

Note from our *RENT* Dramaturg...

He wrote like he was running out of time.

Musical-theatre wunderkind Jonathan Larson, only in his mid-twenties, wrote music like he knew he was on a deadline.

"He lived at his keyboards, and all he did was compose and write," former roommate Jonathan Burkhart told *Playbill* in 2016. "He was prolific."

His passion project? Of all things, a rock opera. An adaptation of Puccini's *La Bohème* for the MTV generation — or, rather, the AIDS generation. This was a generation drifting away from the theater; not since *Hair* in 1968 had a work spoken so directly to youth. Larson cracked the code, though.

But Larson, who died January 25, 1996, the day before his masterwork's first off-Broadway preview performance, didn't know how precarious his own health was. He didn't know about the ticking time bomb in his aorta, which would tear and end his brief life at only age 35.

But he did know how many friends were dying. The early 1990s were the height of the AIDS crisis in America. First recognized in 1981, AIDS became the leading cause of death for all Americans ages 25 to 44 by the year 1994. New York City and its theatrical community were hit especially strong.

In *La Bohème*, the bohemians are struggling with tuberculosis. After a brainstorm by Larson's initial collaborator, playwright Billy Aronson, *Rent* would capture the lives of people surrounded by drugs, poverty and AIDS—much as Larson and his coterie were. Larson, in fact, regularly attended meetings of Friends in Deed, a grief support group that inspired *Rent*'s Life Support group.

With all of that death around him, and with his tireless drive to make his time on earth count, is it any wonder that the fleeting nature of human life is the centerpiece of the show's main anthem, "Seasons of Love"? "How do you measure the life of a woman or a man?" the song asks. "Measure in love," it answers.

Larson and his collaborators, including many of the cast members who stayed with the show through its Broadway premiere, worked tirelessly for seven years to bring *Rent* to life. It premiered at a 1993 workshop production at New York Theatre workshop; in 1996, almost exactly 28 years before ALT audiences will enjoy the community theater's first production of *Rent*, the full staging officially celebrated its off-Broadway opening in the same space—100 years after *La Bohème* itself premiered.

Following Larson's tragic death, interest in *Rent* would skyrocket. Within weeks, it transferred to the Nederlander Theatre on Broadway, where demand was so high that devoted fans would camp out for hours, hoping to score rush tickets—a practice still followed today for shows like *Hamilton*.

"No one had ever seen that before ever in the history of theatre," Burkhart told Playbill, "so each day there was an awakening with a new audience, and word-of-mouth was just exploding out of that theatre, and each day the ticket sales were going faster and faster and faster."

Rent would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the 1996 Tony Award for Best Musical. A true sensation, it ran for 12 years on Broadway.

"His songs have urgency — a sense of mourning and mystery which insists on seizing the moment," critic John Lahr wrote in *The New Yorker*. "Larson's ... talent and his big heart are impossible to miss. His songs spill over with feeling and ideas; his work is both juicy and haunting."

That's no less true in ALT's first staging of this iconic musical. Even as AIDS recedes from the public consciousness—thanks largely to the advent of drug regimens that make it a chronic, rather than a fatal disease—*Rent* still haunts. It reminds us of the unrealized potential of a generational talent. It, like the AIDS Memorial Quilt hanging tonight in the lobby, reminds us of the countless lives lost to the disease.

And yet, it still gives us hope. Unlike *La Bohème*, *Rent* isn't an unrepentant tragedy. And, as you'll see in tonight's breathtaking finale, even those we've lost remain near us.

Chip Chandler