

*RENT: A DIRECTOR'S PROCESS*

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A Thesis  
Submitted to  
The Temple University Graduate Board

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In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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by  
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August 2010

Thesis Approval:

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## INTRODUCTION

### One More Time, Please

*You ask how to become a director?...You become a director by calling yourself a director and then you persuade other people that this is true.*

Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point*

What is a director? Common sense, even if we have never heard the word before, would tell us that a director is “one who directs.” If we decide not to rely just on our intuition, and go to a source, like the New Oxford American Dictionary, for example, we can find out more: among (decidedly few) other things, a director is one who “supervises” actors – one who is “in charge of” an activity – one who manages or oversees “affairs.”

“Supervises” – “oversees” – it sounds like a pretty boring job. The truth is, no one really knows what a director is – usually not even the people who choose to call themselves one. It is a position in the theater that emerged out of nowhere. At some point in the long history of theater, someone took it upon him or herself to begin “managing the affairs” associated with creating a piece of theater. At some point, someone stepped to the outside, and said, “I’ll just watch.” Let me *oversee* what it is you are doing.

Eventually, this watching became an art form in and of itself. How? I’m sure no one remembers. I suspect that it arose organically, as all art forms do. At some point, this watcher became excited by the possibility of what he saw, and asked himself, what could be done here to make what I’m feeling even stronger? Perhaps, swept up in the

heat of a moment, he suddenly asked the players to stop – and offered that maybe if the one reached out and touched the other’s face in this moment, he would have been swept up in it even more, leaned in just a little further – cried just a little harder.

One more time, please.

And so it progressed – touch her here, turn your face now, lean in at this moment, stay still, no, move, faster, slower, louder, more, clearer, brighter, too much, too little, I can’t hear you, I don’t believe it, what is his *objective*?

Eventually, the hows, whys and whens of making these choices became systematized, and directing became a *craft* – a set of formal methods by which one could create a work of art. For a long time, I rejected the idea of directing as a craft. I thought “directing” was something inherent and ephemeral – it was an intensely personal expression of what one felt and thought about the world – and the deconstructing and reconstructing of the world’s elements to create a reality that only the director truly understood. To me, analyzing how a director directs was as senseless as analyzing the method by which any artist does what he does. Art was a process of divine inspiration, and I thought that a method of making art was as impossible to describe as the method by which God created the world. Never mind that I thoroughly accepted that acting could, at least in part, be taught, or playing the piano, or painting. I knew the best practitioners of these arts had an inherent and inexplicable gift, but nevertheless, I thought this gift could and should be built upon through formal training. Somehow, I thought directing was different, I suppose because I came to feel that it was *my* art form – and far be it from me to allow anyone to trample upon my mode of self-expression.

I came to graduate school with this disgustingly egotistic and selfish idea because I was young and angry at the world for being the way it was, and I had spent a great many (five) years ruminating and thinking deep thoughts that I was convinced no one understood. I thought a director was merely a thinker of big thoughts.

Imagine my surprise when the man who would become my mentor said to me one day, “I don’t give a shit what you *think* – and neither does your audience.” Shortly thereafter, the man who would become my co-mentor would watch something I made which I found to be profoundly deep and meaningful, turn to me, and say, “Why can’t you just do the play?”

Suddenly, I realized that a director was more than a thinker of deep thoughts. Anyone can think – *thinking* truly is abstract. It happens in the far reaches of our brains in an electrical impulse that jumps from one neuron to the next and is gone in a flash. *Doing*, on the other hand, is not abstract. It is concrete. Perhaps doing something *well* cannot entirely be taught, but I was forced to admit that doing something *better* could.

I resigned myself to three years of being taught what I needed to know in order to go out into the world and presume to call myself a director. At the end of those three years, I was to direct a production of a play that would call upon every tool I had accumulated, and without those tools, I am convinced the production would have been impossible. The play was *RENT*. It would test everything I thought I knew about art, and in the end, provide me with the experience of having not only thought, felt, and expressed, but finally having *directed*.

## CHAPTER 1

### WORLD OF THE PLAY

#### A World on the Brink of Collapse

Jonathan Larson's *RENT* is a show that has been much maligned and much adored, sometimes in the same breath by the same person. Books on the history of musical theater usually devote a special section, if not an entire chapter, to discussing *RENT*. They are dutiful in recognizing the play as a game-changer in the American Musical Theater, but also quick to call it on its flaws, and they are usually correct. While it may sound harsh to admit, it is impossible not to see that so much of *RENT*'s meteoric rise to fame was due to the death of its young composer on the eve of its final dress rehearsal. It is a plot twist that would work as the basis for its own tragically beautiful musical. John Kenrick, author of *Musical Theatre: A History*, describes *RENT*'s early and sudden success in the following way:

As it was, the thirty-six year old Larson's death on the night of the dress rehearsal made *Rent* a cultural cause célèbre....As a national wave of sympathetic publicity carried the show to Broadway, no commercial opportunity was wasted....The Broadway opening was hailed as a new beginning for musical theatre, and since it was produced at less than a quarter of the cost of most musicals, hefty profits were assured. (Kenrick, 2008)

John Bush Jones, author of *Our Musicals, Ourselves* gives an account of the press response to the off-Broadway original and its subsequent move to Broadway after Larson's death:

Some of the press's initial enthusiasm, however, didn't transfer to Broadway with the musical, even when a single critic saw both productions. It's possible that Larson's untimely death at first masked the show's flaws, or that reviewers of the off-Broadway original simply chose to ignore them. But once the show moved, the critics' assessments were peppered with phrases like "the cop-out ending," "the puzzling muddle of the story," pretentiousness that is not backed up by culture," and one that frankly helps explain its status as a runaway hit because of Larson's death, "a sentimental triumph." (Jones, 2003)

Whatever the cause of *RENT's* initial success, it went on to inspire a generation of young theatre-goers who knew nothing of its creator or his tragic story, even with what Kenrick describes as its "generic set, bargain-basement costuming and rudimentary staging."

The story of how Jonathan Larson came to write *RENT* is well covered elsewhere. I will tell enough of it here to provide a context, but the complete story is best experienced in *RENT* by Evelyn McDonnell with Katherine Silberger, a book that tells the story through interviews with Jonathan's friends and collaborators.

Jonathan was born and raised in Westchester, just north of New York City. He graduated Adelphi University, where he had studied on a fellowship for acting, in 1982. It was the same year the Center for Disease Control and Prevention gave a name to what had been previously known as the "gay cancer" – AIDS. In New York and elsewhere, people were dying all around, especially in the artistic community, and especially in the theater.

Jonathan had grown up on a steady diet of musical theater fed to him by his parents who brought him into Manhattan to see shows like *West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, *Hair*,

and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, but the musical theater that was happening in New York when Jonathan arrived on the scene was different than the musical theater he remembered. It was a theater of commercialism – mass-produced spectacles designed to bring in big bucks from tourists from out of town seeking a glamorous alternative to Disneyland.

Jonathan was waiting tables and dreaming of musical theater. According to his friend and long-time collaborator Victoria Leacock Hoffman, Jonathan believed theatre should be “transcendent, with the power to change your life. And he believed he was the man to do it.” (Larson, 1996) The New York Jonathan now inhabited was probably very different from the Camelot he probably saw as a child. Not only was AIDS running rampant, so were crack cocaine and homelessness. Almost 25,000 people were living on the streets of New York City. It was a world seemingly on the brink of collapse and Jonathan Larson was living right in the middle of it in downtown Manhattan, among artists and drug dealers, homosexuals and drag queens.

All the while, he was working tirelessly at the Moondance Diner, and he was working equally as tirelessly creating musical theater in his tiny, rundown apartment on Greenwich Street. He seems to have been searching desperately for a modern musical theater – one that would address contemporary issues in a contemporary form, and use the awesome power he obviously saw inherent in the form to speak to his generation. According to most reports, he was happy, although he longed for success – the kind of success that would allow him to create musical theater that would touch audiences of greater numbers than the friends he played and sang for in his apartment and at tiny downtown venues. He was working on a musical version of George Orwell’s *1984* and a

futuristic musical called *Superbia*. Somehow, he was managing little by little to market himself, and build relationships with such prestigious organizations as ASCAP and the Dramatists Guild, who offered him workshops. He also continued to correspond with the American master of the form, Stephen Sondheim, whom he had contacted while still in college, and who became not only a hero to him, but also a mentor.

By 1989, Jonathan was still writing drafts of *Superbia*, and had won several prestigious awards for it, but was still unsatisfied with his career and the world that was on the brink of collapse around him. By now, the AIDS epidemic had hit home again and again as, one by one, his friends were contracting the virus, including his best friend Matt. Of course, in those days, AIDS was a death sentence. No one knew where it came from or how to get rid of it, but they knew it was growing and spreading exponentially. According to Victoria Leacock, Matt's diagnosis as HIV positive "would accelerate everything, because, I believe, it started an invisible stopwatch. Time could run out." The summer of 1989 was when Jonathan finally struck what would have become career gold, although it was only the beginning of drilling the mine, and he would not wind up living long enough to see the gold. He was put in touch, through Playwrights Horizons, with playwright Billy Aronson, who had long been interested in creating a modern adaptation of Puccini's *La Boheme*. Jonathan played Billy some of his music, and they agreed to work together. Eventually, their visions went in separate directions, but Jonathan saw the potential in the material to tell the story of his friends in the form of a rock musical with huge contemporary resonance and a powerful message. The artists in *La Boheme* were living the same kinds of vagabond lives in Paris in the 1800s as he and friends, the artists of the East Village, were living in 1989. And in *La Boheme*, a terrible

disease is running rampant in the streets. After a brief departure, Jonathan returned to the material full-throttle, asking Billy Aronson for his permission to move forward with *RENT* on his own. Less than five years later, the first ever production of *RENT* would meet its first audience to wide acclaim, but by that time, the stopwatch would run out, and its composer would be dead.

### A Modern *La Boheme*

The basic plot of *RENT* follows that of *La Boheme* very closely, with one important exception. In *La Boheme*, Mimi dies. In *RENT*, Mimi lives. While this is the ending that one critic called a “cop-out,” it was far from such. It was an intentional choice. Jonathan wanted to write a show that celebrated life, rather than a show about mourning death. While miraculous, this ending shows the essential beauty of *RENT* – that love truly can conquer all, even death. It’s a little like a fairy-tale, but it’s important to keep in mind that before theater became obsessed with *realism* it was concerned first and foremost with *myth*. How plausible the ending of *RENT* is is neither here nor there. It is not a show about plausibility. It is a show about hope.

The basic plot of *RENT* is simple, although the show is also rife with subplots. Roger and Mark, are best friends and artists living in the East Village of Manhattan in the 1990s. They live like bohemians, refusing to pay rent, living on next to nothing, and struggling to create art alongside their other bohemian artist friends. Roger has AIDS, and so do several others in the group of friends. When we meet Roger, he has all but given up hope after the death of the love of his life. Mimi, also HIV positive, sees something extraordinary in him and, against his will, he falls in love with her. Mark’s

ex-girlfriend Maureen is now a lesbian and is in love with her legal aid worker girlfriend Joanne. Best friend Tom Collins finds a soul-mate in drag Queen Angel. Ex-friend Benny has become a landlord and is struggling to evict the homeless from his lot. By the middle of the play, relationships and alliances have been destroyed and rearranged, and there is war among the group of friends. The fabric of their lives is literally being torn apart by anger, hate and resentment – all the traps Angel has been trying to show them how to avoid. Then, Angel dies, and the friends realize what truly being torn apart feels like. It is not until the near death of Mimi that they truly hear Angel’s message – that unconditional love for each other is the only salvation when the world is ending and all hope is lost.

Jonathan Larson may have borrowed situations and characters from Puccini, but the final work is truly about his own life and experience living in a world on the edge of collapse in which time is running out. He believed in living a life of unconditional acceptance and love, and by all accounts, he practiced what he preached. The AIDS epidemic was an important and life-changing given circumstance of Jonathan’s world and the world of the play, but *RENT* is not finally a play about AIDS any more than *La Boheme* is an opera about tuberculosis. Both are tremendously heartfelt pieces of theatre about the life-giving power of love. It is about a feeling that all of us have felt, and, if we are lucky enough to witness *RENT* and really feel Jonathan’s spirit moving inside it, it is a feeling we will nurture and allow to guide our lives.

## CHAPTER 2

### CONCEPT AND APPROACH

#### Why *RENT*?

Most discussions of the concept and approach to directing a show begin with the question: “Why [insert title of show]?” In many cases, especially in the case of a project as important as an MFA thesis production, a director will choose the piece he or she has always dreamed of working on. In the case of our production of *RENT*, the title of the show was essentially an assignment. At first glance, this might seem to put the director at a disadvantage, given the fact that he or she might not even have ever heard of the show. However, this scenario is all too often the case in the real world, when a freelance director-for-hire essentially has to take whatever work he can get. Thus, being assigned a show became a good lesson in how to find the beauty in a piece of art you had never thought much about before.

I will discuss briefly what would have been *my* choice of material to direct in an MFA thesis production, as this will provide some important context for my approach to our production of *RENT*. I knew very early on in my graduate studies that I would be interested in directing a piece of musical theatre as my thesis, as this is where my primary interest in theatre had begun and has always remained. I am attracted to lesser-known and lesser-performed pieces that take risks and break boundaries in a form that is relatively young in the history of theatre. The American Musical Theatre has yet to become set in stone and institutionalized, because it seems, more than any other style of theatre, to continuously change with its times. At its core, musical theatre is a fusion of

many different types of performing arts, as it has always held text, music and movement on virtually equal planes. Thus, it is destined to reflect trends in any one of these forms and movements in any of the individual components that make it up are bound to alter the whole. Musical theatre is young, ephemeral and still struggling to define itself.

Musical theatre began as and has always been a popular art form. On one hand, it can be viewed as a cultural and artistic hodge-podge – a dumping ground for whatever trends seem to be motivating it at the time. On the other hand, it can be viewed as an ever-shifting kaleidoscope that reflects not only the artistic trends of the era in which it is created, but also the socio-political and cultural trends of the time. This malleability has the potential to make musical theatre one of the major forging grounds of artistic experimentation in theatre. Due to the nature of an incorporation of musicalized text and movement, the formal aspects of musical theatre necessarily elevate reality to something heightened, something more expressionistic than so-called “real life.” As rhythmically poetic and musical as a David Mamet piece is, one is far more likely to go out on the street and witness people screaming profanity at each other than they are likely to witness people *singing* profanity at each other.

Robert Wilson is fond of saying that all art is something “poetic,” meaning that all art is a deliberately constructed metaphor representing selected aspects of reality in a variety of ways, and not a direct representation of reality itself. This is true even of the most seemingly “realistic” plays, photographs, paintings, narratives, etc. Anything created by an artist is a series of choices of what to foreground and frame, accompanied by a series of choices of what *not* to foreground and frame.

