

## ***Rent: Reinventing the Musical Genre Through the Limitations of Representation***

*By Rori Nogee*

There are no curtains. The lights do not dim to signal silence. There is no overture. Yet the show has begun. Even without the conventional theatrical elements, from the moment that the character known as Roger Davis saunters onto the stage and strums his guitar, the audience is catapulted into a two and a half hour whirlwind of raw emotion. On April 29, 1996, Jonathan Larson's *Rent* opened to rave reviews at the Nederlander Theater. Jonathan Larson created *Rent* in hopes of representing a diverse group of Bohemian city dwellers at the end of the millennium, all of whom are confronted daily with AIDS, homosexuality, and impoverishment. Through the use of formal properties from the musical and rock opera genres such as symbolic scenery, a multitude of complex characters, and truthful gut wrenching lyrics, *Rent* attempts to accurately represent the struggles and triumphs of a people whose hearts are filled with love, hope, and a thirst for life.

"The breakthrough musical of the 90's," chimed *Newsweek*. "A landmark rock opera!" claimed the *New York Times*. Despite the labels that *Rent* was given in various reviews, one must question whether this spectacle can truly be defined a musical or rock opera. "What is a Musical?" ponders Susanne Lo Iudice in the title of her article which defines the musical genre. In the broadest sense, musical theater is a type of entertainment set on stage which intertwines music and drama. Iudice describes a musical as a narrative which is a "representation of reality from fantasy" ([http://bonza.rmit.edu.au/essays/text/1998/musicals/what\\_is\\_a\\_musical\\_.html](http://bonza.rmit.edu.au/essays/text/1998/musicals/what_is_a_musical_.html)). Iudice meant that because anything placed on the stage is merely a representation of life, the theater must yield a sense of fantasy. Yet, fantasy on the stage involves a "real characteristic" (Iudice, [http://bonza.rmit.edu.au/essays/text/1998/musicals/what\\_is\\_a\\_musical\\_.html](http://bonza.rmit.edu.au/essays/text/1998/musicals/what_is_a_musical_.html)). Iudice explains that emotions expressed by theatrical characters are meant to depict feelings that are intensely real and not contrived. The vocal expressions of the characters in *Rent* are in accordance with Iudice's descriptions of real emotion. In "One Song Glory," Roger passionately sings about his dying wish to leave his mark on the world. He exudes feelings that one can easily relate to such as that of hope and the anguish of warding off death to pursue his dreams. Similarly, the song "Another Day" which involves Mimi's desperate plea to be cared for while she is still alive, is a timeless romantic notion of unrequited love.

Besides the outpouring of emotion, entertainment in the musical genre is normally marked by sweeping spotlights, moving scenery, cliché story lines, and glitzy costumes. Yet, *Rent* is unlike anything ever before presented on a stage. The production is unique in that it does not adhere to the standards of a traditional Broadway musical. This is not to say that the production strays from the conventions of its genre, but rather it causes people to reassess the very genre in which it exists. The stage is designed with haphazardly placed glow tape which highlights positions for cheap metal chairs. The theater itself exhibits peeling lime green paint, cracked mirrors, shards of ceramic plates, and discolored bulbs in the dingy chandeliers. This atmosphere caused critic Steven Winn to comment that the production "often plays more like a staged concert than a fully realized musical drama" because of a lack of "conventional scenic and directorial panache" (Winn, <http://www.geocities.com/Broadway/9596/April30.html>). However, it was the director and his team who deliberately chose to create such an atmosphere in order to consume the audience in a realistic representation of Bohemian life in the East Village. Additionally, *Rent's* focus on taboo issues such as disease and the gay culture is highly original, as traditional musicals usually focus on lighter topics.

