appeared on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Charlie Rose Show*, and *The Tonight Show*, and sang “Seasons of Love” at the 1996 Democratic National Convention. Their show got profile exposure through television news shows such as *Hard Copy* and *Prime Time Live* (Miller 185).

New York Times’ political columnist and former senior theater critic Frank Rich wrote, “At so divisive a time in our country’s culture, *Rent* shows signs of revealing a large, untapped appetite for something better” (qtd. in Miller 186). The media, unable to

deny the success, impact, and, according to many, the genius involved with Jonathan Larson's *Rent*, fell into the general funnel of support for the production—even if it was half-heartedly. The classical music reviewer and the pop music reviewer for the *Times* both evaluated the flourishing musical, neither of them enthusiastic but both finding much to admire (Miller 180).

Before, and even during, the shattering success of *Rent*, there were those involved in the production that revealed some angst about the potential reach of the show's stardom. In an interview, director Michael Greif tells *South Bend Tribune* that “audiences in New York have been filled with tourists from across the country, but the play's subject matter may be a bit more difficult as a hometown sell,” prints the *Tribune* (Bornstein E6). “Combining one heterosexual and two gay couples, a drug-addicted Mimi and four HIV-positive leads, *Rent* addresses homelessness, disease, sexuality and American mores in blunt, if moving, terms” (Bornstein E6). In agreement, the Midwest's *Star Tribune* had published an article addressing the same topic nine days earlier as a page one News article:

It has been uncertain how this tale, updated to New York's gritty East Village and involving avant-garde artists, gays, lesbians and AIDS, would play out outside New York. McCullum (one of the producers) admitted that “the St. Paul production will be the first to test the show in America's heartland.” But he said he had confidence that the passion and heart of the show would parry any Midwestern conservatism (Steele 1A).

The straight media, for the most part, has been “trained” to be extremely cautious when reporting on gay issues. Up until only a few years ago were they taught that the term “gay” (which has lost its original meaning of “happy, colorful, energetically frivolous” etc.) was to be substituted for the term they were familiar with—

“homosexual,” which kept a sort of (medically) derogatory connotation to it. Today’s reporting, and reviewing, has become almost oversensitive as to what is considered politically correct, and when it comes to the gay community it’s no exception. However, it is evident that issues of gay reality and gay representation are still in an ongoing struggle to be received graciously, with or without the media communicating it directly.

Although Anthony Rapp, a member of the original cast of *Rent*, sees his celebrity as a means of helping gay youth, his character was straight. The two gay men in the performance (Collins and Angel) were played by straight performers, and, as usual, were specifically advertised as straight (Clum 273). In an interview with the Montreal actors who had, at the time, just made Canada’s *Rent* cast, *The Gazette* seemed to have made it a strong point to call attention to the fact that the gay characters are played by straight actors. Identifying the actor, Blanco, as the individual who would be playing the part of Collins, who is gay, *The Gazette* followed immediately with the reality that “...Blanco, who has a 3-year old daughter, isn’t” (Donnelly D3). Not only is he not gay, which is said as bluntly as possible, he has sired a child, no less. The actor reportedly had some reservations at first about playing the gay part, but “he got over it,” the paper printed (Donnelly D3). When introducing Montreal’s other *Rent* star, who happens to be playing a lesbian role in the musical, the publication placed the two actors in a similar situation, “Only she’s had practice” the reporter wrote, referring to her well known lesbian role in Canadian entertainment (Donnelly D3). Again, the article insisted that “just for the record, she’s straight. Her boyfriend is following her to Toronto,” once again providing solid proof—she has a boyfriend (Donnelly D3).

Other slight slips of language possibly demonstrate viewpoints that may or may not have been to intentionally deliver subliminal disapproval of the content in *Rent*. *The Buffalo News*, in December of 1997, printed a review on *Rent* that seemed generally in favor of the musical success. Aside from a critique of the character Angel, saying that his “transvestite garb was not outrageous and flamboyant enough to make it obvious that this was a man in drag,” journalist Herman Trotter supplied another interesting quote: “The richly varied textures of the sets, music and performances, however, ought to be ample to make the Toronto run of *Rent* a near-sellout all the way” (24G). Well, besides the set, music and performance, what else is left? Possibly the content? It’s a good thing those three aspects of the production (that can be assessed completely independently of the improper content) can cover enough to ensure the same success in this run as it did in its previous tremendous runs.