Wilson's is essentially a *formal* theatre, that is to say a theatre in which forms are constructed architecturally, using sound, movement, time and space, and it is the architectural arrangement of these elements in which becomes the *content*. In spoken and written text, it is often very easy to describe the "content." This, of course, does not hold true for every type of written or spoken text, as text can be arranged architecturally as well, but our day-to-day use of spoken and written language is primarily a conveyor of *content*. In music, it is really quite impossible to describe *content*. The form *is* the content. This is also true for many types of dance. Thus, music and movement can be described as fundamentally formal elements.

As I see it, there are currently two trends operating in musical theatre – one is a continuation of, and a harkening back to musical theatre's roots as vaudeville – that is, a collection of individual pieces, some of which were sung, some of which were danced, and some of which were spoken. Vaudeville becomes musical theatre at the point in which these elements were united under one umbrella and began to be used toward a single aim. This innovation was the idea of *story*. This movement is generally credited to theatre artists such as Jerome Kern, Oscar Hammerstein and Richard Rodgers, among many others. As these artists began to create a new musical theatre, song, dance and speech became united as equal but separate ways to tell parts of the same story. There are many great books on the history and evolution of musical theatre, but the gist of it is that over time these elements started to melt into each other and recombine in ways that made them inseparable. Sections of text became underscored with music, dances became not pleasant formal amusements, but a way of telling a part of the story words could not. Similarly, songs became not diversions from the spoken text, but a way of *combining* text

and music in a way that would elevate a dramatic moment to a fuller capacity of emotional expression. In this way, the influence of opera had begun to be felt very powerfully in musical theatre.

Here is where the road diverged, and the second trend in musical theatre emerged. Sometime in the sixties, a man named Stephen Sondheim, a tremendous musical genius who had studied under master lyricist Oscar Hammerstein, made his way to Broadway as a composer-lyricist, and began to push the line between music and text. Eventually, the two became inseparable in his work. He played endlessly with the musical aspects of speech and the speech-like aspects of music, forcing them to inform and support one another, until the sung thought becomes a single gesture. Because he allowed himself to break apart these two elements and deliberately reconstruct them as needed, he forced the formal aspects of his music out of the strict set of rules that had hitherto defined “song.” He developed rhythmically, melodically, and harmonically complex ways of combining music and lyric all with the single aim of uniting them to express a single *dramatic action* as fully, immediately, and powerfully as possible.

In the wake of Sondheim’s enormous contributions to musical theatre in the sixties, seventies, and into the eighties, he inspired a new generation of musical theatre writers, of whom Jonathan Larson was one. It was these writers’ material that I was interested in directing as my MFA thesis production.

My top choices were *Sunday in the Park with George*, arguably Sondheim’s masterwork, *The Light in the Piazza*, by Adam Guettel, arguably Sondheim’s *heir apparent*, and *Caroline or Change*, a musicalized version of a text by the dramatic poet

Tony Kushner. Each of these has at its core a compelling, complex and fascinating story about the relationships between compelling, complex and fascinating individuals. Each of these pieces pushes the boundaries between music, text and movement even further than Sondheim dared. Each writer or team of writers was deliberately breaking musical theatre's component elements apart and restructuring them without regard to form or tradition, with the single aim of delivering the dramatic action as immediately and powerfully as possible. They are shows that will make you laugh and cry, feel and think, and experience life on a level approaching something close to the spiritual. They accomplish this because musical theatre by its very nature, as a combination of different forms, allows for a complex and simultaneous assault on the senses, attacking them from virtually every angle - intellectually, emotionally, visually, aurally, rhythmically, and so forth.

As fate would have it, each of these top choices had been or was being performed at area regional theatres in too close a proximity to legally or artistically justify them as choices for Temple University's Theatre Department. *RENT* had already been selected and advertised as a much-anticipated production in the season, and it was given to me to direct.

#### Getting to Know *RENT*

I knew extremely little about *RENT*, and so, my first task as director was to discover whether or not the piece I had been assigned could live up to my trio of musical dream plays. All I had ever known about *RENT* was that many millions had seen it and adored it, and, as a young theatre artist who fancied himself an intellectual, I had

meticulously avoided anything to do with what I regarded as merely a piece of populist entertainment. I was to discover that I could not have been more misguided, and after my first ever listen-through of the entire original cast recording, I began to fall into the world of a musical play that was every bit a part of the evolution and future of musical theatre as anything I had previously known.

My fall into the world of *RENT* began, as many people's has, with the music and lyrics via the Original Cast Recording. What strikes one immediately about the record is the accessibility and the raw emotional power of the music and lyrics. This was no surprise as legions of "rentheads" in my life growing up had listened to the recording religiously and knew it by heart before they even went to see the show. I knew that the music was "accessible" because of the sheer number of individuals it had affected over the years, and the fact that rock music is an idiom that is fairly standardized, and one that many people have grown up with and enjoyed throughout its existence. What I was not prepared for was twofold: the poetic and dramatic complexity of the lyrics, and the multitude of ways the composer was utilizing a pop-rock idiom, veering wildly from very familiar sounds and tonalities into richly complex rhythmic and harmonic structures. The cast album is literally a sonic roller coaster ride, sometimes slipping imperceptibly from feel to feel, sometimes abruptly juxtaposing one feel or form with another. I also found the majority of the lyrics to be eminently singable. They were well, and sometimes brilliantly matched to the music, with lyrics and music often supporting one another in a single gesture. The poetic images in the lyrics were sometimes metaphorically simplistic and yet entirely original, sometimes complex and slightly opaque. Much of the time the lyrics used form to express playfulness, wit, anger, sadness, rage and throughout, lyrical

form was used to illustrate and reveal character, relationship, and dramatic action. In short, *RENT* reminded me of Sondheim.

It was also clear to me that *RENT* was not just a play with songs. *RENT* was not a musical. *RENT* was not even a *rock* musical. *RENT* was a *rock opera*. Now, the concept of a rock opera is far from an original one. Many pieces had been billed as rock operas in the past – beginning in the sixties with *HAIR*, and continuing into the seventies and eighties with *Godspell*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Tommy*, to name but a few. I knew these pieces well, and it was immediately clear to me that *RENT* was wildly different from them. For starters, *RENT* was modern rock – granted, by 2010, “rock” has progressed even further from where it was when *RENT* was written, but in 1996, when *RENT* premiered, the style of music that had earned *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Tommy* the label of “rock opera,” was already outmoded – not obsolete, of course, but of a style that was decidedly 20 years old or more. The rock that was considered avant-garde, revolutionary, and shockingly inappropriate for the musical stage in the sixties and seventies is now very familiar to us. *RENT* reflected a sound that was of its own time – contemporary.

Then there is the second half of the label – *rock opera*. To consider this fully, we have to digress for a moment to discuss what makes something *opera* or *operatic*. Of course, opera is a very old art form, involving the accumulation of tradition over the years, but which has nevertheless seen a long evolution and constant change. In reality, the word “opera,” like any label, is nothing more than a loose set of ideas that group similar things together. Thus, we will consider the *generalities* that seem to deem something *operatic*.

To begin with, most operas are through-sung. This is what, until very recently, has been the primary distinction between opera and the musical theatre, which has always incorporated spoken text. In the place of spoken text, opera incorporates passages of *recitative*, which is essentially musicalized text, with very few of the formal elements that would make a passage of music a “song.” *Recitative* is typically sung without a strict sense of rhythm or meter, and is quite literally sung speech. These are some of the formal elements that make an opera an opera. When we think of opera, we also tend to think of a piece with grand ideas, grand characters, and a grand story with an epic and tragic ending.

These generalizations about opera come from a trend in opera that developed in Italy, post-Verdi, and came to virtually dominate the operatic stage. This form was called *verismo*, and as the name would indicate, was striving to create truth, or “realism” on the stage. It was to this movement that Giacomo Puccini, composer of the opera that would inspire Jonathan Larson to write *RENT*, not only belonged, but seemingly revolutionized.

It was the discovery of and research into Puccini’s work that began to define *RENT* as being, for me, clearly and solidly an opera. Any layperson can close their eyes and imagine an opera singer performing a heart-wrenchingly beautiful aria. Everyone has heard this type of music at some point or another, and many people could even hum an opera “tune.” I would be willing to bet that the first tune a layperson would hum would be a tune composed by Puccini. Puccini was writing melodramatic, emotional, populist entertainment that a wide audience could find something in and spoke to supremely tragic themes that everyone experiences, like love and loss. He accomplished this by putting his musical ideas into a form that was immediate, accessible and powerful.

There is nothing intellectual about his music – it is raw, musicalized emotion. Indeed, this seems to have been his primary concern in his version of opera *verismo* – to take the deepest, most authentic feelings that one person could want to communicate to another, and find a melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic form that would deliver this emotion like a ton of bricks. One has only to watch or listen to a recording of Pavarotti performing *E lucevan le stele*, from Puccini’s *Tosca*, to feel how successful Puccini was at accomplishing this aim. It is a moment of deepest despair in which the character is literally wrenching emotion from his heart and expressing utter torment. It is a moment in which every element of the music works toward the expression of this inexpressible feeling – melody, harmony, accompaniment, rhythm, and tessitura all united in a single, sweeping gesture. Puccini was writing the rock music of his time.

The first thing one reads about *RENT* is that it was inspired by, or could even be called, a modern updating of Puccini’s *La Boheme*. Indeed, *RENT* shares elements of *Boheme*’s plot, setting, and characters. In fact, Puccini’s characters directly inspired many of the names of the characters in *RENT* – Marcello becomes Mark, Rodolpho becomes Roger, Mimi remains Mimi, and so forth. There are also lyrics and song titles borrowed almost directly from Puccini’s libretto. But these are merely indicators of the extent to which *RENT* was “inspired by” *La Boheme*. It wasn’t until I became familiar with Puccini’s canon that I realized what *RENT* shares most in common with *La Boheme*. That, as I have just discussed, is the music. At some point, it became clear to me that *RENT* was quite literally a modern opera, and to be successful, would need to be treated as such. This formed the basis of all of our work on the show, from pre-production through performance, and erased any fears I may have had that the material would lack

the complexity of the modern opera-musicals of which I had grown so fond. With this discovery of what *RENT* was, concept and approach could begin.

### Seeing the Show

I had listened to the recording, I had read the libretto, I had played through the score on the piano. Familiar with the material, and knowing what *RENT* was to me, it was time to see what *RENT* was to the rest of the world. Fortunately, at just this time, the Broadway tour was coming through Philadelphia, and, although tours are sometimes different, and oftentimes lacking in regard to their original counterparts, this was a highly anticipated production starring Anthony Rapp and Adam Pascal, the original Mark and Roger. This was also the first tour outside the Broadway production and featured many of the same performers who had closed the show in New York.

I knew, or had at least heard, that part of the magic of *RENT* was in the beauty of its original production. This is of course what one would hope would be the case, as a piece of theatre is primarily an event in time and not a recorded set of music and lyrics. I also knew that by this time, after fourteen years on Broadway, the original production had become iconic. So, I went to see it – both to familiarize myself with the original production itself as well as the lore surrounding it.

Having not seen the show before, I went in with an open mind, but immediately I saw problems. The first was that I couldn't hear anything. The sound design was weak. What I thought I was supposed to be witnessing had the feel of a rock concert. However, one of the most fundamental aspects of a rock concert is the volume. Everything is loud, as the instruments are electronic and amplified rather than acoustic, and consequently the

singer needs to be mic'd. The sound design of a rock concert is notoriously difficult to mix and make sure all the constituent parts are heard. But most of all what one desires from a rock concert is the *pulse*. Rock and roll was a term invented in the fifties to describe the type of music that was emerging in that time. This music had a heavy backbeat from a strong rhythm section, literally intended to *rock* the listener, in the metaphorical use of the word, meaning "to shake up, to disturb, or to incite." In this production, the sound issues may well have been due to the inconvenience of having to perform in a variety of spaces across the country. Whatever the reason, the band was not present enough in the room and lacked the fullness that heavily synthesized music can attain with only the few pieces they had in the pit. At first listen, one might think that the levels of the band were being deliberately held back in an attempt to make the vocals more present, but the vocals lacked just as much presence as the accompaniment. The result was that I could not hear the richness of the complex musical gestures on the recording and in the score, and more importantly, I could not hear the lyrics. *RENT*, as previously noted, is a show that is almost entirely through-sung. This means that all the information – given circumstances, plot, character, relationship – are all carried within sung lyrics. To boot, the plot, characters, and relationships of *RENT* are all very complex, and understanding them is vital to understanding the message of the show. Without being able to hear the words in which this information is conveyed, one simply cannot decipher the story, so when someone dies and everyone onstage cries, you cannot cry with them because you're not even really sure who that person is and what he means to everyone else. Essentially, what I *heard* was cluttered and general.

Unfortunately, the cluttered generality in what I heard was echoed in what I saw. The stage was awash in visual noise. For starters, the space had no sense of place whatsoever. I am as big a fan as any of the concept of the “empty space,” introduced by Peter Brook, whose book of the same title begins with the line:

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and that is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged. (Brook, 1968)

However, this space was far from empty. There was scaffolding and stairs and junk, placed at apparently random angles, and just stage left of center was an enormous sculpture made of ill-assorted trash. The space had a sense of identity, in a way – it seemed to be *attempting* to call forth the feel of a vacant lot, but the elements were so seemingly without a sense of design that it really just felt cluttered and random.

Of course, this response comes from a personal aesthetic. For some, perhaps this visual design works nicely. For me, it was in violation of everything I feel is necessary to make sure a story onstage can be heard coherently. I have always felt that what we see and what we hear is inextricably linked. We perceive the world through a wash of visual and auditory information that is linked together at all times. In a piece of art, this audio-visual input is precisely controlled by the artist’s choices of what to foreground and what not. This is why Robert Wilson’s minimalist aesthetic works so well when he works on opera. One of my favorite Wilson quotes comes from an interview he did for the DVD of his production of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*:

95% of the time, when I go to the opera, I simply cannot hear music. I can *see* music, but I can’t hear it, because the stage is too busy. If I close my

eyes, and I hear a distant voice here, I can hear myself breathing.

Generally speaking, I listen more carefully with my eyes closed than with them open. So I try to set up a space where we can hear music. (*Madama Butterfly*, 2008)

Wilson's visual aesthetic is based around insuring that we can see exactly what he wants us to see – what *he* himself sees. Because sight and sound are so linked, visual noise can disturb what we hear as much as auditory noise can.

This visual noise continued beyond the set design. I felt the same randomness and lack of design in the costumes as well. There was no sense of unity or focus in color, shape or line. Costumes were not even being used to help delineate character or relationship, as they sometimes often can. It was as if everyone had just been told to go out and bring in whatever they liked and that these would become the final costumes. In short, costume was not being used as a design element at all.

There was also some choreographed dance present in the show. Wherever this dance was, no attempt was being made to justify why people were dancing – they just suddenly were. The dance had the feel of divertissement, or visual adornment, which is everything a design element should not be, and what people like Jerome Robbins had fought against in the musical theater. It was again, visual noise, and this time it was worse because it was moving visual noise.

