

Rent Casebook

James Madison University



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Introduction

In the Fall 2022 Semester, I had the pleasure of being the dramaturg for JMU's production of *Rent*. It was my first time serving as a solo dramaturg for a production, and overall turned out to be an enormously educational and enlightening experience. Before diving into why I wanted to work on this specific production, I feel that it would be beneficial to define dramaturgy and my personal attraction to it.

To put an enormously comprehensive idea simply, dramaturgy is the study of a performance's aesthetic architecture (structure, themes, goals, conventions, etc.). As Michael Chemers puts it in *Ghost Light: an Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy*, a dramaturg is a theatrical artist who engages in analytical practices to "determine the aesthetic architecture" and conducts research to "discover everything needed to transform... the script into a living piece" and "apply that knowledge in a way that makes sense to the living audience at this time in this place." All in all, dramaturgy boils down to one driving question: "why this piece for this audience at this time." It is the job of the dramaturg to ensure that the answer to this question, the overall goal and intended effect of the production, is fully understood by all production members, perceivable by the audience, and that the means of delineating this message are provided and accessible to all.

My personal enchantment with dramaturgy stems from my love of research, teaching, and collaboration. I am always seeking to learn something new and by engaging in dramaturgical roles, I can take that newfound knowledge and work with a team on integrating it affectively and beneficially into my other passion, theatre. I am also drawn to the challenge of assisting in making and solidifying meaning. I find an enormous amount of satisfaction from being able to

work with a director, designers, and cast to ensure that their vision and messages are being constructed and presented effectively and delineating a specific meaning.

Moving on to this semester specifically, I was drawn to being the dramaturg for *Rent* because of the show's historical and theatrical significance, the difficult and momentous material tackled, and a personal deep admiration for the show and its writer. *Rent* highlights a very important, devastating, and misunderstood time in United States history, the AIDS epidemic and the housing crisis in NYC in the 1990s, while bringing awareness to a highly ignored and mistreated community, the LGBTQ+ community. I felt that it was important to work on this show because being a college production, almost all of those involved (and a large majority of the audience), including myself, were born after the events taking place, so I felt that I needed to help ensure that the stories of those who suffered and lived through these times were being appropriately told and honored.

Pre-Production

I began my dramaturgical duties right at the conclusion of the Spring 2022 semester in early June. My first meeting with director Kate Lumpkin and my advisor Zachary Dorsey consisted of a general discussion of the show and creation and explanation of my expectations. We discussed why we were all excited to work on this piece, some of Kate's preexisting ideas, some areas of cultural misunderstanding, and specified the responsibilities she wanted me to undertake as dramaturg.

To be more specific, we talked about how the central context of the show was the AIDS Epidemic and how because of that, we had to treat *Rent* as a period piece since no students lived through it. We also discussed Kate's goal of showcasing the real filthy, uninhabitable, and authentic atmosphere of the Lower East Side. Additionally, an aspect that took me by surprise was that Kate wanted to showcase that Benny isn't necessarily the bad guy; but instead, it was the cops and the government. From this discussion, we brainstormed my central responsibilities: to create a website to showcase my research, to work with the cast to make the context matter, and to be in attendance at the early "table work rehearsals." Furthermore, we played around with the idea of me possibly helping craft some sort of program note and to assist in curating video clips for the top of show video. Sadly, in later meetings, we scrapped both ideas as Kate wished to undertake them herself as the director.

Moving on, over the summer and in early Fall 2023 I met one-on-one twice with Zachary Dorsey to discuss my starting points. Over the summer, we talked about how all my research had to be sharable and accessible to all, which prompted me to make a Google Folder with all my notes and sources. I also was coached on the best collaboration techniques, including allowing humility, curiosity, and collaboration to drive my work. Later, in Early Fall 2023, we had another

check-in meeting to discuss my work as of yet, how to best present it, and to brainstorm possible audience engagement (specifically with Friendly City Safe Space in Harrisonburg). Finally, I was given the task to solidify my responsibilities with Kate.

The following day, I met with Kate, and we then crafted our Director-Dramaturg Agreement of Responsibilities to solidify dates, expectations, and a timeline. The most important aspect of this was that I needed the website to be live the night before the first rehearsal on September 12 for all actors, designers, and other crew. Additionally, we confirmed that I was to attend rehearsal for the sing-through, the “La Vie Boheme” table read, the Act 1 stumble through, and the Act 2 stumble through. This agreement is also where we nixed my participation in the program notes and archival video archive.

All in all, by the second week of the Fall semester, my specific dramaturgical role had been solidified. For this specific production, I was being asked to really focus on compiling an ample amount of contextual research for the cast and crew prior to first rehearsal so they could really understand the world they were creating and roles they were fulfilling, as well as stick around to serve as a resource for any and all questions throughout the rehearsal process as they traversed this world.

Production Research

I spent all summer and the beginning month of the Fall 2022 semester prior to first rehearsal compiling resources and context for the cast and crew to be presented in the form of a website. When beginning to conduct research, I decided to divide my research into the three main categories that the website was to be separated into: *Rent* (specifically production history and playwright information), 1990s context (specifically political, economic, housing crisis, LGBTQ+ community, and AIDS), and vocabulary from the script that might be unfamiliar to a modern audience. Also, to avoid repetition, the full annotations of all of my research and the links to find the sources can all be found on the linked finalized website below.

When conducting my research, I decided to start with the general production information before diving into the period's context. I started by researching just *Rent* itself, its conception, inspiration, production history, and success. Then, I dove deeper into Jonathan Larson himself. I started by reading very broad and generalized pages on him to attain a base level of information. I then dove deeper and found documentaries by his family, letters from co-workers, and even watched *Tick Tick Boom*, the 2021 bibliographic film starring Andrew Garfield to expand beyond just the fact and obtain a deeper, more personal understanding of him as a person because I felt that it would be beneficial towards truly understanding *Rent*.

My specific contextual research process for this production was slightly different from past shows I've worked on because I, just like the cast, didn't live through these times, so I was also starting from ground zero. Similar to my research on Larson, I started with very basic Google searches to get that basic, fundamental understanding of the 1990s society (including the government, the economy, AIDS, squatters, and the LGBTQ+ community). Then, once I had the rudimentary facts, I explored further. I really strove to find first-person accounts because I

believe that for a performance, the more that the cast and crew could get direct insights into the sentiments, hardships, and experiences of those who lived in the time, the more effectively they could bring that world to life. This led to the discovery of several sources that truly opened my eyes into 1990s New York City, including the *Vaginal Davis: An Interview*, which provided a first person account of being a queer individual in the 1990s squatter scene, *The Seven Five*, a documentary about a 1980s rookie cop who was coerced into corruption, “How My Video Got 6 Cops Indicted,” a YouTube documentary of The Tompkins Square Park Riot, “The McKenzie Tapes,” recorded squatter basement concerts, and more that can be found on the site.

My final section was the vocabulary. Kate asked me to specifically include this section because so many of the lines in the script make references to 1990s specific terms. I read through the libretto a few times and jotted down any terms or references that I believed might not be fully understood by a modern 20 year old. This included phrases such as “don’t screen me” and “patched,” terms such as AZT, shanty town, and circle line, and references to pop culture of the time such as Steuben glass, Doc Martens, and Spike Lee. I included definitions for all and even added in photographs or links to video examples for the more specific difficult ones. Finally, I was holding off the entirety of “La Vie Boheme” because it has over 100 specific references, but I luckily came upon on a goldmine during research and found an annotated copy of the lyrics that addressed every foreign term, so I just linked the whole pdf to the page. I appreciated this page because it was a one-stop-shop for all the terms, limiting how far the actors would have to look.

About a week before the first rehearsal I submitted a draft of the website and received a list of revisions to make including adding more colloquial and welcoming language, adding more images and visuals, condensing some of the text in favor of adding more external sources for them to peruse, including more academic articles for students who wanted a deeper

understanding, adding information on PReP to the AIDS page, and editing the grammar and text overall to flow better. Below is the link to the finalized website:

<https://jmurent.weebly.com/>

As specified on that home page, this website was not a set-in-stone link, it was a flexible, adaptable, and ever-changing compilation of resources to best fit their needs that arose throughout rehearsals. One specific instance of adapting it was that I came to understand that many of the actors were more visual/auditory learners, so I went in and added some more video-based resources rather than scholarly writings. I added videos such as *The Last One*, a documentary of the AIDS Epidemic and the meaning of the quilt, *Dallas Buyers Club*, a biographical film about how difficult AIDS medication was to obtain, and *Vaginal Davis: An Interview*, a reflective documentary on Vaginal Davis' experience in the 1980s-90s punk scene in New York. Additionally, I discovered "The McKenzie Tapes," which are recorded tapes of rock concerts that were held in Lower East Side Squatters basements.

I did my best to make the website as accessible as possible by including brief annotated definitions on each page for quick perusal, as well as additional information for varying levels of education and interest. I also included ample pictures and videos for those who aren't as big of readers as others. I believe that the desired accessibility was achieved because once providing the cast with the website, I had some actors thanking me for a quick resource of basic facts because it allowed them to just quickly pull it up, navigate to the area of their question, and be able to quickly find an answer. On the other hand, I had some other actors coming up to me and asking questions about the additionally linked articles and videos that they'd decided to dive into because it had related to their character, and they wanted that more in-depth knowledge.

