



STYLE ANALYSIS

Questions to Pinpoint Individualities in Dramatic Texts
(adapted from Francis Hodge, Wm. Ball, Robert Barton, et. al.)

A. Given Circumstances

1. At what point in history is the play set, written, performed? How do these interact?

- a. **Play Set:** December 24, 9pm EST (Act I): December 24, 10pm EST (the following year). The play purposely does not state a year, but I am choosing to place the action in 1989-1990.
- b. **Play Written:** Work on writing the play began in the spring of 1989 with fellow playwright Billy Aronson. Due to creative differences, Larson sought and received permission in October of 1991 to continue working on RENT by himself. By September of 1994, casting of the workshop began which ran from October 29 to November 6. A success, the workshop prompted several rounds of rewrites, culminating in December 1995 with a revised script. Even with the cast complete, revisions continued to be made even after Larson's death in the early hours of January 25, 1996: the day previews began at the New York Theatre Workshop. After Larson's death, Michael Greif, the director; Jim Nicola, the artistic director of NYTW; Tim Weil, the music director, arranger, and music supervisor; and Lynn Thomson, the dramaturg (who later unsuccessfully sued the Larson estate for a share of RENT's copyrights) worked together to make adjustments to the script for its Broadway debut (McDonnell & Silberger, 20-57).
- c. **Play Performed:** RENT opened off-Broadway at the New York Theatre Workshop on February 13, 1996. After sellout crowds, RENT moved to the Nederlander theatre on Broadway, playing continuously for twelve years, from its opening on April 29, 1996, to its closing on September 7, 2008. This makes RENT the ninth longest running show in Broadway's history (playbillvault.com).
- d. **Interaction of These Elements:** An advantage to opening in 1996 was the 100 year anniversary of Puccini's *La Bohème*, providing a hook for Anthony Tommasini of *The New York Times* to write a story regarding the fledgling production. Within days of that story, Larson was dead, and along with the power of the music, story, and performances, RENT was catapulted to success (McDonnell & Silberger 50). Although the process for moving musicals to Broadway is notoriously tortured, I am

not aware of any that took seven years of constant creative work to bring to fruition. Each page, each song, each lyric was a struggle for Larson; he embodied Roger, struggling daily to write songs of relevance. Because the time of this gap in seven years and Larson choosing not to set the play in a specific year, this gives me and the creative team leeway in setting the time. I'm choosing to keep the action at the inception of RENT: 1989-1990. Within the spectrum of RENT's creation, 1989-1996, 1989 is when the AIDS crisis was at its hottest, public perception was at most hostile, and governmental intervention was at its lowest. 1989 was a dynamic time of revolution: peaceful and triumphant in Eastern Europe, and bloody and repressive in China. It was the year after poor artists, addicts, and workers rioted against the police in Alphabet City. It was a time when unthinkable things were possible.

2. Is the setting rural or metropolitan? Urban or remote? Coastal or inland? Protected or exposed? Confined or open? Why is this appropriate or relevant?

Alphabet City is quintessentially urban and crushingly poor, centered in the most populace city in the country. Manhattan is essentially an island, but no water can be seen over the abandoned warehouses and tenements where we find the people of RENT. However, unlike other plays taking place in crowded urban environments, RENT has an open and expansive feel, as if the city goes on forever. This is critical for the scenic designer, as the show lends itself to a sparse, open concept. This is also essential to accommodate the numerous locations that the play must honor. Aesthetically, having an open feel to the play creates a sense of hope, the open lot that the principals strive to protect against the soaring condos of stifling gentrification.

3. Is specific emphasis placed on any one of the environmental fact categories? Which? Why? or to what effect?

AIDS is the most important environmental element within the play; half of the eight principal characters are afflicted with the disease, and the struggle to live and love with AIDS is a defining factor of every relationship onstage. The only couple not directly affected by AIDS is the triangle of Mark/Maureen/Joanne, but Angel's death by AIDS still has a tremendous impact on their relationships. For Mark, it is affirmation that he must craft something meaningful, even if it means continuing his Bohemian lifestyle. For Maureen and Joanne, it is a powerful lens from which to put their own problems into perspective. For all characters, it is the catalyst to *carpe diem*, and to forever remember and embrace Larson's theme: No day but today.

