

Once Upon A Time...

What's the background of Rent-what it's based on, who made it possible, and how did it come about? Well, it's all here. The history. A synopsis of La Bohème-the original RENT. And information about The New York Theatre Workshop, which saw RENT through from the play's inception, to its first performances, to the move to Broadway and beyond...

It took seven years to take RENT from its idea to its previews. There's so much of Jonathan Larson here, but the fact remains that it isn't only Jonathan. There are other voices here too, other personalities that shaped RENT, who took an idea that had been batting around at Jonathan for seven years, and gave it sets and costumes and flesh and bones and lights and actors and life. It took many other people to allow Jon's voice the clearest opportunity to sing its own song. The history of RENT falls roughly into four periods: The Idea, The First Drafts, The Revisions, and The Premiere.

Here is how it happened.

#### THE IDEA

One of the many other people who made RENT happen is Billy Aronson, who was a Yale trained playwright, who loved opera, and who had this idea. Billy wanted to write a musical updating La Bohème. He wanted it to be about people like himself - struggling to make art under lousy conditions. Some theatrical acquaintances suggested Jonathan. They met a few times in 1989, sitting on Jonathan's roof and absorbing a little kefi, a Greek concept that Jon treasured; if you had kefi, wherever you lived, whatever was going on in your life, it would feel wonderful. It was an idea Jon was going to find useful. Jon came up with the title. He didn't like Billy's proposed upper-west-side setting. Billy wanted to make the show about his friends, and Jon wanted to make it about his, and Jon won. In 1991, he called Billy up and asked if he could take RENT for his own. Billy said sure. Jon also liked one more thing about RENT. In La Bohème, the Parisian bohemians are afflicted with tuberculosis; the whole opera occurs under its specter. The modern equivalent was AIDS. Jon knew all about AIDS. A lot of his good friends were HIV positive, like Matt O'Grady, his pal from back home. Writing RENT provided one way to make sense of the experience.

#### THE FIRST DRAFTS

Jon had written lots of music in the years between leaving college and mounting RENT. He'd written two shows that didn't end up getting produced. An ambitious young producer named Jeffrey Seller had nearly taken on the second, so when RENT came around, so did Jeffrey Seller. He felt the time was right to produce a musical; he had stayed in touch with Jon, because he was convinced that one day, "Jon was going to write a brilliant musical." He came down to Fourth Street. Jeffrey felt the play was baggy, a collage with no narrative shape. "There were great songs," Jeffrey remembers, "but there were endless songs. It was as if Jon had thrown everything at the wall to see what would stick." Some producer friends he had brought with him left at intermission, assuring Jeffrey the work was unsalvageable. Jeffrey was still interested, though - as long as Jon found a story as good as the music.

Jon sent a letter to Stephen Sondheim, his mentor, asking for advice and

assistance. the older composer responded by helping to arrange a \$45,000 grant from the Richard Rodgers Foundation, to support a workshop production of RENT. What they needed now was a director. Jim Nicola, artistic director of the New York Theatre Workshop - a space Jon had decided was perfect for his musical - immediately suggested Michael Greif, a young New York director who had recently become artistic director of the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego. He sent Greif Jon's tape and script. Greif listened to the tape on a Walkman flying from California to New York. The script seemed shaggy. "What impressed me, he remembers, was its youth and enthusiasm, and that it was a musical about contemporary life. Jon was writing about some people I felt I knew, that I sort of loved, or had loved in my life." What Jim wanted in a director was a counterweight to Jon's kefi philosophy, which had allowed him to treat dark subjects like AIDS, homelessness, and drug addiction with optimism. Michael was hard-nosed and cool-headed. He met with Jim and Jonathan in January of 1994, and the three set to work on bringing the script to the level of the music. "It was very fragile material at the time," Jim recalls. "And it was so easy for it to become sentimental or hokey, or any number of things. I felt Michael had the right sort of dryness and sharpness to balance Jonathan's writing."

Jim saw his instincts had been right as soon as the three got down to shaping the script in Jon's loft. They met for a week in the middle of the spring, preparing for the workshop scheduled for November. They went over the script scene by scene, moment by moment. Immediately, the dynamic between Jonathan and Michael slipped into a productive yin and yang. Michael was afraid there was something self-congratulatory about the young bohemian heroes of the show; Jon toned down the lyrics of "La Vie Bohème." Michael fretted about the homeless characters - that they not simply serve as East Village window dressing, as moral scarecrows where Mark and Roger could drape their good social conscience; Jonathan wrote the new song, "On the Street," where a homeless woman gives Mark a stern telling off. Most importantly, Michael had reservations about the message of the show, the "No Day But Today" cheerfulness of the life support meetings. Michael had friends with HIV, just as Jon did, and they were not cheerful about it. Jon added the new scene of Gordon questioning the life support credo, saying he regretted his low T-cell count. And Jon himself kept Michael from becoming too hard-nosed and cool-headed.

