



Jonathan Larson.
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Larson, Jonathan (1960-1996)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Although apparently heterosexual, Jonathan Larson, the theater composer, librettist, and playwright, wrote sympathetically and persuasively about a diverse community of artists, many of whom identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender.

Almost twenty years after his death, Larson's sexuality remains, if not exactly contentious, at least ambiguous. Although he is sometimes described as gay, others contend that he was heterosexual. It is also alleged that a plot incident in one of his plays, in which a woman leaves a man for another woman, is autobiographically inspired, i.e., a girlfriend of his left him for a woman.

As the theater critic Charles Isherwood noted in the *New York Times*, Larson "lived among and loved the people he [wrote] about, ached for their losses, expressed their fears, dreams and everyday indignities in sharp lyrics and evocative melodies." From that perspective, the question of his own sexuality is less important than his ability to identify with a particular milieu in which glbtq values prevail. Moreover, Larson's deepest emotional relationships seem to have been with men.

Larson is best known as the composer and writer of the critically and commercially successful "rock opera," *Rent*, an innovative reimagining of Giacomo Puccini's opera *La Bohème*, with Puccini's struggling artists transported from 1830s Paris to New York's East Village in the 1990s.

The show, first produced in 1996, was inspired, in part, by Larson's need to respond in some way to his friends who were coping with the onslaught of AIDS, and to celebrate the lives of those who had died so young and so tragically.

Frank Rich, writing in the *New York Times*, observed that Larson "takes the very people whom politicians now turn into scapegoats for our woes--the multicultural, the multisexual, the homeless, the sick--and, without sentimentalizing them or turning them into ideological symbols or victims, let them revel in their joy, their capacity for love, and most important in their tenacity, all in a ceaseless outpouring of melody."

Tragically, in the early morning hours of January 25, 1996, just after the last dress rehearsal for *Rent*, and before the show's first scheduled public performance, Larson was found dead of an aortic aneurysm.

A few hours before his death, Larson gave his first and only interview, to Anthony Tommasini, the chief music critic for the *New York Times*. In that interview, Larson discussed something he had learned from a friend with AIDS: "It's not how many years you live, but how you fulfill the time you spend here. That's sort of the point of [*Rent*]."

Larson was awarded posthumously the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Rent*, as well as three Tony Awards for Best Musical, Best Original Book, and Best Original Score.

Jonathan Larson was born on February 4, 1960 in White Plains, New York, to Allan and Nanette Larson.

He was actively involved in the arts throughout his childhood, taking piano lessons from an early age, playing the tuba in his high school's marching band, and singing in the school's choir. He also loved the theater, and was cast in several high school plays, including being awarded the lead role of Tevye in his school's production of *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Larson attended Adelphi University on Long Island, New York, with a full, four-year academic scholarship. While at university, he concentrated on acting rather than on music, but in his spare time wrote songs for several of the school's cabaret revues, as well as the score to the musical *Libro de Buen Amor*, with book and lyrics by the head of the theater department, Jacques Burdick, who became Larson's mentor during his college years.

Another early mentor and champion of his work was the American musical theater legend Stephen Sondheim. Larson first came into contact with Sondheim while still a student, and later occasionally submitted his work for Sondheim's assessment. In fact, Larson often credited Sondheim for encouraging him to concentrate on his work as a composer rather than pursue a career in acting.

After Larson's death, Sondheim revealed how he "welled up" when he first heard a tape recording of some of Larson's work, in part because, as Sondheim noted, it was "generous music," merging the musical theater traditions of past generations with more contemporary-sounding rock.

While still a student, Larson wrote an experimental musical titled *Sacrimmoralinority*, co-written with fellow student David Glenn Armstrong, which was first staged at Adelphi University in 1981. The show was later renamed *Saved!--An Immoral Musical on the Moral Majority*. Both Larson and Armstrong received awards for their work on the show in 1982 from The American Society of Composers, Author and Publishers (commonly known as ASCAP).

In 1982, Larson graduated from Adelphi with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in acting from the university's theater department. Upon graduating, he immediately moved to Manhattan and into a fifth-floor loft with no heat and a bathtub in the kitchen. He lived in this same space until his death in 1996, sharing the loft with a variety of roommates over the years.

He supported himself financially as a waiter in the evenings at the Moondance Diner, in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan, while composing music on an electric keyboard in his apartment during the day.

Between 1983 and 1990, Larson worked on a futuristic rock opera titled *Superbia* (a Latin term for the deadly sin of "pride"). The work began as a retelling of the George Orwell novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but the Orwell estate denied him permission to adapt it. Larson revised the story, but the work remained a dark, dystopian vision of the future.