In addition to creating the website, I also provided 5 physical books to be dispersed amongst the cast and crew for their perusal. I believe that some people are more physical and tactile learners, so being able to have books to physically hold and flip through was important to me for accessibility of the knowledge to all. Additionally, all these novels further illuminated the unfavorable reality of existing in NYC in the 1990s. These books were given to the Stage Manager so they could be present and borrowed at all the rehearsals. Below is the list of books I checked out/loaned from other universities:

- *Kill City: Lower East Side Squatters 1992-2000* by Ash Thayer: This was a photography book of photographs by Ash Thayer that documented the squatting scene in New York City in the 1990s. Ash herself was a squatter who lived in the Lower East Side (specifically in See Skwat). I chose this book because it provided ample visual representation of the gritty, yet beautifully collaborative and communal, reality of squatters.
- *Somewhere Below 14th and East: The Lost Photography of Karen O'Sullivan* by Ray Parada: This book was similar to *Kill City* in that it was a documented photographic novel of photos taken by Karen O'Sullivan, a member in the squatter scene in the 1980s-90s who is now unable to take or share her own photos due to a diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis. I chose this for the same reason as the last book, except that this one focused specifically on the art and concerts held in the basements of squatter buildings.
- *Art After Stonewall, 1969-1989* by Jonathan Weinberg: This book is a chronological compilation of art and photographs that reveal the impact of the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement on the art world. I chose this because it provides expressive and abstracted visual representations of the emotions amongst the LGBTQ+ community in that time. I

also appreciated how it breaks it down by era and purpose, including early civil rights era (post-Stonewall), increasing prevalence, the AIDS movement, political activism, and growing acceptance amongst pop culture.

- *Fragile Dwellings* by Margaret Morton: This book contains photographs and quotations, documenting the lives and living spaces of the homeless community in New York City. The photographs presented in this book differ from the first two because instead of trying to highlight the beauty and comradery in these communities, Morton was aiming at representing the desolation, loneliness, and hardships. I chose this book because the photographs provide even more visual perspectives for the cast and crew to work off of and the quotations provide direct insight to the thoughts and feelings of the population.
- *Dignity in Exile: Stories of Struggle and Hope from a Modern American Shanty Town* by Eric Weissman: This book contains several first-person biographical stories of individuals living in a city-recognized Shantytown in Portland. While not being about New York directly, I believe this book was useful because it contained more in-depth text descriptions of the experience of living in a Shantytown. It illuminated everything from the hardships, to the comradery, to the loneliness. I chose it because for the people who preferred reading over viewing images since this book was very detailed and verbose.

As mentioned previously, I also served as a quick resource because anyone involved could come to me with specific questions or clarifications. One specific instance that both intrigued and challenged me was about halfway through the process, the choreographer contacted me with a question regarding how much voguing and waacking would be included into Angel's choreography, especially the percussion aspects. She also asked me to include some video examples and historical context for the actor. This was new to me because as a non-dancer, I was

unsure of where to start. I spent some time researching and was able to come up with this answer for her:

“I’ve been really looking inot that specific idea that your brought up about waacking and vogueing’s influence on Angel’s movement. I stumbled upon this really fascinating article specifically on waccking and it’s history in the black drag community. On Page 63 is where the history starts and an explanation of how/why it was seen as a “lesser” form of dance since it was practiced in a minority community (especially during the AIDS epidemic where it almost disappeared and died out as a form of dnace since its practicers were falling to the disease). The rest of the article explains how its rebirth in the early 2000s represented pride of the modern day black queer community by paying homage to its importance in history. Here is the link to that article:

<https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=ee40f46e-c9a6-4e59-a4d1-e87535605ce7%40redis>.

I also found a really great short documentary on NY Times called *Voguing has Always Been a Protest*. This really struck me because it explains the unfortunate, yet inspiration, roots.

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/arts/100000007180242/voguing-protests.html>

As for the connection between waacking/voguing and percussion, the connection exists as a steady beat is the source for the sharp precise movements of the style of dance. As mentioned previously, I’m not the most educated on dance, so I watched a few videos of people dancing in this style, and there seems to be a very percussive manner to the dance itself.

I can dig in more later but let me know if you have any more questions.”

All in all, I did my very best throughout this process to be a consistent resource for all cast and crew members to rely on for contextual information that would best influence their performance and design decisions, best allowing Kate’s vision to come to life. By providing the website, the books, and making myself available throughout the whole process for increased clarification, more sources, and spur-of-the-moment inquiries, the world of *Rent* was able to be incredibly informed, thus having added levels that crafted a truly authentic and heartbreaking performance. Being able to actually see evidence in the performance that the cast and crew utilized my research was a really cathartic, delightful, and heartwarming experience for me

because it allowed me to feel accomplished and proud in the work I did (and instill a deep sense of admiration for them as performers for taking those steps in educating themselves). In the end, I believe that I accomplished all the responsibilities expected of me from the Director-Dramaturg agreement, and even went beyond in the Audience Engagement that I'll touch on in the next section.

Audience Engagement

For an element of audience engagement, we held a post-show talkback and debrief with Friendly City Safe Space. FCSS is a local Harrisonburg LGBTQ+ safe space with a mission of “[being] a community for LGBTQ+ people and aspiring allies of all ages, racial, and ethnic identities in Harrisonburg and surrounding counties that will empower them with the resources, education, and community necessary to thrive as equal, healthy, supported essential members of society.” We felt it important to have a conversation with members of this group as they have such a profound personal connection with the story, and we were interested in hearing their experience and thoughts on our show. Also, we wanted to explore just how the meaning of this show being love and hope still persists amongst the LGBTQ+ community nowadays. We provided several members of FCSS free tickets for them to come see the show and an invitation to our talkback where we could have a group discussion of the show overall, its meaning and impact, and answer any questions they might’ve had.

Going into preparation for this talkback, we brainstormed goals of this discussion. We came up with the purpose of the talkback being to hold space for spectators to express their feelings and reflections on the show, allow for a few people who worked on the show to provide insight into the process, and to talk about its persistent message in modern society 25 years after opening. Then, we came up with the possible discussion questions/outline for the hour-long discussion:

- Introductions
- A warm-up question to the audience: What moments from the production linger or echo or reverberate for you? What do you remember?
- A question to all collaborators present, starting with Kate: What drew you to working on *Rent* in the first place? What was your previous experience/knowledge of this show, and what were your goals in being a part of this production?

- A question to Kate: What did you hope to accomplish with your approach to this play? How did you lead the performers in designers in telling this story together?
- A question to Jordan: How did you support the work of your collaborators during the design and rehearsal process, and what did you learn about *Rent* and NYC in the 1990s along the way?
- Questions for actors present: Perhaps something about the challenges of creating these now iconic characters for a show set in the 1990s – a moment when everyone in the cast hadn't even been born...
- Questions for designers present: Considering Kate's approach/concept/ideas about the story and the production's possible aesthetics, what was your journey and what aspects of your own design work were you the most excited by?
- Question for everyone, including audience: Why was *Rent* successful in 1996 (and why was it also critiqued)? How did the musical function in that moment?
- Question for everyone, including audience: What does/can *Rent* mean in 2022? How does it mean differently than it did in 1996? Will we still be performing it in another 25 years?
- Question for everyone: Does the queer community from within the musical *Rent* mirror, reflect, or help us understand the queer community (communities?!?) of Harrisonburg and JMU? Did the production team consider and/or seek to reflect the queer community of Harrisonburg, JMU, or 2022 even as they staged this show in/from the 90s?
- Questions to the JMU folks from the audience

Overall, I am incredibly pleased with the outcome of this talkback. The production members present were the director, three actors, and myself, and there were only three FCSS members in attendance. Although being a very small gathering, it allowed for a very deep, intimate, and genuine conversation between all of us. We started out with the broad “what moments stood out” question, then utilized the prewritten questions to an extent, but more so let the conversation flow naturally between the production members and the audience (utilizing almost an hour and 15 minutes and inevitably hitting almost all of our talking points). We spent a good chunk of time discussing how *Rent* means differently in 2022 than in 1995 and how its message of honoring the LGBTQ+ community will continue to persist through time. This also led into a really engaging conversation about just how behind media is in representing the true vastness of

the LGBTQ+ community (how it's still so binary/trinary and stereotype based). All in all, this talkback was an incredible and cathartic conclusion to the work on the show because it allowed us to see how we not only effectively delineated the show's intended message but were able to inspire additional conversation around advocacy for further advancements in equality.

Conclusion

Overall, I am incredibly proud of the work I did on this production because it was a much bigger dramaturgical endeavor than I'd ever encountered in the past. Being able to really witness the cast and crew utilizing my resources and materials to influence their performance really provided me with a great sense of validation for my own work as well as an admiration for them as dedicated and passionate performers.

Despite not engaging in some of the more traditional dramaturgical behaviors (i.e., being a part of pre-show conceptual conversations, creating a lobby display, and helping with program notes), I still undertook massive responsibilities that really pushed my personal boundaries and allowed me to expand upon several of my academic skills. To be more specific, the ample research really pushed my depth of exploration (and locations where I found research- I better learned how to work educational databases and physical libraries). Additionally, having to condense all the information and give it meaning for the website really honed my analytic skills. Next, creating the website itself was a massive technological undertaking that was a huge challenge for me (and personally is my proudest achievement of this process because I have never been technologically inclined). Furthermore, having to be available to answer questions on the fly increased my communicative and collaborative skills, as well as allowing me to adapt to become more flexible and spontaneous (which has always been a challenge for me given my OCD). Finally, leading the talkback required a lot of confidence and agency on my part to be able to speak about my own work and opinions in front of everyone. The audience engagement also continued to enhance my communicative skills and allow me to traverse unknown territory as the facilitator of a larger conversation.

