



# Study Guide

Book, Music and Lyrics by

**JONATHAN LARSON**

Musical Arrangements by:

**STEVE SKINNER**

Original Concept and Additional Lyrics by:

**BILLY ARONSON**

Music Supervision and Original Arrangement by:

**TIM WEIL**

Dramaturg:

**LYNN THOMSON**

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**The *Rent School Edition* Study Guide can be used in several different ways:**

Schools are increasingly moving towards a more connected and universal approach of education by embracing cross-curricular learning. It is our

**BY THE SCHOOL**

hope at Music Theatre International that your production of *Rent School Edition* will not only impact the students and faculty directly involved with the musical, but the school at large. In order to help you (the teacher or director) disseminate information to teachers in other departments, we have provided you a quick reference guide outlining topics that are relevant to different school subjects. We encourage you to copy these pages and offer them as a resource and springboard to your colleagues.

Directors can use this guide as a tool to help students acquire a deeper understanding of his or her role in the show by assigning some of the

**BY THE DIRECTOR**

writing tasks found in section five of this guide, or encouraging cast discussions among groups while they are not actively participating in rehearsals. A series of acting warm-ups are also provided in section five that will assist the students in making the transition from school to rehearsal, break down inhibitions, and improve performance focus. The warm-up activities done in groups also help promote the familial camaraderie that goes along with producing a musical.

This guide should serve to enrich the experience of the actors performing the show by providing helpful background information, character analyses, a historical context

**BY THE ACTORS**

for the show, thought-provoking activities and questions, a reference recording that corresponds to the student libretto/vocal books, and fun facts that can be explored during down time at rehearsals.



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## INSPIRATION FOR RENT

**I**N 1989 WHEN HE BEGAN WORKING ON *RENT*, Jonathan Larson was living “la vie boheme.” He lived in an apartment in New York’s West Village. The bathtub was in the kitchen and friends had to call from the pay phone outside so that the key could be thrown down for them to get in. He was a waiter at the Moondance Diner, working just enough shifts to pay the bills so that he could spend as much time as possible on his music. Many of Jonathan’s friends were living the same life.

When the idea of updating *La Boheme* was presented to him, Jonathan saw it as an opportunity to write about his friends and their struggles. Many of his friends – male, female, straight and gay – were HIV positive. Like Mark, Jonathan had a girlfriend dump him for another woman. He had friends like Benny who had turned their backs on the bohemian life for the stability that the corporate world could offer. While none of the main characters in *RENT* are directly based on any one real person, aspects of many of Larson’s friends are present in the many East Village residents in the show.

Additionally, the locations are real. Though he lived in the West Village, he would go to the East Village and observe people and “scout” locations. The Life Café, CBGBs (where Roger’s band

played), the 11<sup>th</sup> Street vacant lot (where Maureen holds her performance) – these were all places that Jonathan visited during the development of the show. While there was no Life Support in real life, Jonathan had become involved with Friends in Deed and based the fictitious support group on this actual organization.

### LA BOHEME

Giacomo Puccini’s fourth opera, *La Boheme*, premiered in Turin, Italy on February 1, 1896 to a less than favorable critical reception. The libretto was written by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, based on Henri Murger’s *Scenes de la Vie de Boheme*. Despite its initially tepid reception by critics, Puccini’s *La Boheme* went on to become one of the most beloved and most produced operas in the popular repertory.

### PLOT SYNOPSIS

**ACT I:** It is Christmas Eve in a cold garret in the Latin Quarter of Paris (c.1830). We are introduced to roommates Marcello, a painter, Rodolfo, a poet, Colline, a philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician who has found a job and is able to supply some provisions to the group. They celebrate this good fortune, but are interrupted by Benoit, their landlord, who has come to collect the overdue rent. The Bohemians succeed in getting rid of Benoit and then head off to Café Momus, leaving Rodolfo behind to finish an article he is writing. Rodolfo’s work is interrupted by Mimi, a young neighbor, who has come seeking someone to light her candle, which has gone out in the drafty stairs. In the process, Mimi loses her key and Rodolfo helps her search for it. By the end of the act, the two declare their love and head off to meet the others.

**ACT II:** At Café Momus, Rodolfo introduces Mimi to his friends. Marcello’s former lover, Musetta, arrives on the arm of Alcindoro, a wealthy councilor of state. Musetta sends Alcindoro away and flirts relentlessly with Marcello. Finally winning him over, Musetta joins Marcello and the other Bohemians, leaving Alcindoro to cover the bill when he returns.

**ACT III:** It is later in the winter and Mimi arrives on the outskirts of Paris where the reunited Marcello and Musetta are living. She tells Marcello that she and Rodolfo must part because of his jealousy. Rodolfo arrives to speak with Marcello and Mimi hides. After complaining of Mimi’s flirtatious behavior, Rodolfo finally confesses that Mimi is dying and that staying together in their squalid conditions will only make her health worsen. Mimi overhears all of this and reveals her presence. She and Rodolfo pledge to stay together until the spring. Meanwhile, Marcello and Musetta get into an argument and separate.

**ACT IV:** Some months later, Rodolfo and Marcello are back in their garret, separated from their loves. Colline and Schaunard arrive with some food and the four make merry. The party is interrupted by Musetta who enters and explains that Mimi is downstairs, too weak to climb up. She is dying and begged to be taken to Rodolfo. While Rodolfo and Mimi reminisce about their first days together, the others try to get help. The others return, but help does not arrive soon enough. Mimi dies and the opera ends with Rodolfo calling out her name in grief.

### THE COMPOSER

Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy on December 22, 1858 to a very musical family. At the age of 18 he saw a production of Verdi’s *Aida* and became interested in opera. He studied at conservatories in Lucca and Milan. Puccini wrote nine operas: *Le Villi* (1884), *Edgar* (1889), *Manon Lescaut* (1893), *La Boheme* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), *Madama Butterfly* (1904), *The Girl of the Golden West* (1910), *La Rondine* (1917) and *Turandot* (1926), which was published and performed posthumously. Additionally, Puccini wrote *Il Trittico* (1918), which included three contrasting one-act operas (*Suor Angelica*, *Il Tabarro*, *Gianni Schicchi*) to be performed in a single evening. Aside from his opera work, Puccini wrote some solo songs, a small amount of sacred choral music and a few orchestral, chamber, organ and piano works. He died of cancer of the throat at age 65 on November 29, 1924.





## THE LIBRETTISTS

Luigi Illica (1857 – 1919) was an Italian playwright and librettist. He began his literary career in Milan in 1879, writing prose. He moved on to playwriting and in 1889 began writing librettos. He collaborated with Giuseppe Giacosa on three operas of Puccini's (*La Boheme*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*) and also served as one of the librettists for Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*. He worked with many other composers as well, writing some 80 librettos in his career.

Giuseppe Giacosa (1847 – 1906) started his career as a lawyer with his father's firm in Milan. After writing a successful one-act comedy, he changed the course of his career. From 1888 to 1894 he was the chair of literature and dramatic art at the Milan Conservatory. His professional relationship with Puccini and Illica began in 1893 when music publisher Giulio Ricordi united them to work on *La Boheme*. This writing partnership lasted until his death in 1906.

## SCENES DE LA VIE DE BOHEME – HENRI MURGER

*Scenes de la Vie de Boheme*, by Henri Murger, which served as the basis for Puccini's opera (as well as another opera titled *La Boheme* by Italian composer Ruggero Leoncavallo), began as a series of character sketches published in a magazine over the years of 1847 – 1849. These stories were romanticized versions of the bohemian life Murger and his friends were living in Paris. In 1849, Murger co-authored the play *La Vie de Boheme* with playwright Theodore Barriere based on this series of articles. After the success of the stage work, Murger achieved fame and wealth, removing himself from the bohemian life. However, in 1851 he published the collection of stories as *Scenes de la Vie de Boheme* and continued to write of the bohemian life until his death in 1861.

# THE CREATION OF THE MUSICAL

## THE HISTORY OF *RENT*

**J**ONATHAN LARSON WAS A "STARVING ARTIST" when, in 1989, his friend and fellow struggling playwright, Billy Aronson, suggested writing a contemporary, American version of Puccini's opera *La Boheme*. Initially, Aronson and Larson developed *RENT* together, writing early drafts of the title song as well as "Santa Fe" and "I Should Tell You," but they eventually parted ways amicably, and Larson continued to develop the show on his own.

In the fall of 1992, Larson completed a first draft of *RENT* and dropped off a demo tape to James Nicola, the Artistic Director of New York Theater Workshop, who said about Larson:

What drew Jonathan and me together in a philosophical place was the belief in how tragic it was that pop music and theater music had gotten a divorce. I felt he was the first composer I had run into who had the possibility of doing something about it.

The first staged reading for *RENT* occurred in March of 1993. The response to the music was overwhelmingly positive, and after this reading director Michael Greif was brought on board to begin to work with Jonathan on the structure of the piece. In January 1994, Larson was awarded a Richard Rodgers Development Award, which he had applied for on the advice of his mentor and hero, Stephen Sondheim. The \$45,000 prize helped finance a two-week workshop of *RENT* that took place in November of that year. Two of the people in the audience were up-and-coming producers, Jeffrey Seller and Kevin McCollum. Based on the strength of the workshop presentation, the two producers agreed to partner with New York Theater Workshop to stage a full production the following year.

Throughout 1995, Larson continued to hone the work, and dramaturg Lynn Thomson assisted in sharpening the characters and structure. A final draft of the show was delivered to Nicola and the production team at the end of the summer. The show was cast, rehearsals finally began and the show continued to change and evolve throughout the process. On the night of the final dress rehearsal, Larson complained of chest pains and fever, which he had started to experience a few days earlier. Still, he watched the show and afterward, gave what would be his final interview to *The New York Times*. A few hours later he was dead of an aneurysm.

The reviews for the Off-Broadway production at NYTW were the most ecstatic that the theater community had seen since *A Chorus Line*. The show was called a "landmark musical" and the demand



for tickets created such a frenzy that the show was quickly moved from its downtown location to the Nederlander Theater on Broadway. *RENT* opened on Broadway on April 29, 1996.

The film rights to *RENT* were sold very early on in the run of the musical. However, it would not be until 2005 that the musical finally made it to the big screen in a film directed by Chris Columbus. Despite the long gestation period for the feature film, six of the eight original leads reprised their roles.

