

Political Theatre, The Audience, and *RENT*

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It is February 2000. Then out-of-work actors Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen were sitting in the audience during a conference at Columbia University about a group of men who had been called the “Death Row Ten.” The only reason the two were there was because Jessica thought it sounded interesting. Little did they know that this conference would shape the next chapter of their lives. Blank and Jensen began working on a play, a piece of “documentary theatre,” which they called *The Exonerated*. After meeting with forty exonerated death row inmates, they turned the transcripts into performable monologues. The show ran for 600 performances Off-Broadway and toured the country (Blank, Jensen 15-17).

The show’s influence was not fully realized until 2002. This was the year when George Ryan, then governor of Illinois, asked the show to be brought to Chicago so he could see it. This was not on a whim; at the time he was considering commuting all 167 death row sentences in Illinois to life in prison, and he thought seeing *The Exonerated* could possibly help him with the decision making process. After the performance, he talked to the writers of the play, the cast, as well as several exonerated inmates in attendance. Jensen and Blank were quoted saying, “As far as we were concerned, if that evening in Chicago were the only performance the play ever had, it would have been enough” (Blank, Jensen 21).

When the writers were driving through California, they heard a historic breaking-news story: Governor George Ryan of Illinois had, in fact, commuted all 167 death row inmates to life in prison, completely pardoning six. While Blank and Jensen do not claim credit for influencing Governor Ryan's decision, they quote him as saying he would "never again doubt the power of the arts to effect social change" (Blank, Jensen 21).

While it is not often that we are able to witness theatre having such a profound effect on our society, the fact that it does happen means theatre successfully fulfills its job. After all, *American Theatre* writer Eliza Bent states, "When theatre really does its job, an audience buzzes afterward" (58). That is exactly what happened after Governor Ryan saw *The Exonerated*, and it happens after many politically and socially driven shows. For example, *Hairspray* could lead to a discussion of racism (in the 1960s and today). *Spring Awakening* could influence discussions on a plethora of topics including teenage sexuality, teen pregnancy, abortion, depression, and suicide. Even *Legally Blonde* could start conversations about the routine application of stereotypes in higher education and the work force. However, the musical that has had arguably the most profound influence as of late is Jonathan Larson's *RENT*. Since 1996, the musical has developed an almost cult-like following (the self-proclaimed *RENT*heads) and has caused thousands of people to think about, maybe even reconsider their opinions on, issues such as homelessness, healthcare, GLBT rights and awareness, AIDS, even corporate America.

Prior to discussing the idea of political theatre and *RENT*, two definitions must be explained: political theatre, or the idea of theatrical productions causing the audience to think about political and social issues; and the audience as individual spectators and as one unit.

Political theatre is a term with a more complex meaning than meets the eye. Graham Holderness, writer and editor of *The Politics of Theatre and Drama* provides a wonderful analysis of the term. He begins by explaining how political theatre is different from “ordinary theatre” because of “its relationship with something other than itself: politics.” While this may seem obvious, Holderness makes an excellent point. “Ordinary theatre,” as Holderness describes it, only concerns itself with the script, actors, and everything else related to production. Political theatre deals with that, plus the relevance of political issues in the area of production. At this point, the writers and producers must also ask themselves if the show will be timely, if the means of addressing the issue will be relevant to the geographic region, and whether the show will make the audience think (2).

Holderness next asserts that to be considered political theatre, the theatres themselves must “become partisan, split on party-line conflicts, and line up with a particular group, cause, or ideology.” Because of that, assumptions tend to be made. In our society (and in Britain, as Holderness points out) the concept of political theatre is usually equated to left-wing political groups. In America, this could be true because the Democrats have not had executive power in almost a decade; it is very possible that the converse will take effect in several years. Within the left-wing limitation of Holderness’s definition, he makes two distinctions in the style of political theatre. On the one hand, playwrights can choose to work against the flow of mainstream institutions. This could mean that one playwright within a particular company has a more liberal view than his colleagues, and he actively shows it in his writing. For example, say a playwright was commissioned by a production company to write a work about a certain topic. This playwright would try to approach the topic in a more liberal manner, but not so liberal that the company sends the

script back for a complete rewrite. On the other hand, playwrights can work on the outside of edge of the mainstream, and therefore believe themselves to be more politically active because of this. These particular playwrights work independently, meaning their plays can be as liberal as they want them to be because they are not writing to please anyone. If one producer does not like the show, then they can present it to another producer. These playwrights could consider themselves more politically active because they do not have anyone looking over their shoulders as they write (2-3).