*Rent* also expands the limits of its sub-genre known as rock opera. A rock opera more closely resembles an operetta which is a theatrical production without speech that adheres to more popular subjects and styles. Jonathan Larson stated that his intention in creating his adaptation of Puccini's opera, *La Bohème* was to "bridge the gap between Broadway and the youthful energy and audience of rock music" (Winn, <http://www.geocities.com/Broadway/9596/April30.html>). *Rent* does seem to follow the "full" structure of the rock opera, as described by "Genre: Art (Symphonic) Rock, Manifestation: A Rock Opera," in which the vocal parts are performed by individual singers, as opposed to the "symbolic" form in which one voice speaks in different tones for the entire ensemble. Additionally, the small orchestra of the production which includes keyboards, synthesizers, drums, a bass guitar, and two electric guitars, fulfills all of the necessary requirements of rock music set for the stage. However, the show does not remain consistent with its rock style. The songs range from soul in "I'll Cover You" to techno in "Today 4 U" to Latin rhythms in "Tango Maureen" to funk and gospel. This mixing of music genres is more reminiscent of Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* with its varying musical styles meant to appeal to all audience preferences, than to his true rock opera, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Yet, this eclectic mix of styles does not place it out of the sub-genre, for as Christian Mena, former cast member of the *Rent*

national tour says, "It's a rock opera and its based on comtemporary music, so of course its going to be different than what people are used to seeing in musicals" (Halverson, [http://www. bennytour. com/ articles/ texas/houston/ houstonarticle2 .htm](http://www.bennytour.com/articles/texas/houston/houstonarticle2.htm)).

Although *Rent* extends beyond the conventional boundaries of a musical, it cannot extend beyond the limitations inherent in representation such as the paradoxes of presence and absence and the unintentional failures of misrepresentation. These limitations inhibit the cultural realism that the text initially set out to depict. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines representation as "an artistic likeness or image; a statement or account meant to influence opinion or action; dramatic production or performance; substitution of an individual." *Rent's* depiction of village life adheres to the descriptions of the ambivalent nature of representation that is discussed in Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Goodwin's introduction to *Death and Representation*, as there is an opposition between presence and absence or loss. The introduction describes the representation of death in art as having no location as it exists both in the "here and the nowhere" (12). Artistic representations of elusive death are present as they are shown in public forums to many viewers. Yet, at the same time, there is a sense of loss because the actual object which is represented is missing in action. *Rent* is considered a present signifier as it is the representation of the signified, the Bohemia of the early 90's. As a signifier which must follow production requirements of the musical genre, it is presented eight times a week to thousands of witnesses in a standard Broadway theater on 41st street and 7th Avenue. However, the actual East Village is absent from this representation as the real location lies downtown, far from the amplified speakers and glaring Broadway lights which accompany its stance as a commercially profitable musical representation.

A representation additionally confines the true essence of an object as it is only capable of reproducing a portion or selective frame of the total object In the case of *Rent*, it is the characters that are noticeably represented with a partiality which minimizes the full truth of the individuals that they signify. Homi Bhabha addresses this second paradox of representability in his essay, "Of Mimicry and Man" when he speaks of mimicry as having the dual action of presentation and repression. Bhabha explains that every representation results in an unintentional failure, for as much as the representation bears resemblance to the actual object, it is "...almost the same, but not quite" (1092). Bhabha describes this phenomenon as a "diminishing perspective" (1093) and a "mode of representation which marginalizes

the monumentality of history" (1093). It is a dilemma in artistic creation of representation to choose which part of the object to repeat. Larson's trouble in creating *Rent* was that the personalities of actual village inhabitants were so varied that he could not fairly depict every type of individual. He therefore chose to feature two starving artists with AIDS, a lesbian couple, a drug addict, a transvestite, and a homosexual. Director Michael Greif remarked that there was an attempt at "preserving authenticity and preserving integrity in the way we present those characters" (McDonnell, 25). However, author Sara Schulman noticed the loss of authenticity in selective framing that *Rent* so eagerly tried to maintain. Schulman asserts that the show possesses examples of "repressive tolerance" because while it boasts of being accepting of all ethnicities and sexualities, "...it repeatedly inscribes lesbian relationships as unstable, bickering, and emotionally pathological" (<http://www.nyu.edu/classes/jeffreys/gaybway/rent/crit.html>).