4. Are the polar attitudes obvious? Unique/Fresh? How so?

(Please see page 10 of text analysis for in depth chart detailing beginning/ending polar attitudes for all eight principal characters)

What's exciting about each character's polar attitudes is the intersection of two important elements: art and love. Both elements can be said to embody the Bohemian

lifestyle: all worldly possessions or goals are secondary and subsidiary to heightening one's artistic craft and romantic affections. Each character values both art and love to one extent or another, and by the end of the play, each character has a deeper appreciation or success in one or both areas. Even the antagonist, Benny, is not a melodramatic villain; he is obsessed with the prosperity of Cyberarts (his clean aesthetic for what the world's next, best wave of expression will be) and finding love with Mimi. Having these layered attitudes helps keep the characters from becoming two dimensional, a common occurrence in musical theatre, especially in operas and operettas.

B. Dialogue

1. What is distinctive about the dialogue and/or language?

The most striking feature of RENT is the virtual absence of spoken dialogue. With but a handful of exceptions (and those exceptions rarely lasting more than 4-6 consecutive lines), each song bleeds into the next. Because musical theatre songs are an amplification of an emotion, the only means capable of expressing the fountain of ideas when simple words fail, it considerably ups the stakes of each character. It gives the show a breathless quality; something critical in keeping a 2.5 hour show moving swiftly.

2. Are patterns in utilization of dialogue/language apparent? If so, to what effect?

The most striking pattern is Larson's repetitions of songs and motifs throughout the play. Larson uses reprises throughout the play in two main ways: for expositional purposes and for thematic reinforcement. Please see pages 10-12 of text analysis for a more in depth examination of each occasion of these patterns in lyrics and dialogue.

C. Dramatic Action

1. Are the unities of time, place, and action observed? What impression does this create?

The unities of place and action are not observed: locations vary from place to place, with multiple plots and subplots winding throughout. The unity of time is honored in Act I: stage time is real time, and no time elapses in between stage events. Act II winds throughout a year, with crossover narration or music moving the audience from New Years, Valentine's Day, Labor Day, Halloween, and Christmas. Additionally, there's evidence that "Seasons of Love" is meant to be a flash back from the funeral (it was in an earlier draft of the script), showing that time need not be strictly chronological in the second act. By playing with the unity of time, Larson underscores its importance: Act I is a union of relationships within a day, and Act II is an unraveling of relationships within a year. In Act I we see how important a single hour of a single day can be, and in Act II we see many of our heroes forget to cherish what they have and, in so doing, lose that which they prize most. It is the theme "No day but today" in action.

2. What is the type/genre of action (tragedy, comedy, tragi-comedy, farce, melodrama)?

RENT is a rock-opera

3. What makes the play this type of action?

RENT is a textbook example of this genre: it is infused with rock music, and contains virtually no spoken words, fitting the description of an opera. It is possible to call RENT a rock-operetta, but instead of clarifying the genre, that seems to needlessly complicate it. Larson himself describes RENT as a rock-opera, and I see no reason not to honor that choice.

While discussing genre, it is important to note the multiplicity of musical genres contained within RENT. Larson seemed to have gone out of his way to include virtually every genre of music in regular circulation in the late '80's and early '90's, including, but not limited to the following:

Rock:	("Rent", "One Song Glory", "Out Tonight")
Pop:	("I'll Cover You", "Take Me or Leave Me", "What You Own")
Hip-Hop/Rap:	("La Vie Bohème")
Country:	("Santa Fe")
Gospel/Soul:	("Will I", "Seasons of Love")
Tango:	("Tango Maureen")
Techno/Dance:	("Today 4 U, Take Me")
Performance Art:	("Over the Moon")
Christmas:	("Christmas Bells", "Little Town of Bethlehem")
Musical Theatre:	("Light My Candle", "We're OK", "Halloween")
Ballad:	("Without You", "Your Eyes")

This seems to be Larson's attempt to craft an opera that speaks to younger audiences in a musical language accessible to them. Also, the multiplicity of musical genres speaks to the cultural melting pot that is New York City at the end of the millennium. In a lesser artist's hands, this fusion of styles could easily lead to a trite and cumbersome musical, but Larson weaves them brilliantly, using each musical style as reinforcement for the character's personality or goals.