Holderness points out, "It seems that political theatre can be progressive, but not regressive; socialist, but not conservative; subversive but not conformist or radically reactionary." Political theatre does have a proclivity for finding itself disadvantaged by notions of what it can and cannot be. The definition Holderness suggests allows almost no leeway when it comes to identifying political theatre. Of the three binaries, two of them are very much applicable to political theatre. It must cause people to think in a new way, and not rely on old, potentially outdated ideals, therefore being progressive and not regressive. If a show is radically reactionary, then it is possible the audience will avoid it, because they think it would make them feel uncomfortable. Along those same lines, if a show conforms to societal norms, the audience could find it boring because they have nothing new to think about. Subversive, in its simplest meaning, calls for the change in political regime, or a change in the political party currently in power. Being subversive is a dangerous line for playwrights to write around—the work must call for change (based on this definition) but at the same time, the change that the show calls for cannot be so extremist that it is unable to garner support from the audience. The final binary is unfairly limiting. It is possible for a piece of political theatre to be conservative in nature. The deciding factor here depends on

the location and which political party is in power. If the powers that be are more conservative, then the political theatre will be more liberal. This is how it has been in America for the past eight years. However, in a more liberal geographic region, the political theatre would have to be more conservative in order to make people think (3).

Defining what we mean by “the audience” is more difficult than it first may seem; that is because the audience is more than just people who attend a performance. The audience is the group of people the playwright intends to reach. The playwright wants to create a moving story and meaningful characters to draw the audience into this world that they have created. Monica Prendergast, in her article *From Guest to Witness*, encounters a strain between the actors and the audience based on a name people on the business side of theatre gives audience members, “[T]he term ‘guest’ when referring to ‘audience’ is symptomatic of the deep abyss dividing artists and audiences in contemporary and mainstream practices” (95). She claims that by calling the audience members guests, it hinders the actors’ ability to connect with the audience, which is essentially what they are paid to do.

Another way to look at the audience is to treat them like the actor. Just like an actor must have the talent for performing on-stage, the audience must have a talent for appreciating the art they observe. Leah Lowe in her article *Towards “Critical Generosity,”* cites Ann Patchett’s definition in her 2001 novel *Bel Canto*. Victor Fyodorov, a character in the novel, claims, “It is a kind of talent in itself to be an audience. There have to be those who witness art, who love and appreciate what they have been privileged to see” (141). This statement amplifies the importance of the audience, in a sense that they are not only observing talent, but also they are using talents of their own. For the most part, art, be it

visual art, music, or dramatic performance, is meant to be on display for the masses. While everyone enjoys art in his or her own way, it is the uniqueness of individual appreciation that denotes the talent of being an audience member. This claim that it takes talent to be in the audience shows that the audience is equally as important as the actors.

The history of political theatre cannot be discussed without examining the foundation laid by Bertolt Brecht and George Bernard Shaw in particular. Brecht challenged the theatrical norms of the day when he wanted his actors to not completely immerse themselves into their characters' psyches; rather, he urged them to "retain their critical and political awareness" (Bradley 5). Brecht believes this method allows for a more involved criticism of the performance, and the issues addressed. Laura Bradley, writer of *Brecht and Political Theatre*, claims, "By emphasizing the decisions that informed the actions of the characters, the performers encourage the spectators to see how alternative courses of action have provoked different outcomes" (5). In short, the audience has a better understanding of how to apply these new ideas to their own lives. They see what could happen and begin to consider it, especially since they already have some idea of the result.

Brecht was unique in the fact that he would edit his text between productions, based solely on the audience's reaction to the previous one. Bradley says, "This practice enabled Brecht to tailor his plays to his target audience and to address the social and political issues of the day" (1). Having custom tailored plays gave Brecht an advantage in the world of political theatre because, thanks to his practice of continually revising his works, his shows were always relevant. He used the audience in a manner no one else had ever done. Brecht did not change what the audience thought about certain issues, but rather how they

thought about them, according to Bradley. His view of theatre allowed him to gauge what the audience needed to see and needed to learn.