Throughout this process, I certainly learned a lot about dramaturgy. To bring it back to Chemers' quote, this process really showed me just how much it takes to "discover everything needed to transform... the script into a living piece." The copious amounts of research and work I did all boiled down to his driving question of "why this piece for this audience at this time" because I was allowing the cast, crew, and audience to be able to grasp the incredible lasting importance of this show by enlightening them into the authentic realities of the time. By informing the cast and crew with the website and answering all their inquiries, they were able to take the provided information and allow it to influence their performances which then translates to the audience better grasping the meaning. Additionally, the talkback allowed the audience a safe and brave space to further reflect on *Rent's* significance and ask their questions, create their own meanings, and communicate their ideas towards further action that were influenced or brought upon by our show.

Despite being incredibly pleased with the process and result, there are a few aspects that looking back I would've done differently. Firstly, while I did do a large amount of research over the summer, I should've jumpstarted it even more because I severely underestimated the amount of time that the website would take once I finished the research. I assumed that compiling and condensing the research would be the lengthy part, forgetting that the workings of the website, including the website interface, visual hierarchy, accessibility options, and pathways, would require much time and care. Second, I attended all the rehearsals I was asked to be at, but I wish I would've used my own agency to attend just a few more to create a better relationship with the cast and crew because I do have a fear that some didn't come to me with their questions due to not fully knowing me or my role. Third, when lending out the books to the cast, I wish I'd have kept better track of them or even just kept them myself and only lent them out at request (instead

of leaving them with the stage manager) because they got lost and caused a ton of stress on me due to their rarity and price. I did emphasize the importance of them safely being returned to me in the beginning of the process, but maybe I should've reiterated it over time. However, once they were lost and I reached out repetitively to the cast, only the Stage Manager responded in helping me search, which did hurt my feelings a bit because I felt ignored (although I'm not too pressed because she did eventually end up being the one to find them, so crisis was averted). Finally, in the beginning of the process I was asked to help collect archival video footage, so I began to explore videos and put them into the shared Google Drive. However, at the first read through the video was already done by just the director with none of my research included (and later realized none of her videos were put into the Drive, meaning she just did it totally on her own). I wish there could've been a bit more communication there that I was no longer being asked to contribute because I did waste a bit of time on that aspect (but nonetheless any research experience is beneficial to me). This allowed me to learn that it is important as a dramaturg to assert agency and keep up with communication (double texting/emailing is alright), which is something I've always been uncomfortable with, especially being a student working amongst adults. However, looking forward, I'm going to try to be a bit more assertive and self-assured in my actions.

All in all, I loved *Rent* and I'm grateful that I had the opportunity to work on it because it deepened my admiration for the piece as well as for the art of dramaturgy. Looking into the future, I definitely want to serve in this role again for later productions, and even hopefully expand my responsibilities to include a possible lobby display or set of program notes. Lastly, I want to end this by thanking everyone involved for being a pleasure to work with; especially

Kate for entrusting me with so many responsibilities despite my status as a “baby dramaturg” and Zachary for advising me along the entire way.

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Appendix A: Meeting and Rehearsal Notes

Dramaturg Initial Meeting Notes 6/1/22

- Rent is a period piece → no student lived through it
- AIDS affected literally everyone- CENTRAL CONTEXT
- Wants to add essential context by adding an initial image of Mark w camera being an audience member looking at scrim of news footage montage
 - o Mark=Outsider (other side of the camera)
- World is filthy, uninhabitable, authentic
 - o Back is all windows (clear, colored, mirrored, etc)
 - Glass tells story
 - o Set design: lip of stage is a triangle w pink LEDS lit up
 - o Will be lit up w AIDS quilt projected during Seasons of Love
- Look into book Kill City for squatters rights
- My duties
 - o Make a website to showcase research (distilled down and full articles)
 - o Attendance: def first rehearsal, table work, weekly check in
 - o Work w cast: MAKE CONTEXT MATTER
 - o No program note, no lobby display
 - o Help find clips for top of show

Starting Point Meeting with Zachary Notes 6/11/22

- What is info flow right now? Does cast have additional assigned reading over summer?
- Convo about what is research that goes into website/how it is used
- Start sharing research w her and designers immediately
 - o Shared google drive?
 - o Annotations vs excerpts- have convo
- Convo ab collaboration for video
- Convo ab additional program material
 - o Contextualizing vs how rent was reviewed/produced/25elation in its time
- Casebook: dramaturgical scrapbook/portfolio to track work on a show (all drafts, notes, research, artifacts, ephemera, etc.)
 - o kcactf: kennedy center 25elation college theatre festival- national network of theatre makers (think cappies but college)
 - o Find examples online (google kcactf)
- Convo about my schedule, when am I needed
- Be pedagogical
- Email kate- “hey i’m starting research... im available... should you wanna talk again... is there anything else you wanna push me on/schedule a conversation, no pressure”
 - o Use interrogative not imperative

- Humility, curiosity, collaborative spirit

Checkpoint Meeting with Zachary 8/30/22

- Harrisonburg Safe Space (lgbtq+) wants an engagement event
 - Panel, conversation, talkback, etc? Zachary will mentor me on this
- Go through agreement doc w Kate and figure out exact expectations
- Website should be annotations, beckon my collaborators to read on
 - Think about audience experience for paragraph vs bullet points
 - Bullet points can feel disconnected, craft into paragraphs
- Get books physically ****
- Sign up office hours next week

Checkpoint Meeting with Kate 9/1/22

- Bad guy : capitalism, cops, government
- If show written today, Angel would be a trans women
 - Find info on drag scene/club kid research
- Actor website by first rehearsal
 - Bring books
- Rehearsal attendance
 - First rehearsal
 - La Vie Boheme dance rehearsal, September 21
 - Come any days of staging- week 3
 - Stumble through- Sunday Oct 2
 - Stumble through- Sunday Oct 9
- Archival video footage
 - Mckenzie tapes
- Potential quad performance

Checkpoint Meeting with Zachary 9/6/22

- Be at rehearsal once a week
- If we do educational outreach, make it 26relationship26 (educational)
- Website tips
 - Fix name – not just actor’s
 - Assert myself on the website
 - Locate myself within production team- orient the users
 - IN TEXT CITATIONS?
 - Add two or three other sources (more La Boheme and the 26relationship)
 - Get better sources for politics
 - Change name of politics (possibly pull squatters in and make it “whats going on in ny”

- More explanations in economy- characters lived through it
- OPEN UP THE INFO
- Get rid of scribd, do slideshow
- FLASHBAK GOOD SOURCE, GET MORE LIKE THIS, “if you read no other source, read this one”
- Just link la vie boheme source
- Change sentence of vocabulary: “as I was diving into the libretto, I found some unfamiliar concepts”- keep myself in it, no preachy teacher
- ASK KATE AB IF SHE WANTS PHYSICAL ACTOR’S PACKET
- Big thoughts
 - Tone/rationality
 - Quality of sources
 - Teach within the website, encourage towards sources
 - Overall editing
- NEXT DRAFT BY FRIDAY

First Rehearsal Notes 9/12/22

- Exploration: who are these people becoming as the world is rapidly changing
- Honor Jonathan Larson’s legacy
- Challenge each other out of love
- Safe word: mortgage; safe action: both hands up
- Truthful storytelling and conversation

Set

- Inspired by Limelight club: a club that got shut down and became a hub of club kid culture
 - Will become the loft, the church, the club, etc.
- Not pretending that we’re not in a theatre; not pretending that we’re not in a church:
 - ~theatrical experience~
- Multiple play spaces
 - Center of stage
 - Under the cover
 - 3 levels
 - In the audience
- Center window will serve diff purposes
 - Stained glass window in church
 - Maureen’s moon
 - Etc.
- Will utilize a scrim along the front for the opening video

Costumes

- Inspired by club kids: eccentric “influencers” of the time

- Gender fluid, punk, alternative
- Not everyone is a club kid

Choreography

- Turning the stereotype/role into a performance and physicalized movement
- Very movement-based world
 - Everyone dancing all the time- creating moments of dance that didn't exist before
- Goal: for everyone to look and feel confident in a story of ~becoming~

Moving on

- What should I be actively working on?
- When should I come?
- Send out McKenzie tapes to cast
- Do you ever want me to facilitate/be there for the hard convos (do you want me to fill those shoes as a dramaturg?)

Act 1 Stumble Through 10/2/22

- Notes on aspects that don't work
 - Camera is incorrect period (is too modern)
 - Update: is a stand in
 - Red solo cups in the 90s?
 - Update: is a stand in
- Aspects that do really work
 - La Vie Boheme references work
 - Good on Angel's vogue influence
 - Cellphones are all period

Act 2 Stumble Through 10/9/22

- Is Mimi coming back to life too humorous for the theme?
- Mimi and Angel deterioration?
- Possible Roger deterioration?

Appendix B: Director/Dramaturg Agreement of Responsibilities

I'm unsure of why it has formatted this way, but it is on the next page.