After 12 years and 5,123 performances, the Broadway production of *RENT* is scheduled to closed in September 2008.

## RENT AND THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN MUSICAL

*RENT* was hailed as “groundbreaking” and a “landmark musical.” It was called the “Hair of the ‘90s.” Jonathan Larson had succeeded in bringing contemporary music back to the Broadway stage, and with it a younger audience that had abandoned Broadway musicals for more accessible forms of entertainment like movies, television and music videos. While contemporary music on Broadway was something very new in 1996, it wasn’t new to the art form of musical theatre. In fact, when Broadway was born, the music that appeared in the shows was the popular music of the day. During the 1960s, with the growing popularity of rock ‘n’ roll and other forms of music, Broadway and contemporary popular music parted company. When *Hair* opened on Broadway in 1967, it brought a return of contemporary issues and popular music to the stage. However, this did not start a lasting trend. By the 1990s, Broadway show tunes did not resemble the music heard on the radio or MTV and the subject matter of Broadway musicals was not concerned with contemporary issues. The widespread popularity of *RENT* had a hand in changing that trend. There are still plenty of musicals being produced that have a more traditional “musical theatre sound,” but *RENT*’s presence has made it possible for composers to break the mold and deal with current issues in a musical style that doesn’t sound like Rodgers and Hammerstein.

## THE CREATIVE TEAM

### JONATHAN LARSON (BOOK, MUSIC, LYRICS)

Jonathan Larson received the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *RENT*. He also won the 1996 Tony Award for Best Musical and the 1994 Richard Rodgers Award for *RENT* and twice received The Gilman & Gonzales-Falla Theatre Foundation’s Commendation Award. In 1989 he was granted the Stephen Sondheim Award from American Music Theatre Festival, where he contributed to the musical “Sitting on the Edge of the Future.” In 1988 he won the Richard Rodgers Development Grant for his rock musical “Superbia,” which was staged at Playwrights Horizon. He composed the score for the musical “J.P. Morgan Saves the Nation,” which was presented by En Garde Arts in 1995. Mr. Larson performed his rock monologue “tick, tick... BOOM!” at Second Stage Theatre, The Village Gate and New York Theatre Workshop. In addition to scoring and songwriting for “Sesame Street,” he created music for a number of children’s book-cassettes, including Steven Spielberg’s “An American Tail” and “Land Before Time.” Other film scores include work for *Rolling Stone Magazine* publisher Jann Wenner. He conceived, directed and wrote four original songs for “Away We Go!”, a musical video for children. *RENT*, his rock opera based on *La Boheme*, had its world premiere on February 13, 1996 at New York Theatre

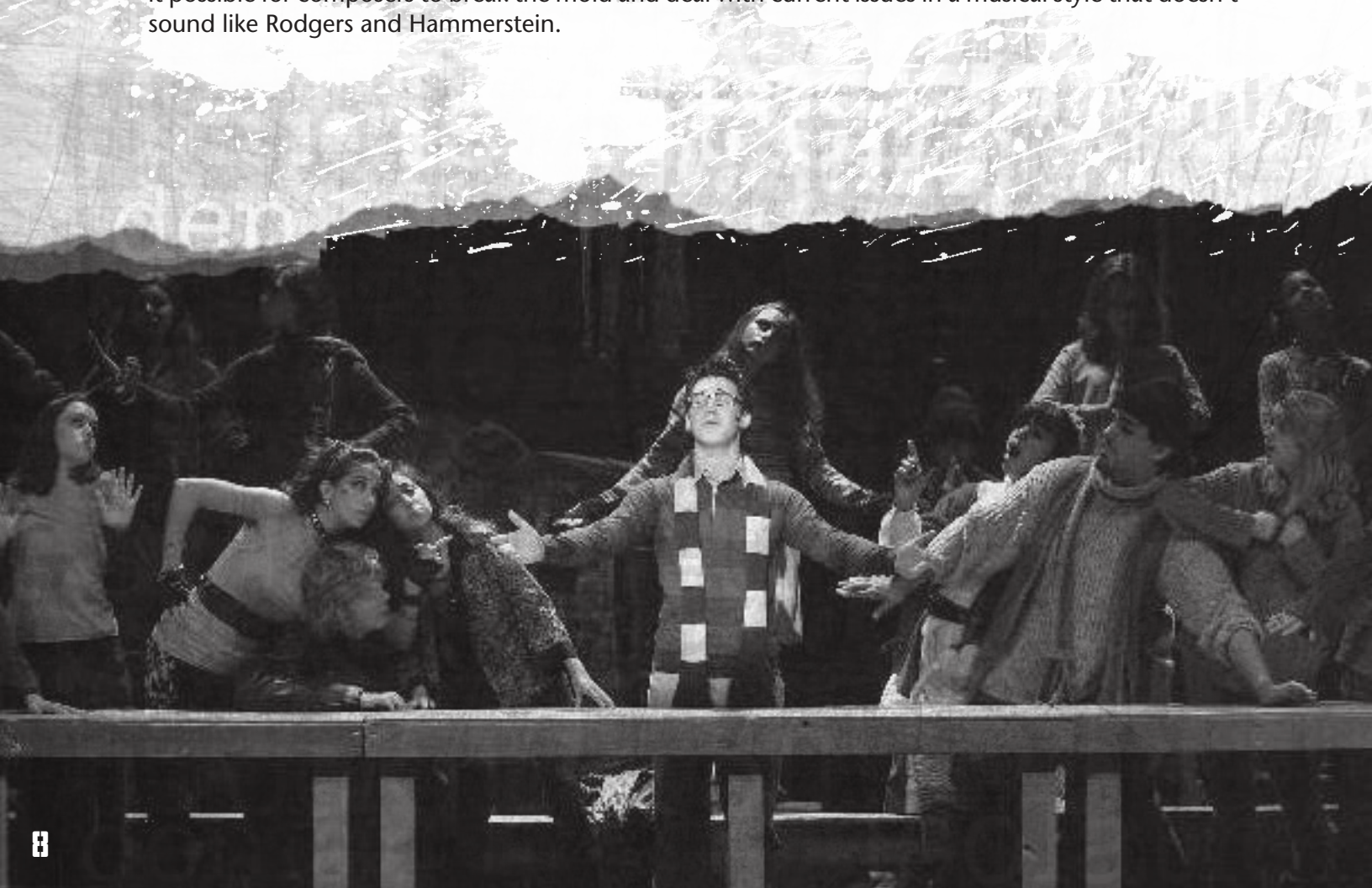
Workshop and opened at Broadway’s Nederlander Theatre on April 29, 1996. Mr. Larson died unexpectedly of an aortic aneurysm on January 25, 1996, ten days before his 36th birthday.

### BILLY ARONSON (ORIGINAL CONCEPT AND ADDITIONAL LYRICS)

Billy Aronson’s plays have been produced by Playwrights Horizons, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Woolly Mammoth Theatre and Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater and published in *Best American Short Plays*. His writing for TV includes scripts for “Courage the Cowardly Dog,” “Beavis & Butt-Head” and “Postcards from Buster.” His contributions to *RENT* include first-draft lyrics for “RENT,” “Santa Fe” and “I Should Tell You.”

### LYNN M. THOMSON (DRAMATURG)

Lynn M. Thomson is a dramaturg, director and teacher. She brought nearly 20 years of new play dramaturgical experience to her months of work with Jonathan Larson on the script of *RENT*. She was Associate Artistic Director for the Philadelphia Theatre Company where she created and administered a new play festival. She was Dramaturg at Circle Repertory Company. She has directed over 100 productions of both new plays and revivals at regional New York theatres, and many more workshops and readings of new plays. She is currently head of the MFA program in dramaturgy at Brooklyn College.





UPDATING *LA BOHEME*

A quick review of the Plot Synopsis and Character List for both *La Boheme* and *RENT* will reveal the origins for many of the elements of *RENT*. Below is a list of some of these elements as they exist in Puccini’s opera and Larson’s rock musical. This is just the tip of the iceberg. There are many more similarities, large and small, to be discovered.

<i>LA BOHEME</i>	<i>RENT</i>
<b>CHARACTERS:</b>	
<b>Marcello</b> – a painter <b>Rodolfo</b> – a writer <b>Mimi</b> – a seamstress who falls in love with Rodolfo <b>Colline</b> – a philosopher <b>Schaunard</b> – a musician <b>Benoit</b> – a landlord <b>Musetta</b> – Marcello’s ex-girlfriend <b>Alcindoro</b> – a state councilor and Musetta’s current mate	<b>Mark</b> – a filmmaker <b>Roger</b> – a songwriter <b>Mimi</b> – a dancer who falls in love with Roger <b>Collins</b> – teacher, computer-age philosopher <b>Angel Schunard</b> – a street musician and drag queen <b>Benny</b> – Mark and Roger’s landlord <b>Maureen</b> – Mark’s ex-girlfriend <b>Joanne</b> – a lawyer, Maureen’s new girlfriend
<b>PLOT POINTS:</b>	
Marcello and Rodolfo, freezing in their garret, burn Rodolfo’s manuscript for warmth.	Mark and Roger, freezing in their loft, burn Mark’s film script and Roger’s old rock ‘n’ roll posters for warmth.
Benoit comes to collect overdue rent.	Benny comes to collect overdue rent.
Mimi meets Rodolfo while looking for someone to light her candle. While in the garret, she loses her key and Rodolfo helps her find it.	Mimi meets Roger while looking for someone to light her candle. While in the loft, she loses her drug stash and Roger helps her find it.
The friends celebrate Christmas Eve at the Café Momus.	The friends celebrate Maureen’s performance on Christmas Eve at the Life Café.
Rodolfo pushes Mimi away because of his jealousy over her flirtatious behavior. We later learn that Mimi is dying of tuberculosis and Rodolfo is afraid that their living conditions will worsen her condition.	Roger pushes Mimi away because he is jealous of her previous relationship with Benny. We later learn that Roger can’t bear to watch Mimi die from HIV.
A dying Mimi finds Musetta and begs to be taken to Rodolfo to see him one last time.	A dying Mimi finds Maureen and begs to be taken to Roger to see him one last time.