George Bernard Shaw also provides an interesting take on political theatre. In *The Theory and Practice of Shavian Drama*, Eric Russell Bentley cites Shaw saying, “Rhetoric, irony, argument, paradox, epigram, parable, the re-arrangement of haphazard facts into orderly, intelligent situations; these are both the oldest and the newest arts of the drama” (46-47). Based on Shaw’s statement, it appears he is claiming that the means for political theatre have always existed; it was just a matter of putting the pieces together correctly.

While arguments can be made concerning which comes first, the text or the characters, for the purposes of this discussion, it can be assumed that the text was developed first. Sean O’Casey, writer of *The Play of Ideas*, claims once a playwright creates the characters to express the ideas found in the text, “it takes a mastermind to do that so it will appeal to the imagination of the audience” (78). Without characters to relate to, political theatre inevitably fails. The audience cannot relate strictly to ideas. In order to even remember the ideas presented on stage, the audience needs people to connect the ideas to.

Within his analysis of Shaw’s characters, O’Casey also discusses his incorporation of political issues in his works: “Shaw’s plays are packed with punches for all kinds of reforms, yet there is hardly one of them that isn’t glittering with the fanciful guile of a dramatist” (78). It appears as though the author believes Shaw was attempting to write like a politician but letting the playwright shine through. Another assumption that can be made from the phrasing of “fanciful guile” is that Shaw can be considered slightly over exuberant with his characters, not necessarily with his presentation of the political ideas he wished to

present. Nevertheless, writing these types of characters tends to make them more memorable, which means their ideals are more memorable as well.

Maria Brennan, in the article *Towards a Theatre of Action*, cites feminist Gerda Lerner saying that it takes about a century before a socially progressive idea is considered the norm (8). According to this theory, the themes presented in the works of Brecht, Shaw, and their contemporaries are just now considered socially acceptable. But that is not necessarily true. Marge Betley and Skip Greer, who work at Geva Theater Center in Rochester, NY told Eliza Bent that after certain productions, “It was clear to us that our audience was hungry to talk about current ethical and political topics, and more beyond the spin of entrenched positions—and that theatre was the perfect venue for such conversations” (Bent 1). This shows that these issues are being thought about and discussed almost immediately after their depiction on stage, which means that positions are being changed in a time span much shorter than a century. These political pieces are causing people to be more open minded; but the efforts of theatre, political and ordinary, have a greater effect on the audience than that.

One of the things Jonathan Larson claimed he was trying to do with *RENT* was change American musical theatre (McDonald, Silbinger 15). He thought that because he felt like audiences were not being challenged by the new shows being produced. It seems as though Susan Bennett, writer of *Theatre Audiences*, was writing about Larson and New York Theatre Workshop, which first produced *RENT*, when she said, “Surely, today, many theatre groups formed and operating in opposition to dominant cultural and political practice would willingly endorse that description of theatre practice” (7). This could very easily apply to Larson’s ambition when he began writing. He had been an avid theatre fan

his whole life and he thought something needed to happen to challenge the norms. Larson knew he could change American theatre the way *Hair* did in the 1960s, and he did it. Not only that, he changed the audiences as well. He developed a fan base that was forever changed by his work, and could be considered what propelled *RENT* into a twelve year run on Broadway. Bennett also writes, “The intensity of interest in audience sparked by the rejection of naturalist practices has, in the latter half of the twentieth century, become an obsession” (7). Not only did Larson want his show to touch people, but people also felt drawn to the characters he created. In fact, the audience was drawn to this show to such an extent that some actually became obsessed, calling themselves *RENT*heads. These are the fans who will camp out in front of the theatre to be first in line for lottery tickets, will see the show multiple times, and even plan trips to New York City to see a milestone performance, such as the final night for a particular cast member (McDonnell, Silberger 133). Shows need this kind of dedicated fan base to keep the production running.