There were three excellent performances in the show, and these were given by the three original cast members who were playing the roles they created in the original company – Anthony Rapp as Mark, Adam Pascal as Roger, and Gwen Stewart as the female Seasons of Love soloist. Most of the rest of the cast was much younger than

them, and in many cases, the performances felt less like characters engaged in living out a story, but actors engaged in living out the dream of being in their all-time favorite musical, the music and lyrics of which they had been singing since they were children. In all but the three original company members, everything felt very easy and very low-stakes. This could be largely due to the life of a performer on tour, playing a lengthy run in multiple cities and traveling all the time. But there was something altogether different about the three original company members, who were presumably leading the same off-stage life. There was a sense of urgency and importance in their performances. They were playing characters who wanted and needed things from each other, and they were grabbing ahold of music and lyric and using them in an attempt to obtain what they desired.

I left the show with very little idea of what I had just seen, other than having heard some familiar music and lyrics. The crowd around me had gone wild, and I suspected that hearing these music and lyrics live was more than enough for some of them to have an amazing experience. If I had not know the story going in, I felt certain I would have walked out of the theatre having no idea who cared about whom and why, or who was doing what to whom and why. And even though I knew these things, I still left with a very confused idea of what this piece was trying to say other than “this is an amazing piece of musical theatre written fourteen years ago that had important things to say in its time and everyone should love it forever.”

## But What Does It *Mean*?

By this point, the formal aspects of the show were becoming very clear to me. At the very least, I had a laundry list of what I would try *not* to do with our production of *RENT*. I had yet to get clear on what the show *meant* to me, and how to go about making that clear to an audience.

Form can be deciphered via research – listening to the score, playing the score, reading the libretto, seeing the show. I had seen an entire music hall full of people go raving mad at seeing what I felt was a lackluster production. As discussed, I think much of the reaction now comes from the show’s history and folklore. Many people who see *RENT* already know much about it, and it already holds great meaning for them. But where did this deep meaning and universal admiration come from? What was it about *RENT* that had touched so many? It had to go beyond the formal structure of it all – the music and lyrics are *good*, but so are those of many other plays and musicals. The production was *effective*, perhaps even a game-changer in its time, but it now seemed a bit haphazard and old-fashioned. Nevertheless, one was still able to decipher the residue of a message that the original creative team had intended in crafting the form they did nearly fifteen years ago. But what did *RENT* finally *mean*? And what did it mean to *me*?

*Meaning* is something subjective, something personal, and often something inexplicable. There is no process for deciphering meaning. It comes on its own, usually suddenly, and when you least expect it. For me, the meaning of *RENT* hit me late one night, not long after my first listen-through of the recording. I was at the piano playing through a section of the score I had heard many times – “Another Day,” the song that

Mimi sings to Roger early in Act One, after inviting him to take her “Out Tonight.” She bursts onto the scene in Roger’s apartment without knowing anything about him other than that the voice and the song she hears in the apartment below has spoken to her in a way she’s never felt before. Roger, who has essentially sequestered himself to die, is not ready to receive this invitation out into the world, especially from someone so suddenly beautiful and wild. Mimi’s song quickly turns from an invitation to a plea to a demand, as she realizes that there is someone in front of her who is on the brink of despair and destruction – just like she is. Her song becomes an attempt to save both of them:

THE HEART MAY FREEZE OR IT CAN BURN  
THE PAIN WILL EASE IF I CAN LEARN  
THERE IS NO FUTURE  
THERE IS NO PAST  
I LIVE THIS MOMENT AS MY LAST  
THERE’S ONLY US  
THERE’S ONLY THIS  
FORGET REGRET OR LIFE IS YOURS TO MISS  
NO OTHER ROAD  
NO OTHER WAY  
NO DAY BUT TODAY

Later in the song, the ensemble joins her in singing these lyrics behind Roger, who is singing a line of his own in ardent refusal of her plea. Sitting at the piano playing the driving accompaniment that underscores these lyrics, I had the image of Mimi appearing as an angel to Roger, taking him by the hand and rising up with him as the rest of the

world fell away. When I finished playing the number, I realized that my face was wet – tears had been streaming down it without my even realizing.

This is when I knew that, for all the faults of the original production and even some of the writing, there was something profound and spiritual in this music and these lyrics. Jonathan Larson had written his heart and soul into these characters, and his words and music had touched me unknowingly, awakening something deep inside me. It had opened the door to the ephemeral, the spiritual realm that Peter Brook speaks of so often, which can only be accessed by bypassing the intellect:

The theatre, through the energy of sound, word, color and movement, touches an emotional button that in turn sends tremors through the intellect. (Brook, 1993)

I suddenly understood why people loved *RENT*. Jonathan Larson had given voice to a group of outwardly ordinary but inwardly extraordinary people and allowed them to say – no, sing, *cry* even, from the very bottom of their hearts, about things we all desperately need – to live, laugh and love each other, truly, madly and deeply, drinking in every second we have been given. This is the beginning and the end of finding happiness – the only thing any of us is really seeking.

David Mamet has written that art is an expression of joy and awe. *RENT* shows us that *life* should be an expression of joy and awe, and that a life lived full of love is a masterpiece.

## Developing an Approach

By now, I had several goals to accomplish in mounting our production of *RENT*. First and foremost was to make sure that story was as clear as possible. *RENT* is a piece of theatre with an important message. It is message that was forged by a group of individuals in the midst of a historic socio-political crisis that to many extents has continued today. They crafted a piece of musical theatre to convey this message in the way that only theatre can – through watching living breathing human beings enact the story of their lives together – through watching them want and need and hope and dream, crafting and destroying alliances with each other in order to achieve these objectives.

After seeing the Broadway tour, I knew several things that would need to happen in order to make this story clear. First of all, the music must be not only heard, but felt. This would involve turning a meticulous and detailed ear toward the music, making sure that every subtle melodic, harmonic and rhythmic nuance was learned until it became inherent to the expression of a single dramatic gesture. I knew that the pulse and the rhythm of rock must be felt by the audience to the fullest extent possible. I knew that the text must be attended to in the same way. I knew that both music and lyric must be heard and felt or the shifting relationships, objectives and tactics of the characters would not be clear, the story would not be understood, and the message would finally not be heard. We would need to know in explicit detail who each of these people were. We would need to know who they cared about, and why. Information about given circumstances and plot conveyed within the lyrics would have to be made crystal clear through whatever means necessary so the audience could follow the story.

Above all, I had realized that what I had on my hands was a piece of modern opera, written in the idiom of pop-rock music, and performed for the masses for years on the Broadway stage. *RENT* had clearly been a game-changer in its time, revolutionizing the course of American Musical Theatre, and spawning a new generation of writers to push the form forward.

## CHAPTER 3

### PRODUCTION PROCESS

#### Design

As previously discussed, so much of what a show becomes is arrived at through the rehearsal process. This is the period in which the show is forged and becomes flesh and blood when previously it only existed as a series of ideas. Unfortunately for those working in the theatre, there are other considerations to keep in mind, such as the budget and the time it takes to construct and put together all the technical elements that go into making those dreams and ideas reality. Thus, the design process of a show is forced to begin well before the cast and director have met. In most cases, this process begins before the show is even cast.

This was the case with *RENT*, and so, work on the physical world of the play in terms of costumes, set, lighting, music, and dance, began well before the first rehearsal was even scheduled. Fortunately for me, this is the way in which I like to work. In his book *Thinking Like a Director*, Michael Bloom makes a statement that intellectually, I agree with. It is an idea that Peter Brook also supports and uses in the creation of his work:

In the best of all worlds, the approach to a play and its design would develop alongside the rehearsals, so that the actors' insights could inform their work. (Bloom, 2001)

Not only is this scenario usually impossible, but for me, it has always seemed unnecessary. Perhaps because of my affinity for Robert Wilson's work, I have always viewed the design process as something vital and separate from the rehearsal process. Of

course, throughout rehearsals, as discoveries are made and the raw material of what will become the show is forged, the design elements must keep a certain amount of malleability so that as the show grows, they can grow with it. For me, however, it has always been important to create the world in which I am playing before the playing begins. To me, in production, the “world of the play” at some point ceases to be the world of the *play* and becomes the world of the *stage*. The “world of the play” is nothing more than a set of ideas created by our imagination in response to a text. The world of the stage is something else, and it necessarily differs from the “world of the play.” For example, the world of the play *RENT* is the lower east side of Manhattan in the early nineties, on the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> Street and Avenue B. It is unnecessary and impossible to transplant an entire intersection from New York City to your stage, and indeed, if *RENT* is a play worth anything, it is clearly not a play about an intersection. Therefore, I view the world of the stage as a concrete, realistic space created *in response* to what we imagine the world of the play to be. Once *this* world is in place, a concrete, actual space, then we can begin to imagine the possibilities of what might occur within it.

Therefore, once I had deciphered what *RENT* is and what it means to me, it took little work to begin creating the world in which we would be able to express those ideas most immediately and powerfully. But where to begin?

For me, one of the most powerful tools I have learned in grad school is the concept of a central metaphor to develop in tandem with the designers. A metaphor is concrete enough that it narrows the field of possible choices in regard to design, but open enough that it allows room for interpretation. In his book *A Sense of Direction*, William Ball says:

Exercising great discipline in conforming to one metaphor tends to give the production visual unity, consistency and power. Without a metaphor, one is working at random with unlimited resources of color, line, texture. In such productions, the fact that the ingredients are unlimited cause the work to look like a shamble of accidents. (Ball, 1984)

A have never read a more incisive quote, and one that describes ninety percent of the theater I see, including the original production of *RENT*. In the same passage, he goes on to say that we see unity in a work of art. I thoroughly believe this to be true. I believe without some degree of some type of unity, the whole is unfocused, and the audience doesn't know what to look at or how to listen, and so, cannot receive whatever "message" or idea an artist may be attempting to capture.

Thus, it was essential that the team of designers working on *RENT* agreed on a metaphor. After talking through many of the ideas previously discussed here, the designers and I decided that the metaphor for our production of *RENT* would be "*Puccini's La Boheme starring Kurt Cobain.*" This metaphor spoke to different people in different ways, but it gave us all the sense of a clash – a clash between old and new, between liberal and conservative, between modern and classical. For me, this metaphor encapsulated an aesthetic that was a clash of heroin-induced grunge-rock and the most refined classical opera. I would later decide, in various ways, in tandem with the designers, that we sought not a clash of the two but a fusion. The two would have to be simultaneously and palpably present at all times – classical opera, *and* grunge rock. It is in the juxtaposition of two disparate elements that dramatic tension lies. In acting, we speak of the juxtaposition of a strong objective with an equally strong obstacle. The struggle of these two equal and opposing forces it what creates the electricity of life we

seek to expose and exploit on the stage. I knew that our production of *RENT* could not only be a rock concert, nor could it only be an opera. It had to be some wild, clashing fusion of the two. The first place we began was the primary element of the physical performance space – the set.

### The Set

I was fortunate to get a second year MFA designer, Kyle Melton, as my set designer. I say fortunate, first because Kyle is an incredible artist. He thinks poetically, without limit, but he can think practically as well. Also, Kyle and I shared a class in set design, in which we were able to spend the entire semester before *RENT* went into production tossing around ideas and developing our perfect space. Kyle is a graffiti artist at heart. His aesthetic is rooted in designed chaos. He was quick to correct my mistaken idea that graffiti was just some words spray painted on a wall, and to show me that graffiti was an art in its own right. Kyle's is an aesthetic rooted in chaos, and so he immediately gravitated toward the idea of capturing a raw, urban setting. This, I'm sure, is why he was assigned to this project in particular. What better than a graffiti artist to capture the feel of a gritty, urban, vacant lot in the East Village of the early nineties? However, Kyle was quick to note that my aesthetic was entirely other than his. I am interested in clean lines and simplicity, in tremendously tight focus with the least possible means, in a sense of grandeur and elegance. Again, this is merely an issue of personal aesthetic. There is as much value in poor theatre, in experimental theatre of "cruelty," primitivism and chaos, as there is in a theatre of simplicity and silence. Kyle and I were saddled with the task of reconciling two wildly different aesthetics. Fortunately, he looked upon it as a challenge – how could he create something that was as gritty and

urban as it was simple and elegant? Working with Kyle was one of the best and truest collaborations I have ever experienced. We worked through a process of respectful compromise and mutual admiration, and our central tool remained the design metaphor we had come up with in tandem with the rest of the designers. Kyle quickly became as interested in my clean lines and elegance as I was in his sense of gritty urban rawness.

The first thing we agreed upon was that our aesthetic would not be rooted in the idea of junk. Even if our central visual metaphor was to become rooted in the idea of graffiti (which it did not), Kyle was quick to point out that graffiti need not feel like “junk.” So, the first thing we did away with in the original design of *RENT* was the massive junk sculpture stage left, which is actually scripted. Neither Kyle nor I was interested in any type of visual clutter that would obscure us from seeing and hearing the story and music. I shared with him the Robert Wilson quote about setting up a space in which we can hear music, and he agreed whole-heartedly.

We did, however, decide to keep the *texture* of junk. So, if our set was to have clean lines and elegance, they would be clean, elegant lines that were distressed, raw and realistic. This was the first incarnation of the idea of a fusion of grunge-rock and refined classical opera.

This early success in convincing a designer of the importance of an uncluttered and thoroughly designed aesthetic would inform the rest of the design of the show. All the designers agreed that lack of visual chaos would allow for a clearer figure-ground relationship. That is, we can see clearly who the person is that is standing in front of us, and they are not subsumed into the set as one more piece of junk in an indecipherable and

chaotic maelstrom. We knew that this would allow the audience to more clearly see who was speaking to whom and what they wanted from them, and if our production of *RENT* was to succeed on any level, allowing this happen would have to be everyone's absolutely central goal.

Kyle also came onboard very early with the notion of utilizing the ideas of classical opera. He agreed that we ought to try and move the show beyond its original incarnation, which we viewed as little more than a semi-staged concert reading. We both knew, and were quick to make it clear to the rest of the company and design team, that we were dealing with an opera – with complex characters, and a grand and tragic story that takes place in a real time and place. So, we became interested in creating a more defined space than the generalized performance arena suggested by the script and the original production. We wanted to be able to capture the environment in which these characters were living and functioning – old, run down lofts and vacant lots in the East Village of the nineties. We quickly started to gravitate toward a sense of realism in the set. We decided that the band would no longer be onstage, as it was in the original production, but hidden away in the pit. We decided that, although we wanted to work in a unit set, the multitude of locations in the story would need to be clearly and realistically defined in order to give us a sense of the environment which so heavily influences the lives of these characters.

We were also interested in pushing the notion of a modern adaptation of Puccini's *La Boheme* to its limit. We began looking at traditional, realistic *La Boheme* sets, and noticed that the primary feature of these spaces was a massive window upstage. In *Boheme*, Marcello and Rodolpho live on the top floor of a building that they have turned

into an artists' loft. Mark and Roger inhabit the exact same space in *RENT*. As soon as I thought of the idea of this massive window, and read Puccini's own description of it in the libretto of *La Boheme*, it began to take on massive symbolic significance to me in the case of *RENT*. I had a powerful image in mind of Roger sitting at the window, struggling desperately to compose the song that would either be his farewell to the world, or his first move back into it. There is something about the skylight windows on the upper floor of industrial buildings that feels so open to the sky, and yet, by the nature of the panes of glass, feels like a greenhouse or a cage, which are designed to trap whatever is inside and force it to stay within. Simultaneously, there is the possibility of flight, and the realization that flight would never be possible.