Schulman means that representation interferes with the believability of the Bohemian dwellers who at first glance appear to represent real people with real life challenges. Yet, representation results in an unintentional repression in the reality of these characters who ultimately come across as token characters. The character, Alexi Darling, is one such example of how partiality creates a stereotypical image. She is an Asian woman who directs a tabloid series for entertainment, bribes her workers with promises of money, and lists numerous ways that she can be contacted such as phone, e-mail, fax, and internet. Because there is no room in the production to give a vivid account of Alexi's private life or personality, she is repressed into an ultimate stereotype of commercial exploitation in mainstream society.

However, *Rent* is unique in that it is able to utilize its position as a cultural and historical text to make beneficial some of the hindering aspects of representability. The *Rent* production team has preserved the show in its entirety since its opening, to remain true to Larson's original vision. Because the representation is a portion of one specific historical period frozen in time, it thereby teaches us about the past and provides a basis to which we can compare cultural transitions. The production which is situated in 1994 is a cultural and historical text which is no longer current. It now serves as a historically nostalgic reflection of the living areas and ethnic distribution in the village of the recent past. However, the cultural milieu and understanding of the East Village life outside of the theater has continued to change with the times. Christopher Mele, author of *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York*, stated that "The representation of the East Village spun by

*Rent*...yields a specific rendition of the neighborhood and the everyday experiences of its residents" (2). He implied that *Rent* is a text which gives the impression of a certain standard that no longer holds true. The use of the bare stage is meant to depict the poverty stricken tenement slums which artists and immigrants are subjected to. However, while poorer areas do remain, Mele explained that the East Village is now a residence defined by commercial consumerism, a predominant middle-class, and expensive commercial living quarters that boast of being situated among the ethnically diverse (3).

*Rent*'s abundance of racially mixed characters are also a reflection of history. Many critics claimed that the characters were too contrived as they stood for every type of unique person residing in the village Larson represented such individuals as "too multi-cultural, multi-racial, and multi-sexual" (Olveczky, "*Rent: A Loud Letdown*"). Today, although there is cultural diversity, it is not nearly as apparent for the village is a "gated community without the gate" (Mele, 2). There exists a blending of class and ethnicity as every lifestyle now seems commercially exploited. According to Mele, the rappers, drag queens, and gays all became accustomed to "consumable lifestyles" (3). While it is true that the show is reflective of the various ethnicities that reside in the village, its partial reflection doesn't acknowledge the fact that the village has recently undergone noticeable class changes, as the eccentric artists seem financially indistinguishable from the students, professors, and working class peoples who now equally inhabit the area.

Indeed *Rent* is an innovative rock opera which makes use of the limitations of representation for cultural significance. Yet, one might question how representative "partial presence" (Bhaba, 1093) impacts the artist as an individual and how his or her fulfillment of social responsibility impacts the audience of the representation. For the artistic creator, the repression of the full object in a representation is responsible for providing the artist with a sense of power: The power of choice and the power of control. This idea is suggested by Bronfen and Goodwin who write that representations of death in society ultimately lead to a sense of power over nature because artistic portrayals of this abstract concept fulfill the excessive human need to understand and tame what is unknown and incomprehensible. The authors remarked that "people thus accrue power and control by manipulating and legislating death" (17). Similarly, in deciding on what smaller areas would be the main focus of his production, Larson was utilizing the normally limiting aspects of representation to exert power over issues which normally have power over us. In this case, the issue was AIDS, a disease often characterized

by lesions, hacking coughs, and sometimes even paralysis. For Larson, *Rent* was a creative tool which allowed him to maintain control over his own life. It was a heartbreaking shock when in 1987, Larson's four closest friends were diagnosed with HIV. To deal with this news, Larson offered his services to an AIDS support group known as, "Friends in Deed." Yet, he could not rid of the feeling of complete helplessness Larson then wrote *Rent*, which depicted accurately as well as idealistically the unfortunate reality that his friends had to face.