In 2008, some theatres employed an interesting practice to get the audience more involved. For example, “Fierce [a production company] encouraged audiences to choose which shows would be performed; Pilot Theatre has developed scripts with audience input online” (*A New Theatre—Made by Audiences*, 2). These theatres show how important the audience is to their success, and have decided to honor their input.

When looking at the business side of theatre, one thing becomes painfully clear: they need money to survive. As much as it exists for entertainment purposes and to move people, theatre, at its core, is a business venture. An article entitled *The New Theatre—Made by Audiences*, states, “Theatre companies may have a particular mission—but they are businesses too and they can’t fulfill their mission successfully unless they have enough

money” (1). Without funding, political theatre cannot reach its audience. A sizable portion of this funding comes from the audience, as well as outside groups who simply approve of what the theatre is doing. Bennett claims, “The survival of theatre is economically tied to a willing audience—not only those who sit and watch a performance, but increasingly those who approve—a government, corporate, or other subsidiary” (4). And in order to maintain this economic support, theatres will tailor productions to what keeps patrons coming back. Bennett even goes as far as to claim companies will tailor everything down to performance techniques to ensure the audience will return.

Bennett also shows how the play-writing process begins with the audience in mind, “The playwright invariably shapes the text and the director invariably shapes the production to provoke particular expectations and responses within the audience” (20). Writers and directors know what they want the audience to feel, which is why this tailoring process continues up until opening night. Bennett says, “The interactive nature of theatre is particularly evident from the rewriting a playwright often chooses (or is called) to do while a play is in rehearsal and from the cuts or changes a director makes after previews, try-outs, or indeed during a run” (20). Playwrights and directors will do whatever they can to gain the support of the public.

The amount of time a person has to research a show before they see it could influence their reaction to the actual performance. For example, Bennett addresses people she calls habitual theatre spectators. These people are “willing to attend virtually anything with tickets available on any particular night” (132). This person’s decision to attend a particular performance is usually spontaneous. These people generally have no idea what they are about to see, and they do not even know if they will like the show they are about to

see. The habitual theatre spectator loves live theatre in general, and will attend a performance specifically for the live experience. This person's snap decision to attend a performance could be based on the title sounding interesting or wanting to see a certain actor in the show. The converse of this person would be the spectator who has a subscription ticket, or at least buys their ticket in advance. They will have "the opportunity to prepare for that particular production" (Bennett 132). This spectator would prefer to have an idea of what they are going to see performed. They do not want to leave the theatre guessing or in shock.

The time of ticket purchase can also provide insight on the likely level of responsiveness from that audience member. Bennett claims, "[T]he purchase of a subscription or the early booking of a ticket can build interest and anticipation, surely ... the remoteness of the decision to attend from the actual experience of the event might well add an element of unresponsiveness" (132). A person who has time to research a show before they see it, and actually uses the opportunity to do so, will have less to process as they watch, and have the chance to be more responsive in the theatre. Similarly, the person who attends a performance on a whim will have more to process, and will be less responsive as they watch, but will respond more as they have time to think about what happened before them. However, it is possible for the converse to be applicable as well. A person who has, and uses, the opportunity to research a show enters the theatre with a certain level of expectation. If, throughout the performance, that expectation is not met, their level of responsiveness will decrease. At the same time, a person who spontaneously attends has no level of expectations, and therefore is less likely to be let down, which allows for a higher level of responsiveness.

Monica Prendergast, in her article *From Guest to Witness*, uncovered an interesting split when it comes to what audience members notice about a show. On the one hand, she claims “[A]dult spectators focus their interpretive attention on the perceived qualities of a performance, with talk about acting more predominant than that of design and directing” (98). This sample of people cared more about *how* the characters were portrayed, not what they portrayed. It also appears as though the environment of the characters had no influence on their reactions. Although Prendergast claims less of a focus was put on directing, it is also almost impossible to focus on the performance of the actors without considering the director. After all, the director is the one who guides the actor through the text and builds a solid performance. Another interesting point Prendergast makes was that “younger audiences tend to focus on the fictional world and the emotional struggles of the characters” (98). Younger people, based on this observation, go to the theatre to find someone to identify with, to confirm they are not the alone in their experiences. They enter the theatre hoping the story is realistic, and if the show is portraying an issue they have dealt with, that it is done in an accurate manner. They care a little bit more about what is said, not the manner in which it is delivered. However, Prendergast points out that the focus of both groups was the acting (98). One group cared more about the presentation, and the other about the characters, but in both cases, the acting was the center of attention.

