

## THE THEATER WILL ROCK

While, on the one hand, members of the music press did not warm to *The Who's Tommy*, the show seemed unable, on the other, to appeal to many traditional theatergoers, who avoided the production for fear of loud volumes, lewd subject matter, or both. Lead guitarist Mark Stewart fielded complaints from both theater and rock camps during his term with the production. "The standard, stereotypical complaint about *Tommy*," he recalls, was that for "theater people, it wasn't enough theater; musical people, it was not enough musical; and rock people, it was not enough rock. It ended up being somewhere in the middle."<sup>35</sup> While the middle ground clearly failed *The Who's Tommy*, it worked wonders for the next rock-influenced musical to show up on Broadway: *Rent*.

### *Rent*

One of the most successful rock-influenced musicals in recent years—and, in fact, in the history of the rock musical subgenre—is *Rent*, with book, music, and lyrics by Jonathan Larson. Because of its phenomenal success, as well as several stylistic and structural similarities, *Rent* is regularly compared with *Hair*. Yet these two musicals are ultimately very different, particularly in terms of their marketing and impact.

*Rent* was originally developed at the New York Theatre Workshop on East Fourth Street in Manhattan. A retelling of Puccini's *La Bohème* set in the early 1990s, Larson's musical follows a group of young, East Village idealists over the course of a single year. Like *Hair*, the musical attempts to provide a snapshot of a particular place and time, and tackles themes that would seem unapproachable by traditional musical theater standards, including AIDS, heroin addiction, and homelessness. Also like *Hair*, the original staging of *Rent* featured regular breaks to the fourth wall, and did away with elaborate sets in favor of a sparse, curtainless stage exposed to the wings and set with a minimum of props. In place of the totem-pole featured in *Hair*, the stage of *Rent* boasted an immense sculpture of junk, wire, and Christmas-tree lights, which was used, depending on the scene, to symbolize the facade of an apartment building, a Christmas tree, and a church. *Rent* was perhaps most similar to *Hair* in its use of amplification and its musical presentation. It made use of standing microphones set downstage left and right, as well as radio microphones worn conspicuously over each actor's face. The actors were accompanied

by a five-piece band that sat onstage in a confined structure resembling a huge wooden crate with most of its slats kicked away.

Also like *Hair*, despite themes that might initially strike some as extreme or alienating, *Rent* was able to transcend its subject matter and appeal to mainstream theater audiences in several ways. First, for all its taboo subjects, *Rent* relies heavily on a number of classic musical theater structures and images. The romantic leads, Roger and Mimi, are flanked by two other couples. One, the ever-quibbling Joanne and Maureen, functions primarily as comic relief; the other, the optimistic, HIV-positive drag queen Angel and his devoted boyfriend Tom Collins, is tragic. In keeping with tradition, act 1 closes with a lively, full-sized production number, “La Vie Bohème,” during which the budding romance between Roger and Mimi is established. In its noisy celebration of youth and non-conformity, the number is reminiscent of the anthem “Hair” from the musical of the same name; simultaneously, however, its lyrics—built almost entirely of long lists—pays obvious homage to the works of Stephen Sondheim.

Don Summa, the press agent for *Rent*, adds further that Mimi’s entrance in act 1—during which she dances down a staircase as she sings the song “Out Tonight”—clearly invokes the classic musicals *Hello, Dolly!* and *Mame*, in which the title characters both make their entrances in much the same way. Whether purposely or inadvertently, Larson structured his musical in a way that references a Rodgers and Hammerstein classic: Whereas the 1954 musical *The King and I* features a first act that spans a year and a second act that spans a day, *Rent*’s first act takes a day and its second spans a year. Finally, Summa argues, the significance of the title should not be overlooked: “he called it *Rent*. I mean, you know, clearly he was thinking about *Hair*.”<sup>36</sup>

It is also significant that the musical diverges from its source at the conclusion. Whereas *La Bohème* ends when the consumptive Mimì dies in the garret bed of her bereft lover Rodolfo, who bellows her name to no avail, *Rent* features an ending more befitting its traditionally upbeat genre. The HIV-positive Mimi, now homeless and sleeping in the park, is found by Joanne and Maureen, who bring her to Roger and Mark’s East Village squat. Although she seems, initially, to be nearing death, she is miraculously revived when Roger sings the love song he has composed for her on his electric guitar. The lovers resolve to savor every moment they have together as the musical ends.