There would be a *La Boheme* window on our set. Kyle and I decided together that the window would be massive and imposing, conveying a sense of danger while simultaneously affording a larger, tempting view of the world without.

With this information, Kyle went to work on his first sketches and renderings of the set. What he brought back was an incredibly detailed unit set that was a photo-realistic interpretation of the interior of an artists' loft in an industrial building – with a massive set of very imposing windows. Kyle and I both thought we had found the space in which we could make a *RENT* that was everything we wanted it to be. As it turned out, the scale of it was the only thing that eventually made its way into the final design.

When we presented our initial drawings to the rest of the design team, my advisor, Douglas C. Wager, was quick to point out several problems with what we had created. It was clear that we had gone way too far in creating a realistic space. For one, this set cut

off any possibility of creating the variety of locations called for, outside of Mark and Roger's loft. More importantly, we had erected an impossibly thick fourth wall, which directly contradicted not only the feel of the piece as a whole, but made certain sections of the script which use direct address to the audience completely impossible. In trying to bring the "rock concert" *RENT* into a real and distinct space, we had lost what was beautiful about *RENT* to begin with – its direct and immediate connection to the audience. If there was to be any fourth wall in our production of *RENT*, it needed to be transparent and removable. How else was the cast going to be able to look into the eyes of the audience and ask them the questions in the lyrics of "Seasons of Love?" After this important meeting, and deeply indebted to Mr. Wager, Kyle and I went back to the drafting table.

What we came back with wound up being the final design of the show. It was a space that absolutely encapsulated everything we were after, and represented the fusion of two completely different aesthetics – everything that I hoped our production of *RENT* could be. Kyle had developed a phrase for himself to guide his work – *on the edge*. It is a phrase he used over and over as he brought to me different elements of what would become the final design. First was the window. He decided that it would be massive, yes, over twenty feet tall in fact, but for it to be imposing, conveying a sense of danger, it would have to be free-standing, as opposed to his initial rendering of a series of windows connected to walls and the rest of the space. This new, monolithic window would be suspended from the flies, floating in space upstage, with the capability to tilt forward and back. Its shape would be that of a tall trapezoid stood on its end, narrow on the bottom and wider at the top, as if a tall window was being reflected in a funhouse mirror. These

tilted, askew lines would be echoed throughout the set, which would consist of a trapezoidal deck pitched not perpendicular to the edge of the stage, but on a diagonal, and jutting out over the pit and virtually into the audience. The deck would be treated to resemble a distressed hardwood floor, and would be raised several inches to separate it from the surrounding floor, which would be painted dark, creating the feel of a defined playing space existing in the middle of a sort of limbo. Rather than an upper level platform which disappeared into the wings or into flats representing “wall”, the central platform would be freestanding in the middle of the space, giving an indication of a loft apartment, but opening a variety of possibilities as well. The platform would be high – again, massive, grand, imposing. It began at eight feet and quickly became ten. The upper deck of the platform would not be rectangular and parallel to the edge of the stage, but a jagged “Z” shape. Behind the window upstage, Kyle placed a device used by Robert Wilson in many of his productions – a cyclorama which had in front of it two traveler curtains, which would open and close, making the amount cyc seen wider or narrower. In Robert Wilson’s design, these travelers are not curtain, but black curtain-height flats, providing a clean and exactly perpendicular edge. The resulting effect is that the cyc looks like a column of light that contracts and expands. Kyle was able to accomplish this by reinforcing the leading edge of the travelers with a clean edged flat. Our effect was one of massively tall doors closing on the cyc. We called these doors the “Robert Wilson toms.” For me, they would be used as a barometer of hope, exposing more of the brightly lit cyc in the beginning of the show, and increasingly less of it as the show began taking turns for the worst, gradually closing fully at the moment Angel dies and all hope seems lost.

Already, Kyle had created a space that was very expressionistic and yet allowed for the feeling of being in a specific place, namely Mark and Roger's loft. The fourth wall and the limitations of a totally realistic space had successfully been broken. We had an amazing set for a modern expressionistic opera, but the feeling of a rock concert was still somehow missing.

This problem was solved in several ways: first, the orchestra pit would not be lowered entirely, so that the band would be partially visible, although still separate from the playing space onstage. I knew I wanted to extend the show into the audience, with characters making entrances and exits from the house. Kyle accommodated this and, at the same time, added even more rock concert feel back in with the addition of two bridges from the theater's aisles over the pit and up onto the stage. These bridges became known as the MTV bridges.

Kyle also incorporated six lighting booms, three on either side of the stage, as requested by the lighting designer, John Hoey. Ostensibly, these booms were there to provide side-lighting, but the presence of the booms themselves created the effect of a concert performance space invading, and yet somehow meshing with, our semi-realistic opera world. John had also requested that the area around the central deck be painted to help open up and extend the playing space, and to give a surface which would pick up his lights. The color chosen was blue, and this color would extend into every area of the production design, becoming a powerful visual symbol and well as providing a sense of visual unity.

Early on, Kyle and I had discussed whether establishing period in the set was something necessary or useful. We quickly decided that it was unnecessary, and left any establishment of period up to the costume designer, endeavoring instead to provide a fertile ground in which these period characters could come to life. However, there are multiple locales in *RENT*, and of course, the play happens over the course of a year in the life of these friends, and so the passage of time is something important to the show as well. We thought we could indicate time and place via projected subtitles. As a projection surface, we were interested in newsprint, as this to me is a powerful symbol of a.) the media and b.) the homeless. The titles were to be projected on “newsprint screens” which would be made by a cluster of the homeless ensemble holding newspapers up and creating a screen on which we could project things like “St. Mark’s Place, January 1986.” In the end, we decided that this kind of specificity would be unnecessary and distracting, and the story did not need such indications to function. The newsprint, however, remained as a texture for us, and Kyle not only painted the floor around the deck blue but also wallpapered newsprint onto the surface of the stage. The homeless ensemble still read newspaper, and the screen on which Mark would project his film at the end of the play was constructed of newsprint as well.

So, what we wound up with was a unit set that gave us essentially an empty space, rather than a cluttered junkyard of visual noise. The lines were clean and elegant, yet placed at dangerous and unstable angles. There was an absence of “stuff” but the very architecture itself was visually interesting. The environment represented a clash of and yet somehow a fusion of aesthetics and one could as easily stage a production of *La*

*Boheme* in it as one could stage a Kurt Cobain concert. We had found our physical environment. Now it was time to envision the people that would inhabit it.

### The Costumes

Although we knew *RENT* would need to be treated in part as a period piece, all of the designers agreed that the play was not just a story about a time in history. Rita Squitiere, costume designer, was no different. She was disinterested in merely using the costumes to give us an authentic period feel. To be sure, the costumes would all fit within the period, and if any of the design elements of the show were to capture a detailed and specific sense of period, it would be the costumes. But Rita also has a fabulous eye for what looks good on bodies, and again, she was quick to recognize that *RENT* was a fusion of realism and something more expressionistic – a rock concert. If the piece was to feel like a fusion of the two, the characters had to look *good*, by today’s standards, in what they wore. Therefore, we would not sacrifice design for faithfulness to period. Rita picked and chose from among these trends and fashions and adapted them to the silhouettes we would expect today – there would be few awkwardly baggy pants, oversized shirts and turtleneck sweaters. The cast would look like sleek, svelte, perhaps mythologized versions of what people of this time period were.

Rita was free to play with the sense of period, and in the end, everything she chose or constructed looked like it fit in the period, even if we had never really seen anything like it before. We also decided early on that, whatever the “period” style we chose, the costumes would need to have a real sense of authenticity. They would need to be full of detail, texture, and specifics in order to help us understand that these are real

people we're watching and not representative images. Kyle had deliberately kept the set abstract and minimal so that we would be able to *see* the real people that were existing within it. This figure-ground relationship comes from two separate Robert Wilson principles – the first is to keep things clear of visual and auditory noise in order to see and hear better, as was discussed earlier. But keeping things clear and uncluttered is not enough unless what is in the foreground stands in relief against what is in the background. This is where the second of Robert Wilson's greatest principles comes into play. I call it the principle of the Baroque candelabra, and it is a statement he makes often in interviews about his work. It is an image that has always had immediate resonance for me, and it goes something like this:

I can take a baroque candelabra and put it on a baroque table, and that's one thing. Or, I can take a baroque candelabra and put it on a rock – and that's something else.

He is talking about juxtaposition. His point is that perhaps we notice the baroque-ness of the candelabra more when it is placed on a rock because it stands out in relief – it is suddenly foregrounded, and we notice it more than when it is the same as and thus fades into the background.

This is how Kyle's set and Rita's costumes would work in tandem. If the lines of the set were clean, simple, elegant, and non-period specific, Rita's highly detailed, mostly period, bright, colorful, textured, interesting costumes would stand out in crystal clear relief instead of fading into a background of visual noise.

Rita and I were also both interested in giving the costumes a sense of unity – that is, they should feel as though they came from the same world. There would be an interrelation of colors and textures that would echo and draw lines and parallels between different characters while simultaneously reinforcing *our* world of the play. Rita came up with extremely interesting ways of drawing visual parallels in the costumes that became indicators of relationship in subtle ways. For example, Angel’s costume at the end of the play, when he is near death from AIDS became not just white hospital clothes, but white linen garments that echoed the linen that Collins had worn throughout the play. In Collin’s case, this costume choice was a marker of his art and vocation as a philosopher – his dress harkened back to philosophers that he might have admired, such as Mahatma Gandhi. With Angel dressed in these white linens as Collins was taking care of him, it was simultaneously a visual parallel linking the two of them together, and plot-wise suggested that perhaps Collins had borrowed something from his own wardrobe in which to dress Angel and make him more comfortable.

Rita also had a concept that would echo our column of light upstage, our so-called “barometer of hope.” She called it the “inner light.” Each character would have a single solid bright color underneath a layered costume. They would begin the play in layers of grunge inspired 80s and 90s wear – clothes that hip but poor artists leaving in the East Village might have worn. Gradually, they would shed these layers and expose the color underneath. This was symbolic to her of a group of people who weighed down and imprisoned by the harsh realities of their existence, but who gradually learn to love and expose the light within one another. This idea survived in certain cases, but is a device

that I missed when all was said and done, and other considerations had to force the idea mostly out.

Above all, our most important consideration was that the clothing helped to define character. As previously discussed, the costumes of the Broadway production seemed to have very little “design” as such. They seemed like random, generalized items that everyone sort of brought to rehearsal in a big bag and then chose what they felt like wearing. Whenever Rita brought me a sketch of one of the costumes, she referenced at least what the character was like, if not coming armed with a detailed understanding of what their objectives and obstacles were. I will give two examples of characters for which Rita’s clothing served to illustrate character in an incredible way.

As I just noted, Collins is a philosopher – therefore he would wear clothes that would emulate his heroes, the people he studied. He is kind, generous, and sees the beauty in the people around him. He seems to lead a very spiritual life. He was mostly in khaki linens, and wore a Muslim *kufi* throughout. On Broadway, he wore a day-glo orange vest over an oversized denim shirt, baggy ripped jeans, and work boots. He looked like a construction worker, not any kind of artist or philosopher. If Collins is allowed to wear clothes that contradict entirely who he is, it’s just one more thing to get in the way of the audience having a clear conception of who he is, who he loves, and what he wants.

Angel is of course, a drag queen. But he is so much more. If Angel is dressed merely as a screaming, preening queen we lose all the heart and soul of who he is. He dresses the way he does out of a deep love and acceptance for those around him who are

different. Someone who dresses that way to accomplish an aim like representing those around him he loves, is someone very different from someone who dresses that way because they did too many drugs, and have decided to say “to hell with the rest of the world, I’m doing what I want.” This distinction is vital in making the audience fall in love with Angel. If the audience does not, the entire play is rendered virtually pointless, and the visual look of Angel is the first line of defense in helping the audience understand his openness and honesty as a person.

### The Lighting

Of course, without light, one cannot see, and the nature of light can have a profound effect on *how* we see. The predominant trend in modern theatre has long been a search for “naturalism” or “realism.” Our main aim has been to capture and replicate onstage the life we see out on the streets. There are other theatres that seek other aims, but we, at least in America today, seem to be on an increasing search for this “slice of reality.” Design for the theatre seems to have followed the same path, and these trends have, of course, influenced the way opera is produced as well. Many modern productions of opera seem to have the aim of bringing the opera, which is sometimes a lofty, expressionistic, and possibly melodramatic form back down to the earth of realism. Understandably, a major way of accomplishing this would be to use lighting in a way that is not lofty, melodramatic, or expressionistic, but is subtle and realistic, making no real statements of its own, but being subsumed into something more “real.”

In fact, Puccini seems to have been seeking this aim in his music. Our lighting designer John Hoey used a phrase that I quite like – a “boffo moment.” He uses it to

mean a look or a moment that is sudden, dramatic, impressive and dynamic. As previously discussed, Puccini's music is grand, melodramatic and emotional. For all its musical dynamism, a Puccini opera has few musical "boffo" moments. In fact, much of his musical material is exquisite in the moment, but pretty unmemorable after the fact – and this is intentional, as he was not in the business of writing "singles" or numbers, but rather, musicalizing emotion. For example, one of the only "boffo" musical moments in *Tosca*, and consequently the most hummable tune in the show, is *E lucevan de stelle*. As Puccini was working in the type of opera previously discussed as *opera verismo*, or realistic opera, his music usually seeks several aims: it is conversational and naturalistic (as far as sung speech can be); it uses musical forms such as melody, harmony, rhythm and tempo to express the ever shifting changes in emotion as his characters react to each other and the world around them; and there are not really abrupt shifts in tone – everything flows smoothly from one moment to the next. Puccini's *opera verismo* seeks to replicate the ever changing, shimmering, and ephemeral qualities of reality.

In our early conversations, John was very onboard with the idea of exploring what it would be like to make a *RENT* that is a true opera, taking it out of its previous setting as a semi-staged concert reading of rock musical. As we had discovered in our troubles with early renderings of the set, the issue is that *RENT* is partially a rock concert. There are *boffo* moments, expressionistic moments, and, unlikely in Puccini, broadly aggressive and abrupt shifts of tone in the music. In order to fully hear these abrupt changes of feel and tone, one has to return once again to the Robert Wilson quote about setting up a space in which we can hear music. In fact, lighting is our primary tool for foregrounding changes that occur in time, such as shifts in music and tone. Thus, if the lighting design

of the entire show echoes the spirit of Puccini's musical "realism" and becomes an ever shifting array of subtle and barely perceptible changes, we cannot *hear* the changes in the music. This is absolutely essential to the communicative ability of the piece, because the changes in the music echo and express changes in dramatic action, and everything we can bring to bear to facilitate the audience's *feeling* these changes must be utilized. Besides all that, a subtly shifting lightscape undercuts the inherent rhythm of the piece as partially *rock* concert.