"What Jon gave Michael was some of his hope and heart and generosity of spirit. And what I think Michael gave Jon was some edge and realism and complexity, and making sure things didn't all resolve nicely and prettily. It was a good marriage," remembers Anthony Rapp, who originated the role of Mark. Jim, Michael, and Jonathan met again that summer at Dartmouth College, where the NYTW ran a kind of working camp for its affiliated artists. Michael and Jon talked plot. One large problem, they agreed, was the relationship between Maureen and Mark; in these drafts, a major plot point was Mark winning Maureen back. Michael didn't like it. "My position was, if they're gonna be lesbians, let them be lesbians. Don't make them about going-back-to-their-man." In October, back in the city, Michael worked out the "performance vocabulary" of RENT. For budgetary reasons - and also because it suited the nature of the characters - the NYTW decided to have minimal props. Michael suggested the three "Frankenstein" tables, which could be made to serve multiple functions in the show. He pushed for a multi-racial cast. Because it was rock, Michael played around with microphones, with actors singing directly to the seats: "We were very

anxious to take advantage of the fact that it would be as much a concert as it was a play.

## THE REVISIONS

For all its flaws, the November workshop was a tremendous success. It ran two weeks with the audience growing larger and more enthusiastic each night; by the last week it was sold out. Anthony Rapp, remembers the excitement: "I kept telling people it was going to be an event. We knew it needed work. But people I trust and respect - friends and collaborators - would come down and be knocked out by it. By the spirit and energy, and the raw feeling." Jim Nicola thought it needed work, too. But the responses he was getting from his friends were just what Anthony was hearing. "There was a lot of passion - again, the most striking thing was the intensity of opinion about it. There was a large segment of people whose tastes I trusted who just loved it, and didn't care what the problems were. I felt even more convinced that there was really something strong here." Jim found himself moving towards an exciting, scary, stirring decision. RENT was the kind of show to bet the company on.

The second week, Jeffrey Seller returned to East Fourth Street. He brought his business partner, Kevin McCollum. Sitting down in the front row, seeing the three tables, remembering the plotless show he'd seen a year earlier, Jeffrey had time for a crisis of confidence. He turned to Kevin before the show and warned him, "This is either gonna be absolutely brilliant or it's going to be a piece of crap." At intermission, after "La Vie Boheme," Kevin nudged Jeffrey and said, "get out the checkbook."

A couple of nights later, the two brought a business associate named Allan S. Gordon to the NYTW. Allan's response fascinated them. "Here you've got this Wall Street businessman who's enthralled by the East Village setting, by the kids smoking outside," Jeffrey remembers, "and who loves the energy and loves the music. When Allan told them he wanted to be part of the production team, Jeffrey and Kevin took it as a sign; "RENT wasn't going to be a downtown cult thing. It touched everyone who saw it."

After the holidays, Jim, Michael and Jonathan sat down again in Jim's office. They spoke about what need fixing. The show had no single story, no primary narration - in the November workshop, all the characters narrated. When they had something to say, they turned around and said it right to the audience. And the characters themselves, especially Maureen and Joanne, needed refinement. Jim gave Jon a task: Could he boil the plot down to a single sentence? The sentences Jon first turned in were impossibly long, crammed full of clauses and parentheses and second thoughts. But as Jim anticipated, as the sentences came into focus, so did the play.

Michael and Jim decided to hire Jonathan a dramaturg. Dramaturgs work with playwrights as shapers, advisers and editors. Jon did a lot of interviews before meeting Lynn Thompson. They hit it off right away. From the first, Lynn seemed to be on Jon's wavelength. She was able to speak in a voice that sparked Jon's enthusiasm. Jim and Michael put the two on a schedule; Jon would deliver a revised draft by the summer's end. RENT was to begin rehearsals in October. Jon had found another strong collaborator. Lynn suggested he work up biographies of the characters, that he write a version of RENT told through each person's eyes. Her belief was that once Jon understood the story completely, once he really had the characters under his belt, the rewriting

of the play would come in a simple burst. They worked through the summer, discovering a structure for RENT. "One of the direct results Lynn had is that Jon's capacity to write a dramatic song blossomed," Jim remembers. Jon came up with new songs and scenes like "Happy New Year" that moved the plot and told the story. The play really transformed in that period," Jim says, "more than it had during all the years we'd worked on it." By October they had a new draft. Jon was confident his six years of work were over. Actors read the script aloud to everyone.

Jim and Michael were both struck by the changes, but they knew they weren't out of the woods. The characters were sharper, but Jon had done some structural fiddling, turning much of the show into flashback. The first act began with Angel's funeral and Mark wondering, "How did we get here?", with the rest of the story catching up from there. No one was comfortable with this except the playwright himself. The Maureen-Joanne relationship was finally working, but their second act duet was by all accounts miserable. "One of the worst songs ever written," Michael remembers with a laugh. "The songs was a straight out cat fight, the lovers sniping at each other, Maureen telling Joanne, "You're the hepatitis in my clam."

Jeffrey was especially concerned. The show was supposed to go into rehearsals in six weeks and RENT didn't feel ready to him. "On the one hand, the new script made a huge, wonderful leap from the workshop - a gigantic creative stride - but it wasn't there yet. Now it's late October and we're in casting. And the show starts rehearsing in December." Jeffrey dashed off some quick, blunt notes on what he felt need to be changed in RENT before the production could move ahead.