Dramaturg Responsibilities	Required	Date to be Completed and/or Due Date of Review Draft	Notes/Special Instructions Hundley 30
Audition Attendance – <i>note-taking and solicited advice/answering of questions</i>	No		
Director Prep Work Assistance and/or Packet – <i>production history, playwright bio, cultural significance, historical context, glossary of terms, visuals, etc. and/or a project of the director’s choosing</i>	Yes	September 11, day before first rehearsal	Actor information website: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New York city mayors office, politics, police - Act Up, on the ground AIDS and squatters org - Vocabulary of La Vie Boheme - “We screen,” payphone, answering machine - Basic contextual info - Items (cellphone) - Info about drag scene/club kid research
Designer Packets – <i>same as above</i>	Yes	^	
Actor Packets – <i>same as above, plus additional materials if needed (essays and reviews, pronunciation guide, period movement instructions, explanation of cuts, etc.)</i>	Yes	^	
Production Meeting Attendance	Not usually, though Kate will invite Jordan if needed.		
Dramaturgical Presentation – <i>first rehearsal, distribution and explanation of actor packets</i>	Yes	^	
Table Work Attendance – <i>note-</i>	Yes	September 12	No traditional table work, will be sung through on first day

<i>taking and solicited advice/answering of questions</i>			
Rehearsal Attendance – <i>note-taking and solicited advice/answering of questions (*please specify in Notes the expected regularity of rehearsal attendance: daily; weekly; at key rehearsals like first run-thru, crew view, etc).</i>	Yes		Def La Vie Boheme, September 21 Any days of staging (up to me and my schedule)- week 3 Act 1 stumble thorough- Sunday Oct 2 Act 2 stumble through- Sunday Oct 9
Program Notes	Probably not – but is there research we share with audience?		Final draft, 3 weeks before opening night Rough draft, 5 weeks before opening night Proposal/pitch, 7 weeks before opening night (?)
Lobby Display	Probably not – but definitely need help with clips for top of show...		Archival video footage - Drop any clips
Educational Outreach A: Publicity – <i>brief lectures/workshops in appropriate JMU classes and wider community organizations</i>	No		Potential idea: - Cast on quad to publicize show w a qr code to resources
Educational Outreach B: Preshow Programs and/or Postshow Talkbacks	No		

<p>Educational Outreach C: JMU Student Guides – <i>to assist student audience members, especially if attending as part of a course</i></p>	<p>No</p>		
<p>Educational Outreach D: Online Webpages and/or Blogs</p>	<p>No</p>		
<p>Dramaturgy Casebook – <i>binder that contains all work done by dramaturg throughout the process</i></p>	<p>Yes</p>		<p>Jordan, essentially, save/track EVERYTHING from last week’s conversation with Kate and I until the show closes. Let’s talk more about what a casebook is and how it can serve you.</p>
<p>Other (please describe):</p>			

Appendix C: Personal Research Notes

Production History

Broadway

- First seen at the NY Theatre Workshop in 1994
- January 26, 1996: opened in NYC off Broadway
- April 29, 1996: opened on Broadway at Nederlander Theatre
- June 1, 2008: closed run
- Reception
 - o 4,300 performances
 - o 7th longest running show ever
 - o 2nd longest running show currently
 - o Grosses over \$280 million

Film

- November 2005
- Features most of original cast members
- Directed by Chris Columbus, written by Stephen Chbosky

North American tours

- Angel tour
 - o Began in 1996 Boston and ending in September 1999 San Francisco
 - o Toured US
- Benny Tour
 - o Began in May 1997 in LA
 - o Featured Neil Patrick Harris as Mark
- Collins Tour
 - o Toured Canada

Production history

- In addition to Broadway and north America it has been performed in Sydney, São Paulo, Toronto, Shanghai, Helsinki, Berlin, HongKong, Budapest, Reykjavík, Dublin, Rome, Tokyo, Seoul, MexicoCity, Auckland, Manila, Barcelona, Athens, Amsterdam, Lisbon, Madrid, Stockholm, Karlstad, Copenhagen, Moscow, Santiago, Panama City, Taipei, Buenos Aires, Warsaw, Zürich, Tallinn, Santa Cruz, Singapore City, Johannesburg, Bratislava, Bangkok, Tel Aviv, Paris, Brussels, Vienna, Oslo, Perth, and London.
- Performed in 21 languages: English, Portuguese, French, Mandarin, Finnish, German, Magyar, Icelandic, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Polish, Slovak, Estonian, Greek, Norwegian, and Hebrew.

10th anniversary production

- April 24, 2006: original cast reunited for 1 performance at Nederlander theatre

- Raised over \$2m for Jonathan Larson performing arts foundation, friends in deed, and NY theatre workshop

School edition

- 2007: modified version made available
- Omits Contact and some language

Rent remixed

- October 16, 2007: rent remixed opened at duke of york's theatre in west end London
- Modernized production for 2007
- Bad reception

Rent live on Fox

- Ft Jordan fisher, brennin hunt, james levya, brandon victor dixn, kiersey clemons, mario barret, and vanessa Hudgens

Awards

- Tony: nominated for 10, won 4 (1996)
 - o Won
 - Best musical
 - Best book of a musical
 - Best original score
 - Best performance by featured actor (Jermain Heredia)
 - o Nominated
 - Leading actor: adam apscal
 - Leading actress: daphne rubin-vega
 - Featured actress: Idina Menzel
 - Lighting design
 - Choreography
 - Direction
- Additional awards
 - o Won
 - Pulitzer prize for drama
 - Drama desk award for musical
 - Drama desk award for book
 - Drama desk award for outstanding featured actor: Wilson Jermaine Heredia
 - Drama desk award for outstanding orchestrations
 - Drama desk award for lyrics
 - Drama desk award for music
 - Theatre world award for new talent (adam pascal)
 - Theatre world award for new talent (daphne rubin vega)
 - o Nominations
 - Drama desk award actor: adam pascal
 - Drama desk award actress: daphne rubin bega
 - Drama desk award director

- Drama desk award costume

Jonathan Larson

Early Years

- Born on February 4, 1960 in White Plains New York
- Jewish
- Musical and performance interest from early age
 - Loved Elton John, the doors, the who, billy joel, the beatles, and Stephen Sondheim
- Attended Adelphi University as an acting major
 - Started composing in college
 - Cowrote Sacrimmoralinority: a Brechtian themed cabaret musical

Works

- Superbia
 - Loosely based musical adaption of George Orwell's 1984
 - Followed story of society where emotions are erased at birth, but Josh's erasure is failed
 - Deep look into power of emotions and mankind's attachment to technology
 - Won a Richard Rodgers production award and grant
 - Never received a full production, only a 1989 rock concert
- Tick tick boom
 - 1991 autobiographical "rock monologue"
 - Written for just Larson with a piano and rock band
 - Drew on feelings of rejection with superbia
 - Performed off Broadway at Village Gate and Second stage theater
 - After Larson's death it was rewritten into a staged musical by David Auburn in 2001
 - Film adaption later made by Lin Manuel Miranda in 2021
- Rent
 - In 1988, Billy Aronson wanted to create a dark musical inspired by La Boheme, and Larson collaborated
 - Began as a staged reading in 1993 at new York theater workshop
 - Followed by a studio production that played a 3 week run
 - Larson died on day of first preview
 - Cast tried to simply sing show through, but gave up and performed it fully
 - Moved to a Broadway theater in April 1996
 - Posthumously won several awards

Death

- Died in his home on January 25, 1996, ten days before 36th bday
- Died of an aortic dissection
 - Speculated that he has undiagnosed marfan syndrome

Legacy

- Played at nederlander theatre from debut in April 1996 to September 2008
- 11th longest running show
- After death, Larson's family and friends started the Jonathan Larson performing arts foundation to provide monetary grants to artists
- In 2003, Larson's work was given to the Library of Congress
- Jonathan is portrayed by actor Andree Garfield in biographical musical drama in 2021
 - o Won several awards

Personal life

- Dated Victoria Leacock
- Dated a dancer who inevitably left him for a woman
- Lived/died in a 5th floor loft with no heat on 58. Greenwich street
- Worked as a waiter from 1985-1995

Awards for rent

- Pulitzer prize for drama
- Tony for best book
- Tony for best musical
- Tony for best original score
- Drama desk for best book
- Drama desk for outstanding music
- Drama desk for outstanding lyrics
- Ny drama critics circle for best musical

Nominations for tick tick boom

- Drama desk for book
- Drama desk for music
- Drama desk for lyrics

1980-90's Political Turning Points

1983

- New York post issues headline "headless body in topless bar" with Robert Murdoch
- Michael Stewart is beaten to death by NYPD
- Limelight nightclub opens
- Def Jam recordings opens
- Lesbian and Gay Community services center opened

1984

- Palm Sunday massacre
- Eleanor Bumpurs is shot and killed by police as they tried to evict her***

- Bernhard Goetz shoots and wounds 4 unarmed black men, generating headlines about crime and vigilantism in the media
- Wigstock begins

1985

- Edmund Perry shot by a undercover cop
- Gambino crime family boss Paul Castellano is shot
- Poets House establish
- Artworld Geurilla Girls pranksters active