The discussion of the theory surrounding political theatre and the audience can only allow for so much understanding. It becomes imperative to apply theory to an actual performance, while also look at the piece as dramatic literature. Larson’s *RENT* is an excellent example of political theatre, as well as showing a performance’s effects on the audience.

The inspiration for Larson's *RENT* comes from the opera *La Bohème* by Puccini. *La Bohème* was written and performed during the 1890s, when "audiences became increasingly passive and increasingly bourgeois," according to Bennett, writer of *Theatre Audiences* (3). With that being said, an argument can be made that Puccini was trying to revitalize his audience by writing an opera that was about people like them. *La Bohème* is about a group of artists and writers dealing with life and the tuberculosis epidemic. This translates into a group of friends, writers, musicians, performance artists, and anarchists who are dealing with the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s in New York City.

Jonathan Larson was born in White Plains, NY on February 4, 1960. His parents, who had been avid theatre fans, took Larson and his sister, Julie, to see shows all the time, anything from *Fiddler on the Roof* to *1776*. Throughout high school, Larson was always the center of attention in the theatre department, which is how he received a full scholarship to Adelphi University, a college with a prominent theatre conservatory. While there, Larson began to try his hand at writing lyrics and composing music. He started out writing individual songs for the school's student run cabaret, and by the time he graduated in 1982, he had composed the entire production. It was at this point that Larson shifted his focus from being an actor to being a composer (*No Day But Today*, documentary). When he graduated, Larson moved into a rundown studio apartment in a dilapidated building in the Village, and he worked two to three days a week at the Moondance Diner, where he made just enough money to get by. The rest of his time was devoted to writing and composing (McDonnell, Silberger 8, 12).

Larson began working on *RENT* in the late 1980s with a man named Billy Aronson. The two men had trouble working together, so Aronson worked on some other plays, and

Larson wrote *Tick, Tick... BOOM!*, a rock piece about living the Bohemian lifestyle in the twentieth century. This show built up some recognition for Larson, and he then went back to work on *RENT*. After nearly six years of writing and revising, *RENT* finally opened at the New York Theatre Workshop. Unfortunately, Larson was not able to enjoy the success of his show, because he died of an aortic aneurism on January 25, 1996, the evening before opening night (McDonnell, Silberger 20).

“I am the future of the American musical.” This is what Larson told a friend of his father’s at a dinner party in the early 1990s. While that statement seems arrogant, at the same time, if Larson did not believe it, he would have never finished *RENT*. He had to keep telling himself that he was essentially put on this earth for this one purpose, and that is how he kept himself going during the years it took to complete the show (McDonnell, Silberger 15).

Larson began writing *RENT* in 1989, collaborating with a Billy Aronson. They wrote a few scenes and songs over the course of a few weeks. As the characters began to develop, Aronson began to realize Larson was going in a direction he knew nothing about. They initially worked on separate projects, and in 1991, Larson asked Aronson’s permission to continue working on *RENT* alone. . He felt compelled to write *RENT*, and he did not have time to wait on Aronson. He also knew the show had to go a certain way, so collaboration was really not an option. As he began to work solo, Larson began looking for a theatre in which to present his work to an audience. In 1992, Larson passed a theatre that was being remodeled; this space was the New York Theatre Workshop. He sent the producer a letter, and they took him on. Larson kept writing and writing, until finally, in 1994, the draft was

complete, and was ready to be workshopped. After several months of casting, the show was finally ready to open (McDonnell, Silberger 20, 22).