Superbia was given a workshop at New York's Playwrights Horizon and a rock concert version was performed at the Village Gate in 1989. Larson also received a Richard Rogers Development Grant from the American Academy of Arts and Letters for his musical.

Although several influential people in the musical theater world were impressed with Larson's efforts, the show was deemed too big in scope and too angry in tone. Consequently, Larson was unsuccessful in finding producers interested in giving the work a full-scale production, which disappointed him greatly.

During the years he worked on *Superbia*, several friends of Larson's succumbed to the AIDS epidemic. When one of his friends from high school, Matthew O'Grady, with whom Larson remained close, learned he was

HIV-positive, Larson was the first friend he told.

Through O'Grady, Larson got involved with Friends in Deed, an organization dedicated to providing emotional and spiritual support to anyone with HIV/AIDS or other life-threatening illnesses. As O'Grady explained in an interview after Larson's death, "Jonathan came with me to meetings and held my hand. He went through this with me."

Larson next worked on a smaller, and, he hoped, less expensive show to produce, which he variously titled *Boho Days*, *30/90*, and finally *Tick, tick … BOOM!* It is an angry, intense, and self-referential solo show about a man named Jon, an aspiring composer of musical theater, who wakes up on his 30th birthday and complains, in song, about his frustrated ambitions and the perilous times in which he lives, among other things. Toward the end of the show, Jon learns that his best friend is HIV-positive.

The show is dedicated to Larson's friend Matthew O'Grady.

Larson performed the solo show himself in his agent's office for various producers and backers in May 1990, and later took it to the Village Gate for a limited engagement, but the show never received a full theatrical production in Larson's lifetime.

Over a decade later, however, with the help of playwright David Auburn and musical director Stephen Oremus, Larson's 45-minute monologue was turned into a one-act play for three characters--Jon, his girlfriend Susan, and his best friend Michael, who discovers he has AIDS.

The show opened Off-Broadway in 2001, starring the bisexual actor Raúl Esparza as Jon. It received the 2001 Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Off-Broadway Musical. Larson himself was nominated posthumously for the 2002 Drama Desk Awards for Outstanding Book, Music, and Lyrics.

Many friends remarked how working on *Tick, tick … BOOM!* had changed Larson's attitude and outlook toward his art. He had been able to express his anger and frustrations in the solo show and could now move forward, toward a more peaceful and accepting perspective.

"Somehow Jonathan found the nerve to keep working in the diner, to be true to his art, to realize that life was to be lived a day at a time," the documentary filmmaker Edward Rosenstein, a friend of Larson's, noted. "How could he kvetch about his struggles when friends were dying?"

This new attitude altered the tone of his next show, *Rent*.

The idea for the musical that would eventually become *Rent* originated with the playwright Billy Aronson in 1988. Aronson, an opera buff, wanted to create a contemporary American version of his favorite Puccini opera *La Bohème*, set in New York's Upper West Side.

Larson recognized parallels between Puccini's bohemians and his own circle of friends, young artists with raw talent who work low-wage jobs in order to support their art, and who live in an urban environment unsettled by drugs, poverty, and disease.

He jumped at the chance to collaborate with Aronson. Larson came up with the show's title, and suggested setting it in the East Village, which at the time was much grungier than the Upper West Side. The two men worked together on the show for several years, but by 1991 Aronson had lost interest in the collaboration, and Larson asked if he could take over the material himself.

The parting was friendly. Larson wrote a formal letter to Aronson stating that "if any such miracle as a

production ever happens," he would give Aronson credit and compensation for the idea. When *Rent* was eventually produced, Aronson was credited for "original concept/additional lyrics."

Larson's book and lyrics, as Charles Isherwood noted, "are steeped in references to the physical and psychological struggles faced by people with AIDS in the 1980s and '90s, before the drug cocktails that have made the disease more manageable. Four of the play's main characters--the heroin-addicted Mimi; her ex-heroin-addict boyfriend Roger; the black activist Tom Collins; and his lover, Angell--are HIV-positive."

Rent was given its first staged reading at the New York Theatre Workshop in 1993. It received a second staged reading in 1994, where it won a Richard Rogers Studio Production Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Larson's mentor, Stephen Sondheim, who had earlier seen a workshop production of *Superbia* and admired it, was the jury chairman. "[Sondheim] has been a huge supporter of my work," Larson later remarked in an interview. "Whenever I have a problem, he is always there."