1986

- Ed Koch sworn into third and final term as mayor
- Koch signs city's first ever homosexual rights bill
- "preppie murder" - raised issues over victims rights
- New York Mets won second world series
- Larry David opens fire on police officers
- White mob in Queens attacks thee African American men
- Four world financial center built

1987

- NY Giants win Super Bowl XXI
- Juan Perex (11) is mauled and killed by two polar bears at zoo
- Bernhard Goetz is acquitted of the four attempted murders from 84
- Joel Ateinberg and Hedda Nussbaum are arrested for the beating and neglect of 6 year old adopted daughter Lisa Steinburg
- ACT UP is formed
- Dia Center for arts opens
- New York cares is established

1988

- Phantom of the opera opens on Broadway
- Bright lights, big city is released (about cocaine)
- AIDS quilt on central park's great lawn
- NYC Campaign finance board and Lower east side tenement museum is established
- World financial center is completed
- Human rights watch headquarter in city
- Tompkins square park riot

1989

- Central park jogger attacked
- Ysuf Hawkins murdered
- David Dinkins elected as first African American mayor
- NY becomes sanctuary city for illegal immigrants
- Angelika film center opened

1990

- David Dinkins sworn in as mayor
- Avianca flight 52 crashes and kills 73
- Copy cat zodiac killer Heriberto seda kills
- Arson at happyland social club killed 87 people
- Tourist Brian Watkins stabbed to death by gang of youths
- Founder of Jewish defense league assassinated
- City registers 2245 murders, new record
- Population 7.3 mil, new record

1991

- First arohn kee rape and murder
- Baby hope found in cooler
- Crown heights riot: Jewish driver accidentally killed 7 year old black boy
- 4 train crashes after motorman falls asleep
- First major gentleman's club, scores, opens
- 9 people crushed to death trying to enter a celerity basketball gam/rap concert
- Wu tang clan formed

1992

- USair flight 405 crashes, 27 dead
- Noreaster strikes
- Red Hook school shotting
- Labrynth theater company founded

1993

- World trade center bombing
- Freighter carrying 286 ollegla Chinese immigrants runs aground, killing 10
- New Yorkers against gun violence headquartered in city
- Staten islanders vote in favor of secession from city

1994

- Rudy Giuliani becomes mayor
- New York school bus shooting
- New York rangers won stanley cup
- Hackers on planet earth conference begins
- Friends debuts
- Edward J Leary firebombs a 3 train w homemade explosives
- Anthony Baez dies after being placed in an illegal chokehold by NYPD officer
- New York underground film festival conference begins

1995

- J train crashed into M train, killing 1 and injuring 50
- Long racial dispute in Harlem over eviction of African American record store owner by a Jewish proprietor ends in murder and arson

- City website online
- Luna lounge in business
- Dahesh museum of art established

1996

- Second avenue deli owner Abe Lebewohl is shot and killed during a robbery
- TWA flight 800 crashed and kills 230
- NY Yankees win 23rd world series

1997

- Empire state building shooting
- Time Warner CEO Gerald Levin is robbed and killed
- Abner Louima is beaten and sodomized by NYPD officers
- Museum of Jewish heritage opens
- Manhattan couple disappeared from apartment after complaining to landlord about lack of heat
- Center for urban pedagogy established

1998

- Bank of America robbery
- NY Yankees win 24th world series

1999

- Kendra's law passed
- Unarmed African immigrant Amadou Diallo is shot and killed by NYPD
- Amy Watkins, social worker who worked with battered women is stabbed and killed in robbery
- Death in NYC from AIDS exceeds 75k since onset ****

Basics of AIDS Epidemic

Key facts

- First cases in June 1981
 - o Now, more than 1.2 million people, 35,000+ new cases a year
- 700k+ have died
- Disproportionate effect on certain populations: racial and ethnic minorities, gay/bisexual men, men who have sex with men or transgender women
- 13% of affected are unaware they're infected
- ART (Antiretroviral therapy) is treatment
 - o Makes "effectively no risk" of transmission"
 - o Yet many don't seek treatment
 - o Has to be done early

Overview

- People with HIV are living longer now, but also there are more people with it than ever before
- Promising trend: infections declines 73% between '84-2019 and 9% between 2015-2019
- HIV related deaths rose in 1980s and peaked in 1995
 - o Death rate has dropped 80% since peak, and 50% since 2010 due to ART
 - o In 2019, 5k people died
- Transmission patterns have shifted over time
 - o 2019, 66% of cases were male-to-male sexual contact and 4% were with drug users
 - o In 2019, more cases were due to heterosexual sex (23%)
- Missed opportunities for addressing pandemic
 - o 87% of HIV infected are diagnosed, only 66% receive care and 57% are virally suppressed

Impact across country

- Not uniformly distributed amongst states
 - o South accounted for more than half of cases
 - o 2/3 are within 10 states (metropolitan areas)
 - o Highest state is DC (for rate per 100k)

Impact on communities of color

- Racial and ethnic minorities have always been disproportionately affected
 - o 40% (479.3k) of those living are black or Latino
 - o Black diagnoses are 8x white, latino are 4x
 - o 43% of deaths to HIV were black

Impact on women

- Women account for 22k
- While male rates declines, female has stayed steady
 - o Especially women of color: black women are 55%, white 22% and latina 18%

Impact on young people

- Teens and young adults most at risk
 - o 57% are under 35
 - o Most affected sexually
- Parental transmission has decreased due to increased testing and ART

Impact on gay and bisexual men

- Gay/bisexual men only comprise 2% of US population, 66% of cases are LGBTQ+ related

US government response

- By 2019, total funding was 34.8 billion
 - o Dispersed among Medicaid/medicare programs, cash and housing assistance, research, and prevention

AIDS Timeline

June 5, 1981: new pattern emerges

- CDC called to treat PCP in 5 previously young healthy men in LA
- Officials notices spike in Kaposi's sarcoma among men in new York
 - o Rare immune suppression cases showing up in same population

Summer of 1981-1982: CDC investigates

- CDC forms task force on KS/OI
- Hypothesized that it was transmitted through sexual contact, some speculated that recreational drugs or environmental factors also were in play
 - o Late 1981: transmitted through blood
- Transmission through blood confirmed when immunosuppression was reported in 3 people with hemophilia

1982: new guidelines: "universal precautions"

- Wearing gloves when exposing self to bodily fluids
- Wearing goggles/masks
- Using safe needle disposal cases
 - o Biohazard red containers

1984: ELISA: the first HIV blood test

- Scientists began working with AIDS specimens in July 1981, but remained unknown
- By 1984, FDA license commercial blood test, ELISA to detect HIV

1985: stigma: educating a nation

- First few years were isolated to few cities, so didn't receive much attention
 - o Started media attention when infants and people with hemophilia were infected
 - o 1985: RYan White: teenage hemophiliac getting blood transfusion was infected
- 1986: US Surgeon General C. Everett Koop issues Surgeons General's report on aids
 - o Education on sex and AIDS
 - o Widespread use of condoms
 - o Dispelled mosquito myths
- 1987: CDC launched America Responds to Aids (ARTA)
 - o Increased awareness and understanding
 - o Seek counseling
 - o Used minority organizations to push

LGBTQ+ in the 1990s

The 1990s, "Don't ask don't tell" and DOMA

- Overall: LGBTQ+ community was treated unequally, faced violence and prejudice
 - o However, a younger generation began to realize that LGBTQ people were entitled to same rights (it'll be 20 years until those rights to be realized though)

- 1993: “Don’t ask don’t tell”: military applicants were not to be asked about their sexual orientation
 - o Theoretically lifted a ban on homosexual service that was instituted in ww2
 - o In reality it continued a statutory ban by only allowing homosexuals in military of they suppressed their sexual orientation
 - o Amendment 2 in CO: denied LGBTQ protection against discrimination because they were “special rights”
 - 1996: struck down in Romer v Evans because those protections constitute ordinary civil life in a free society
- April 1993: In response to Don’t ask don’t tell, CO Amendment 2, rising hate crimes, and on-going discrimination against LGBTQ community, over 800k-1m people participated in the March on Washington for LGBTQ rights
- 1996: Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA): defined marriage as the union of one man and one woman
 - o Brought about by a fear that if states granted same sex marriage, then the federal gov and state gov would have to honor them
 - o Didn’t bar individual states from recognizing same sex marriage, it imposed constrained on the benefits that same sex would receive
 - Insurance benefits, social security survivors benefits, immigration assistance, ability to file for bankruptcy, filing of joint tax returns

Supreme court cases

- Romer v Evans 1996
 - o Held that a state constitutional amendment in CO that prevented protected status upon homosexuality did not satisfy the equal protection clause
 - o Failed rational basis review
- US v Windsor 2013
 - o Section 3 of DOMA is unconstitutional
 - o Definition and regulation of marriage has been treated as being within the authority and realm of the separate states

New York Public Housing Crisis

Overview

- “No heat. Leaking roofs. Mold and pests. Interminable waits for basic repairs.”
- Over 400k residents
- Called NYCHA (NYC Housing Authority)
- Was once a seemingly reliable option for working poor

NYCHA history (1930s-1969)

- Founded in 1934 by Mayor Fiorello H LaGuardia during Great Depression
- Originally excluded welfare residents by screening for moral factors including alcoholism, irregular work history, single motherhood, and lack of furniture
 - o “When my mother came, only white people lives here, until the 1950s” -Natividad Nieves, resident of Queensbridge Houses in Queens since 1945