Chapter 3

THE WORLD OF *RENT*

THE EAST VILLAGE – NEW YORK CITY

THE EAST VILLAGE IS DEFINED AS THE AREA IN LOWER MANHATTAN bordered by 14<sup>th</sup> Street on the north, Houston Street on the south, the East River on the east and Broadway (more or less) on the west. It includes the neighborhood known as Alphabet City, which is east of First Avenue where the parallel streets are named Avenue A, B, C and D. Until the 1960s this area was considered part of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. With an influx of artists, musicians and other bohemian types, there was a cultural shift and the distinction became recognized with the new classification as the East Village. This culture is what Jonathan Larson observed on his bike rides and walks through the area while creating *RENT*. Below are some of the places that are found in or referenced in *RENT*.

**Tompkins Square Park** – at the center of the East Village, between Avenues A and B, the site of the 1988 police riot that inspired the riot in *RENT*.

**Life Café (now closed)** – corner of 10<sup>th</sup> Street and Avenue B (a block away from where Mark and Roger live at the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> Street and Avenue B), the site of the celebration after Maureen’s performance and frequent hang out of the bohemian friends.

**CBGB (now closed)** – 315 Bowery, where Roger’s band played gigs.

**The Pyramid Club** – Avenue A between 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Streets, where Roger’s band played gigs.

**St. Mark’s Place** – Essentially a renamed section of 8<sup>th</sup> Street between Avenue A and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. The “Christmas Bells” street scene full of vendors and people milling about shopping is based on this three block stretch of street.

**New York Theatre Workshop** – 79 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street (between Bowery and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue), which Jonathan discovered on a bike ride. The original producing organization of *RENT* off-Broadway.



## BOHEMIANS

Many of the residents of the East Village depicted in *RENT* can be considered “bohemians.” As defined by Random House Webster’s College Dictionary, a bohemian is “a person, as an artist or writer, who lives and acts without regard for conventional rules and practices.” For bohemians, money is of little importance. Their relationships with others in their community and their common ideas on life and art are what they treasure. They have chosen this path, and live for the present.

Mark and Roger both receive voice mail messages from their parents. It’s clear that they have people they could go to for financial support if necessary. They also have the option of joining Benny, leaving poverty behind for the corporate life. Mark eventually “sells out” for a brief period, taking a job with the tabloid television program “Buzzline.” In the end, he stays true to himself, his friends and their bohemian ideals, quitting the job and finishing his own film.

Bohemian societies have arisen in various locations throughout history. More well-known places include Paris’ Latin Quarter (as seen in *La Boheme*), San Francisco’s Haight Ashbury and New York’s Greenwich Village (as well as the East Village as seen in *RENT*). The film *Moulin Rouge!* gives another glimpse at a group of people living the bohemian life. The characters in this film are writers, performers, musicians and artists with very little money, living for their art and for love.

## SQUATTERS

Going back to Random House Webster’s College Dictionary, we find that a “squatter” is defined as “one who occupies property without permission, lease, or payment of rent.” Though squatters have no legal rights to occupy their “residence” in New York City (as in most places in the United States), they often are able to live in one place for long periods of time due to apathetic or unaware property owners. The history of squats in New York City is a varied one. In 1995, police force was used to evict squatters from buildings on East 13<sup>th</sup> Street in the East Village. It was a violent struggle requiring SWAT teams and the use of a police tank. In 1997, squats on East 5<sup>th</sup> Street were demolished by the city. However, in 2002, various squats were legalized, with squatters being given the titles to the building in which they lived.



## HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness in the United States is a problem most often found in urban settings. New York City is no exception. The homeless population there was rising in the period leading up to the beginning of Jonathan Larson’s work on *RENT*. According to statistics from the New York City Department of Homeless Services, the number of individuals in the Municipal Shelter System reached an all-time high of about 28,000 in the late 1980s. The beginning of the 1990s saw a sharp decline in these numbers, followed by a slight increase and a leveling off (between 20,000 and 25,000) that lasted into the new millennium. Another sharp increase saw numbers soar past 30,000 to a new all-time high of over 38,000 in 2003. Daily reports in early 2008 put the number somewhere between 34,000 and 35,000. Measuring the number of homeless is not an exact science. Therefore, the above numbers are likely lower than the actual number of homeless people in New York City. The current national estimate lies somewhere between one and four million, depending on the source.

Various efforts have been made over the years to combat homelessness in New York City. Mayor Bloomberg put forth a five-year action plan (2004 – 2009) called “Uniting for Solutions Beyond Shelter” in an effort to bring relief to this important problem. Less humane efforts have been made in the past. The riot on Avenue B that occurs unseen near the end of Act One of *RENT* was inspired by actual events that occurred in August of 1988. A curfew had been imposed on Tompkins Square Park, mostly in an effort to clear out the many homeless people who lived there. When the curfew was ignored, police action was taken and a violent riot broke out. From the riots to the NYC Department of Homeless Services current plan, it is clear to see that there has been a shift in attitude toward the homeless by government agencies. In the past, the focus was on getting rid of homeless people from the public places they inhabited. Now, government agencies are looking at getting rid of homelessness and helping the people achieve a better situation in life.

## HIV/AIDS

It is important to know the difference between a person who is HIV-positive and a person who has AIDS. HIV is the virus (or the cause) and AIDS is the disease. A person who is HIV-positive might not show any symptoms of AIDS.

The first reported cases of AIDS in the United States were diagnosed in June 1981. At the time, the disease did not have a name. By the time Jonathan Larson started writing *RENT*, the AIDS epidemic had spread throughout the country and the world. During the years that *RENT* was in the final stages of development (1994 – 1995), AIDS became the leading cause of death for all Americans ages 25 – 44. In this same time, new treatments were developed that helped bring about a decline in AIDS-related deaths in the US by 1997.

While HIV/AIDS had a huge impact on Jonathan Larson and his circle of friends, we are living in different times. Treatments have improved and a positive diagnosis for HIV is not the death sentence that it was once considered. No cure or effective vaccine has been found, but with a successful treatment plan, HIV-positive individuals can live long, healthy lives. To quote Larson, people are “living with, not dying from disease.” Because of this, many young people don’t see the dangers of the disease or the risky behaviors that can lead to contracting HIV and don’t take the necessary precautions to protect themselves.

HIV is avoidable. It cannot be passed through casual contact. The ways in which HIV can be transmitted include 1) unprotected sexual intercourse, 2) sharing of contaminated needles, 3) a transfusion of contaminated blood or transplant of contaminated tissue, and 4) transmission from mother to child in the womb. Certain drug treatments can reduce the likelihood of passing the disease from mother to unborn child. Additionally, the medical community has put many precautions in place to keep the blood supply free of infection. However, every individual has to be personally responsible for stopping the spread of HIV through the first two methods.





## LIFE SUPPORT = FRIENDS IN DEED

"Will I lose my dignity?" This question was asked by a man at one of the discussion groups Jonathan Larson attended at Friends in Deed. It became the inspiration for the song "Will I?" in *RENT*. Friends in Deed – The Crisis Center for Life-Threatening Illness was co-founded by Cynthia O'Neal and director Mike Nichols. According to their website, "Since 1991, Friends has helped transform many thousands of lives through our programs and services. We provide emotional support for anyone with a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS, cancer or other life-threatening physical illnesses... their family, friends, and caregivers... and anyone dealing with grief and bereavement." All of the services offered by Friends are free of charge and include The Big Group (the model for Life Support), One-On-One Crisis Counseling, Body Work, Yoga, Meditation and the School Program – an HIV prevention program for teens.

Jonathan Larson began going to Friends in Deed with one of his HIV-positive friends. The meetings he attended had a profound impact on his development of *RENT* and his treatment of HIV in the musical. When *RENT* was in rehearsals for its off-Broadway production at New York Theatre Workshop, Jonathan Larson invited Cynthia O'Neal to a rehearsal to speak with the cast about the work that Friends does.

## PERFORMANCE ART

Maureen's performance, "Over the Moon," is an example of performance art. Though its roots can be traced back farther, the term "performance art" began being used in the United States during the 1960s. It referred to a live artistic event, which incorporated some aspect of visual art. As the term was adopted around the world in the 1970s, its definition expanded. Performance art pieces often included aspects of many of the performing arts, including music and dance, but it was not theatre. The use of the body became increasingly important to performance art during this period.

As performance art moved into the 1980s, developing technology was often incorporated. If you watch "Over the Moon" in the film version of *RENT*, you can see the inclusion of various forms of technology including recorded music and video images. However, true to the art form's roots, the focus remains on the performer as art. One of the most commercially successful examples of performance art is Blue Man Group. Though some would argue that as a commercial, theatrical event, Blue Man Group cannot be considered performance art, it certainly demonstrates many of the characteristics of the art form.

# THE MUSICAL: AN ACTOR'S GUIDE

## PLOT SYNOPSIS ACT I

It is Christmas Eve in New York City. MARK, a filmmaker, is living in the East Village with his roommate, ROGER, a songwriter. Mark is setting up his camera to film Roger (*Tune Up #1*) when their phone rings. They screen the call and we hear MARK'S MOTHER leave her son a message about his ex-girlfriend, MAUREEN, who is now dating a woman (*Voice Mail #1*). The phone rings again. This time it is COLLINS, their friend and old roommate, at a pay phone downstairs. Mark picks up, but the call is cut short — Collins is being mugged (*Tune Up #2*). The phone rings once more and Mark picks up hoping it is Collins, but finds out it is BENNY, another former roommate, who is now their landlord and has called to collect the rent. Then, as if things couldn't get any worse, the electrical power blows. Mark and Roger vent their frustrations (*Rent*) by burning old rock 'n' roll posters and Mark's screenplays. The world around their apartment comes to life raging, including Maureen's new girlfriend JOANNE, who is having trouble with the technical aspects of Maureen's performance art piece, which is taking place that evening. Mark's phone rings yet again. This time it's Maureen calling, begging Mark for help with her performance piece. He agrees as the commotion has taken over the street.