In addition, controversy, soon found its way to the mega-hit, leading to some negative coverage. Lawsuits were filed against Larson’s family and the *Rent* estate for a share of the show’s profits: Larson’s colleague from New York Theatre Workshop sued the family and lost. Sarah Schulman claimed aspects of her novel, *People in Trouble*, were stolen by Larson and put to use in his lucrative musical, but she too had lost legally (Miller 186). The frame had gradually transformed from rave reviews to discrediting the hit musical. This transformation, however, led to, not only negative coverage in general, but, some rather unenthusiastic judgments from gay critics.

Schulman, a lesbian playwright and novelist, has written a book-length critique of the show’s representation of lesbians, gay men, and AIDS. About reception of Collins and Angel (a gay couple in *Rent*) by the straight audience, she writes:

They kiss on stage while the transvestite is wearing a dress. The audience is reconfirmed in their own sense of how tolerant they are. Gay men wear dresses. They die. How sad. What a relief. Well, that's what happens to gay people, I guess. They're secondary subplots. That's their place, even in the story of AIDS (148).

From a 1997 article in the Toronto Star, Schulman asserts that by altering the perspective of the story, Larson also subtly altered the meaning of it. “Now—in *Rent*—straight people are the heroes of the AIDS crisis, which is just not true,” she quotes in the article (qtd. in Obejas D1). “In *Rent*, straight people never have to deal with the guilt of having abandoned gay people during the AIDS crisis” (qtd. in Obejas D1). Clum, a gay author, agrees, affirming that “this quasi-bohemian community has been created by a straight white male...we still have a gay character alive at the end, but the transgressive one, the one Mother in Long Island would have the most trouble accepting, is killed off while the heterosexuals with AIDS are alive at the final curtain” (272). At the very least, however, Clum acknowledges that the *Rent* recognizes the existence of “queerness at the margins of a marginal society,” but reaffirms towards the end of his book that “*Rent* has gay characters, but it isn't really gay” (274).

It might have been nice to see more of these opinions on *Rent* and its non-straight substance at the beginnings of publications—places readers would actually be able to notice without specifically searching for it. One must keep in mind, however, *Rent* is still Broadway Theater, and Broadway Theater is still within the bounds of the Entertainment, Arts, and “Gusto” pages. So although many may want to see these theater reviews further up on the layout food chain of newspapers, many others prefer them to remain in the back pages, both because they fit the criteria of those pages and also in order not to

separate gay-themed theater from straight-themed (arguably mainstream) theater (paralleling society as a whole).

In the complex scheme of the modern day, the evolution of society has brought some unexpected, almost ironic, twists. “It’s expected nowadays that a musical will give you gay people and people different from those in Westchester, but politics is the great American taboo. What the straight middle-class kids who flock to *Rent* buy now is the racial assimilation the show represents and the hipness of being anti-homophobic, if not particularly pro-gay” (Clum 273). The phenomenon of *Rent* could very well be a hugely influential vehicle for where we are about gayness in the Broadway Theater. In WASP America, however, there is no doubt still a large portion of the population that simply will not let themselves overcome certain expressions of a narrow mind; they are now just forced through a thick, unforgiving filter (commonly known as being politically correct), especially when it is presented as media coverage.

“... ‘Rent’ does not attempt to cater to what marketers and politicians erroneously call ‘middle American’ or ‘family’ values. The fact that all three main couples are interracial holds as little shock value as their sexual orientation or their HIV status. These marginal people cannot afford the luxury of prejudice. They have to rely on one another to survive, and therein lies the lesson. These days such a lesson is lot to carry away from musical theater, and it feels good to stretch out and meet the load” (Habich 7F).