Early on, John was able to create and display computer generated renderings of "looks" or isolated visual moments in the show. We were looking together at moments that were broadly stated, powerfully foregrounded, and contained dynamic and aggressive lights that cut through the space. These looks echoed things that we would go on to try and capture in rehearsal with the actors: the unrelenting pursuit of a powerful objective, butting up against a strong obstacle, with aggressive tactics required to overcome it – dramatic actions and events that are underscored with powerful rock music throbbing underneath. Of course, the trick in working with the actors in rehearsal is to play these powerful dramatic actions with as much truth, and I suppose "realism" as possible.

John's inherent understandings of art and theater are profound. He understood what realistic drama was, and wanted to aid in the aim of bringing these feel to this high stakes opera. However, because the playing of the actors would sometimes need to be more understated than the movement of the music in favor of some sort of emotional truth, the lights needed to help the music, not the actors, along. In this way, I envisioned a world which plopped authentic, truthful, and real behavior into a world of aggressive

rock music and operatic melodrama. This is the metaphorical, poetic expression of the world in which these characters live – a world on the edge, on the brink of collapse and destruction.

In John's initial renderings, these moments seemed truly "boffo" and I thought I was in for, in short, rock concert lighting. Once John's computer generated models became reality, several problems arose. Firstly, the looks that were so dynamic in the model became understated onstage, especially in many of the scenes which, on their surface, *seem* conversational and naturalistic. The looks became much more subtle than I remembered them in the renderings, but more than that, it was the movement between the looks that became the problem – transitions were too few and too subtle. It wasn't until we got into tech and started see the lights in context that I truly realized the style of the show that has so much to do with the MTV generation in which it was created – the show literally has the rhythm of a music video. The lighting as it existed when we got into tech undercut this style. One of the essential aspects of the art form that became known as the "music video" is the jump cut. Rock music videos are comprised of images that flash before us reflecting the aggressively active style of the music – in the theatre, lighting is really the only element that can move quickly enough to mimic this effect. John had created a brilliantly subtle version of this that would be exquisite in a shimmering, classical Puccini piece. However, I was beginning to realize that we may have again compromised some of the rock concert aspects of the show in favor of highlighting the operatic elements.

The solution to this problem was to add back into the design the idea of rock concert lighting. John had already given us, as previously discussed, the lighting booms

stage left and right that were as much as a visual symbol of a concert performance as a tool to carry sidelighting. In the retooling of many of the cues in tech, he began to utilize the booms as even more dynamic and expressionistic, dimming the lights slightly so that their function became less to functionally side-light things and people, and more a bold display of color. He began to use less mixed lighting, narrow down his palette in each scene so that lights were not mixing to create a subtle feel of natural light, but isolating colors. He increased the use of a hazer throughout the show so that beams of spotlights could be seen throughout. The most important change that needed to occur and continued to occur all the way up to previews, was the addition of more and internal cues. We discovered in tech that the lights would need to shift *much* more often than we had ever realized, or the changes in the music would get lost. The shifts between cues also became much faster in all cases. There were very few moments where a long, slow transition from one look to the next was appropriate, because of how abruptly the music shifts within and between songs.

In the end, we wound up with a lighting design that was more than just functional – and was as bold, dynamic and expressive as we could make it after realizing a bit too late in the game that we may have sacrificed too much to the idea of *RENT* as an opera.

### The Sound Design

As sound designer, we were fortunate to get a gentleman by the name of Mike Kiley, who is not just a sound designer, but also a rock musician and a rock vocal coach. He could not have been a more appropriate choice for a role that would be pivotal in making sure the story was heard and understood. He and I agreed very early on that

everyone onstage would need to be mic'd as the vocals needed to be mixed with instruments that were electronic and amplified, and neither of us was willing compromise the volume and pulse of live rock music. Often in musicals produced in arenas that do not have the resources of Broadway, where everyone is always mic'd, down to the last chorus dancer, there are people that go un-mic'd, especially when many people are present onstage at one time. Often, the mics need to be switched backstage between "numbers," because there are two few in stock to go around. Such was the case at Temple. However, in *RENT* there are very few breaks between musical "numbers," as each runs immediately into the next, and there, of course, no spoken "book scenes" which could facilitate the switching of mics. Also, the nature of *RENT* as an ensemble piece meant that in group numbers, almost everyone present onstage would be singing at least one solo line. In a musical that is accompanied by non-electronic, un-amplified music, it might be feasible that such a solo line could be heard, but certainly not in *RENT*, over screaming electric guitars.

We also both had a vested interest in the music itself being present at all times. One of the essential elements of rock is a strong backbeat provided by a rhythm section carrying a beat that must be *felt*. In the case of *RENT*, the conventions of musical theater/opera writing are also present – there are countermelodies, accompaniment figures, representing motifs and expressing subtext. As I mentioned, *RENT* has everything Sondheim values, and so, all these elements work toward speaking the dramatic action of the scene. Thus, all the component parts of what the band is playing must be mic'd separately and mixed so that they can be distinctly hear and subsumed into a general wash of loud rock music.

Also, we both agreed that the music should be loud. This is inescapable in capturing the true essence of rock, a form in which the style of singing is expressive of heightened emotion, so the *pianissimo* moments are many fewer than the *fortissimo* moments.

The music would be loud, dynamic, and exciting in a very physical way that you can feel in the body. This, for the most part was accomplished in our production, although Mike was working with a very limited and outdated sound system in a space that was far from acoustically perfect. He did the best with what he had, and any problems in understanding the lyrics were mainly due to a large oversight in the direction, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

### The Choreography

I found a kindred spirit in my choreographer, Brandon McShaffrey. I could not have asked for a more generous, talented, and collaborative artist, and one with whom I shared so many fundamental beliefs about the nature of choreography and dance in theatre, and especially in *RENT*.

Brandon's specialty and interest lies less in choreographed dance than it is in expressive movement, especially as it relates to story and character. Brandon is also interested in working with performers to find movement that is authentic to them, and comes from their own personal vocabulary of movement. This has long been an interest of mine as well. These qualities made Brandon the ideal choreographer for a show in which there is little "dance" for dance's sake, as is sometimes the case in older examples of musical theater, for instance, Cole Porter's *Anything Goes*.

The first thing Brandon and I agreed upon was the absence of random and non-specific interpretive dance. In the original Broadway production, some of the major problems we were both interested in finding creative solutions to were the random dancing homeless people in “Santa Fe,” the over-choreographed and non-realistic ensemble movement in “La Vie Boheme,” and the interpretive dance of death in “Contact.” Much of our problem with the movement in the Broadway production was that it was totally unjustified. In modern musical theater, there is an expectation that people are singing for a reason – because words alone can no longer communicate what is they are trying to express. “Dance” in musical theatre should operate on the same principle, but here were dances that were essentially ornamentation. If there were moments that seemed to call for movement, both Brandon and I wanted to make sure that it was expressive of story, character, or both.

Beyond choreographing the “steps” in the few moments that called for choreographed movement, Brandon also took it upon himself to work individually with those actors whose characters moved in a specific way that was foreign to them in the beginning. For example, Mimi is a drug addicted nightclub dancer who is living an explosion of life to its fullest with no concern for the future. Our girls had no direct experience of how someone like that might move, and Brandon worked hard with each of our Mimis to find movement that was authentic to each of them, and that arose from the “stripper within.” Angel is again, a drag queen, and we were working with a boy who had never even considered that one day he would wear a skirt, let alone heels. Brandon worked with him to figure out how an individual moves that is accustomed to wearing these things on a daily basis. Roger is a bold and defiant individual in the beginning of

the show who has given up on life, and is utterly defensive toward everyone around him. Both our boys were shy and physically withdrawn and had a hard time in the beginning manifesting the sort of power and defiance that defines Roger.

Without tending to the physical life of these characters in this way, the actors playing them would have found it impossible to find any sense of authenticity, no matter how hard we worked on objectives, obstacles, and given circumstances in rehearsal. Once they found a way of moving that was authentic to them and yet expressive of these characters, their work exploded in entirely exciting ways.

Another advantage of Brandon's work is that he has an inherent sense of musicality. His choreographed movement always took the music into account, and helped foreground the formal nuances that give it life and expression and keep it from being a general wash. This is very similar to the way that the lighting should ideally have worked. Movement and lighting would become our primary tools for making sure that the heartbeat of the rock music was in place within our operatic, "realistic" world.

### Casting

Simultaneous with the pre-production and design process was the process of casting the actors. We were looking for fifteen actors: eight principals and an ensemble of seven that would play various roles. Casting is possibly the most important decision a director has to make in the process of directing a show. William Ball says that if you cast correctly, you have done about eighty percent of your work, and I would agree.

Especially in a show like *RENT*, where one must find not only people that can meet the demands of a rigorous vocal score, but can latch onto these passionate, idealistic, artistic

characters and attack them with fearlessness and emotional availability – and sell it all like they are rock stars. This is an especially tall order in an arena like college theater, where most students' instruments are still growing.

Above all, I was looking for actors I believed – actors who could walk onto the stage with a sense of honesty and openness that was free of pretense and facades. Of these, one of the hardest to find would be Mark.

As previously stated, the character of Mark had bored me in the original show. I found his material to be limited, his character underdeveloped and I was confused about who he was and what he wanted. Nevertheless, Mark is the one who walks onto the stage at the top of Act One with no music, no introduction, and nothing else to say but “We begin.” I knew I needed to find an actor who would be capable of commanding the audience in a large house merely by the presence he brought with him. Mark's journey in the play is also difficult for an actor to navigate. He is as in denial at the beginning as Mimi is. He does not have the disease many of his friends have, AIDS. He is in no immediate danger of dying, and so he has little understanding of what they are really going through. Nevertheless, he has a tremendous capacity for love, and loves his best friend Roger with everything he has in him. Mark is obsessed with his work, and uses it as a way to distract himself from the difficulty of living with troubled people in troubled times. By the end of the play, he realizes that there is more to life than art, and that he must come to terms with reality and must join his friends in living everyday as if it may be his last.

Mark's best friend, Roger, is the most troubled character in the show. He has come fully to terms with the fact that he is living with a death sentence that could spell

his end at any moment. He has lost the only person he has ever truly loved to AIDS, and so feels betrayed by her, God, and the world. As a result, he has retreated within himself, and carefully guards his heart against any intrusion. A man who once knew how to live life to its fullest has now been destroyed by that lifestyle – and so, he has decided to refuse to live. There is within him a lover, an artist and a poet, yet these impulses are squelched by anger and despair, and so, his journey is one of learning to accept that life is finite, and to live every day with love and gratitude for the time he has been given.

Mimi is dealing with same given circumstances as Roger, but deals with them in the contrary way. She too has AIDS, but rather than shut herself off from the world, she has welcomed it with open arms, living life in an explosion of recklessness, seeking adventure and danger for the same life-giving rush for which she uses drugs. The problem with this is twofold – first, she has gotten herself into a downward spiral of self-destruction. She lives a nihilist, caring about nothing, recognizing no consequences, and so, she is inadvertently shortening her time. Secondly, she is acting selfishly – the only needs she attends to are her own, and anyone who infringes upon the fulfillment of those needs is cut off. This all changes when she meets Roger, who awakens the love within her, for she too, like all the characters in *RENT*, shares one thing with the rest of humanity – a tremendous capacity to love one another. Her journey will be learning how to love another, and consequently, learning to love herself.

Collins is Mark and Roger's best friend. He is extremely intelligent - a philosopher and a thinker who teaches computer age philosophy at universities like NYU. He is HIV positive and acts as an agent of peace, and until Angel comes along, is the one that struggles to pull Roger out his dark place, and force Mark to see that Roger needs

him, and in fact, that the three of them need to support and love one another. His is the one who most directly feels the loss of someone he loves – which gives him a new sense of what Roger is going through and reinforces the importance of making sure this family of friends remains together until the very last.

Angel is the newest addition to the group of friends. He takes care of Collins after Collins has been beaten on the street. Angel's primary quality is that of honesty. He too, has AIDS. His way of living combines all the best aspects of his new friends – he has Mimi's zest for life, but without going to the extremes of self-destruction. He is as passionate as Roger, and as loving as Mark, but without either of their withdrawal, anger, or denial. Most of all, he is like Collins, in that he understands that all this group of people has is each other. At a time when people are dying all around them, Angel is the one who from the very beginning, knows that you must live every second with love for your fellow man, that all we have is each other. His generosity comes from a profound sense of gratitude for this gift of love, and he seeks at every moment to share it with those around him. Even though he himself is sick and in need of help, he puts himself last always.

Maureen is Mark's ex-girlfriend. She is feisty, funny, passionate, and artistic. She fancies herself an agent of social change, and will not go about it peacefully. She is the one who takes most offense at the wrongs she sees around her, and will do what it takes to get people to understand. However, this passion often manifests itself in anger rather than love, and so her journey through the play is to discover that the best and most effective way to ignite passion in others is to do it with love. It is her discovery of Joanne, with whom she falls deeply in love, which teaches her something about herself –

she realizes this anger, and what she learns most of all is that a major part of love is forgiveness. She learns to see the beauty in those around her, and like, everyone in the play, learns that life is far too short to harbor any resentfulness. Instead, every moment must be viewed and lived with gratitude, because at any moment, those you love could be taken away from you.

Joanne, Maureen's girlfriend, is interested in social change as well, but goes about in the polar opposite way as Maureen. Joanne knows the power of money, and understands that one must infiltrate this system in order to change it. Where Joanne is all too similar to Maureen is in her raw and unbridled passion to affect this change in others. This passion also manifests itself in anger at times, and she too must learn forgiveness. She must also learn that money is not the only way to affect change in the world around you – and that the power and the gift of love is worth more than all the money in the world.

Benny is in some ways a parallel to Joanne. He was once one of this group of friends, until he sold out in an attempt to create what he views as a better life for himself. He has married a woman with whom he is probably not in love, and is seeking ways to make money that actually wind up betraying the friends he once loved. Benny is far from a villain though, because he views the way the friends are living their lives through a different perspective than they do themselves. He sees vagabonds and anarchists who are fighting a system that cannot be fought. He thinks that he has seen the light, and he wishes to share this with them, shake them out of their world of idealism and naivety, and help them to a better place. Of course, Benny is also misguided in that he thinks money is the only path to this kind of enlightenment. He is as passionate and artistic as the rest

of them, but their rejection of and scorn for him has caused him to withdraw, similar to Roger, and he begins to view them as enemies. He too learns at the end of the play that the very last people in the world you should be viewing as enemies are your friends. He learns that friendship is more important than money, and that love is the only path to true success.

In addition to these roles, there are seven ensemble tracks. Each of these actors plays a variety of roles, but each has one specific role in which they have at least one pivotal moment in the show. Therefore, it was important to cast ensemble members who were capable of playing one of the principle roles. In this way, *RENT* is truly an ensemble piece, because the ensemble members carry as much of the weight as anyone else.

“Seasons of Love” is a gospel number that opens Act Two. It is both the cast’s anthem of how they believe life should best be lived (by measuring it in love) and their direct appeal to the audience to do so. The number calls for two gospel soloists, one male and one female, and both must have the power to inspire the audience through their inspired vocal performances. They must have a deep sense of soul and be able to tap into this when they sing.