Down on the street, a beaten-up Collins is discovered by ANGEL, a male street musician, who offers bandages, comfort and an invitation for a night on the town (*You Okay Honey*). Their instant attraction becomes a bond with the realization that both are HIV-positive. Back in the loft, Mark urges Roger to come out for the evening, but Roger refuses. Left alone, he stoically takes his AZT and dreams of writing one great song to give his life meaning (*Tune Up #3 / One Song Glory*). As he is playing, he is interrupted by a beautiful stranger from downstairs, MIMI. Mimi's electricity is also out and she needs a match (*Light My Candle*). She and Roger are instantly drawn to each other and Mimi soon drops the idea of looking for a match and begins to flirt with Roger. While in Roger's apartment, Mimi drops her stash, but is able to recover it before she leaves.

Elsewhere, Maureen and Joanne's answering machine receives a message from Joanne's parents (*Voice Mail #2*), but she is not home to hear it.

Mark returns to his apartment with Collins, who brings provisions and money because of Angel, who is now decked out in glorious drag. Angel explains how she has earned a fast \$1,000 (*Today 4 U*) when Benny barges in with a deal: If Mark and Roger will stop Maureen's performance, Benny will forgive Mark and Roger's back-rent (*You'll See*). Once Benny is gone, Mark, Angel and Collins head out for the evening, leaving Roger alone again.



Mark gathers his courage to go meet Joanne. He goes to the empty lot and Joanne reluctantly accepts his help. The two quickly find common ground in their shared experiences of the self-centered, unfaithful albeit irresistible—Maureen (*Tango Maureen*).

Angel and Collins attend an AIDS Support Group meeting and Mark arrives in order to document it on film (*Life Support*). Meanwhile, Mimi is dressed to kill and turns up again on Roger's doorstep and implores him to take her out (*Out Tonight*). Roger is tempted, but his fear ultimately compels him to push Mimi away (*Another Day*). Simultaneously, STEVE quietly asks, "Will I lose my dignity... Will someone care?" Steve's questions are echoed by each member of the Support Group and whole community, including Roger, who decides finally to leave his loft room in search of answers (*Will I?*). Back on the street, Mark, Angel and Collins rescue a homeless woman from police harassment (*On the Street*) and dream about leaving New York behind to live the good life in Santa Fe. When Mark goes to check on Roger, Angel and Collins are finally alone and declare their newfound love (*I'll Cover You*).

Joanne dials Maureen from a pay phone to update her on what is happening and simultaneously juggles two other calls on her cell phone (*We're Okay*). In St. Mark's Place, the homeless, vendors, junkies, drug dealers and cops intermingle with Angel, who buys Collins an overcoat. Also in St. Mark's Place, Roger meets up with Mark and Mimi hunts for a fix (*Christmas Bells*). Roger finds Mimi and apologizes for his behavior, and invites her to dinner. She accepts.

Maureen's performance piece starts (*Over the Moon*) and afterward everyone meets at the Life Café. Benny is there with his employer, MR. GREY, declaring that bohemia is dead. Mark and his fellow Bohemians joyously reject Benny's pronouncement (*La Vie Boheme*). Benny exits, stopping only long enough to hound Mimi, who appears to be his former girlfriend. As her beeper sounds, Mimi pauses to take her AZT. Roger sees this and discovers that Mimi is HIV-positive like he is. They decide to take the risk and begin a romantic involvement (*I Should Tell You*).

Joanne is finally fed up with Maureen and announces that their relationship is over. She also informs everyone that a riot has broken out, Benny has padlocked Mark and Roger's building, and he called the police (*La Vie Boheme B*). The Bohemians continue to celebrate. The riot continues to rage. Roger and Mimi share a small, lovely kiss oblivious to what is happening around them.



## ACT II

Act Two begins with the community asking, "How do you measure the life of a woman or a man?" (*Seasons of Love*).

It is New Year's Eve and Mark is filming a "breaking back into the building party" (*Happy New Year*) outside of their padlocked building. With Mark are a smitten Mimi and Roger, along with Maureen, who is trying to earn back Joanne. Collins and Angel arrive with a blowtorch to help break down the door. Once inside, Mark hears a message for him from ALEXI DARLING. She works for a tabloid television show and wants to offer Mark a job (*Voice Mail #3*). Benny crashes the party to apologize, offering the boys new keys to their old loft (*Happy New Year B*). Suspecting Benny's ulterior motives, Roger balks. When Benny implies that Mimi helped change his mind, Mimi angrily denies this and Roger becomes jealous. They seem to make up, but Mimi seeks solace in her old habits and finds THE MAN who offers her drugs.

Valentine's Day. Roger is living with Mimi. Angel and Collins are living together wherever they can find a place. At their apartment, Joanne and Maureen are constantly arguing and give each other an ultimatum (*Take Me Or Leave Me*). They split up once again. Alexi calls Mark and tries another time to get him to come and work with her (*Voice Mail #4*).

Spring (*Seasons of Love B*). Roger's jealousy gets the best of him and he accuses Mimi of being unfaithful with Benny. Mimi and Roger mourn their inevitable break-up as Collins nurses the increasingly ill Angel, who succumbs to the disease and dies (*Without You*).

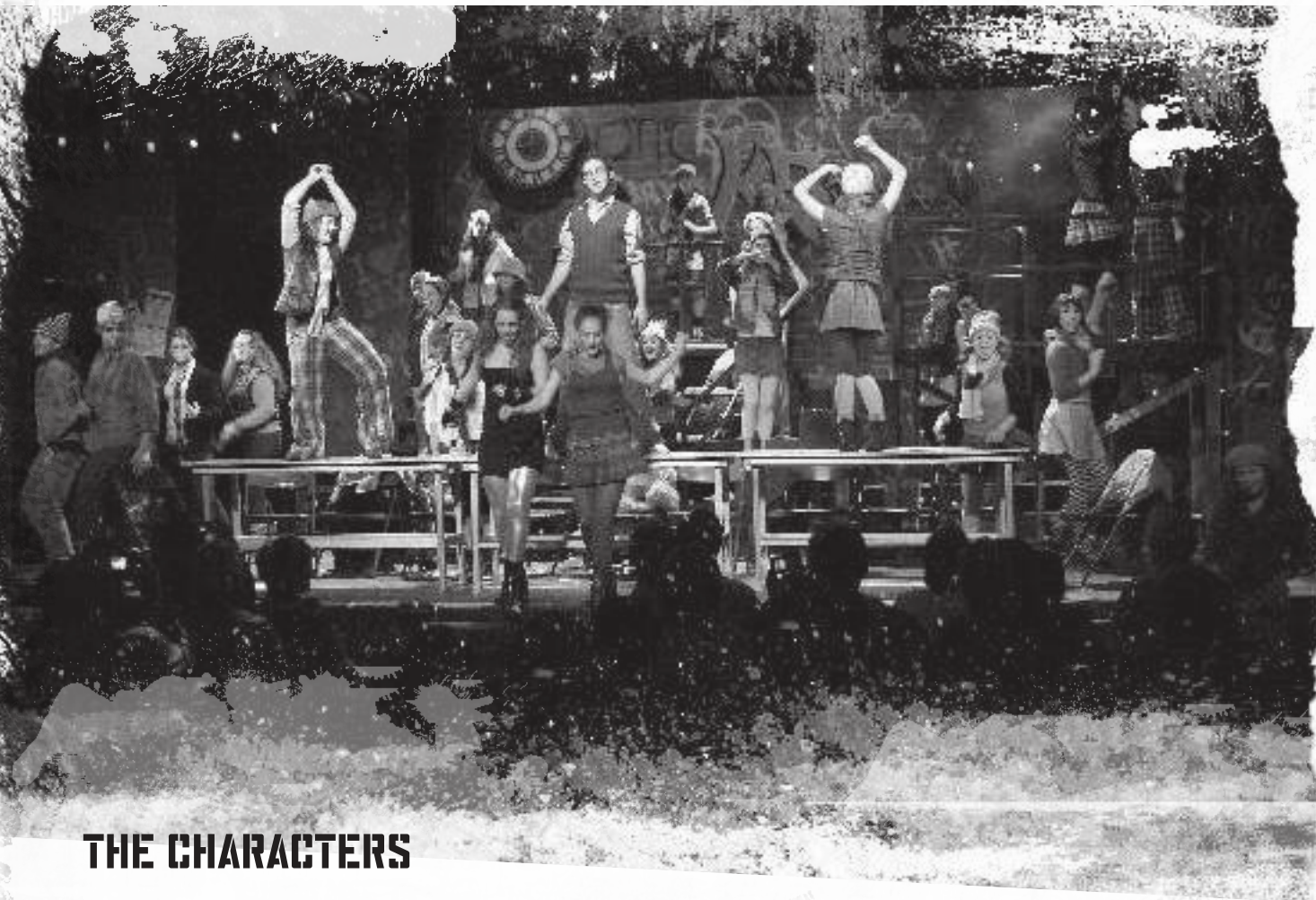
At Angel's memorial, Collins gathers his strength and reaffirms his love for Angel (*I'll Cover You - Reprise*). Outside the church, despondent at how drastically life has changed since Christmas night just one year before (*Halloween*), Mark phones Alexi and accepts her job offer. As they exit the church, Mimi learns that Roger is leaving town and Maureen and Joanne are moved to try once again to reconcile. Mark tries to convince Roger to stay, but Roger lashes out, accusing Mark of hiding behind his camera. Mark wonders whether Roger is simply afraid to stay and watch Mimi die. Mimi appears



and lets Roger off the hook (*Goodbye Love*). Benny turns up and offers to pay for Mimi's drug rehabilitation.

Mark and Roger question the choices they are making. They begin to realize that they have been compromising their dreams and decide to take control of their lives again (*What You Own*). Roger, Mark, Mimi and Joanne's parents all wonder where their children are as the holidays approach (*Voice Mail #5*).

Another Christmas Eve. Mark has finished his film and Roger, who has moved back into the loft, has finished his song (*Finale*). No one has been able to find Mimi. The power blows again but the night is brightened by the arrival of Collins. Then Maureen and Joanne appear on the sidewalk below carrying a desperately ill Mimi. Mimi finally manages to tell Roger that she loves him. Begging her not to go, Roger sings his "one song" for her (*Your Eyes*) as Mimi slips away. Moments later, however, she returns, with stories of a warm white light and Angel steering her back to life (*Finale B*).