D. Characters

1. Are the characters conventional, unconventional, fantastic, or allegorical? Why?

These characters are conventional for the dichotomy of Alphabet City in the early 90's, but highly unconventional for a Broadway musical of the time. Each character has the possibility of becoming allegorical archetypes, i.e.: the heartbroken rocker, the

confused filmmaker, the sunny drag queen, the proactive philosopher, the yuppie sell-out, the self-obsessed performance artist, the lesbian lawyer, etc. Instead, Larson makes those characteristics into defining features, not stereotypes. Each character is fleshed out with a fully developed (and often confusing) back story; these are meaty roles. This is another key difference between RENT and traditional operas such as *La Bohème*: in an opera singing is first and acting is second, but in RENT, acting and singing ability must be equally strong to convincingly portray each role.

2. Is there a hero/heroine or fool? If so, who? What makes him/her one?

Angel is the closest thing RENT has to both a hero and a fool. Angel is the character that binds the group together; his romantic example is the foil to the dysfunctional relationships of the other principals. Whereas the other characters are obsessed with what is NOT working in each of their lives, Angel is perpetually cheery; he focuses on what IS working in his life. In addition, Angel is the jokester of the group, from dressing up as Santa Claus and singing about pickle-drumming an akita to death, to dressing up as Pussy Galore on New Year's Eve. This is why Angel dying, perhaps more than anyone else in the group, causes the fracture that splits the principals apart. Angel is a martyr: a hero who dies.

3. Who is the protagonist and antagonist? Why?

This is a question that I struggled with for some time. Originally I was convinced that Roger was the protagonist, as he lives in the loft and has perhaps the most dynamic romantic relationship. His finding of his song also culminates in resurrecting Mimi, the climax of the show. Roger and Mimi's relationship in RENT is also roughly equivalent to that of Rudolph and Mimi in *La Bohème*, and their relationship is very convincingly the main thrust of that opera. However, this choice does a great disservice to Mark, who could also easily be considered the protagonist. After all, he is also the other roommate, has virtually identical amount of stage time, and perhaps most importantly, the sole ability to break the fourth wall and narrate to the audience. I have gone back and forth on this, at one point determining that BOTH were the protagonists, but I had to go back to Roger having a compelling love story and Mark not, which seems to point to Roger being the protagonist. Also, the revival of Mimi back from the dead is a much more theatrical and dynamic event than Mark simply pushing "play" on his film reel.

Benny is the antagonist. His goal of evicting Mark & Roger and "going corporate" is in direct opposition to the group's lifestyle.

4. Whose play is it? Why?

Although Roger is the protagonist, I would have to say that this is Mark's play, for a few important reasons. Mark is the "witness"; his goal is to capture his friends' lives on film, to document real life, to tell their story. As mentioned earlier, Mark is the only one who can narrate to the audience, the only one who is a one-man play within a play. Also, even though one could find traces of Jonathan Larson in each character, Mark is the clear recipient of Larson's personality. Just as Mark, Larson watched helplessly as

his friends contracted AIDS, and both tried to use their art to tell a story that would move people to action. Just as Mark, Larson lived the Bohemian life, and struggled against the temptation of “cashing in” and succumbing to the disconnecting power of modern media. In particular, those two thematic threads are central to two of Larson’s previous works: *Tic, Tic...Boom!* and *Superbia*, respectively. Mark acts as the voice of the playwright, so in addition to a protagonist, Mark could very convincingly be labeled a musical *raisonneur*. I understand that having Roger be the protagonist and yet having it be Mark’s play can read as dissonant, but there are two questions, and I am giving two answers, and both seem truthful and legitimate to me.

E. Idea

1. What is the major dramatic question posed by the play and how is the MDQ resolved?

“How we gonna pay last year’s/this year’s/next year’s rent?”

The immediate resolution of this question is provided in the first part of Act II, as Benny, in a gambit for good publicity, allows Mark and Roger to return to their flat. However, the long-term resolution to this question is explored throughout the rest of the act, as Mark struggles with ending his Bohemian lifestyle in favor of a career with a steady income and Roger shuns love in favor of pastoral Santa Fe. The recognition comes in “What You Own”, with the resolution coming in the finale, as Mark shows his film and Roger uses his song to reclaim his love.

2. What is the play’s main idea/“general beauty”? What is it about the play that awakens your enthusiasm and warrants attention from an audience?