- “in my day, the staff was the best. They had their job, they did their job, and they were qualified for their job. You’d call, and it would be fixed right away.” – Elaine Walker, resident since 1958
- By 1960s, there are 69 projects with over 1000 units

New problems, changing mission (1969-1999)

- Housing 500,000 by the 1960s
 - Minority residents outnumbered whites
- Loosened selectivity in 1968
 - Number of public residents on public assistance doubled by early 70s
 - “In the seventies it was great. They would fix anything that you needed. They used to have two people working in each building. We don’t have that anymore” - Robert Harrison, resident since 1975
- By 1980, many of NYC’s troubles plagued housing developments: crime, drugs, vandalism
 - “The number of social issues increased significantly. The challenge managerially went up. They had to replace an enormous amount of windows, and elevator maintenance became much more difficult because of vandalism”- Bloom, New York Times
 - “There would be mailboxes bashed in and broken... everyone was getting paper checks, for their jobs or welfare. So you could cash them in anywhere. It didn’t matter who you were” – walker, NY times
 - “the 1980s is the first time when you’re more at risk of criminal violence on Nycha property than you are in the surrounding neighborhood” -Gregory Umbach
 - “When the crack epidemic came, it took over. There were fights everyday, shootouts everyday, people playing music outside of your building to get someone out to fight: -LB Tillman, resident since 1975
 - “Every place you step, you would step on a crack bottle” – Earline Jenkins, resident since 76

Era of defunding (2000-2018)

- By turn of century, NYCHA was being defunded as government stopped playing landlord
 - “they stopped doing preventative maintenance, which led to a lot of boilers not working” – Greg Floyd, president of teamsters local 237
 - “Now, it’s different. It takes time, because there’s a backlog. I called for a paint job in May and they’re coming in August” – Walker , NY Times
 - “We didn’t have hot water. So you couldn’t take a bath or shower” – Miriam Booth, resident since 1996

Squatters

- “halcyon vision of full-figured youth and dun, albeit one obscured by voracious rats and the occasional nutter, and for freezing cold months at a time shrouded in clouds of visible breath”

History

- In 1970s, a massive downturn almost bankrupted NYC
 - o Landlords abandoned buildings, leaving tenants
 - o More than 30k homeless as city buildings sat vacant
- Between 1980 and 1986, NYC took part in Jimmy Carter's homesteading program to help residents rehabilitate landlord abandoned buildings and acquire titles
 - o Ended in the Reagan era, but housing need persisted so the ones who started the process stayed in the buildings (squatters)
 - o Over 2 dozen barely habitable abandoned buildings on Lower east side were occupied by people who hoped to acquire a title once brought up to code
- In 1990s, These squatters stopped their evictions in court using law of adverse possession
- In 2000, the 11 remaining squats started process with city hall and converted them into limited equity co-ops (a win)

Squatter life

- Worked on building during day and partied all night
 - o Group construction projects, community room potlucks, concerts, board meetings, etc
- Was often home to the punk/alternative community
- "a wild scene and full of imperfect people... it taught me so many valuable skills: construction, community organizing, and independent. My ability to trust my instincts and stay true to my beliefs, regardless of what other might think, was strengthened

Appendix D: Website Text

Home Page

Welcome to the website for JMU's 2022 Production of *Rent*

On this site, I've accumulated production history, historical context, images, definitions, and supplementary resources to enrich all of our understandings of *Rent*. It has been really fun for me as your dramaturg to put this little site together and my hope is that it can be useful for everyone involved. So dive right in, play around a bit, and feel free to simply skim or dig deep. I hope you have as much fun learning as I did!

I've had a blast researching and learning about all of this and I'd absolutely love to chat as you explore this site or if you want to share any of your own awesome finds. This website is ever-changing so I'd love to make this a working, growing project. Also, to ever check out the awesome lil library plz hmu:

Jordan Hundley (she/her) hundleji@dukes.jmu.edu [703-479-4690](tel:703-479-4690)

About

Before I dove into unearthing the culture of 1980-90s New York City, I needed to understand the background of the show itself and its creator. In this section, I present information regarding the musical *Rent* and its inspiration, conception, and reception.

Production History

- It's safe to say that *Rent* was (and still is) an absolute hit! *Rent* was first seen at a New York Theatre Workshop in 1994 and later opened off-Broadway in January 1996. On April 29, 1996, it made its Broadway premiere at the Nederlander Theatre, running until June 1, 2008. It performed over 4,300 performances, grossed \$280 million, and became the 11th longest running show in Broadway history. There were also three other North American tours named the Angel, Benny, and Collins tours. Additionally, it has been performed in 44 other countries and 21 languages, demonstrating its cultural range and impact. It has had several subsequent adaptations, including *Rent: School Edition*, *Rent Remixed* (a 2007 modernized version), *Rent Live on Fox*, and the film *Rent*. In total, the musical has won four Tony Awards (out of its 10 nominations), a Pulitzer Prize, six Drama Desk Awards, and two Theatre World Awards.

Overall, *Rent* changed the course of musical theatre history. Larson broke the mold

by appealing to the young, modern, contemporary audiences that had previously abandoned Broadway for television, music videos, and film by employing the technology, music, and prominent themes of the time. Theatre critic Margo Jefferson called it "brilliant and messy all at once" because of its unique, modern style that carried such a "poignant and important" message. Larson allowed this young, angsty, and misheard generation to see themselves on the stage and let them know that their generation was being heard.

Inspiration

- When researching the conception of *Rent*, I felt it was helpful to know just what motivated Jonathan Larson to write because it can help us all in understanding why he felt his message was pertinent to be told at that time. *Rent* was primarily inspired by *La Boheme*, the 1896 Italian opera by Giacomo Puccini, and you'll find several parallels between the two pieces of work. *La Boheme* follows four struggling artists- a poet, a painter, a musician, and a philosopher- in 1830 Paris, France. On Christmas Eve, a young girl named Mimi knocks on their door, falling in love with Rudolfo, the poet. Unfortunately, it is later revealed that she is deathly ill and in urgent need of medical attention. However, being impoverished, the bohemians cannot care for her and are awakened to the harsh realities of life.

While *La Boheme* was a prime source of inspiration, Jonathan Larson was also pulling from his own life as he was living "la vie Boheme." He lived in a tiny apartment with no heat, worked as a waiter, and lived to write music in his little free time. Additionally, many of the characters were drawn from real figures in his life. For example, he knew several HIV-positive individuals, his ex-girlfriend dumped him for a woman, and many of his "bohemian" friends would leave the lifestyle for a stable corporate life.

[To read more of the basics on *Rent's* production history](#)

[To read a heartbreaking article on Larson's original production and listen to an even more tragic interview with the show's original music arranger](#)

[To check out this great honors these on *Rent's* relationship to *La Boheme* written by Swarthmore student Jessica Downing](#)

Jonathan Larson

- Jonathan Larson was born on February 4, 1960, in White Plains, New York. Growing up, he had an interest in music and performance, idolizing artists such as Elton John, The Doors, The Who, Billy Joel, The Beatles, and Stephen Sondheim, which eventually lead him to pursue acting and musical composition at Adelphi University. After college, he moved to New York City and lived in a 5th floor unheated loft on 58 Greenwich St where he worked as a waiter and a writer. His most notable works include *Superbia*, a loosely based musical adaption of George Orwell's *1984*, that was seen as a failure upon its release, *Tick Tick Boom*, his 1991 autobiographical "rock monologue" that drew from the feelings of rejection with *Superbia*, and most famously, *Rent*, a dark musical inspired by Puccini's *La Boheme* and New York's surrounding society. Tragically, Larson died of an aortic dissection on January 25, 1996, the night of the first preview of *Rent*. Despite his heartbreakingly early demise, Larson's legacy lives on as his family and friends started the Jonathan Larson Performing Arts Foundation to provide monetary grants to artists, *Rent* was deemed the 11th longest running show on Broadway, he posthumously won three Tony Awards, three Drama Desk awards, a New York Critics Circle Award, and a Pulitzer Prize for *Rent*, his works were given to the Library of Congress in 2003, and in 2021, his autobiography *Tick Tick Boom* was adapted into a film, with himself being portrayed by Andrew Garfield.

[To watch a cute little video about his life that his family/foundation made](#)

[To watch *Tick Tick Boom*, the memoir of his life. TBH, watching it now, with *Rent* in mind, it was super interesting to consider the urgency that Larson felt to make art as his life ticked away and it's definitely reflected in his *Rent* characters](#) (sadly it's only available on Netflix, so hit me up if you don't have an account and we can watch it and sob together :')

[To read quotes about Jonathan Larson and his legacy from the cast of *Rent*](#)

Context

In my opinion, this is the most fun and interesting part of my job: diving deep into the world of the show! In this section, I've gathered information and resources to illuminate the historical, political, and social context surrounding the world of *Rent*, providing us all a window into the daily lives of our beloved characters and to comprehend exactly just WTF was going on in New York.