## THE CHARACTERS

**ROGER DAVIS** is a rock guitarist struggling to find his voice as a songwriter. He is Mark's roommate, and former roommate of Benny and Collins. He has a tough exterior shell and is reluctant to let people become a part of his life. While he may come off as gruff and mean, it should be clear that he is having a hard time dealing with the recent suicide of his girlfriend and the fact he is HIV-positive. Adding to Roger's frustration is his desire to write a truly meaningful song before he dies.

**MARK COHEN** is Roger's roommate, and former roommate of Benny and Collins. He was recently dumped by his ex-girlfriend, Maureen, and hasn't moved on. Mark is the nice guy who always seems to be around for his friends. He is also an aspiring filmmaker through whose eyes most of the story of *RENT* is told. Mark is surrounded by friends but detaches himself from problems through his commitment to his movie.

**TOM COLLINS** is an HIV-positive computer genius. He has just come back to New York after being away for some time. Collins is a happy, confident, intelligent individual who loves life. When he meets Angel, he is instantly attracted and the two start dating.

**BENJAMIN COFFIN THE THIRD OR BENNY**, is an ex-roommate of Mark's and Roger's and a former boyfriend of Mimi's. He now lives a more structured middle-class life with his wife in the suburbs. He has grown to care more about money than art and is willing to do what it takes to make things happen for his company. While Benny seems to have lost his heart and bohemian attitude, by the second act he starts to work more with his friends rather than against them.

**ANGEL SCHUNARD** is a male transvestite who we meet as a young man at the start of the show. When Angel returns in the show, she is in full drag, and is as confident and strong as any character in the show. She has accepted her HIV-positive status and lives by the mantra of "No Day But Today."

**JOANNE JEFFERSON** is a public interest lawyer, and Maureen's current lover. She is smart, strong and knows how to take charge. While she is definitely in love with Maureen, the whole bohemian lifestyle and performance art scene is foreign and slightly uncomfortable for her. Recently, she has been having trust issues with Maureen and is finally ready to confront them.

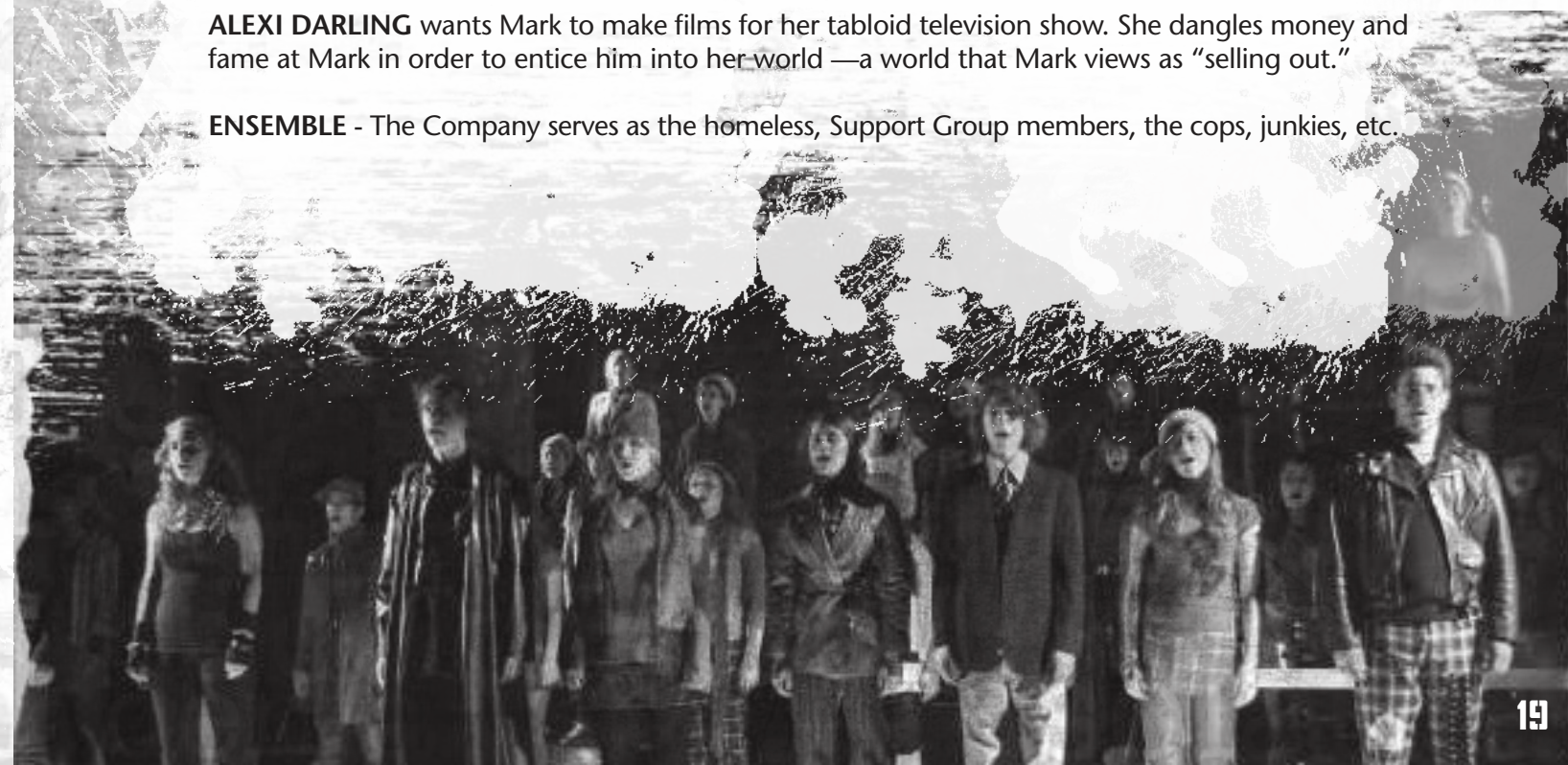
**MAUREEN JOHNSON** dumped Mark and has been dating Joanne for a while. She is a performance artist and is aspiring to make a statement with her art. Maureen is a confident activist who is free-spirited and doesn't have time for people who aren't the same. While she loves Joanne, she is not willing to give up flirting with other people and has no interest in settling down. Maureen is a sexy person without trying. She does have a softer side that she can show when necessary.

**MIMI MARQUEZ** is a neighbor of Mark and Roger's who becomes interested romantically in Roger, and is the ex-girlfriend of Benny. Mimi is the youngest, most naïve and one of the more hopeful of *RENT*'s core cast of characters. She is outgoing and self-confident. She is a late night dancer at a downtown NYC club. Mimi is HIV-positive but unlike Roger she has begun to feel the physical symptoms of AIDS. Mimi copes with the physical and psychological pain of her disease by taking drugs, both prescribed and illegal.

**MARK'S MOM, ROGER'S MOM, MR. AND MRS. JEFFERSON** are the parents. Each one has their own quirks that can be highlighted and established by the actors playing the roles.

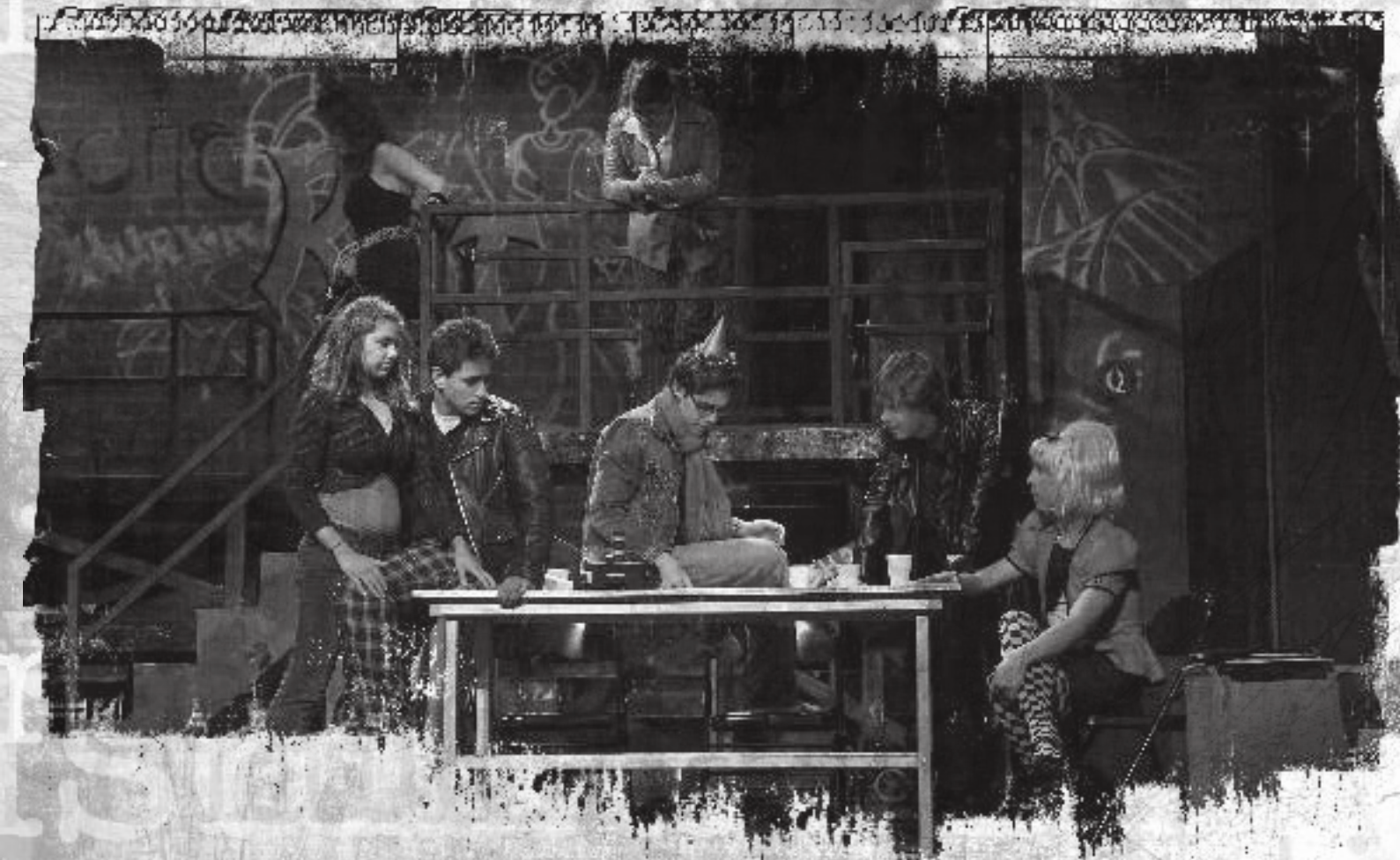
**ALEXI DARLING** wants Mark to make films for her tabloid television show. She dangles money and fame at Mark in order to entice him into her world—a world that Mark views as "selling out."