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Nods to more traditional musical theater aside, *Rent*'s broad appeal is due in part to the fact that despite the amplification, emphasis on vamped accompaniment, and reliance on electric guitar, electric bass, and drum set, *Rent*'s score—like that of *Hair*—borrows from a variety of different styles, including slow ballads, salsa, tango, and gospel. Despite the stylistic and thematic similarities that may be drawn between *Hair* and *Rent*, less risk was involved in moving the latter from Off Broadway to Broadway. In some respects, the comparative lack of gamble was the result of highly atypical momentum generated during *Rent*'s initial run at the New York Theatre Workshop. *Rent* outlasted the initial hype, however, as a result of savvy marketing techniques that snowballed during the period between the musical's premiere on Broadway and the end of the millennium.

Despite *Hair*'s hit status when it opened Off Broadway in 1967, Michael Butler was rejected by most members of the Broadway establishment in his attempts to bring *Hair* uptown. He did so at the risk of failing to find an audience. By contrast, Broadway's major producers fought feverishly over *Rent* weeks after it had opened Off Broadway.<sup>37</sup> Even before it entered previews at the New York Theatre Workshop in early 1996, *Rent* generated a tremendous amount of hype as the result of a tragic backstage story. After watching the final dress rehearsal of his musical on January 24, 1996, Jonathan Larson died of an aortic aneurysm in his apartment at the age of thirty-five.<sup>38</sup> The media took great interest in this tragedy. The fact that *Rent*'s many HIV-positive characters juxtaposed youthful vigor with the specter of untimely death made the sudden demise of its composer particularly poignant, and *Rent* thus became central to countless human-interest stories. The barrage of media attention—combined with strong word-of-mouth and the glowing critics' reviews that appeared after the musical opened Off Broadway on February 13, 1996—resulted in such a furious demand for tickets that within three weeks of its opening, producers announced that *Rent* would be moving to Broadway.<sup>39</sup>

*Rent* was restaged at the Nederlander Theater on West Forty-first Street, where it reopened on April 29, 1996.<sup>40</sup> The musical won an impressive array of awards, including the Tony, New York Drama Critics Circle, Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, and Drama League awards for best musical, as well as the Pulitzer Prize for drama. International and touring companies for *Rent* sprang up across the globe; these reflect the increased interest in theatrical franchising. Whereas different productions of *Hair* were custom-designed to fit the flavor of each host city, *Rent*'s producers

stipulated that all productions of *Rent* were designed to be as nearly identical to the Broadway version as possible.<sup>41</sup>

Early in its run, there was little question that despite its tragic foundations, the media blitz surrounding *Rent* was good for business.<sup>42</sup> While the intense hype might well have steered its initial reception, *Rent* was nevertheless buoyed significantly as a result of the application of innovative advertising and marketing techniques. In the days of *Hair*, a musical's commercial success depended much more on strong reviews and word-of-mouth than on the few local advertisements run for any given production. *Rent*'s move to Broadway in the spring of 1996, however, was accompanied by a flurry of both local and international advertising, which had by this point become much more important to the theater industry.