First and foremost, the music of *RENT* is unparalleled. No contemporary musical boasts as many showstoppers as this one: from “Rent”, “Today 4 U”, “Out Tonight”, “Support Group”, “I’ll Cover You”, “La Vie Bohème”, “Seasons of Love”, “Take Me or Leave Me”, and “What You Own”—the list goes on. I love how *RENT* is not your typical musical, both in style and content. No other musical can juggle as many genres of music so successfully while framing believable characters tackling some of the biggest social issues of the day. Few commercial musicals, especially in the mid-1990’s, could take on homosexuality, bisexuality, poverty, artistry, addiction, and AIDS; and none dared to take on all of them at once. *RENT* is instructive without being didactic, romantic without being campy, and inspirational without being religious. *RENT* has the story to win a Tony, the lyrics to win a Pulitzer, and the music to win a Grammy. It is the best piece of musical theatre to come out of New York in years, possibly decades, and audiences respond accordingly. They come for the music, stay for the characters, and leave with the themes. *RENT* is, in short, masterful.

3. Is this idea fresh/trite? Valid/invalid? Why?

Even 17 years later, *RENT* is considerably fresh. The music is aging well, and even the techno beats in “Today 4 U” and “Contact” are starting to make a resurgence in popular music. AIDS may not be killing as many people in the US as in the ‘90’s, but worldwide AIDS is a monster, especially in the developing world. Until there is a cure for AIDS, *RENT* will continue to be immediately relevant, and even after AIDS is (hopefully) cured, the music and characters of *RENT* will persevere.

F. Tempo/Rhythm and Mood

1. Using adjectives, characterize the overall tempo/rhythm and mood of the play.

Because there are 42 musical numbers in this play, the tempo/rhythm is closely linked to whatever song is occurring at the time. Generally speaking, Larson uses a weaving pattern with the songs, placing a contrasting song after the previous song in order to dramatically shift the next unit. Additionally, Act I seems to utilize more genres than Act II, allowing Act II to twist motifs and ideas the audience has been exposed to in the previous act. Larson uses an additional trick in Act II with the arrangement of numbers, by placing transitional songs in between other songs grounded in a specific time. (This is explored in greater detail in pages 2-5 of the text analysis). The mood of Act I is generally more hopeful than that of Act II, and this is directly related to the swiftness of Angel’s deterioration from AIDS. This downward spiral is bookended by the uplifting “Seasons of Love” at the top of the act and “Your Eyes” and “Finale B” at the end.

G. Predominant Element

1. Is this a mood, theme, character, scenic, or language dominated play? Why?

In order of importance, these are Aristotle’s six elements of drama in context of *RENT*:

1. **Music:** Obviously, as a stylized opera, *RENT* is dominated by its use of music, and the other elements are subordinate. Without the driving music, *RENT* would lack a soul, and the show would simply not work.
2. **Character:** The characters infuse the music with soul; believable and invested characters make the audience listen to the lyrics and not just the music. The themes ring true because we see them in action through the actions of the characters. The relationships among the principals provide contrast with each other; we see ourselves and our friends in the actions of those characters, and they make *RENT* come alive.
3. **Theme:** Through repetition and powerful melodies, Larson leaves the audience with no doubt regarding the moral of the story. Concepts such as “No day but today”, measuring your life in love, and the scourge of AIDS are hammered home repeatedly. Because the music is so catchy and the characters so compelling, the audience has no choice but to hum “Seasons of Love” or “No day but today” as they leave the theatre.