Government

- Mayor's Office
- From 1978 through 1989, Democrat Ed Koch was in office. While he was known for his tenacity and brashness in fighting the rising crime rates and refurbishing abandoned housing units, he was simultaneously criticized for his lack of attentiveness to the AIDs crisis and racist remarks. This failure to properly handle the AIDs epidemic recently became double-edged because after his death in 2013, Koch was outed by his acquaintances as having been a homosexual. Then, in 1990, New York City elected its first African American mayor, Democrat David Dinkins who took office at a time when the city was plagued with racial discord. Despite lowering the crime rates, rehabilitating poverty-stricken neighborhoods, and reducing pollution, Dinkins' political popularity was marred by polarizing events such as the Crown Heights Riot and an overall negative perspective from the media. In 1994, he was defeated by Republic Rudy Giuliani who took office until 2001. Giuliani promised to reform the city's finances and continue to crack down on crime, so he cut expenditures by trimming down the city's workforce and winning concessions from unions. As for crime, he encouraged the police to take an aggressive and harsh stance against all crimes, including minor offenses such as littering, jaywalking, and reckless driving (and as noted in the police section below, police brutality increased as a result of this stricter enforcement). Overall, he is nicknamed "Nanny of New York" for his reduction of crime and how he later handled the September 11 attacks, but he has since recently had a major downfall in popularity due to an onslaught of controversies.

[To read more of the basics on Ed Koch or David Dinkins or Rudy Giuliani](#)

[To read an engrossing article about Koch's suppressed homosexuality and his handling of the AIDS epidemic](#)

[To read a short book on how intensely media coverage affected Dinkins' mayoral term as the first African American mayor \(sign in with your eID\)](#)

[To read an op-ed on Giuliani's "long, hard fall" from his popular status of "Nanny of NY"](#)

- NYPD
 - o Throughout the late 1980s and through the 1990s, the government of New York City took different efforts to crack down on the rising crime rates. However, this stricter policing brought about an increase in police brutality, which the government often defended as "cutting down on crime" (except during Dinkins' mayoral term where he attempted to expose it as

abuse). Examples of such injustices include Michael Stewart being beat to death in 1983, Eleanor Bumpurs being shot while the police attempted to evict her in 1984, Edmund Perry being shot by an undercover cop in 1985, over 100 cases of unnecessary violence by a cop during the Tompkins Square Park Riot in 1988, Anthony Baez being choked to death by NYPD officer in 1994, and many many many more.

[To read a timeline on major political events in NYC](#)

[To watch "The Seven Five," a documentary about a 1980s rookie cop who was coerced into corruption \(sign in with eID\)](#)

[To read a 1985 newspaper article published on Eleanor Bumpurs' murder](#)

[To watch "How My Video Got 6 Cops Indicted," a short documentary of the Tompkins Square Park Riot \(TW: graphic content\)](#)

Economy

- To be entirely transparent, anything having to do with the economy goes WAY over my head. Therefore, I am attempting to break this down as simply as possible, both for my own understanding as well as for anyone who may be in the same boat as me. In the early 1980s, America was suffering through a deep recession, meaning there were higher unemployment rates and less consumer spending. However, by 1983, the economy had rebounded and enjoyed a sustained period of growth throughout the rest of the 1980s and part of the 1990s. Overall, the time from 1983 through the 1990s is remembered as a time of strong growth, job creation, low inflation, rising production, and a surging stock market due to technological advances and a solid central monetary policy, but this prosperity wasn't evenly distributed. From 1989-1991, the country was in a recession due to the S&L Crisis (Savings and Loans Crisis) where gas prices rose because of the Gulf War and unemployment followed (approximately 1.621 million jobs were lost in this recession). Slowly, the Federal Reserve cut interest rates to 3% and inflation subsided and promote growth for the rest of the 1990s.

[To read more on the US economy specifically of the 80s](#)

[To read more on the US economy specifically of the 90s](#)

[For my financially literate friends \(could not be me\), here's an intriguing journal article about the relationship between the S&L Crisis and rising crime rates](#)

Squatters

- If you're going to go really ham on any section, let it be this one. The concept of squatting is essential to *Rent* and was, at least to me, the most unfamiliar going into this process. If you look at nothing else, be sure to click through the resources I linked at the bottom of this page. They entirely changed my perspective on the 1990s era in NYC. Also, this section has lots of pretty sick photos, so have fun!

In the 1970s, there was a massive economic downturn that almost bankrupted New York City, causing landlords to abandon their buildings and their tenants. More than 30,000 were homeless as city buildings sat empty. In the early 1980s, President Jimmy Carter issued a homesteading program to attempt to help residents rehabilitate the buildings themselves and acquire titles. Although this program was ended in the Reagan era, the housing need persisted so the tenants who began the rehabilitation process stayed in the buildings, becoming *squatters*. Over two dozen barely habitable abandoned buildings on the Lower East Side were occupied by people who hoped to acquire a title once the buildings were brought up to code. The squatter lifestyle soon birthed a tight-knit community of punk or alternative young people. They would work on their buildings during the day, participating in group construction projects, hosting community room potlucks, holding board meetings, and they'd party at night, oftentimes organizing concerts in their own building basements. However, at the same time, many of the troubles that plagued New York City as a whole affected these lower income areas, such as crime, drugs, and vandalism.

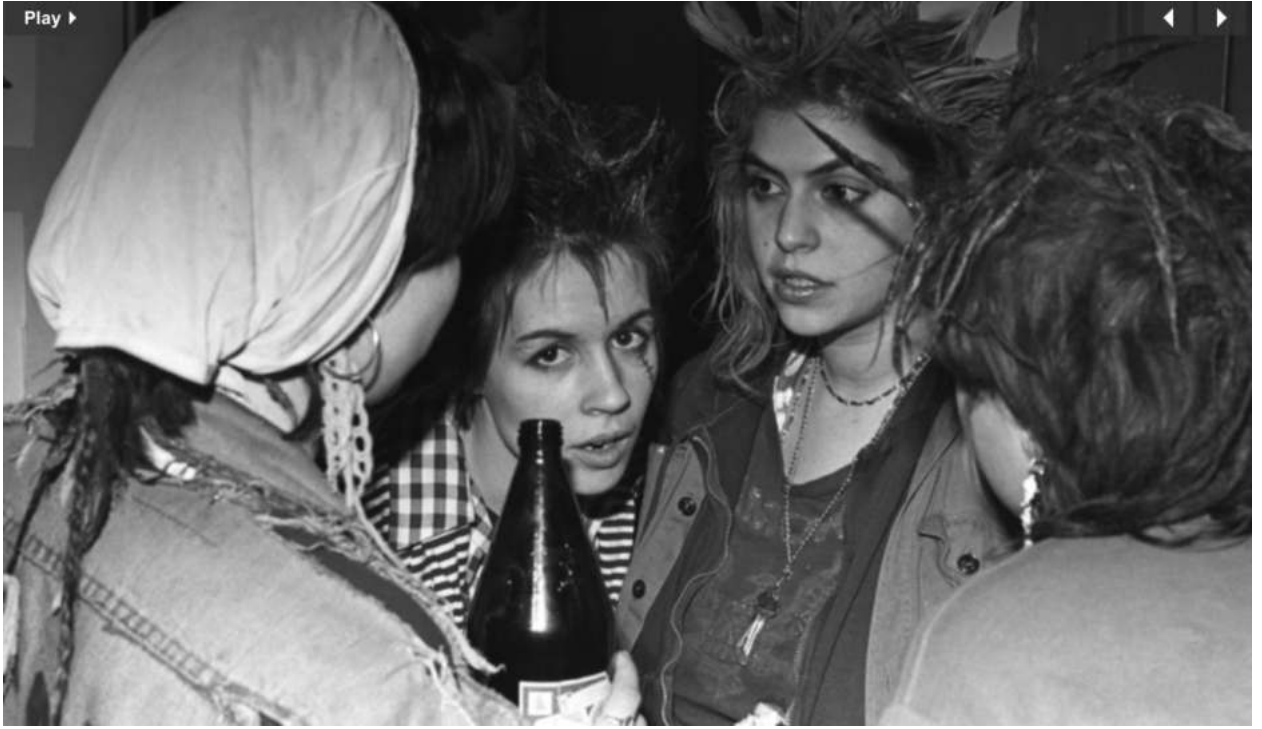
- Below is a slideshow of images from *A Visual History of the Lower East Side* and *Kill City: Squatters on the Lower East Side*. Both will provide you with photographs of squatters of the Lower East Side to give you a visual sense of their truly gritty, abrasive, and tight-knit realities.