Another workshop production of *RENT* was scheduled for December 1995. Between those two productions, Larson made some significant changes to the script. While no details of what songs were featured in the 1994 workshop are available, Larson wrote seven new songs, including “Tango: Maureen” and “What You Own.” This is reminiscent of Brecht’s practice of editing his shows between productions so they stayed relevant. He also completely rewrote the song “Right Brain,” which became “Glory” (McDonnell, Silberger 30). Producer Kevin McCollum tells the story behind the change:

“Right Brain” was about finding the right side of your brain, which is very esoteric. Jonathan was saying “Got to get the right side of my brain going,” but what he meant was “I’ve got to write a great musical.” I think Michael [Grief, the director] said, “That’s great, but get past the poetry; what’s the intent?” “To write a great song.” “So write that.” (McDonnell, Silberger 31)

Larson was getting very convoluted in his writing, and director Michael Grief helped him write in a manner that made it easier for the audience to connect with the work. The line “Got to get the right side of my brain going” became something similar to, “One song/ Glory/ One song/ Before I go/ Glory/ One song to leave behind” (McDonnell, Silberger 80). The song became clearer, which made it easier for people to relate to it.

Because of several contributing factors, including Larson’s long time friend Gordon passing, the December 1995 workshop of *RENT* was pushed back to January 1996. This made Larson very frustrated, because he knew he had to write this show, and things were not falling into place like he thought they should. When the next round of revisions was

completed in October 1995, the structure of the show had changed: it was now a retrospective piece told by everyone attending Angel's funeral. This apparently did not sit right with the producers, because the final script was completed in December 1995, and that is the version of show (synopsized below) that was performed on Broadway, is performed on tour as well as regional theatres around the country (McDonnell, Silberger 32, 37).

One night during the rehearsal process, Larson gathered the cast and crew together for a potluck dinner of sorts. He got up and started talking about how important this show was to him, and he ended his speech by saying, "This show is about my friends, so you're playing my friends." Larson meant that very literally. During the song "Life Support," the audience is introduced to Gordon, Pam, and Sue, three members of Angel's HIV/AIDS support group. These three people were all close friends of Larson who died of AIDS in 1995 (*No Day But Today*, documentary). The final rehearsal of *RENT* at New York Theatre Workshop happened on January 24, 1996, and it functioned as a preview. The audience was packed, and they absolutely loved the show. This was the only chance Larson ever got to celebrate *RENT*, because he passed away in his home that night (McDonnell, Silberger 37, 51).

When the cast found out the next morning, they were completely devastated. The group decision was to cancel the actual performance that night, but perform a sing-through, seated, in honor of the late composer. In spite of that, the house was still packed, standing room included. People poured into the aisles to see this show. After a month of performances, and a second month's extension, the producers announced that *RENT* would be moving uptown to Broadway into the appropriately dilapidated Nederlander Theatre on

West Forty-First Street. This announcement was made on February 23, 1996, and *RENT* opened in the Nederlander about two months later on April 29, 1996. Coincidentally, *RENT* opening on Broadway also coincided with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the premiere of Puccini's *La Boheme*, from which *RENT* draws its inspiration. The show ran on Broadway for over twelve years, and closed on September 7, 2008 (McDonnell, Silberger 52, 58,63).

*RENT* takes place in and around a loft near Eleventh Street and Avenue B in New York City. As the lights go up, the audience sees Roger Davis tuning a guitar and his roommate Mark Cohen preparing to film a new documentary ("Tune Up 1"). Phone calls interrupt Mark's progress ("Voicemail 1"), and in one of these calls, their former roommate-turned-landlord Benjamin Coffin, III (known as Benny throughout the rest of the show) is demanding rent from the past year ("Tune Up 2"). Mark and Roger panic, knowing they have no means of coming up with the money ("Rent"). Out on the street, Angel DuMont Schunard happens upon Tom Collins, who has just been mugged. Angel offers to take care of this injured stranger, and they make their way off-stage ("You OK, Honey?"). Back at the loft, Mark has been summoned to help his ex-girlfriend Maureen Johnson prepare for her latest protest against corporate expansion in the neighborhood ("Tune Up 3"). He leaves Roger alone with his thoughts about life and death, and his desire to write one hit song before he dies ("One Song Glory"). Roger is interrupted by Mimi Marquez, a dancer in need of a match and potentially a partner for the night. When she discovers this will not be the case, she returns to her apartment downstairs ("Light My Candle"). Mark reappears, this time with Collins in tow, who introduces his former roommates to Angel ("Today 4 U"). Benny crashes the party by coming up to collect the rent. He gives Mark an ultimatum: make Maureen cancel her protest, or Roger and Mark will be living on the street ("You'll