On January 26, 1996, a full production of the show opened at the New York Theatre Workshop for an initial six-week run. The show was directed by Michael Greif, and starred a cast of mostly unknown actors.

The Off-Broadway show received largely ecstatic reviews and *Rent* was quickly moved to Broadway, with the entire cast intact.

Ben Brantley, writing in the *New York Times*, called the show "one of the most genuinely dramatic--and cathartic--nights at the theater I've ever spent." He also noted that what makes *Rent* so "wonderful," is its "extraordinary spirit of hopeful defiance and humanity," and observed that Larson had "conceived the show's surrogate family of fringe artists, drag queens and HIV-infected drug users with such rich affection and compassion that it is impossible not to care about them."

Jeremy Gerard, writing in the trade publication *Variety*, called *Rent* "the best show in years, if not decades," and enthused that the show "makes the musical theater joyously important again."

The many awards Larson received posthumously for *Rent* include the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, four Drama Desk Awards for Outstanding Musical, and Outstanding Music, Lyrics, and Book of a Musical, and three Tony Awards for Best Musical, Best Original Book, and Best Original Score.

Rent remains one of the longest-running and highest-grossing shows in American musical theater history, with multiple touring companies performing around the world.

Sadly for Larson, however, he was never able to enjoy the accolades he and his show received.

In the final weeks of rehearsals leading up to the show's first public performances, Larson was twice rushed to emergency rooms, both times complaining of severe chest pains. At the first hospital, he was diagnosed with a case of food poisoning and sent home. Two days later, he was again rushed to an emergency room where doctors told him he had a virus and released him.

On January 25, 1996, just hours before his show's first performance in previews, Larson was found dead on his kitchen floor at the age of 35.

An autopsy revealed that he had died of an aortic aneurysm, a more than foot-long tear inside his aorta, the main artery carrying blood from the heart to all the other organs, which was caused by a congenital weakness in the blood vessel.

Poignantly, several hours before his death, Larson participated in an interview for the *New York Times*. "I'm happy to say that other commissions are coming up," he revealed, "and think I may have a life as a composer."

In light of Larson's death, a four-month long investigation, led by the New York State Health Department was conducted. In the end, both hospitals where Larson had sought emergency treatment were fined several thousand dollars for the poor quality of care he received and for failing to diagnose the potentially treatable condition that killed him.

In 1997, Larson's parents founded the Jonathan Larson Performing Arts Foundation in his memory, which offers financial help to playwrights, composers, lyricists, and producing companies.

They have also worked tirelessly to increase awareness of an inherited connective-tissue disorder called Marfan syndrome, which they believe their son died from. The syndrome can produce a fatal tearing of the aorta, but can be treated if diagnosed in time.

In 2005, *Rent* was adapted into a movie directed by Chris Columbus, with a screenplay by Stephen Chbosky. Most of the original cast members of the show reprised their roles on film. The movie was met with mixed reviews, but was commercially successful, nonetheless.

In November 1996, Lynn Thomson, a dramaturg (the term refers to a vaguely defined position within a theater company for someone who consults with actors, authors, and helps edit texts), who had been hired by the New York Theatre Workshop to help Larson restructure his show, sued in Federal Court in Manhattan for recognition of her contributions to the show and for a percentage of the show's royalties.

In her suit, Thomson claimed that from May to October 1995 she and Larson essentially co-wrote a "new version" of *Rent*, and that she had written a significant portion of the lyrics and libretto of this "new version."

While neither Larson's estate, nor the New York Theatre Workshop, challenged Thomson's assertion that she had worked with Larson on the show--she had been paid \$2,000 by the Workshop and received an additional \$10,000 from one of the show's producers for her work--they emphatically denied that she in any way "co-wrote" *Rent*.

In fact, during the trial, Thomson failed to recall the lyrics to the songs she claimed to have written or the structures to the libretto she claimed to have created. She also could not explain why she seemingly failed to assert her ownership claims to the show while Larson was still alive.

The court ruled that while Thomson had contributed some copyrightable material to the musical, she could not claim authorship, or by extension, any author's royalties and gave the Jonathan Larson Estate full credit and right to *Rent*. That judgment was later upheld by an appeals court.

Larson also composed the score for *J.P. Morgan Saves the Nation*, an En Garde Arts site-specific musical, with a book by Jeffrey M. Jones, which was staged in the summer of 1995 on the steps of the Federal National Memorial on Wall Street.

He also wrote music for the children's television series *Sesame Street*, and co-wrote songs, with Bob Golden, for the children's short video *Away We Go* (1996). He was also working on a project called *Loony Tune-Ups* for Warner Brothers Animation at the time of his death.

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