In March 1996 an advertisement consisting of nothing but a stenciled logo surrounded by blank space appeared in the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday *New York Times*, as well as on buses, taxi cabs, and billboards throughout the metropolitan area. This minimalist campaign helped sell \$750,000 worth of tickets to *Rent* in three days.<sup>43</sup> At roughly the same time, a line of clothing inspired by the musical was placed on sale in a special boutique on the second floor of Bloomingdale's in Manhattan,<sup>44</sup> and fashion spreads featuring the cast appeared in *Newsweek*, *Time Out New York*, and *Rolling Stone* magazines.<sup>45</sup> The advertising blitz boosted sales for the already hot show; in the short time that it took to move *Rent* from the New York Theatre Workshop to the Nederlander, the musical generated a \$6 million advance.<sup>46</sup>

While *Hair* became a phenomenon because it was the first musical to successfully merge rock and Broadway fare, *Rent* succeeded *despite* its affiliation with a musical subgenre that had fared notably poorly in its three decades of existence. Tom Viertel argues that in modern marketing campaigns, avoidance of the terms *rock musical* and *rock opera* remains crucial to a musical's success. "I don't think you would market anything as a rock musical anymore in part because rock is so fragmented," he notes. "You could describe something as a rock musical back in the days of *Hair*, when rock 'n' roll was basically one strain of music. But within three years of *Hair*, it was not one strain of music anymore, and now everything in rock is a niche." *Rent*, Viertel argues, is an example of "a theatrical composer utilizing rock forms. Not that *Rent* doesn't qualify as a rock musical. But what we're hearing is theatrical composers borrowing

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forms to make a point. Larson didn't have any currency as a rock writer. He was a theatrical writer."<sup>47</sup>

Viertel's opinions are mirrored by those of Don Summa, the press agent for *Rent*, who went to great lengths to avoid labeling the musical during its development. Although the theater press insists on using labels like *rock musical* and *rock opera*, history taught him to adamantly oppose applying such terms to *Rent*:

I never like to call *Rent* a rock musical . . . because for the people who really care about the music and know about the difference between rock music and—they're not going to see this as rock music. It certainly has rock motifs, and uses rock rhythms, but, I mean, you have pop, you have gospel, you have a tango—this isn't a rock musical. My problem with "rock musical" is that it doesn't get the people who like rock to come, and it doesn't get the people who like musicals to come. So who's gonna come? People who are interested in rock music aren't gonna go to Broadway, and people who are interested in musicals don't care about rock music. That's why I think *Rent* is successful—because it's not really a rock musical. The press loves to call it a rock musical or a rock opera. But . . . I just didn't think that was going to sell it to anybody.<sup>48</sup>

Whereas the creators of *Hair* flaunted its rock influence by incorporating the description into its title—thus inadvertently coining the phrase—those responsible for selling *Rent* made an effort to avoid pigeonholing the musical for fear of limiting the audience.

Rosenberg and Harburg note that in most cases, "the real distance between not-Broadway and Broadway is several hundreds of thousands of dollars and a carload of glitz."<sup>49</sup> *Rent*, however, is a notable exception. Once on Broadway, *Rent*'s sparse set and low budget worked to its advantage by contributing to its long run in the years after the hype surrounding its opening and the impact of the initial advertising campaign waned. Summa notes that because *Rent* is cheap enough to break even at only 60 percent capacity, the show can withstand dips in attendance that would be fatal to most Broadway shows.<sup>50</sup>

Befitting its low-budget bohemianism, *Rent* moved into the long-unused Nederlander Theater, which was badly in need of renovation. Because of its fraying carpets, fading curtain, peeling paint, worn seat cov-

ers, and unfortunate location—the corner of Forty-first Street and Seventh Avenue, just down the block from the magnificently ugly Port Authority Bus Terminal—the dilapidated *Nederlander* was hardly the most sought-after performance space in New York. Nevertheless, it made the perfect home for *Rent*. Expensive renovations were unnecessary. In fact, the auditorium was made even more dilapidated to fit the musical's grungy, downtown aesthetic.