**ENSEMBLE** - The Company serves as the homeless, Support Group members, the cops, junkies, etc.





# CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS



## FROM *LA BOHEME* TO *RENT*

### OBJECTIVE:

To explore the process of updating and adapting a classic piece of art to fit modern times.

### PREPARATION:

Review the information in Sections I and III of this guide on *La Boheme* and the creation of the musical *RENT*. Do a more thorough examination of the two pieces by reading the full librettos of each or watching a video of a production of *La Boheme* and the film version of *RENT*.

### DISCUSSION EXERCISE:

Discuss the similarities between the two works. Note what characteristics and plot points of the original opera Jonathan Larson retained for his musical. Also note the places where Larson veered from the source material and created his own story for the characters.

### WRITING EXERCISE:

Write the outline for an updated version of another opera or piece of musical theatre. Find a work that interests you and re-imagine it in today's world. How will the characters' attributes translate to the present day? What plot points and elements of dramatic structure will you retain and what will you leave behind? Remember the major similarities between the plots of *La Boheme* and *RENT* exist in the very first scenes of *RENT* as the characters are introduced and at the end when Mimi is reunited with Roger. In between, Jonathan Larson created a lot of different story lines and conflicts for his characters that do not exist in the opera in any form.

After deciding on a structure for the piece, consider the type of music that fits in the world you have created. Jonathan Larson's goal as a composer was to bring contemporary music back to Broadway, in a way that hadn't been seen in years. Popular music today covers a broad spectrum of styles and genres. Try to focus on a style that best suits your dramatic purposes.

After completing the outline for your new musical, try writing a scene. If you get inspired, continue with the project and write more. Perform completed scenes in class to see how they work on their feet. Revise your work to make it stronger.

### FURTHER EXERCISES:

Explore other ways in which *La Boheme* or other operas, plays or musicals have been updated. *La Boheme* has been set in different time periods while employing the original music and libretto. This was done most notably by film director Baz Luhrmann at the Australian Opera in 1990 and on Broadway in 2002, setting the opera in 1950s Paris. More recently, Polish film director Mariusz Trelinski staged a present-day *La Boheme* for the Warsaw National Opera and later the Washington National Opera. The creators of the Broadway musicals *Aida* and *Spring Awakening* combined their period source material with contemporary music. What do you find to be the pros and cons of each type of adaptation? Which treatment of the source material creates the most successful new work? Remember, this is a subjective argument with no right or wrong answer.



# HOW ARE WE GONNA PAY...?

## OBJECTIVE:

To explore different job opportunities in the arts and other disciplines and begin to discover the different paths to achieving one of these careers.

## PREPARATION:

Discuss the various characters in *RENT* and the work that they do. While they are living the bohemian lifestyle and many do not hold down full-time jobs, most of them work in fields that offer various career opportunities that can provide a steady income. Create a list of the various fields in which the characters work. Be specific. Divide the arts into the various disciplines shown in the musical.

## EXERCISE:

Choose a career that interests you from the list you generated. If none appeal to you, choose one that you know very little about, or choose a career not shown in *RENT* that you are interested in. Do some research online about the various options within the career field you chose to explore. Try to discover all of the different things you could do within the discipline.

Next, find colleges and universities that offer programs in the career area you have chosen. What types of courses are required? What other disciplines are involved? What are the requirements for getting into the different programs? How do the various college and university programs differ?

With this knowledge of your chosen career area and college programs in the field, start to think about what pre-college preparation you could do. What activities could you get involved in your own community with to begin the path of this career? What options does your school offer?

## PRESENTATION:

Share your findings with the class in the form of an oral presentation. Describe the career field and the various options within that discipline. Discuss the various options for college programs and things you can immediately begin doing in order to get started on this career path.

## FURTHER DISCUSSION:

After each presentation, discuss the challenges and rewards of each career path presented. Consider all aspects, not just financial. How could the characters of *RENT* make a living out of their various activities? How would this change their lives?

# OVER THE MOON

## OBJECTIVE:

To learn more about performance art and to explore its use as a means of personal expression and protest.

## PREPARATION:

Review the information on Performance Art in Section II of this guide. Go further and do some online research about performance art and popular performance artists throughout the past half-century. Examine how the art form has changed and evolved over the years.

Also, read the "Over the Moon" scene in the script or watch this scene in the film of *RENT*. In this performance, Maureen is protesting the eviction of the homeless from the 11<sup>th</sup> Street lot.

## DISCUSSION EXERCISE:

Analyze Maureen's performance piece. How does "Over the Moon" serve as a protest? If you watched the scene from the movie, discuss the different types of media Maureen incorporated into her performance.

Next, create a list of issues facing young people today. These can be injustices you think should be changed or simply important issues you think people should be more aware of. Issues can be universal, those faced nationwide, or something specific to your community, your school, your family or you as an individual.

## WRITTEN EXERCISE:

Choose a topic from the list generated by the class you feel most passionate about. Write a position statement about this topic. Be very clear about your point of view on the issue and what your message is. Next, think of a way you can use performance art to express your opinion on this issue and write a performance piece. If your piece includes speaking or singing, create the "script" or what you will say. If your performance art is non-verbal, outline and describe in detail all that you would do. Describe any types of technology, media, props, etc. that will be involved and how they will be utilized.

## PERFORMANCE EXERCISE:

Perform these pieces for the class.

## FURTHER DISCUSSION:

Discuss the various performance pieces. Which were the most entertaining? Which were the most effective in getting their point across? Which had the best balance of both? Did any of the pieces change your opinion on a particular subject or move you to want to act on an issue? Should any of these pieces be performed for a broader audience (the whole school, the community, etc.)?



# LA VIE BOHEME

## OBJECTIVE:

To explore the lives of the characters in *RENT* and their bohemian existence through their inspirations and influences. To discover what influences and inspires you.

## PREPARATION:

Read through the lyrics of the song “La Vie Boheme” in the *RENT School Edition* script and listen to the song on your reference recording. This is a list song of many different things. Divide the song into separate lists of various categories: actual people mentioned in the song, activities, life experiences, events, emotions, credos, etc.

## RESEARCH EXERCISE:

Find out more about the people, places and events listed in the song lyrics. If they are unfamiliar, do a little investigating to find out more. It’s not important to learn everything about each individual, but to at least have an understanding of who they are and what kind of work they did. This background information will help inform the rest of the activity.

## DISCUSSION EXERCISE:

What types of people or things inspire the people of this community? Are these things that you find inspiring? What things are being praised and which things are being complained about? Are all of these things universal or are some specific to the character who sang them? As a class, create a new list of things that inspire, inform, annoy, etc. Start with the separate categories to get going, then combine everything into one general list.

## WRITTEN EXERCISE:

Take the group list that was created in class and add any personal additions that you may have. Find the items on the list that speak to you most strongly. Now find a way to substitute these things for the lyrics of “La Vie Boheme.” Remember to think like a song writer. Organize your list in a way that makes sense musically and dramatically. Find ways to create rhyming schemes, as Jonathan Larson did with the original lyrics. Also remember the mood of the song. It is joyous and celebratory.

## FURTHER DISCUSSION:

Share the newly created songs with the class. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, the most exciting of which would be to have everyone (or at least a few volunteers) sing them to the class. Or pass out lyric sheets and have everyone sing them as a group. Whatever the method, follow up the sharing with a discussion of the similarities and differences between the various new versions. How much did each song reflect the individual who wrote it?

# FROM “MUSSETTA’S WALTZ” TO “TANGO MAUREEN”

## OBJECTIVE:

To explore the two styles of music and dance used in relation to their respective characters in *La Boheme* and *RENT*.

## PREPARATION:

Listen to “Quando me’n vo” (“Musetta’s Waltz”) from *La Boheme* (be sure to have a translation handy so that you can understand what is being said) and “Tango: Maureen” from *RENT*.

## DISCUSSION EXERCISE:

Compare the lyrics of each song and discuss the similarities and differences in their purposes in their respective shows. What do we learn about the characters of Musetta and Maureen through these songs? How would “Tango: Maureen” be different if Maureen was actually present and contributing as Musetta does in “Quando me’n vo”? Why do you think Jonathan Larson chose the tango for the musical style of this song?

## FURTHER EXPLORATION:

Research the dance styles related to the above songs. What are the characteristics of the waltz and of the tango? How do these dances relate to the characters they are paired with, if at all?

Find someone in your community that is familiar with these two styles of dance or locate an instructional book or video. This shouldn’t be too difficult as these two styles of dancing (and others) have come back into popularity in entertainment in recent years thanks to shows such as *Dancing with the Stars*. Learn to do a basic waltz and tango. Perform each of these dances in class to the songs from *La Boheme* and *RENT*. How does adding the dance change your experience of the song?

## FURTHER DISCUSSION:

The musical theme from “Quando me’n vo” is used throughout *RENT* as Roger attempts to write his “one great song.” Why do you think this piece of music was chosen? What purpose does it serve in *RENT*? What does it represent?

What aspects of the lyrics to “Quando me’n vo” found their way into the second act song “Take Me or Leave Me” (Maureen and Joanne’s duet)?



# TECHNOLOGY IN *RENT*

## OBJECTIVE:

To explore advancements in technology that occurred since *RENT* opened on Broadway in 1996, and to examine how these advancements have changed our lives and the effect these advancements would have had on the lives of the characters in *RENT*.

## PREPARATION:

Review the script to *RENT: School Edition* or watch the film version and make a list of the different types of technology used by the characters throughout the show. Make a second list of types of technology that you use on a daily/weekly basis.

## DISCUSSION EXERCISE:

In regards to the list of items from *RENT*, which of these items was fairly new when *RENT* opened? Which things had been around for a while? Which things are used by the characters as a result of their economic status? How have all of these pieces of equipment been improved upon? Are there any that haven't really experienced advancements since 1996?