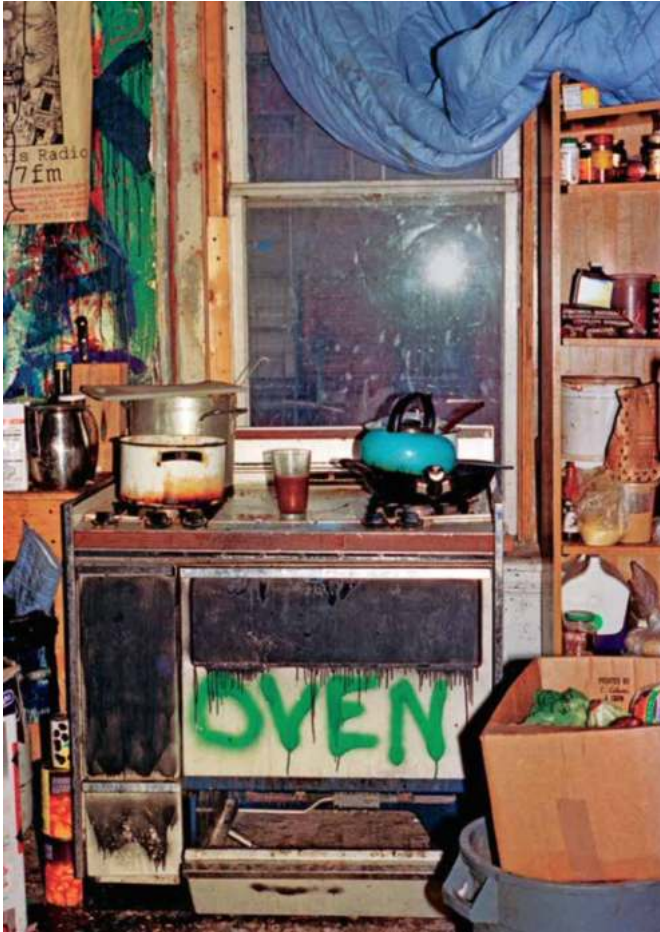
















- Quotes

- "...A wild scene and full of imperfect people... it taught me so many valuable skills: construction, community organizing, and independent. My ability to trust my instincts and stay true to my beliefs, regardless of what others might think, was strengthened" -Ash Thayer
- "When the crack epidemic came, it took over. There were fights everyday, shootouts every day, people playing music outside of your building to get someone out to fight" -LB Tillman
- "Every place you step, you would step on a crack bottle" – Earline Jenkins

[To see the entirety of *A Visual History of the Lower East Side*](#)

[To see the entirety of *Kill City: Squatters on the Lower East Side*](#), (I have a physical copy of the full book as well)

[To read more on NYC squatters](#) (condensed website)

[To read *even more* on NYC squatters](#) (chapter of a book)

[To hear a ton of awesome tapes of the type of concerts that would've been held in these squatter basements](#)

[To read more on the NY Public Housing Crisis as a whole](#) (there's some awesome first person quotes here)

LGBTQ+ Rights

- In the late 1980s through the 1990s, the LGBTQ+ community was treated unequally and faced constant violence and prejudice, especially with the HIV and AIDS epidemic on the rise. However, the younger generation began to realize that those in the community were entitled to the same rights and began to speak out (but it would be 20 years until though rights are realized by the government).
- In 1993, the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy was instituted within the US military that stated that applicants were not to be asked about their sexual orientation. In theory, this policy lifted a ban on homosexual service that was instituted during World War II; however, in reality, it continued a statutory ban by allowing those in the LGBTQ+ community in the military if they suppressed their sexual orientation. Additionally, in Colorado, they issued “Amendment 2” which denied the LGBTQ+ community protection against discrimination because those rights are “special rights.” In response to “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” Amendment 2 in Colorado, and rising hate crimes, an estimated 800,000 people participated in the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation on April 25, 1993.
- Despite continuing advocacy efforts, in 1996, the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was enacted, defining marriage at a federal level as “the union of one man and one woman.” This didn’t ban individual states from recognizing same-sex marriage, but it imposed constraints on the benefits that same-sex couples would receive at the federal level such as insurance benefits, social security survivors’ benefits, immigration assistance, the ability to file for bankruptcy, and the filing of joint tax returns.
- Furthermore, despite the beginnings of growing support for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual equal rights, the transgender community remained wildly ignored and

discriminated against. To protect themselves, many transgender women actually turned to the drag scene because although it was scorned and seen as perverted, it was safer than coming out as transgender. However, in the East Village, drag was embraced and celebrated. At the time, “the inside of the clubs... were a hedonistic, wild atmosphere, because... the police were so busy dealing with crimes, so the clubs weren’t much of a concern.” However, as the AIDS epidemic got worse, so did the violence against drag queens, causing many to retreat and suppress their true selves.

[To read a Howard University summary on the 1990's LGBTQ+ rights and Supreme Court cases](#)

[To read first person accounts of what it was like living as a gay man in the 1980s](#)

[To read more on the drag scene of the 90s and look at some absolutely fabulous photographs](#)

[To watch an absolutely outstanding interview with Vaginal Davis \(the famous drag queen\) where she describes the challenges she faced as a person of color in the LGBTQ+ community during the Reagan Era \(sign in with your eID\)](#)

AIDS

- I know I said that understanding squatting was pertinent to comprehending *Rent*, but AIDS is a close close close second. Personally, this was the hardest concept emotionally for me to dive deep into, but having an in depth knowledge of this disease and its disparities has opened my eyes to so many nuances and windows of the characters of *Rent*.

HIV, human immunodeficiency virus, is a deadly virus that attacks the body’s immune system. If not treated, it leads to AIDS, or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. It is spread through coming into direct contact with bodily fluids of those infected, most commonly through sexual contact, sharing of needles, and birth. Currently, there are more than 1.2 million people living with it, more than 35 thousand new cases a year, and a minimum of 700 thousand deaths attributed to AIDS since its discovery. Right now, there is no cure, but if treated properly and early enough, those affected can live long healthy lives. Once diagnosed, there is treatment available called ART, or antiretroviral therapy, which if started early enough, can cause no risk of transmission. However, 13% affected are unaware that they’re infected.

- It has continually had an extremely disproportionate effect on those of racial and ethnic minorities and gay and bisexual men. Right now, 40% of those living with AIDS are black or latino and 43% of deaths are black. 65% of cases are in members of the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, 57% of those infected are under the ages of 35 and almost 90% of transmission is sexual. These current statistics are actually much lower now than they were back in the 1980s, when it was first discovered, due to the advances in technology and medication and an increase in advocacy.
- The first cases were seen in June 1981 among 5 previously healthy gay men. It wasn't until 1984 that the FDA licensed the ELISA test to detect HIV. Since it began in the LGBTQ+ community, media attention and government spending were limited. It wasn't until infants and people with hemophilia were infected in 1985 that people began to report on it and act. In 1987, the CDC launched America Responds to AIDS (ARTA) to increase awareness and understanding, advocate for those infected to seek counseling, and to promote safe sex. Around the same time in 1987, ACT UP was formed, or the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, in response to social and government neglect. They're a diverse and non-partisan group of individuals with a mission to meet with government officials, distribute medical information, protest, counter the stigma and discrimination, and provide a safe space for those infected. They are still incredibly active today, fighting now for sustained investment in research and equitable access to healthcare. Finally, although in the 80s-90s there were antiretroviral therapies available to treat HIV and AIDS after infection, it wasn't until 2012 that a treatment was created to *prevent* infection, called PrEP. This is significant because up until PrEP's creation, HIV/AIDS was 100% a death sentence to those infected; this medicine changed the livelihoods of the LGBTQ+ community as they no longer had to live in as much fear of expressing themselves.

[To read more on the basics and statistics of the AIDS epidemic](#)

[To read a timeline of the AIDS epidemic from 1981-now](#)

[If you're more of a visual/auditory learner \(like me :\), feel free to watch this powerful documentary, "Last One," which chronicles the AIDS epidemic through the story of the AIDS quilt \(sign in with eID\)](#)

[To read more on PrEP](#)

[To visit ACT UP's website](#)

[Click here to watch *Dallas Buyers Club*, one of my favorite biographical films about a man fighting AIDS who illegally attains and sells the treatment medication to those who can't](#)

[afford/don't have access to it](#) (must have a Hulu account, so hit me up if you wanna borrow mine and have a little watch party)

Vocabulary

As I was diving into the *Rent* libretto, I encountered some outdated terms and concepts that I was unfamiliar with. Below, I present my findings on these ~vintage ideas~ of the 1990s to hopefully clear up any confusion you may have come across as well. Should you have questions on any other terms, please contact me and they will be swiftly added to our collective dictionary here.

- **Answering machine** (pg 2): tape recorder on a landline that supplies a recorded answer to a phone call and can record an incoming message (ex: I call you because I miss you, you don't answer, so I leave a message saying "hi, I miss you")
- “Are you **screening** you calls” (3), “don’t screen Maureen” (8): the process of viewing an incoming caller ID and deciding whether or not to answer the phone (ex: when you look down, see your Mom calling you, and go "mmmm no...")
- **AZT** (13): zidovudine; a type of anti-HIV drug considered a “nuke” (nucleoside analogue); used in combination as a treatment for AIDS; not a cure
- “I hear **Spike Lee**’s shooting down the street” (19): African American film director, producer, screenwriter, and actor that explored the African American experience
- **Prozac** (26): prescription anxiety and depression medication (fun fact: last year, my cat and I were both on prozac at the same time)
- “**Patched**” (31): a temporary fix or modification in sound technology until that particular problem can be fully addressed
- **Cell phone** (45): In 1989, the first “non brick” portable phone became available, the MICROTAC 9800X, and began slowly gaining popularity; not many people had portable cell phones; ~luxury~
- **Pay phone** (45): essentially a public landline; generally cost 25 cents
- **Saks** (47): Sax fifth Avenue; a high end department store
- **Steuben glass** (53): an American art glass manufacturer; ~luxury~
- **The entirety of La Vie Boheme** (59) briefly annotated by the State Theatre New Jersey (they did the work for me!)
- **Doc Martens** (76): popular work boot in the 80s known for being tough; at this time, they weren't an everyday alternative fashion staple like they are today, they were mainly just used as a work boot
- **Shanty Town** (86): a deprived and poor area on the outskirts of town
- **Circle line** (97): the circle route in public transport

- **Musetta's theme** (116): a waltz in act two of Puccini's *La Boheme*