When AIDS first garnered attention in America, it was popularly thought that "heterosexuals need not worry about this disease of gay men" (Silverman, [http://www.thebody.com/encyclo/culture\\_overview.html#perspectives](http://www.thebody.com/encyclo/culture_overview.html#perspectives)). Larson made sure to break this false belief by having his five main characters acquire AIDS in different manners: Mimi contracts HIV through her drug addiction, Roger and Mark through heterosexual relationships, and Angel and Collins through their homosexual relationship. Yet many critics questioned the accuracy of the representation of AIDS in the musical. The Toronto Sun asked, "if the character known as Roger is stricken with AIDS, why are his arms cut like a weight lifter's?...Why are people dying of AIDS simply depicted as more glowing versions of themselves? Why don't they die when they should?" (<http://www.nyu.edu/classes/jeffreys/gaybway/rent/crit.html>). The answer is that Larson purposely chose to represent AIDS within a small framework so that he could control and confront it, without diminishing its importance or seriousness. He played God by controlling the epidemic: he decided who lived and who died and how quickly the disease took its toll on the body of the characters. He consciously used his artistry to idealize the deadly disease and emphasize the fact that "It's a play about life, not about death" (McDonnel, 21).

Larson additionally used representation to his advantage by making his specific and even stereotypical Bohemian figures expressive of broad universal truths that were meant to impact not only the Broadway audience, but the culture as a whole. It is the responsibility of artists to allow their representations to give insight into the context of the cultural world in which we live. Cast member Adam Pascal remarked that the musical "...doesn't speak for a generation, it speaks to a generation" (McDonnel, 139). This element of theatrical representability was discussed by author Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his essay, "Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space." He stated, "The community learned and passed its moral codes and aesthetic judgements through narratives, dance, rituals, music, games, and sports" (1440). Thiong'o also exclaimed that what was deemed "desirable and undesirable in the

realm of values" (1440) was embodied by performance. Thus, as the theater is a reflection of our times and history, we can review the traditions and activities that define our culture, and thus determine how we should act and respond to others. *Rent* represents the American culture by depicting Bohemians struggling to live as misfits in the midst of mainstream society which is obsessed with money, deadlines, and commercialism. Yet, the show has a moralizing effect as it reminds viewers that the most important thing in life is love and acceptance. "It causes you to see things from other people's perspective...It is life affirming" (McDonnell, 139). The show portrays the struggles that are faced by a people in our culture whom we may have previously refused to acknowledge or accept. Larson wished that his creation would illustrate to a world of historical prejudice that it is necessary to embrace and celebratedifferences rather than reject them. This is accomplished by depicting drug dependency, homelessness, selling out art to make money, and raging diseases, in the lives of fiery, passionate, and hopeful characters whom we grow to care about deeply. Larson also hoped that his show would foster support and awareness for the fight against the cultural epidemic of AIDS, and ultimately bring people to realize that "It's not how long you're here, but what you do while you're here" (McDonnell, 51). Larson summed up this thought in the finale of his musical: "There is no future there is no past I live this moment as my last...no day but today"(Act II, Song 17).

*Rent* is a musical with ingenious and powerful artistic choices which makes use of the limitations of representability. The production serves as a way to observe history and gauge our cultural progress, preach moral lessons to its audience, and embody the idea that life is a gift which should not be taken advantage of. This is accomplished with technical elements which are innovative in the ways of theater. Although the concept of representation minimalizes the reality that *Rent* set out to create, it is executed with such artistic efficiency that its truths and ethical guidelines for living still penetrate the hearts and minds of its audiences more deeply than any other musical, past or present. A former *Rent* cast member expressed this to Larson when he stated, "I think you're going to change the American musical theater." Larson smiled as he whispered, "I know." (McDonnell, 28).

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