Three of the male ensemble tracks have important roles to play in the Support Group scene. Gordon is the parallel of Roger. He is distrustful, angry, and closed off from the group. One must read the burden of the weight of the world in his face when he sings in that number. Gordon is the support group leader, and must have a sense of warmth and acceptance, and a selfless desire to help others. In this way, he becomes the

parallel of Angel. Steve questions it all. He begins “Will I,” asking the question “Will I lose my dignity?” He feels lost and alone in a world where his fate is imminent. He is the one who doubts, and questions, and is most in need of the support of the support group. He must harbor a deep sense of sadness and longing for an answer he knows he won’t find.

The other two ensemble tracks are essentially comic relief. They must be extremely versatile actresses, capable of handling comic solos, and alternating between being spunky, funky and ridiculous standouts of the ensemble, but be able to switch gears in the scenes such as “Will I,” that convey a deep sense of loneliness.

Casting *RENT* would clearly be no easy task. It was clear that the demands of the story on the cast as actors were as huge as the demands of the cast as vocalists. An what’s more, the two skills would need to operate simultaneously. There could be no casting of singers who could not act, and there could be no casting of actors who could not sing. And this group of fifteen had to come from a talent pool of undergraduate students who were still finding their way through life, art, and their rapidly changing instruments.

### Auditions

The initial audition consisted of one sixteen bar cut of a song in the style of the show, pop-rock. It would have made little sense to ask for a monologue, as the show is almost entirely through-sung, so it was made clear to the audtionees that this sixteen bar cut should demonstrate vocal range and ability in addition to acting ability. I was looking for three things: first, people who had strong and specific vocal chops, whose voices

would be able to handle the demands of the range and style of the music; second, I was looking for people who could tell a story, openly, honestly and with a sense of emotional availability; third, I was looking for real people – people with a sense of authenticity and individuality, who seemed to know who and were comfortable with who they were.

Brandon conducted a movement call, not to make cuts, as is the case in a traditional musical, but mostly to get his own process started – to see what it was he was working with - and also to make recommendations to me as to who was and was not inherently “in their body.” After the initial audition, we would weed out those who we knew would not be useful cast members, and call back those we felt had the potential to make it work.

The callback was where we would be able to test the auditees’ abilities in regard to character, relationship and dramatic action. We gave those called back sections of songs to learn and prepare, consisting of solos and duets. These would be the equivalent of seeing monologues and scenes in a straight play. The duets were chosen specifically to see how and if the actors would interact transactionally with one another in the context of character, relationship and given circumstances.

One of the major tools in making the message of the show palpable was to insure that the relationships were clear. It is how these characters change over time in relationship to one another, through the pursuit of objectives – things they need from each other – that forms the heart of the “story.” In addition to this, pairs of actors needed to have what is commonly referred to (albeit opaquely) as “chemistry.” For instance, there needed to be an immediate spark of something unexplainable in the personalities of

the actors who played Angel and Collins – something that was inherent and would form the basis of what could be forged and developed in the rehearsal hall. Roger had to have a certain chemistry with Mimi and with Mark, Collins had to have a certain chemistry with Mark and Roger, and of course, Maureen and Joanne needed to have a powerful and somewhat strange chemistry of their own.

The first and clearest choice we found was Mark. Owen Pelesh was one of the only actors to walk into the audition and immediately take command of the space. He has an outward extending energy that simultaneously projects out toward you and welcomes you in. He has a strong voice and was willing to make risky choices in his initial audition. He is also young, and carries a certain sense of innocence – although one can see the intellectual wheels turning in his eyes, and you get a sense that there is the beginning of a very wise man inside him. I knew that he would be able to walk onto the stage at the top of the show, and welcome the audience in, and that he would have an innocence that would temper Mark's more petulant aspects, and help them understand and care about his journey.

Ideally, the entire show would have been double cast due to the vocal demands on the young performers and the length of the run. However, due to budget restrictions in costumes, I was given two roles to double cast. I knew that, in my opinion, Roger was one of the more vocally demanding roles in the show, especially given this age bracket of performers, so I knew he should be one of the double cast roles. For the other, it made sense to double cast Mimi, so each pairing of Mimi/Roger could stick together, since this is one of the more complex and vital relationships in the show.

Roger was obviously a difficult role to cast. It is hard to sing, emotionally complex, and demands an actor with power, heart, and command of his instrument. I was able to find only two actors who would truly fit this bill, and I knew it would take them both a lot of work – one was a sophomore and one only a freshman. Kyle Segarra was a dark and moody sophomore. He looked like he could star in the next gothic vampire movie. He had a strong rock tenor voice, and when he sang, you could tell he understood Roger's dark and painful side. The other choice for Roger was clearly Trevor James, a freshman vocal performance major from the Boyer School of Music. He was an extraordinary musician for his age, and sang in a glorious tenor. He was naturally a little guarded and withdrawn, so I knew opening him up onstage would be a challenge, but again, you could hear the potential when he sang - he knew how to open and access his heart, and I felt confident he would be able to share that with an audience.

So, I had an opera Roger and a punk rock Roger. I needed to find their Mimis. Mimi #1 would be a young singer by the name of Merci Lyons-Cox. She too, had begun in vocal performance at Boyer, but transferred into the Theater Department in the newly formed musical theater concentration. Merci was full of life and soul. She had tattoos of pistols on her hips and had a voice of tremendous range, vocal flexibility and interpretive ability. She could have competed with any pop-rock country radio beltress. Her feel was extraordinarily contemporary and very rock-and-roll. She didn't look at all Latina, which is an important aspect of Mimi's given circumstances, but to have a Mimi who could manifest so much emotion in her tightly controlled yet emotionally unbound vocal instrument was gold, and so she was cast. She would be placed alongside Kyle-Roger, as

I knew her real-world authenticity would work well with his, and hopefully raise him up in terms of the risks he could take onstage.

Mimi #2 would be Eileen McHugh, again, a young student in the Musical Theater concentration. Eileen *did* look Latina, but much more than that, she had a powerful and well-trained belt, and an excellent sense of musicality. She lacked some of the sassy, salt-of-the-earth realness of Merci, but she made up for it in her willingness to take *huge* risks with little concern for what she looked like, or what people thought. Here was an actress absolutely willing to launch herself into huge choices and really put herself out there – vital for a role like Mimi. I knew her sense of control of her instrument would work well with Trevor's, and I hoped her wild risk-taking would encourage him to do the same.

The next pair to cast was Angel and Collins. I knew from the start Angel would be difficult to find, because he is the character around which the shows turns, and arguably the most important for the audience to fall in love with the minute he steps on the stage. There can be not one iota of pretence or fakery about this actor – one must feel that he *is* Angel, and just happened to wander off the street and onto the stage. Besides all that, the vocal part is extremely difficult and unique to sing. There were two actors that had the innocence, the profoundly beautiful heart, and the ability to sing to vocal part – a young Asian actor named Sam Han, and a young Latino actor named Christopher Santiago. They were the only two called back, and in the audition, it was clear that although Sam had a beautiful voice and a deep understanding of pursuing dramatic action through song, his voice was too light and airy, and simply could not meet the demands of the score. Chris's voice could, but I had my doubts as to whether he would be able to

embody a character and play a scene. It would take until his callback with Collins for him to blow me away – which he did.

Collins was a clear choice from the start. Derrick Millard is an excellent upperclassman actor, who had performed in several mainstage shows, and whose experience onstage showed in his ability to make huge choices and his absolute dedication to the honest pursuit of objectives as an actor. He threw himself into roles and scenes with abandon, and I knew he would be a fun, warm, caring, and sympathetic best friend for Mark and Roger. He also had the vocal chops to pull off Collins' gospel styling throughout the show.

In the Collins and Angel callback, both choices became crystal clear as I watched Derrick and Chris sing together – there was instant chemistry, a spark of love and support that exploded between them and left the entire room in tears – you could actually see the actors, who knew each other very little, helping each other through the scene, and I knew that this love and support for one another would fly across the footlights.

The next pair was Maureen and Joanne. The choice for Maureen was clear. The most experienced and naturally gifted musical theater actor in the program was Janet McWilliams. She knew how to make big, bold choices, was emotionally available, had a strong sense of comic timing, and was highly intelligent in respect to character and the pursuit of dramatic action. To boot, she has a strong, high and solid belt that I knew could sing the show over a long run and lose no steam. Finding a Joanne to compete with her would be no easy task. Joanne is normally cast as an African-American woman, and in this role, as with the others that call for African-American or Hispanic performers, I

wanted to preserve this multi-cultural casting. Essential to the story of *RENT* is that the fabric of this group of friends is made of an extremely diverse group of people. However, it would be awhile before I found an African-American actress that could compete onstage with Janet, and I considered briefly casting the role as a Caucasian. Eventually, I found Tiara Greene, a woman from outside the Department of Theater. She has a strong voice and an extraordinarily musical sense of Gospel styling. She has a gentle heart and a warm spirit, but not much experience as an actor at all. She was nervous, but I felt confident that I saw a strong and powerful woman inside her that we would be able to tap into in rehearsals, and that putting her onstage next to Janet would help to draw this out.

Benny would be the most difficult role to cast. I had an extremely gifted and experienced actor by the name of Craig Bazan, whose facility with Shakespeare was not to be believed in a student of his age. He had a strong and commanding presence, and an inherent and well-trained understanding of what acting was. I knew that he would be able to present all the multi-faceted aspects of Benny's personality and journey to the audience, and would insure that Benny was not regarded as a villain.

The only problem was that Craig is not trained as a musician or singer at all. I had to seriously consider whether I could use someone who might have trouble learning and performing the vocal parts of his role. I kept calling potential Bennys back, some Caucasian, some African American, and still could not find the right mix of musicality and acting ability. In the end, Benny was the role in which I felt we could most utilize an excellent actor who might be a little rough around the edges as a musician, so we cast

him. Fortunately for us, any doubts I had were put to rest in the rehearsal hall and in performance.

For the ensemble tracks, it was not at all difficult to find a diverse, sassy, honest, fun and talented group of young actor-singers with the versatility to cover the many ensemble roles. In fact, my goal of finding ensemble members with the ability to play one of the principles roles was met with absolute success. There was not a weak link in the cast. In fact, the problem was not finding actors to fill the roles in the show at all – the problem was having too many actors who could do the job and too few roles to go around. Therefore, I decided to take my second choices for all the roles and form a group of pit-singers who would become part of the band – adding to the fullness of full ensemble vocals and providing a full cast of understudies, in case someone in the cast fell ill or became vocally tired during the course of our exceptionally long run. In exchange, these actors would get their first taste of something they would likely be called upon to do in their young careers – understudy a role.

In the end, we had found a diverse and talented group of seventeen players, including two doubles, and a crew of ten pit-singer/understudies. We were ready to take them into rehearsal and begin the process of forging what we would put onstage in front of an eager audience five weeks later.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### REHEARSAL PROCESS

#### The First Meeting

The first step in any rehearsal process is getting people on the same page. This is similar to the jumping off point for the pre-production design process, in which we used a central metaphor that all the designers agreed upon as a way to focus their work and insure from the beginning that we were all operating toward the same goal. In a rehearsal process, this jumping off point must be established on day one, when all parties involved get a chance to meet and greet one another and lay the groundwork for the process to follow.

For me, the most important thing to do in the beginning of the rehearsal process is to start developing a sense of ensemble. As has been made clear, this would be especially important for our production of *RENT*, a show about love and community. I knew that, with this show in particular, it would be important to make it about more than just “putting on a show.” I knew that the strongest work I could get from the actors, especially given their ages, would come from a united sense of purpose. One of the best tools I have found for beginning this process is William Balls’ “measure of success.”

I introduced this topic at the top of rehearsal, and told the cast that the creation of such a “measure” was the main objective for tonight’s rehearsal, and that by the end of rehearsal we would know what it was.

We began by sitting in a large circle on the bare Tomlinson stage, the space that eventually we would fill with our show. Everyone involved was invited, including designers, stage management, assistants, staff, and cast. Design and dramaturgical presentations were planned for later, but, as simple as it sounds, the best way to begin was by getting clear on who we were and what the show was that we were working on together.

In a circle, everyone introduced themselves, stating their name, year, and their position or character. In addition, everyone was asked to state briefly what it was that interested, excited, or intrigued them about working on *RENT*. This simple prompt elicited a variety of responses that would form the basis of our conversation to follow, because we immediately realized that there were certain things about this show in particular that gave us a common ground.

But before we started talking about that, it was essential that we make sure everyone was familiar with the show. In a straight play, or even in a musical with a book, day one of rehearsal often involves a read-through. This is a sometimes unnecessary but traditional activity that some directors avoid in favor of getting right to work. I like to do a read through if possible because it makes the entire group feel that we are all beginning our journey from the same blank slate. With *RENT*, which is through-sung, a read-through is impossible, as the entire book consists of song lyrics. Instead, we read together a detailed synopsis, and talked briefly together afterwards about plot points, relationships, and characters that were confusing.

Once we had this common ground of who we were and what *RENT* was, we moved to design presentations. I had talked little thus far, and had decided to let the designers and their designs speak for themselves, rather than precede them with a lofty and confusing discussion of concept. I knew that if I left the designers and their work to their own devices, “concept” as we had created it over time, would emerge and become clear little by little as each designer displayed and discussed an additional piece of the puzzle. In addition to that, seeing the designs cold rather than with an introduction would enable a sense of mystery and excitement to arise as we went along. Sure enough, this happened, and the designers had come armed with a dazzling artillery of visuals. Kyle had his model, photographs, and renderings of the set. Rita had her collages for each character, and sketches of the different clothing looks she had designed. John Hoey came with a computer and a large flat screen TV on which to display his CGI renderings of the set in different “boffo” lighting moments. Brandon discussed his ideas of how the bodies in the show would move, and David Ames, musical director, spoke about what the overall soundscape would be like with the orchestrations.

The buzz in the room was electric, and the cast began to sense that this was not going to be the *RENT* they all knew. This was an entirely original production that they could develop and use to express themselves – young, dark, sophisticated, sexy – a little opera and a little rock and roll. The excitement in the room was becoming palpable, and the oohs and ahhs kept coming with each new display.

Each designer reported on what they and I had been working on, and, as I suspected, *they* did all the talking about “concept” I would have needed to do. When they had finished their presentations, they were dismissed and stage management talked a little

about business and schedule. We took a break before the cast came back for the second half of the evening – a roundtable discussion with just them and me, where we could continue getting to know each other, get riled up about the show, and together develop a plan of attack.

We began by talking about the play – what they knew about it and what they didn't, their reactions to the presentations of the designers, and any questions they had about the world we would be creating on the stage. I was interested in hearing what they thought *RENT* was about, but I told them I wanted to keep the discussion limited for now, as so much of what it would finally be about would be discovered in the rehearsal room. Nevertheless, they had a lively discussion both about what they thought *RENT* meant in general, and what it meant personally to them.

They were interested in discussing the original Broadway production, with which the majority of them were intimately familiar. They could tell from the design presentations that our *RENT* did not look like the one they knew, and they were anxious to know whether I thought ours would work as well. It was time to talk about the measure of success.