Jeffrey's notes were intended for Jim and Michael, but Jon got a hold of them. What the notes called for was another rewrite. Jon didn't want to do any more writing. "There was real terror the production wouldn't happen," Michael remembers. "It was a tense few days. Jon was very upset and very frustrated. But what it came down to was, we all want this to be as strong as it can be. No one thinks this is finished, so we should have another go at it." Jon turned to Sondheim one last time, and Sondheim reminded him of a key proposition: theater was collaborative. Part of Jon's job was to take into account what his collaborators felt. So Jon signed on.

Michael wanted a simplified structure, with a clearer emotional division between the two acts: "The first act should be much more the celebration, and the second act should be a lot of the ramifications and sorrows surrounding these lives." Jon finally quit his job at the Moondance Diner. His friend Eddie Rosenstein remembers, "After he left the diner, and he announced that he was a full-time professional musical playwright, his spirits soared. That's all anybody wants to do in life, isn't it? A chance to do what they do."

During Jon's rewrites the show moved in casting. Jon wanted a youthful, sexy cast, and he and Michael leaned toward young performers who seemed to have some connection with their characters, whose spirit could add dimensions to the work. The cast seem to invigorate Jon. "He was really inspired by this company," Michael says. "We still needed the Joanne-Maureen song. And Jon really wisely said, 'let me just sit with these actors, and

let me bring you something.' And then what he brings me is 'Take Me Or Leave Me,' and I'm totally thrilled out of my mind."

#### THE PREMIERE

From December, when Jon finished the script, it was a quick sprint to the show you've seen, or perhaps you have yet to see. There were a lot of what Jon called "programming changes": shifting songs from one position to another, seeing where they fit best. In January Jim finally allowed himself to simply watch the show. He sat in a rehearsal with a group of NYTW board members, and the emotional response to RENT was extraordinary. "It continued to get even tighter and better through rehearsals," Daphne Rubin-Vega, the original Mimi, remembers. The New York Times got wind that a rock musical based on La Bohème was going to premiere on the 100th anniversary of the original La Bohème. No one had known this; it was a simple fluke.

Since Jon's death, there have been a few revisions. Lynn, Jim and Michael would meet and attempt, by looking over the many drafts of RENT, to divide what changes Jonathan would have approved. They would put their heads together and out of their three component visions try to come up with a close duplication of Jonathan's. When the show premiered, they knew they had something special on their hands - people in the audience were weeping at the last act. Jon's death added an explosive, powerful element to the cast's understanding of the play. "The company had already come together so well, but that eve of Jon dying just brought us together that much more strongly," Daphne remembers. "It let us remember that the bottom line is really about what you do with this experience, because tomorrow isn't promised you. There was no more powerful way of receiving that message than from someone who was completely healthy and died. Someone whose life was just beginning. It just became that much more urgent to do right by him."

The day of Jon's death, no one at the Workshop was quite sure what to do. The first performance was scheduled for that evening. Jim Nicola was for canceling; but he knew they needed to do something for Jonathan's memory. The first act, in particular, involved a lot of tricky dancing and jumping on tables. It hadn't been completely rehearsed, and he was afraid there would be injuries. Eddie Rosenstein urged him to run the whole show full out. By the evening, Jonathan's friends were streaming into the theatre, his parents were there, New York Theatre workshop was filled to capacity with people Jon had loved. Jim decided on a sing-through - no acting, just songs. Throughout the first act, the cast was able to hold their seats. But very slowly, they began to rise. They acted, they danced. "It was incredible and terrible," Anthony remembers. "It was like we had to do it. We were all sobbing and crying." The lighting people made their way to the lighting booth; the sound manager began to pick up his cues. "They couldn't contain themselves," Eddie remembers. "The audience was reaching out to the cast. They were crying and cheering." By the second act, he was laughing. Silently. He was laughing on the inside. You know what happened to the play next. The show has become one of the biggest things ever on Broadway. It's become the sort of thing a playwright hopes for in the middle of the night, and in the morning is embarrassed at how wild he's let his fantasies run. RENT - Jon's first produced show - is like an athlete that has won the Rookie of the year award, a gold medal, the World Series, and the Most Valuable Player, all in the same season. It collected the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the Drama Desk Award,

The Obie Award, the Tony Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. RENT was on the cover of Newsweek. Time called it a "breakthrough." The New York Times, "an exhilarating landmark." At the 1996 Democratic National Convention, the cast of RENT sang "Seasons of Love." Movie and television stars have returned again and again, and afterwards, at the Nederlander Theater, they've gone backstage to sign a long brick wall, a kind of Broadway Wailing Wall - Spike Lee, and Billy Joel and Jodi Foster - forwarding their best wishes and congratulations to Jonathan and the cast. People in the say they recognize the same audience members coming back to the Nederlander ten, fifteen times. If a young playwright told you this was a fantasy of theirs, you'd smile at their ambitions, and they'd walk away embarrassed. But here it is true.