See”). Mark enters the unknown when he approaches the empty lot that serves as the set for Maureen’s protest. To his dismay, JoAnn Jefferson, Maureen’s new lover and stage manager is there. He helps JoAnn with the technical difficulties (“Tango: Maureen”), and heads to Life Support, Angel’s HIV/AIDS support group (“Life Support”). Mimi approaches Roger again, practically begging him to sleep with her (“Out Tonight”), but he refuses, upsetting her so much in the process that she begins to cry (“Another Day”). Roger and the rest of the cast begin to question the value and importance of life, and for the first time in six months, Roger leaves the apartment (“Will I?”). Mark, Angel, and Collins leave the support group meeting, and begin to wonder if life would be better if they did not live in New York City (“Santa Fe”). Mark leaves the other two in search of Roger, hoping his friend will leave the house. Angel and Collins share a moment together, in a sense declaring their love for each other (“I’ll Cover You”). Next, JoAnn is seen being put into a panic by all the things going on in her life at once (“We’re OK”). Outside, in the park, people are bustling about in anticipation for Maureen’s show (“Christmas Bells”). The performance itself is great (“Over the Moon”), but the riot afterwards puts a slight damper on things. To celebrate the success of Maureen’s show, the group goes to the Life Café, where they celebrate everything about the Bohemian lifestyle (“La Vie Boheme A and B”). While there, Roger discovers that Mimi, like him, has HIV, the one thing that made him recoil from everyone else. Act I closes with the potential for love in Roger’s life (“I Should Tell You”).

Act II opens with the question, “How can you measure the life of a woman or a man?” which gives the audience something to think about during the second act (“Seasons of Love”). The cast returns, and it is now New Year’s “Rockin’” Eve. The only problem is that the artists are locked out of their apartment; however getting back in is no problem, since

the group has come equipped with everything from a blow torch to destroy the lock, and rope to enter the loft through the skylight (“Happy New Year”). Benny ruins the party again, trying to make a truce, but the rest of the group will not have anything to do with him (“Happy New Year B”). Relationships take a turn for the worse, as Roger and Mimi and Maureen and JoAnn break up and get back together (“Without You,” “Take Me or Leave Me”). Tragedy strikes the group three-fold at Halloween: both couples break up, seemingly for good, and Angel loses his battle with AIDS (“Contact,” “I’ll Cover You Reprise”). Mark decides to take a job with a show called *BuzzLine* (“Halloween”), and Roger leaves town in an attempt to escape the tragedy surrounding him. Mimi feels completely alone without Roger and disappears (“Goodbye Love”). Finally, Mark and Roger realize they have been avoiding their own lives, and decide to just give in and live (“What You Own”). Mark finally finishes his documentary (“Finale A”), but a power outage, and Maureen and JoAnn’s discovery of Mimi living in the park interrupt the viewing. Mimi is on the verge of death, and Roger is in a panic. The only thing he can think to do is play the song he wrote for her, and somehow it brings her back (“Your Eyes”). The show ends with a somber celebration of life (“Finale B”).

In July of 2009, Memphis’ professional theatre, Playhouse on the Square, presented the regional premiere of the controversial rock opera. During a set of four performances, I was allowed to survey the audience, specifically to garner an understanding of their reactions to the political and social issues addressed on stage. Prior to beginning research for this project, I was convinced that *RENT* would be the perfect example of political theatre simply because of the topics the show addressed. As I read through different texts, I began to worry. Holderness’s claims that caused the most concern was that political theatre had

to subversive was the source of this concern. I did not think *RENT* was subversive at all. Larson was not calling for specific change in his work; he was simply making people aware of different issues that needed to be examined. In other theoretical aspects, *RENT* was a good choice for examination. The characters are memorable, which is what scholars find important about Shaw's works, and Larson was continually revising, which was a practice of Brecht. Larson's characters, however, are the highlight of his work. He put so much depth into them, and so much heart, that the audience could truly understand what the characters are going through on stage. Because each character has such a specific identity, identifying with them becomes easier.