We began our development of a measure of success by talking about what they felt would constitute a rewarding experience working on a piece of theater, and specifically, a show like *RENT*. Some things we talked about were abstract, like filling the stage with “energy, life and love.” We talked about building a community together, since this is what the play is about, and how much more authentic the story of the play would be if we could do this ourselves. We talked about being present and enjoying

every moment, and being profoundly grateful for having been given the opportunity to work on this piece together - which I pointed out is a direct reflection of the story and message of this play.

We decided that our rehearsal process needed to be about discovering together what this play said to us, and working together to find the best form in which to make it speak to the audience. We talked about just “putting up” a show – the “summer stock” model, where a stock show is learned and blocked in a week, thrown up, and taken almost immediately down to put up the next one. We decided together that this was not the model we would follow, and indeed, were under no pressure to, as we had adequate rehearsal time to spend really delving into the material.

Most of all, we talked about the fact that this play was much bigger than any of us, in terms of the story we were telling and the message that story carried. We decided to consider ourselves conduits – that we had a duty to fulfill, by working hard together to make something that would effect change in our audience. My proudest moment was hearing them agree that if we could do this, it would be all we would need to do to honor the original production and Jonathan Larson’s legacy. The cast was solidly onboard, and we were ready to state our measure of success.

We decided that we would consider our process thoroughly successful if we were able to create an original production of *RENT* that comes from, and is true to who we are as individuals – a show that we would perform with passion and urgency in order to make the audience understand that they must love and support one another with the little time they have – in short, to get them to understand there is “no day but today” to begin

“measuring their lives in love.” This is the statement we arrived at, verbatim, at the end of day one. We wrote this statement down and would return to it periodically as rehearsal progressed.

At the end of the day, they were given two assignments to get them thinking about and working on the play – the first was to make a table of everything their character said about themselves, everything they say about everyone else, and everything that is said about them. Professor Lynne Innerst calls this the “fact-finding exercise,” and it gets the cast searching in the *material* first and foremost for their information about given circumstances, character and relationship. The second exercise was to listen to the second act anthem “Seasons of Love,” and ask themselves “what does this number mean to me personally? What is the truth of these lyrics for me, in my life?”

It was one of the most encouraging and immediately rewarding first days of rehearsal I have ever experienced, and I left ready to begin the work of creating the play.

### Rehearsal Begins

The first step in rehearsal, as I said, began on day one, and that was beginning the process of developing a sense of ensemble and a united sense of purpose. The second step was for me alone, and that was to begin developing my *own* plan of action – deciphering where it was we needed to go and making a plan for how to get us there.

Learning music can be a complex and tedious process, even in *RENT*, the score of which almost the entire cast had been singing since they were children. Given the nature of the show as an opera, I knew that no real investigation would be able to begin until the

score was thoroughly learned and internalized. To jumpstart this process, I decided that the entire first week of rehearsal would be devoted to learning and working only the music. Isolating the music first would insure that it would not become a distraction later, and it would give the cast and the music director time to make purely formal decisions that might get glossed over by the time we were working the numbers in the context of scene work.

A week of music rehearsal would also give me a chance to sit back and observe the actors at work as they began to delve into and wrestle with the material on their own. This would afford me the opportunity to make notes on where we needed to go and what would best get us there. I decided to develop a profile on each actor in this first week, solely for my own eyes, identifying their strengths and weaknesses and familiarizing myself with what we would need to do with each individual over the course of the rehearsal process. Here is a sample of my selected notes from this first week of rehearsal:

Tiara Greene (Joanne)

*I'm not sure if she trusts her belt. She seems to have the notes, especially in "Take Me or Leave Me." But in other parts of the show, she usually chooses head voice, at least in rehearsal. Maybe the belt will come as she grows more confident with the music. At the very least, the challenge with Tiara will be getting her to understand that she has to use the style of the music (rock-gospel belt) as a tool to accomplish high stakes action and to communicate high stakes emotion.*

*The body, voice, and mind must be engaged in a total gesture that comes from an understanding of objective and pursuit of a strong action in order to get a result out of her scene partner (for example, Maureen.)*

*Tiara is very internal and introspective. Her energy, voice and action do not transmit very far beyond a few inches in front of her. She does not frequently make eye contact.*

*Meisner work may help this. Helping her manifest action vocally and physically directly at people (full eye contact.) Will help. Also, doing physicalizing and vocalizing actioning work from across the room with her scene partner will help as well.*

#### Janet McWilliams (Maureen)

*Janet's vocals (belt and mix) are solid and THERE. I think that she trusts them, but doubts herself in regard to pitch, rhythm, etc. She seems to approach the music as a musician, worried about the accuracy of what she's doing. She needs to start incorporate the high-stakes TACTICS of rock singing. At least she's CONNECTED to what's going on and what she's doing as an actor. Now she just needs to understand that she can let the instincts of her voice let go and do what they will do.*

#### Owen Pelesh (Mark)

*The vocals are solidly there, but he has no breath support/control. He needs to work with Lynn and David on getting some power behind his vocals.*

*He seems to be pretty free physically, but this physicality is frequently manufactured. We must get him out of his head; get him to stop watching himself. He is also listening to himself. He is often worried about "singing," rather than playing an action in the direction of his scene partner, endeavoring to send the message to them.*

These notes to myself served me well and allowed me to find a specific angle with which I could help each individual actor. I made a profile like this for each a cast member, including those covering ensemble tracks. As is clear from these examples, many actors had the same issues and roadblocks, many of which merely come from a lack of experience and a certain amount of guardedness that comes with being young and being human.

Some actors had a strong sense of the text; some had a strong sense of the music. Almost none had any sense of their body. It was clear that our rehearsals and scene work would need a threefold attack – first, attacking the scene from a dramatic perspective, isolating lyrics; second, attacking the scene from a musical perspective, isolating music if needed, but focusing on how the music and the lyric operate together as a single gesture; third, attacking the scene from a physical perspective – this would include work with me on creating and opening up a neutral body, and work with Brandon on physical characterization and how dramatic action manifests itself in the body.

Once we had spent a week learning the music backwards and forwards, I began the second week with this work on the physical body. I taught the cast a yoga-based warm up that would help center their minds and bodies as well as begin getting them to feel a sense of physical exertion – loosening them up, and helping them explore the untapped possibilities of the body. I also taught them a number of exercises inspired by the work of Jacques LeCoq's method of training in the development of a neutral and expressive body, which I was fortunate to study several semesters during my graduate school training.

We also worked on ensemble building exercises adapted from both LeCoq and Viewpoints – physical exercises that involve bodies following impulses as a group. These exercises foster a strong awareness of what is going on around the performer – in the space, bodies and minds of those with whom they are working. It gets them out of their personal bubble and allows them to feel themselves become part of the fabric of a larger whole. This alone knocks out so many of the problems of introverted, self-conscious, and physically/vocally awkward acting.

While I would think twice about spending time on this type of work with older actors, in straight plays, and in short rehearsal periods, I have yet to find a play or a cast to which this type of work does not provide immediate value. Working at least in part from an entirely physical perspective is an especially good use of time with young actors who have not yet had opportunities to discover for themselves what the body is capable of. Time in our rehearsal process did not always allow for us to do group warm-ups and physical exercises at every rehearsal, but the cast was encouraged to do this work on their own. Periodically throughout the process, usually during our longer rehearsals on the weekend, some time would be devoted to returning to these exercises, and we would call upon them, and others, as needed to solve problems that arose throughout the process.

When we worked physically on the weekends, we often began with an exercise designed by Joanne Akalaitis called “slam-dancing” to all kinds of music – sometimes classical, sometimes opera, often rock, and sometimes wild electronic Philip Glass. The first step of this work is dancing to know the space. This activity increases awareness of the space and each other in a way that lets the mind go – so that the body becomes aware and able to follow through with its own physical impulses. The second step is slam-

dancing to know each other. This involves dancing to know the space and directly encountering one another, at which point the dance transitions to slow motion and the two partners work together, before mutually agreeing to “bounce off” one another and back into the general dance, finding a new partner. Variations of this exercise are incredibly helpful to get at general emotion. “General emotion” should sound like a bit of a swear word to anyone who has “studied” acting or directing. In most acting methods, emotion is not a goal – playing an emotion or a state of being results in something fake or manufactured – believable representations of emotion should be a product that come from the honest pursuit of an objective. However, in warm-up, exercise, and training periods, it is often useful to explore what it feels like when emotion manifests itself in the body, finding ways of experiencing these physical realities without having to go through intellectual exercises to get there. In variations of Akalaitis’ “dancing to know the space” exercises, the director can guide the dancers through different kinds of imaginary architectures, using side-coaching to ignite their imaginations. He or she can suggest that they dance in a place of power – or in a place that intimidates them – or in a place that is entirely comfortable to them. In *RENT*, two major ways characters feel at various times are *powerful* and *frightened*. Taking them through physical exercises that get the intellect entirely out of the way and foster authentic, impulsive responses in the body is a powerful tool when the time comes to play a scene in which they experience something they are unfamiliar with – such as extreme power or profound fear. They find that they are comfortable “going there” (because their body has been there before) and this knocks down the walls of self-consciousness that can prohibit the playing of strong, organic choices.

We also worked on exercises taught to me by physical theater artist Pal Bernstein. The most valuable of these exercises is one he called “Icons.” This involves creating a static image in the body. Pal uses these exercises to develop physical characters. I have applied my own variations to these and typically use them to explore physicalizing dramatic action in the body. The first leg of the exercise is to create three “icons” expressive of character – in a variation, I utilize the concept of dramatic action and ask them to choose three actions that they play in the scene. The images they create in the body can be abstract, as long as they have three things – energy, extension and balance. These three images are performed in isolation, then in slow motion paying careful attention to the transitions between them – utilizing LeCoq’s ideas of movement analysis. Eventually a movement solo is created of the images and the transitions between them, and two more images are added for a total of five. This movement solo is then performed a variety of ways, beginning with extreme slow motion and working up to flipping through images as fast as possible. Besides increasing awareness in the body and opening up untapped realms of physicality, the actors found that this was an excellent way to wake themselves up, get themselves in the zone, and feel generally open and available.

In young actors, this work goes a long way toward breaking down barriers that inhibit the making of choices and the full-throttle, unguarded, total-body pursuit of actions and objectives, as well as getting the actors used to thinking with their bodies, staying on impulse, and getting out of their heads.

The type of physical work just described is mostly for training purposes, ensemble-building, and warm-ups. We were fortunate to have a long enough rehearsal

process to afford us some time for this kind of work, but because of the sheer size of the show, the bulk of the rehearsal process was spent creating the raw material of the play – exploring and staging scenes and numbers.

### Scene Work

Before we even began the “staging” section of the process, I laid down several ground-rules – things for the cast to constantly bear in mind as we worked, and goals for them to work toward on their own. Before we got into the thick of it, I knew we needed to have a long conversation about the necessity of taking care of themselves. Of course, because of the difficulty and range of the musical material, vocal health would be of prime importance. Vocal exercises should be done on their own, prior to rehearsal. They should work on their material during the day, then give their voices a chance to rest, then warm up before rehearsal. After rehearsal, they should cool down their voice with attention as equal to warming it up. They should be careful not to yell and scream and be wild during the day. Of course, they should not smoke or drink. They needed to make sure they were sleeping. They needed to make sure they were eating well and keeping themselves hydrated, bringing a bottle of water to every rehearsal.

All of this takes a tremendous amount of self-discipline. It essentially equates to the single “rule” I tried to get them to understand from day one – this show needed to be the focus of their lives right now. I told them that they have a tremendous responsibility to themselves, their fellow cast-mates, and the piece itself. I made it clear that if they did not attack their work with this kind of discipline, they were setting themselves up for disaster with a piece like this. I told them not to allow themselves to lose a day by acting

irresponsibly, and that, if they were careful to do all these things, this could be one of the most rewarding learning experiences of their lives.

With one or two exceptions, this was the first and only time the conversation needed to be had. For the rest of the process, the cast attacked the material with a voraciousness and an appetite for excellence that one would expect from a much older ensemble – and in the end wound up producing work that belied their young ages.

I also explained a bit about the process in which we would be working over the next few weeks, and gave them some guidelines about how to help me make it the most effective for them. First was to tackle the problem of having a group of actors who already knew every word and musical note of the material before they even *auditioned*. I knew that any good show arises from the organic exploration of the unknown. There is not a second of *RENT* that was unknown to any of them. For them to get the most out of the material, they needed to find their own way in, and this would involve a conscious decision to reject what they already *thought* they knew. They could not underestimate how well they already knew the words. Already in our first week of music rehearsal, I was losing tons of words in the lyrics, because they knew them so well, that they merely had to turn the dial in their head to “*RENT*” and open their mouths and voila! There was the show. The trap with doing this with *RENT* is that, because it’s through-sung, all the plot information is contained in sung lyrics, and they are lyrics that are sung high in the range, at a rapid pace, and against loud, driving accompaniment. It didn’t matter how well *they* knew and understood what they were saying. It didn’t matter how much *they* were “feeling” something. If the dial was merely set to “*RENT*” and put on auto-pilot, the audience would receive nothing.

From day one of music rehearsal, I tried to encourage them to “get their nose out of the book” – to try as quickly as possible not to drown themselves in words, musical notes and dynamic markings, but to take the words and notes “off the page.” While they were working music that first week with the musical director, I tried to plant the idea early on of getting used to what it means to play an action – using their words and music to *send* something to their acting partner – to try and use what they were singing/saying to get inside of and affect a change within their partner. I reminded them frequently that the word or the note is only *part* of the total gesture.

In any piece of theatre, the only way to arrive at dramatic action is to use the words (or in the case of a musical, the music and lyrics) to get your partner to *do* something. In *RENT*, an actor has the supreme good fortune to have music that has been constructed brilliantly to achieve this. *RENT* is in many ways an extraordinarily well-written piece of musical theater, the kind that represents the culmination and integration of the form’s history. In this kind of material, an actor has the opportunity to communicate something to someone using their entire *being*. This would become the main objective of our work together – getting the actor used to communicating something using everything they are. In *RENT*, not only does the *form* itself demand this, but the story itself does as well. How else could one fully communicate the circumstances of these people, and what is going on in their lives at this moment in time? The stakes in *RENT* are extraordinarily high, and it was never too soon to get the cast thinking beyond the notes and words on the page, and the ones inscribed on their collective memory.

Prior knowledge of the music and lyrics was not the only thing I knew would hold the cast back from discovering the material on their own in a fresh light – for many of

them, they were finally playing roles they had always dreamed of. What young pop musical theater tenor born in the late eighties or early nineties hasn't dreamt of playing Mark or Roger in *RENT*? In fact, I'm convinced that much of the vocal style we see being taught, performed and written for in contemporary musical theater comes from a certain style of singing pioneered by Anthony Rapp as Mark. Perhaps that is a topic for another paper, but I think it is fair to say that for a generation of musical theater artists, musical theater *was RENT*. So it was not just the score that the cast was familiar with, but the characters themselves. The trouble was, now it was time for *them* to *be* those people, rather than just looking at them as old friends with whom they had shared an imaginary journey dozens of times, or looking at them as a prebuilt persona that they now how to find a way of inhabiting. Unless they "built" the character themselves (whatever that means) the result would have no chance of authenticity.

