Have you ever heard the name Jonathan Larson? Odds are you have drawn a blank because he died before his name could become as big as Mel Brooks, Rodgers and Hammerstein, or Bob Fosse. Larson, like these well-known Broadway directors and writers, created an ingenious musical, but then he died just before it opened and before he could see the mark he left on the world of Broadway. Larson worked on other projects that quenched his creative thirst even though they could not pay the rent. These works included musicals called *J. P. Morgan Saves the Nation, Superbia*, and a rock monologue called *Tick, Tick... Boom!* that was performed by Larson himself. He not only won the Richard Rodgers Studio Production Award from the American Academy of Arts, but he also received a Stephen Sondheim Award from the American Music Theater Festival: both honors were for *Superbia*. Sondheim (a famous Broadway composer well-known for his musical *Sweeney Todd*) was a mentor of Larson’s, which made the latter achievement all the more personal and impressive. Larson was a starving artist in New York City who produced a masterpiece that showcased the Bohemian life, loss, and relying on close ones in the darkest of times. *RENT*, Larson’s famous creation that many are familiar with because of the 2005 movie, was introduced to the Great White Way (a.k.a. Broadway) in January of 1996.
RENT is a raunchy 1990s rock opera inspired by La Boheme (a popular opera of the late 1800s) plus a dreamer’s message about his view on living life. RENT premiered on the 100th anniversary of La Boheme - a mere coincidence, believe it or not. Rodolfo, the poet became Roger, the punk-rock artist; Marcello, the painter turned into Mark, the videographer; Mimi had HIV rather than TB; and in both settings, the characters fought against authority and winter’s chill by burning their eviction notices. Larson took these inspirations and made his own story line of love gained, life lost, and friendships tested (pbs.org). “Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes; how do you measure a year in life?... In truth that she learned, or the times that he cried; in bridges he burned, or the way that she died... Remember the love... Measure your life in love,” (RENT, act 2). The lyrics from his reoccurring theme, “Seasons of Love”, sum it all.

“To days of inspiration, playing hooky, making something out of nothing, the need to express - to communicate. To going against the grain, going insane, going mad... To being an us for once, instead of a them. La Vie Boheme,” (RENT, act 1). These lyrics from Larson’s eulogy for Bohemia embody his love of life and all its ups and downs. Across the country, the lyrics of this song and others became famous, not to mention of course, the actors. The names Adam Pascal, Anthony Rapp, Idina Menzel, Jesse L. Martin, Taye Diggs, and Wilson Jermaine Heredia are associated with their breath-taking performances on stages across America. The cast and crew of RENT brought life to Larson’s story and music. To audiences everywhere, Roger was a brother, Mimi was a best friend, and Mark was a neighbor. To audiences everywhere, the characters Bennie, Maureen, Joanne, and Collins were real. To audiences everywhere, the death
of Angel was the death of a closest and dearest friend and relative - not an eye was absent of
tears during this scene in the show.

Not only was the story and those who acted it out phenomenal, but the set itself was a sight
to remember. It was simple, and it never changed but for a few folding tables and chairs. There
was a balcony, under which a rock band accompanied a full orchestra in the pit; there was a set
of scaffolding, light fixtures everywhere, and a sort of bridge set back into the wall that
connected the two sides of the stage. All these served as an apartment, a community center, the
streets of New York, and a cafe. The simplicity of the set accented the depth of the story and let
the audience focus on the characters, not where those characters danced and sang.

RENT, being so popular and meaningful on Broadway, was made into a movie in 2005 with
most of the original cast. Although the raw feeling of the live performance was not present and
select songs and scenes were cut, the movie held its own and honored the memory of Larson and
his tremendous work. Because of the movie, people around the world could experience a
dreamer’s wish-come-true that originally was only viewed by well-off Americans. People
around the world could share the enthusiastic inspiration.

There are those who slandered RENT, saying it was a rip-off of La Boheme. To them I say
RENT, yes, took inspiration from the nineteenth century opera, but the only thing RENT was a
rip-off of was Larson’s life. He, like his characters, lived in a crumby apartment even though his
parents were perfectly happy to support him in all he did; he could barely afford cable let alone
heat; and he even had Mark throw the apartment keys down to Collins on the street in the show
because that is what he did for his own friends in reality. There were those who said RENT did
nothing but preach to the choir about a controversial message. To them I would say, yes, it is
a controversial message, and his musical was in-your-face, but that is because the 90s were in-your-face. Larson took an issue that needed to be addressed and set it to a story in the perfect time period: the decade of rock ‘n roll, independence, and... AIDS.

Despite the degrading remarks about it, RENT was initially meant to show for five weeks, and in less than 24 hours after opening night, every show was sold out. Of Larson and his show, “NEWSDAY’s Linda Winer called it ‘the first original breakthrough rock musical since Hair.’”

Larson put his heart and soul into the making of RENT. He lived as his characters lived - poverty stricken - worked as a waiter at the Moondance Diner, and put seven years into getting his rock opera onto the stage. “It’s both tragic and ironic that Larson never saw ticket holders enjoy his show.’ Wiederhorn wrote. ‘Even more uncanny are the parallels between Larson’s life and his characters’ - many of whom cling to life knowing that it could end at any moment,’” (pbs.org).

Jonathan Larson died of an untreated heart condition just before his dream was introduced to the world, but not before it was made real in front of his eyes in a stunning production. When Larson finally quit his job as a waiter, “his friend Eddie Rosenstein remembers, ‘After he left the diner, and he announced that he was a full-time professional musical playwright, his spirits soared. That's all anybody wants to do in life, isn't it? A chance to do what they do,’” (angelfire.com). He is remembered in loving memory by all who knew him, and he lives on in his musical. RENT was not just a show: it was a dream, a personality, a memory, a life.

Jonathan Larson was an Average Joe like you and me, and he proved that if you are willing to act on your dreams, they can come true. His wishes, his loves, his losses, his anger, and his laughter all became that of audiences not only on Broadway but world wide. His sister
said of opening night, “It was the best and worst moment of my life. This play was Jonathan. It is totally my brother,” (pbs.org).
Works Cited

[http://pbs.org/wnet/broadway/stars/larson_j.html].