Thirty-eight people participated in the survey at Playhouse on the Square, and their ages ranged from late teens to sixties, but it was surprising to find that, for the most part, the reactions were very similar across the board. Among the thirty-eight responses, five stood out more than others.

The first comes from a thirty-three year old person. When asked about their initial reactions to the political and social issues addressed in *RENT*, this person said, "Less relevant now. At the time, it changed almost everything for me." This person is acknowledging how influential *RENT* was on American culture and their own life... in 1996. Today, according to this person, these issues are not as relevant—while they are still somewhat important, the American public has moved on to other, more contemporary concerns. This is very similar to the response from a forty-nine year old patron who said, "All very 90s—We've moved on!"

Another audience member addressed the issue of relevance, saying, "While more controversial thirteen years ago, the issues are still relevant and continue to need

addressing.” It is as though this person is saying that every now and then the public needs a reminder that the issues of GLBT awareness, homelessness and poverty are still there and we cannot ignore them.

Of the thirty-eight people polled, only one person showed distaste for how *RENT* depicted the social issues plaguing America in the 1990s and today. The forty-nine year old person said, “Those are issues I’m concerned about, but didn’t really like the way they were presented in the play.”

For one patron however, *RENT* did fulfill the goal of political theatre—to make people think. The patron, in their sixties, said, “I was very moved. It put faces on lots of things people don’t like to think about.” This person is asserting that people do not like to dwell on the negative; however, having a face to put with these issues not only make them more real, but also could be more likely to prompt people to do something about them. This response illustrates the importance of characters in political theatre and the roll they play when presenting certain issues on the stage.

Along with the patrons from Playhouse on the Square, I also surveyed the members of the Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies. They answered a more in-depth survey, and the answers to one particular question stood out from the rest. The question was, “When Mark signs the contract with *BuzzLine*, is he really selling out, or avoiding what his documentary has become?”

One student provided a very poignant response to this question. This person summed up their answer by saying:

I just thought that it wouldn’t have been much of a sell out if he had gone through with the contract, since that had been the goal all along, but he

started thinking of it as a sell out, not because he didn't like what his documentary had become, but more because of what the success of his documentary meant he had become.

This person suggests that Mark is not trying to avoid his documentary because he is afraid of it. This is the life he chose, and he knew things were going to become overwhelmingly difficult at some point. This person sees Mark taking the job at *BuzzLine* as an avoidance of what the people around him would think of him if he succeeded. Mark began to see his work as exploiting his friends, and that was not how he wanted to be known. He, of course, ends up finishing his documentary because he realizes it was his calling.

Another person pointed out that Mark was toeing the line between what people needed to see versus what they wanted to see: "Rather than facing the facts of the hardships of the people around him, he settles for showing the things others want the world to see." Mark knew what he wanted to show the world, he just needed to get over his fear of doing so. While still engrossed in that fear, he takes the job at *BuzzLine* because he has no connection with what is being reported. He only tells people what others tell him to share. He finally comes to terms with the fact that hardship and pain cannot be avoided, and then decides to embrace the work he was meant to do.

Two people saw Mark's signing the contract as a sell out, but also as a sign of Mark taking responsibility for his life. They believed Mark was finally growing up and entering the real world, including the real world mentality of "it does not matter if you do not like your job, at least you are making money." The "yuppie" movement of the late 1980s-early 1990s illustrates this mentality. One of the two even displayed distaste for Mark quitting to pursue his own documentary.

From these surveys, I was able to come to one general conclusion: that *RENT* is not viewed as a show that calls for any type of change, which would mean *RENT* does not qualify as political theatre according to Graham Holderness. *RENT* is more about awareness. Most audience members surveyed said *RENT* made them aware of issues they would not have necessarily thought about on their own. It is fairly clear that Larson did not know *what* kind of change he wanted to see happen; he just knew that changed needed to happen. *RENT* is a political piece in that it makes the audience think about issues such as homelessness, poverty, the treatment of the GLBT community, even the structure of the American healthcare system. If the right people hear this message requesting change, although no specific challenges are made, then these changes have a greater potential to be made, whatever they may end up being. I believe that is what Larson intended to do when he started writing this work.

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