Which of the items from the *RENT* list also appear on the list of things you use? How essential are these items to the way you live your life? If you had to trade in your technology for what existed in 1996, how would that impact your life?

## EXERCISE:

Try living with only the things that were widely available in 1996. Consider each item carefully to decide if it was something you would have had if you were living back then. Certainly anything that didn't exist (the iPod, for example) has to be eliminated, but there were some things that did exist, but weren't widespread (for instance, not as many people had cell phones). Once you've figured out what things to put away, try it for a day and see how it changes your life. If you can, try it for a week.

## FURTHER DISCUSSION:

What areas of your life were most impacted by the lack of technology? How did you communicate with people? Did you have more free time or less? How did you spend your time differently?

How could current technology improve the lives of the characters in *RENT*? What things do you think they would have access to? How would they use these things in their lives?

What other technological advances have been made that are not related to things in the musical *RENT*? What role do these things play in your life? How would they figure into the world of *RENT* and the lives of the characters?

# THE HAIR OF THE 1990'S?

## OBJECTIVE:

To compare the impact of *RENT* in 1996 to that of *Hair* in the late 1960s and to examine the place of both musicals in the history of Broadway and the American musical theatre.

## PREPARATION:

Watch the film version of *RENT* and the film version of *Hair*. Find articles in books and online about the public's reaction to both musicals when they opened. Learn about some of the other musicals that were considered groundbreaking over the years and what they contributed to the art form.

## DISCUSSION EXERCISES:

What similarities exist between *Hair* and *RENT* as musicals? How are they different? Do you think that the phrase "*Hair* of the 1990's" holds weight, or was it an erroneous designation?

What types of musicals were being produced and running successfully in the years leading up to these two musicals? What types of musicals were produced in the years following each?

How were *RENT* and *Hair* like other musicals in the popular Broadway canon? How were they different? What innovations did they bring, if any?

## FURTHER STUDY:

Choose a film version of a classic Broadway musical to watch. Consider the era in which this musical was first produced. How does *RENT* compare to this musical? How are they similar or different in form? How are they similar or different in subject matter (as it relates to the period in which they were written)?

## FURTHER DISCUSSION:

Some have referred to *Hamilton* as the "new *RENT*." Others have dismissed this statement. Why do you think this comparison has been made? Find out more about *Hamilton* and what it has in common with *RENT* and how it is different.

Have there been other musicals since *RENT* that deal with similar issues or have other things in common with Jonathan Larson's musical?

Discuss some of the trends that have occurred on Broadway since 1996 (for example film adaptations and jukebox musicals). Are these good trends or bad trends? How do they influence musical theatre as an art form? How do they impact Broadway's audiences? What is the reasoning behind these trends?



# WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

## OBJECTIVE:

To explore the futures of the characters in *RENT* based on our knowledge of the United States and New York City between 1996 and the present. Also, to explore the impact of a mega-hit Broadway show on the career of a performer.

## PREPARATION:

Review the plot synopsis found in Section IV of this guide, read the script to *RENT School Edition* or watch the film version.

## DISCUSSION EXERCISE:

Make a chart of the current situation of each of the main characters at the end of the musical. Consider their living conditions, health, financial status, etc. How has each of their lives changed in the course of the year that transpires in the musical? What major events in New York City and the United States occurred between 1996 and the present? Create a list of these events. Think of things that affected everyone in the city or the country, as well as things that would be significant to these characters specifically.

## CREATIVE WRITING EXERCISE:

Write the next chapter for the characters of *RENT*. Begin with the immediate future. What happens that night after Mimi revives? How do they all spend Christmas Day? How do they celebrate the New Year? Next, think farther into the future. What is happening six months later, five years later, ten years later? Maybe choose a specific event that has occurred and write about how different characters dealt with it.

You can write these new pieces as chapters in a novel or as scenes in a play. Deal with characters in a way that makes sense. Remember, in *RENT* not all of the characters are in every scene together. You may have to create multiple scenes or chapters to account for all of the characters.

## FURTHER EXPLORATION:

How did being a part of *RENT* impact the careers of the actors who were part of the original Broadway cast? Do a little research to learn about what these actors have gone on to do. Many have had success on Broadway, as well as in television, music and movies. Read the bios of the actors or check out their websites (if they have one) to see how *RENT* is mentioned. Also, research the amount of press coverage that *RENT* received when it first opened.

## FURTHER DISCUSSION:

How significant do you think *RENT* was to each cast member's career? Who in the original cast made their Broadway debut in *RENT*? Who had an established career before they were cast in *RENT*? Who has become the most famous since *RENT*? How soon after the show did this occur? Do you think it was a direct result of the attention that this musical received?

# FRIENDS IN DEED

## OBJECTIVE:

To explore the important role support from others can play in the lives of people coping with difficult situations and to offer support to those in need.

## PREPARATION:

Invite your school psychologist or counselor to class to discuss services that are available to students at your school. Create a list of issues that you or others in your school may be dealing with. Keep the list wide-ranging, considering all areas of life such as family, health, substance abuse, jobs, etc.

## DISCUSSION EXERCISE:

Create a master list of issues that have been contributed by individual class members. Which of these issues do you think students would feel comfortable discussing openly in a setting similar to "Life Support" in *RENT* or Friends in Deed's "Big Group" meetings? Which do you think are things that students would feel awkward about sharing with others in the student population? Create two new lists based on this discussion. Which things on the "comfortable" list can be grouped together as similar topics? What are the benefits of being able to discuss these issues with others? What are the potential dangers of not discussing these issues with anyone?

## EXERCISE:

Create a student support group. Ask your school psychologist, counselor, or a teacher to be the advisor for the group and get permission from the administration of your school to hold group meetings. Decide on a focus for your group. Will you deal with certain issues or will you leave it more open? Consider the benefits of both. It might be easier to get people involved at first if there is a specific focus. Then again, not everyone is dealing with the same issues, and a more open forum may lead to more participation. Take a survey of the student body to see what might work best.

Develop a format for the meetings. How will they be run? How long will they last? When will they be held? Advertise the group to the student body through various avenues.

## FURTHER DISCUSSION:

After holding a few group meetings, assess the value of what you are doing. How are the meetings going? Do the students appear to be benefiting from them? Are people returning for multiple sessions, or has there been a drop off? How can you reach out to students with issues that they may not want to discuss in front of a large group of their peers? What other help is available at your school or in your community?



# THE PEASANT FEAST

*Each year around Christmas, Jonathan Larson and his friends, many of whom could not afford to travel to visit family, would gather for a potluck dinner they called the “Peasant Feast.” Long tables would be set with mismatched dishes and silverware. Everyone would bring a dish to share. The friends would eat together and dinner would be followed by performances of various kinds, including Jonathan testing out new songs that he had written.*

*Prior to the first day of rehearsals for RENT at New York Theatre Workshop, Jonathan hosted a Peasant Feast for the cast, to share this tradition with this new group who would soon be bringing his friends to life onstage.*

## OBJECTIVE:

*To experience a ritual Jonathon Larson shared with his friends and family each year and to explore the importance of community and bonds created by individuals with a common experience.*

## PREPARATION:

Find information on Jonathan Larson’s Peasant Feasts. There are reminiscences of these events in the documentary on the two-disc DVD edition of the movie version of *RENT*. There are also mentions in the *Rent* coffee table book and Anthony Rapp’s autobiographical book *Without You*. Additionally, watch “La Vie Boheme” in the film or read that section of the script to *Rent School Edition*. Note the various “performances” that are promised that evening from Mark, Roger, Collins, Angel, Maureen and Mimi.

## DISCUSSION EXERCISE:

Explore the significance of an annual event like the Peasant Feast to a group of friends. Why would Jonathan Larson hold this dinner every year? How does the “La Vie Boheme” scene resemble the Peasant Feast? Do you have any traditions that are similar to this annual event?

## EXERCISE:

Hold a Peasant Feast at your school. There are various directions to go with this event in terms of who attends. Explore different options and decide what is right for your feast. It could be an event to help the cast and crew of your production come together as a family prior to beginning work on the show. It could also be a school-wide event, celebrating the success of the production when it has finished or preparing for a different school-wide event. You could look to the community outside your school and consider people who would benefit from such an evening. Next, plan the evening – set the date, secure a location, plan the post-dinner entertainment, create invitations (Larson’s were always hand made), etc. Distribute the invitations to those you would like to attend.

This can be a big endeavor, requiring a lot of organization. Have different people in charge of each aspect. On the evening of the dinner, have someone speak about the inspiration behind the feast and also the specific purpose of your gathering. Along with the planned performances, offer the opportunity for others to share or perform.

## DISCUSSION EXERCISE:

After hosting your Peasant Feast, reflect on the event. What did you gain from the experience? What were the responses of those who attended? What improvements could you make if you were to do it again? How could you make an annual event out of this dinner?

# SUGGESTIONS FOR THEATRE GAMES

## OBJECTIVE:

*When students first begin to act, they may feel a bit self-conscious or nervous. A good director knows this and takes the time to help them get to know each other so they may lose their inhibitions about performing. Theatre games are an effective tool to develop the trust and comfort level students need to rehearse and perform effectively. The following are suggestions for games you might use as you begin your work on Rent School Edition.*

## GETTING TO KNOW YOU

*A warm-up activity to get your cast members comfortable with each other*

1. Ask your students to walk quickly in random directions around the rehearsal or performance space, turning their noses up at each person they meet and giving that person the cold shoulder.
2. Ask the students to slow down a little and to make eye contact with each person they encounter, holding it for as long as possible before making eye contact with the next person they encounter.
3. Ask them to continue walking, and to give a little nod of recognition to each person whose path they cross.
4. Ask them to continue walking while saying “Hello” and waving to each person they pass.
5. Ask them to continue walking and to say “Nice to see you” and to give a little bow to each person they meet.
6. Ask them to continue walking, and to give a “high five” to each person they meet.
7. Ask your students to suggest other forms of greeting. Each student might greet the others as an immigrant, a vaudeville actor, or as another character from the show.