In the years before Times Square's renovation, *Rent* fit perfectly at the *Nederlander*, in part because even its exterior and immediate surroundings seemed appropriate for the musical. Summa, in fact, believes that the "aura" surrounding *Rent's* new home made the show even stronger than it had been Off Broadway. "The show seemed stronger in a Broadway house, and I never thought it would have," he says. The *Nederlander* sits on a block "that was not unlike an East Village block—it was kind of run down, it was—still is—inhabited by homeless people." Not only was the *Nederlander* the right theater, concludes Summa, but "the block was the right block."<sup>51</sup>

Ironically, while the *Nederlander* remains appropriately dilapidated, the renovation of the Times Square area in the years since *Rent* moved uptown has not damaged the musical's appeal. In his article "New York's Facelift," Mark Sussman notes that during the mid-1990s, *Rent* simply became yet another attraction in a neighborhood transformed into a theme-park version of its former self:

In Jonathan Larson's *Rent*, life below 14th Street is thoroughly reified into a high-speed montage of sex, drugs, AIDS, and art relentlessly humanized into an MTV version of Bohemia. . . . Homeless folks fight cops in riot gear. "La Vie Bohème" plays a hip "Downtown" to Times Square's new and improved Uptown. The characters, mostly with wealthy, caring parents, live in upbeat poverty according to the legends of the 1980s and 1990s East Village. . . . AIDS and aesthetics are both neatly contained issues: the AZT goes down easily. The demonstration chant "ACT UP! FIGHT BACK! FIGHT AIDS!" is appropriated as a song lyric, a chorus that doesn't bear repeating. The Underworld has been placed many limo-lengths away. Safe consumption replaces excessive and illicit consumption. The danger of carnival—which keeps many life-long New Yorkers far away from Times Square on a New Year's Eve—is being effaced and contained by this new cultural and commercial zoning.<sup>52</sup>

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In this respect, *Rent* is very like its predecessor. Just as *Hair* appealed to the vicariousness of its mainstream audience, *Rent* fit into its new surroundings due to its upbeat, ultimately unthreatening depiction of squatting, drug addiction, and AIDS. Even further, the musical became a tribute to an East Village that ceased to exist when that neighborhood underwent its own gentrification in the late 1990s.

As they did with *Hair*, many critics received *Rent* with myriad ecstatic superlatives and the declaration that it would revitalize the American musical theater. Indicative of a growing fear of taking risks, however, is the fact that despite its huge success, *Rent*, unlike *Hair*, spawned few imitations on or Off Broadway. Michael Cerveris believes that *Rent* follows in too long a line of disasters to convince producers that rock musicals will ever be safe investments. "After *Tommy*, every other thing I was called in for or sent a tape of was some pop or rock opera thing," he laughs. "There's a lot of that stuff being written—it's just not getting produced. And one of the reasons is that they look at *Tommy*, which was one of the most successful of those things. It made its money back, but then it closed. *Rent* may make people feel a little safer, but it may not."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, if *Rent* managed to renew an interest in rock-influenced Broadway musicals, Paul Simon's *The Capeman* succeeded just as quickly in quashing it again.

### *The Capeman*

In the late 1980s, the singer-songwriter Paul Simon grew interested in developing a Broadway musical, in large part because he found all extant musical theater unsatisfying.<sup>54</sup> He thus commenced work on *The Capeman*, about the Puerto Rican gang member Salvador Agrón, who became tabloid fodder when he murdered two white teenagers on August 30, 1959, in the Hell's Kitchen section of New York City. Less interested in telling a story than in bringing his music to Broadway audiences, Simon immersed himself in numerous Latin popular genres. These, combined with a heavy dose of the rock 'n' roll he grew up listening to during the 1950s in Queens, influenced the musical's score. Eager to create accurate characters, as well as to escape again being labeled a "cultural carpetbagger," as he was after the releases of his albums *Graceland* (1986) and *Rhythm of the Saints* (1990), Simon developed a friendship with the Nobel Prize-win-