I was careful to remind them that for many of them (and many who would be in the audience) these characters had become iconic. So, we may *think* we know them. The first thing we have to learn is that we don't. We had to abolish any preconceived notion of who the characters were and go back to the basics – what we know from the words on the page, and the characters that we build using these words as clues. David Mamet has one of the most prescient ideas of what character is that I have ever read:

The actor does not need to "become" the character. The phrase, in fact, has no meaning. There *is* no character. There are only lines upon a page.  
(Mamet, 1997)

The beauty of the original *RENT* is that the characters sprang from a melding of who the actor was and who the person on the page was. This is, of course, the way it

should always work. The actor lets his imagination start running, and then simply says the lines on the page. If the imagination is truly running, and the actor is saying the lines to achieve aims similar to those intended by the playwright (a strong and accurate objective), character should emerge of its own accord. This is of course dependent upon that actor having fairly open and immediate access to his own personal toolbox of being-a-human-being. This comes from experience, training, and sheer talent. My quest was to get the actors as open to themselves and to the play as possible, so that we could achieve our own fusion of the actor's imaginations and the lines on the page.

I also made clear my belief that the reason the message in *RENT* is so "universal," even though it is socio-political in nature, is that these are *real people* and not merely mouthpieces for ideologies. They are real people, going through real things, in real relationships. The audience connects to them because they recognize themselves in the other. We all have a little Mark in us, and a little Roger, and a little Mimi, and so on down the line. This is the brilliance of Jonathan Larson's imagination as a storyteller.

They are real people, all of them, and they absolutely *must* be played so. No excuses, no concessions, no fakery. Real people, all the way. Angel is not, to use a contemporary term, a "hot tranny mess" who is making a fool of himself on a daytime talk show for attention. If you insist on looking at characters and taking them at face value, attempting to "portray" a "character," you will get something that is impossibly inauthentic, and something that the audience may have fun laughing at or with, but stands no chance of connecting to. Some actors, including Chris, who was our Angel, will just show up and automatically accept that Angel dresses this way because Angel dresses this way. Other actors will have a bit more of a roadblock in understanding something that is

so other than themselves, and that is understandable. This actor must look at Angel as a real person, similar to himself in very crucial ways, although different in a few, and ask: “why does Angel dress this way?” He need not provide or make up an answer – the answer is there in the text, even if the text does support multiple interpretations by his imagination. One interpretation he might arrive at based on Angel’s actions and words would be that Angel dresses this way to send a message that people who look like this are not freaks, drug-dealers and abominations, but good people, who love just the same as you and I. There are other possible answers to the question of why Angel dresses this way, but if an actor shows up and plays actions in line with the text, “because Angel is really funny and likes to make people laugh” will not be one of the options. David Mamet says it best in his own words:

It is the job of the actor to show up, and use the lines and his or her will and common sense, to attempt to achieve a goal similar to that of the protagonist. And that is the end of the actor’s job. (Mamet, 1997)

In this way, we see that not only is there not a “character” from the original production that we must emulate or live up to, there isn’t a character that exists in the world. Mark does not exist. He was a figment of Jonathan Larson’s imagination, which Jonathan attempted to capture in words and music. Anthony Rapp had only to unite his imagination to those words and music to bring a believable and true Mark to life, and our actors needed to have the freedom to do the same. Thankfully, each and every one did.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PRODUCTION EVALUATION

*“Art is violent. To be decisive is violent.”*

Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares*

Opening night of *RENT* was one of the first times in my young career as a director, musical director, or actor that I felt confident that the show was ready to meet its audience. In the end, just how that happened is as impossible to define as what theater, art or directing is. We called ourselves a show, and went about the business of persuading other people that that was so. Aside from the minor trials and tribulations associated with any large-scale project, the process had been incredibly smooth, efficient, and judging by the response the show received, effective.

Of course, if true perfection exists in this world, it is not evidenced in man-made constructions. Every work of art leaves things to be desired, and our production of *RENT* was no exception. Most of what could be considered flaws in the final product could be traced back to a lack of assertiveness on my part as director. The line between allowing others to create art of their own and simultaneously guiding their creation is a very fine one. *RENT* showed me something I already knew about myself – at times, I allow things to progress too far in a direction I know is wrong, in favor of allowing others the creative freedom I feel is necessary for them to explore. At some point, directing must become violent. As much as we want as human beings to equivocate, and say “maybe,” the construction of a work of art is finally about making definitive choices – saying “yes” to this, and “no” to that. This, finally, is the problem of the director, and the final frontier is

perhaps impenetrable. Theater is fundamentally an art of collaboration. The painter has little problem saying “no” to the blue and “yes” to the red, or throwing out the entire canvas in favor of starting again, because he knows the canvas and the paint are not busy trying to realize their *own* dreams.

However, as Anne Bogart so astutely observes, “paradoxically, it is the restrictions, the precision, the exactitude, that allows for the possibility of freedom.” This of course, is easier said than done when the raw material with which one is working is not clay but human emotion. Nevertheless, it is a necessary evil and finding a way to gracefully get what you know you need is perhaps the greatest challenge a director will ever face.

### Design

The final design is perhaps the element with which I was most satisfied. I felt that the designers had created work that was honest and true to who they are, had found a way to fuse it with who I am, and finally used it to communicate in a deep and powerful way what *RENT* is. This occurred through a series of fruitful collaborations based around a central metaphor that was agreed upon by all. Kyle had created a set that was realistic enough to ground the production in some sort of gritty reality, yet abstract enough that it supported the audience’s imaginations in the construction of a variety of locales. Its lines were clean and elegant, and its space large and open enough that we could see the characters and here their story. Rita’s costumes both helped define who these characters were as individuals, down to the last ensemble member, and helped reinforce relationships, helping the audience to understand visually who was linked to whom,

which ultimately aided them in following the story. Mike Kiley's sound design made the very best of what he had to work with, and his design of the mix allowed us to hear the vocals, as well as hear the individual instruments in the pit, so none of the fine nuances of the orchestration were lost. Brandon's choreography was always justified, always original, and always true to what each performer's individual vocabulary of movement contributed. David Ames' musical direction assured that all the formal aspects of the music were in place, and that nothing would distract from the story, as is sometimes the case when a guitar player doesn't exactly know his part, or a singer hasn't exactly been coached in how to use that part of his range. John Hoey's lighting finally got as close as we could get in the wee small hours of tech in capturing simultaneously the feeling of both a rock concert and an opera.

All in all, we had managed to make manifest and mount visually and aurally our chosen metaphor of a *La Boheme* starring Kurt Cobain, and it served to help us capture a beautiful world on the brink of collapse and destruction, expressing the tension of a clash of cultures, ideas and personalities, and saved in the end by the light of love.

### Performance

The performances of the actors in the final product were to be commended. Here were college freshmen, sophomores and juniors, actors who were just moving beyond their teenage years, who had managed to capture all the passion and fury of the characters in *RENT*, come to a tremendous and true understanding of the high stakes of the given circumstances, and who attacked every line and note of music with action intended to achieve an objective. Their bodies were open and free, they were on impulse, in the

moment, and using language and music as though they were inventing it on the spot.

Above all, they were performing the show as if they had an important message to deliver and this moment would be their last opportunity to do so.

For all the successes and the extraordinary growth of the cast, it is in the performances that my willingness to let the exploration go on too long before making a final, direct and “violent” decision showed itself most. In general, my lack of insistence from the very beginning that the formal aspects of the language be tended to as strongly as the intention behind the words created, in certain cases, an inability of the actors to clearly articulate to the back of the house. This is far from a minor concern, as one of the main goals from the beginning was to make sure that the audience got “every word.” This problem could have been solved from the start if I had had the foresight to demand and hire a vocal coach, whose job it could be to tend specifically to this. I knew that the largeness of the space would be difficult to navigate, but it was mostly the communicative ability of the actors’ bodies in space, and not their voices in space, with which I was concerned. This problem didn’t fully reveal itself until we were actually in the space, and I realized the iconic power of the bodies was strong, but that I was missing many of the words. While this is an excellent lesson to learn about working in a larger space, I’m not sure I could have done anything about this problem at any point in the game, realizing as late as I did how severe the issue would become.

This problem was the major one that was articulated by my teachers and mentors who came to see the show, but in the end, the general feedback, even from Lynne Innerst, a voice specialist and one of my most trusted teachers, mentors and friends, actually said that the heart of the show and the performances was so strong, she didn’t even mind

missing some of the words. Of course, this is partially a matter of taste and depends on how much one values what one sees in relation to what one hears – for some who came to see the show expecting to hear every word, the show may have been slightly intolerable and more than a little incomprehensible – for others, what they saw may have more than made up for what they couldn't hear.

The other major concern in the performances was the strongest evidence, and for me, the strongest lesson about indecision and my apprehension to stifle an actor's creative process. Derrick Millard is an actor who gives everything his all. Unfortunately, he does not yet realize or trust his own power, and typically gives much more than he needs to. His Tom Collins was loud, abrupt, brash, and at times, self-indulgent. The most destructive example of this, if one can call it that, was in the reprise of "I'll Cover You," the gospel anthem sung by Collins at Angel's funeral. Derrick understood Collin's grief, and felt for him profoundly. He wanted to give his Collins a chance to cry out to the heavens in this moment and punish God for what He had done to Angel – and what he had done to Collins. Doug Wager was the first of many to point out that Derrick was doing the audience's work for them, not allowing *them* to feel anything at all, because he was too busy working up his own feelings and wallowing in them in the stage. The trouble here was that the action Collins was playing and his objective were ill-defined in rehearsal – if Collins is *punishing* anyone in this moment (the audience, God, his friends) he is in direct defiance of everything Angel stood for – and so betraying a complete lack of knowledge of who Angel was, and assuring us that Angel's message was lost and his death in vain. I allowed the mistake to continue into performance, because I was scared that something unconscious in Derrick would resist and react against a re-directing of a

moment he felt so strongly about and so emotionally attached to. Derrick was putting out more than any other actor was giving, and in a process where so much time was spent pushing actors to give more, at first Derrick's enthusiasm and wild risk-taking was joyous to behold. However, each actor needs a different director. Derrick needed a director who would "reign him in," as the expression goes – helping Derrick to focus his choices and make sure that they were in line with what the *character* wanted to achieve, and not what the *actor* wanted to achieve.

Derrick is the equivalent as an actor of what I was like as a director at his age. I was concerned with thinking deep thoughts and exploding them on the audience with little concern for simple beauty of a play. I was thinking too much and doing too little. Doug Wager told me that he didn't give a shit what I thought and neither does the audience, and it changed the way I direct and formed the basis of what I am able to see, do and communicate now. His harsh, but fundamentally true advice to a young director parallels David Mamet's equally harsh and equally true advice to a young actor:

The professional performs for pay. Her job is to play the piece such that the audience may understand it—the self-respecting person keeps her thoughts and emotions to herself. (Mamet, 1997)

While the statement may seem cold and harsh, the spirit of it is true. It was *Derrick's* thoughts and emotions he was putting on the stage, not the characters – just like once upon a time, it was *my* thoughts and emotions I was putting on the stage, and not the play's.

An artist *should* feel, and an artist *should* think. But an artist's job doesn't end with the thinking and feeling of these thoughts and emotions. If it did, he would just be a

human being, and not an artist. An artist's job, if you can call it that, is fundamentally to *communicate* these thoughts and ideas to someone else. It is the *how* of this communication that can be taught – and directed.

## CONCLUSION

### One More Time, Please

*The seed of acting is the reality of doing.*

Sanford Meisner

So, what *is* a director? Well, quite simply, a director is one who directs. To be sure, a director also thinks, feels, imagines, and dreams – he also manages, supervises, and oversees – but primarily his job is simply to direct the play. Directing is doing – it is effecting concrete change in real time and space, restructuring the formal elements of reality in order to communicate something – effecting some change in his scene partner, the audience. In this way, directing is an awful lot like acting. Doug Wager is fond of saying that if acting were thinking, it would be called that. The same is true of directing.

I had always been attracted to music and visual art because I found them to be ways of making art that are formal in nature – that is, that form gives rise to content. Without finding and constructing a form, the content remains dormant in your imagination.

Form is all around us – it is the method by which nature expresses its beauty. Attending to form does not erase the mystery of things – in fact, when done properly, form allows us the freedom to appreciate this mystery. The form of the sky is “vast and blue.” This form is also its content. There is no more *content* to the sky than the formal elements of “blue” and “big” – and yet its meanings and potentialities are infinite.

When I came to grad school, my first mentor Dan Kern talked to me of objectives, actions and obstacles. These had to do with what a character wants and needs and immediately smacked to me of emotion and content. What I didn't realize then is that these are merely formal elements. Yes, it *is* the job of the director to help an actor choose and clarify the strongest objective possible. It *is* the job of the director to make sure an obstacle is in place for him to struggle against. It *is* the job of the director to make sure the action he is playing is in accordance with what the play dictates the character would do.

It is with these formal elements in place that true freedom of expression opens up.

It is the job of a director to say, yes, I understand you *think* and you *feel* that a stage cluttered with junk expresses something deep about the world in which these characters live. Yes, I understand that you *think* and you *feel* that this character is in torment and despair. Yes, I know that you *think* and you *feel* that this play is fundamentally about AIDS, or homelessness, or the socio-political crises of the world. But it is fundamentally the job of the director to say *no* – what you don't realize is that the form you have found muddles the idea in ways you cannot possibly comprehend, because you are the one having the idea. The director asks the question, what is this junk *doing*? What is the character *doing*? If the answer is “nothing,” and it often is, then it must be back to the drawing board.

Music *does* something. The composer chooses a diminished chord as opposed to an augmented chord because the diminished chord effects a different sort of change in the perception of the listener than does an augmented chord. The painter chooses blue over

red because it effects a different sort of change in the viewer than does red. A squiggly line effects a different change than does a straight line. All of these formal choices *do* something, and the one thing I have learned above all in grad school is that if what something *does* is fully understood and fully attended to, then there is often only one right choice.

*This* is true art. A rose can have no other shape or color, or it is no longer a rose, it is a lily. With one simple change in form, the sky becomes the ocean. One decides what one wants something to *do* and chooses the form that best does that.

Before graduate school, I was obsessed with ideas, feelings, philosophy, and thought. I looked to the sky and saw only billions of years of incomprehensible history and inexplicable complexity. If I had looked at *RENT* with such eyes, I would have seen the same, and I would have drowned. Only God knows what I might have made, but for all my deep and tormented thinking and feeling, it would not have communicated anything I thought or felt and I and the audience would have shared nothing but profound frustration.

Grad school taught me to look at the sky and see “big” and “blue.” To turn to the audience and not try to *explain* the sky, but merely point to it – and let them look for themselves. That, finally, is the job of the director – to direct, to point the way. Some things—like art, like life, like beauty—simply cannot be explained by man – all that man can do is point his brother in the right *direction* – and allow him to look for himself.

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