## FOCUS CIRCLE

*A physical warm-up to help actors develop a sense of focus*

1. Arrange the students in a large circle, leaving enough space between them to allow for movement.
2. Choose one student to begin the exercise.
3. Explain to the cast that the student may make any physical movements, and that the other students must mimic these movements exactly.
4. Call out the name of another student. That student then takes over the lead, choosing a physical movement that the other students must mimic.
5. Continue this process until all students have had an opportunity to lead the group in movement.



## CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT CIRCLE

*An improvisation exercise to develop character. Seat the cast on chairs that have been arranged in a circle.*

1. Designate one chair to be the "character seat".
2. Explain to the cast that the actor in the "character seat" must answer questions from the other cast members in a way that will start to define a character of that actor's choosing.
3. Tell the student directly to the left of the actor in the "character seat" to ask a question of the actor. The first question should always be "What is your name?" The actor should then answer with the name of his or her chosen character.
4. The next student (to the left) asks a question of the actor in the "character seat." The actor responds once more as the chosen character.
5. Continuing to the left, each student asks a question of the actor in the "character seat." The qualities of the actor's character will begin to emerge from how the actor answers each question.
6. When everyone has asked a question of the actor in the "character seat," have all of the students move one seat to the left so a new cast member sits in the "character seat."
7. Continue the process, with the following provision: each person who has moved from the "character seat" must stay "in character" for the rest of the game, playing the character he or she created while in the "character seat." He or she will thus ask questions of the other students as the character he or she created earlier.
8. Suggest the cast keep a record of how many characters they have created over the course of the show, and discuss which ones they found most challenging to create.

## THE MACHINE GAME

*An exercise to develop concentration skills and create an awareness of the connection of physical motion to fellow cast members.*

1. Choose one student to stand at the center of the playing space to begin the game. Instruct the student that he/she is one part of a large machine. Have the student choose one movement and a noise to go with that movement and to perform that noise and movement continuously as if they were a machine in operation. (For example, a student begins this game by lifting their right arm over their head and pulling down on an imaginary cable, and with each downward pull the student says, "Pop!")
2. Explain to the cast that a person must join the machine one at a time, adding on to any of the machine's places that inspire them. (For example, when the next student is ready he/she joins the first student and takes a hold of that student's left arm and cranks it each time saying, "Kerchunck.")
3. Instruct all of the students to join the machine with the specifications that the person joining must physically attach themselves to some part of the machine. All machine movements are to continue working until the last student has joined and the instructor says, "Freeze."

## TELL-A-STORY TAG

*An exercise to develop concentration skills and create awareness of the connection between telling a story and physical motion (as a precursor to blocking).*

1. Choose one student to be "it".
2. Explain to the cast the person who is "it" must tell a story while pursuing other students.
3. When the person who is "it" tags another student, the new student must take up the telling of that story as he or she pursues the other students and tries to tag another cast member.

## CREATE A CHARACTER

*An exercise to develop a three dimensional character.*

1. A leader chooses a group of character traits (such as "shy", "silly", "bossy", and "impatient") and writes the character traits on 3 X 5 cards, one trait for each card.
2. Each actor chooses a card at random. The leader then suggests a situation (such as "waiting for a school bus that is late").
3. Each actor tries to behave as a character with the trait he or she has chosen, given the situation specified by the leader.

## TRIANGLE TRADE

*An exercise to develop improvisational skills within the framework of a timed section of music.*

1. Choose three actors, or divide your cast into three groups of equal number.
2. Position the three groups at the corners of an imaginary triangle within the rehearsal or performance space, so each group can see clearly what the other groups are doing.
3. Designate one group the "beginning," one group the "middle" and the last group the "end."
4. Have the groups listen to a very short segment of music, which could be music from the show.
5. After the groups are familiar with the selection, have the first group improvise the beginning of a scene set to the musical selection. After they have performed for the appropriate amount of time, call out "Middle!" The first group freezes in place.
6. The second group picks up where the first group left off, playing the same characters and beginning the middle section of the scene in the same positions in which the first group is frozen. Let the "middle" group play the scene for the appropriate amount of time before calling "End!" This is the cue for the final group to bring the scene to a conclusion.

## READ MY MIND

*An exercise in exploring the subtext of a scene.*

1. Try to schedule a full cast read-through of the script early in the rehearsal process to help each student get an idea of the full show.
2. Divide the group into pairs of students.
3. Give each pair a section of dialogue from the show (make sure the section consists of dialogue between two characters).
4. Ask each pair to read through the dialogue a couple of times and let the partners decide who will read which role.
5. Have the actors in each pair face each other.
6. After partner #1 speaks his or her first line, have partner #2 comment on what has been said by partner #1, before speaking his or her next line. Partner #2 should comment on what partner #1's previous line means in the context of the show, including why partner #1's character chose to speak as he or she did. There might be a hidden agenda behind lines one character speaks to another in a scene; the characters may not always say what they mean! This hidden agenda is known as subtext.
7. Partner # 1 in turn listens to partner #2's next line and comments on that line before speaking his or her next line.
8. Continue until the section of dialogue has been completed. This exercise will encourage students to think about what motivates the characters in the show as well as the subtext behind each scene. They will begin to better understand the relationship each character has with the others and will quickly gain deeper insight into their individual roles. You might also repeat this exercise using pantomime instead of spoken comments.



## CHANGE YOUR STATUS

*An exercise to develop more complex characters through improvisation*

1. Write the numbers 1 through 10 on 3 X 5 cards, one number on each card. Shuffle the cards, face down.
2. Choose a group of ten actors and have each actor pick a card at random. Ask each actor to look at the number written on the card, but to hide it from the other students. Tell them they will be playing characters that are defined by the number on their individual cards. The actor with the "number one" card plays a character that is extremely weak and submissive. The actor with the "number ten" card plays a very powerful, persuasive person. The numbers in between denote characters with progressively dominant personalities (keeping in mind "number one" is the weakest and most submissive personality and "number ten" is the most powerful, persuasive personality).
3. Have the members of this group walk around, interacting with each other in a manner that befits their "number." This section of the exercise is best carried out in silence.
4. The remaining cast members should study these interactions. They should try to line up the ten actors in order from weakest to most dominant.

## LIVE EYE

*An exercise to develop improvisational skills*

1. Select one student to play a television interviewer.
2. Select various cast members to play the interviewees. Give them a setting (e.g. a New York City street during the Depression) and ask them each to come up with a character that might be found in that setting. Have the interviewer ask questions of the characters.
3. Announce "Ten seconds to go!" to cue the interviewer to wrap up the interviews.
4. Continue this exercise until several students have had a chance to play the interviewer and all participants have become comfortable ad-libbing in character.



# RESOURCE LIST

## BOOKS:

### ABOUT RENT:

Larson, Jonathan. *RENT*  
William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997.

Miller, Scott. *Rebels with Applause: Broadway's Groundbreaking Musicals*  
Heinemann Drama, 2001

Rapp, Anthony. *Without You: A Memoir of Love, Loss and the Musical RENT*  
Simon & Schuster, 2006

Wollman, Elizabeth L. *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, from Hair to Hedwig*  
University of Michigan Press, 2006

### ABOUT THEATER:

Henderson, Amy & Dwight Blocker Bowers. *Red, Hot & Blue: A Smithsonian Salute to the American Musical*  
Smithsonian Institution, 1996.

Kantor, Michael & Laurence Maslon. *Broadway: The American Musical*  
Bulfinch Press, 2004.

Wilson, Edwin. *The Theater Experience – Tenth Edition*  
McGraw-Hill, 2007.



## ABOUT *LA BOHEME*:

Murger, Henri. *The Bohemians of the Latin Quarter: Scenes de la Vie de Boheme*  
FQ Classics, 2007.

## ABOUT OPERA:

Parker, Roger. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera*  
Oxford University Press, 2001.

## MUSIC:

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*RENT*  
Original Cast Recording  
Dreamworks, 1996

*RENT*  
Original Motion Picture Soundtrack  
Warner Bros., 2005

*Jonathan Sings Larson*  
PS Classics, 2007

*tick, tick...BOOM!*  
Original Cast Recording  
RCA Victor, 2001

Baz Luhrmann's Production of Puccini's *La Boheme* on Broadway  
Original Cast Recording  
Dreamworks, 2002

*La Boheme*  
Countless complete recordings exist from opera companies around the world

*Hair*  
Original Broadway Cast Recording (1968)  
RCA Victor, 1990 (Deluxe Edition, 2003)

*Broadway: The American Musical*  
Sony BMG Music Entertainment, 2004

## WEB SITES:

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### ABOUT *RENT*:

[mtishows.com/rent](http://mtishows.com/rent)

### ABOUT *LA BOHEME* AND ITS ORIGINS:

English Version of *La Boheme* Score  
<http://www.dlib.indiana.edu/variations/scores/bhq3853/large/index.html>

New York City Opera Project – *La Boheme* (includes link to recording of complete performance)  
<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/music>

Metropolitan Opera Synopsis  
<http://www.metopera.org/La-Boheme>

Puccini Collections  
<http://www.esm.rochester.edu/sibley>

### RELATED SUBJECT MATTER:

NYC Department of Homeless Services  
<http://www1.nyc.gov/site/dhs/index.page>

Homelessness in New York City  
<http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/>

National Coalition for the Homeless  
<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/>

Global HIV/AIDS Timeline  
<http://www.kff.org/hiv/aids/timeline/hivtimeline.cfm>





HIV/AIDS History  
<http://www.avert.org/historyi.htm>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
<http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/>

#### VARIOUS THEATER-RELATED WEBSITES:

[www.playbill.com](http://www.playbill.com)  
[www.broadway.com](http://www.broadway.com)  
[www.ibdb.com](http://www.ibdb.com) (Internet Broadway Database)  
[www.mtishows.com](http://www.mtishows.com)

#### MOVIES:

*RENT*  
Directed by Chris Columbus  
Sony Pictures, 2006

*Hair* (1979)  
Directed by Milos Forman  
MGM, 1999

*Broadway: The American Musical*  
Directed by Michael Kantor  
PBS Home Video, 2004

*La Boheme* (Australian Opera – 1994)  
Directed by Baz Luhrmann  
Kultur Video, 2006

*La Boheme*  
Many video releases exist of productions of *La Boheme*

*Moulin Rouge!* (2001)  
Directed by Baz Luhrmann  
20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2003