4. **Language:** Related closely to the music are the lyrics and phrasing Larson chooses to use. *RENT* has a vocabulary all its own (as evidenced by the mammoth glossary I created for this play), a vocabulary rooted in urban, contemporary, and poor people of New York City. Oftentimes rhyming, these lyrics capture the goals of the characters in the moment, while keeping the audience guessing how Larson is going to rhyme words our Top-40 ears aren't used to hearing. Walking in, who would expect to hear, "To Uta / To Budda / Pablo Neruta / Too"? Not only does it rhyme, but it swaps the homonym "to" with "too" at the end of the phrase. Clever work, that!
5. **Story:** Because the characters, especially Maureen & Mimi, break up and get together again so frequently and the actors speak in lyrics, following the story can be problematic for the audience. For example, if the audience misses a simple lyric, such as Collins saying "As does mine" in response to Angel admitting to having AIDS, the audience will have no idea that Collins has AIDS as well. This is another similarity with opera; if listening to *La Bohème* an American audience will have only a vague impression of the story, relying solely on blocking, gestures, and musical shifts for plot information. This is one of the greatest obstacles in directing *RENT*, making the story plain without broadcasting it in program notes or expansive, presentational staging.
6. **Spectacle:** Scenery for *RENT* is a means to an end; it is an attempt to do as much as possible with as little scenery as possible. Locations shift too quickly to represent them literally, and the script doesn't even try. To highlight this, in Act II, the padlocked door is represented by one of the tables set on end, with Mark holding a padlock on a diagram. It would likely have been just as easy to wheel on a chained door, but the script goes out of its way for the less-is-more approach. I wholly approve of this choice.

H. Staging Conventions

1. Is the play *representational* or *presentational* in its relationship to the audience?

Being a musical, *RENT* cannot escape a certain degree of being presentational, as people generally do not sing their feelings at one another. Other overtly presentational moments include the use of Mark as a narrator; characters singing directly to the audience in "Rent", "Seasons of Love", "I'll Cover You-Reprise", "Over the Moon", and the last portion of "La Vie Bohème"; the gyrating, undulating explosion of "Contact"; the death march of Angel during the eulogy preceding "I'll Cover You-Reprise;" and the aforementioned break-in at the loft. Besides those exceptions, the singing in *RENT* is treated very representationally, with actors singing to each other in order to accomplish their immediate goals, not as asides to the audience to communicate their inner turmoil. The dance breaks are organic and consistent with typical behavior from each character. The people who populate *RENT* must be *real*; breaking the fourth wall is something to be done selectively, especially since the number of solos in *RENT* is

relatively limited compared to other musicals (a primary source of presentational moments in musical theatre). *RENT* is at times presentational toward the audience, but never at the expense of believability.

2. What relationship will there be between the conventions of the historical period from which the play comes and this particular production?

RENT opened 17 years ago and was initiated 24 years ago, but it has only been a little over 4 years since it closed on Broadway (and only a few months after closing Off-Broadway). Because the musical was so cutting edge for the time, it has taken years for its contemporaries to catch up. This means very little must change to adjust to audience expectations. Public opinion about drug abuse, poverty, and homosexuality have certainly evolved since the mid 1990's, but they are still very much germane to today. This is especially so with recent laws legalizing marijuana in Washington and Colorado, and the legalization of gay marriage in 9 states and the outright prohibition of gay marriage in 31 states.

I. Briefly summarize the style of this play.

2. Include here what you find beautiful and/or important about the play, what the sensory experience (tempo/mood, textures, line, shape, sound, movement pattern) of the play is for you, and any metaphor or image that you feel will help to shape or define the look and feel of this play's "unique world".

GENERAL BEAUTY

I love how full of *life* *RENT* is. For these characters, there is so much from which to despair: poverty, rejection, isolation, and disease. Faced with that, each character instead chooses *life*. This play constantly peers and pushes forward: the past is dead and gone, and the only thing left to do is live each day in the moment to the fullest. Not to mention, the music is undeniably awesome. This play *rocks*: in every sense of the word.

TEMPO/MOOD

Act I, although longer, has a much quicker tempo than Act II; exuberant numbers abound, from "Rent" to "Today 4 U" and "Out Tonight" to "La Vie Bohème". In Act I, as much life as possible is packed into two hours of a day. Act II is more sedate and reflective; we see how each character measures up over the course of a year and how they cope with death, despair, and doubt.

SENSORY EXPERIENCE

RENT is skeletal; it is tenements of steel and brick, populated by societal flotsam & jetsam. It is a cold, angular world of tall buildings and zigzagging fire escapes. It is dark lots besieged by huddled hobos and burning garbage cans. It is piled trash, faded graffiti, and police sirens. It is the stink of unwashed masses, sewer steam, and taxi exhaust. It is the world of the unwanted. In defiance, the scrappy denizens of Alphabet City have transformed themselves into a rolling inferno of rockers, divas, lovers, and aesthetes. *RENT* is a determination to live, an irrepressible surge of musical celebration. It is an artistic melting pot, a celebration of optimism. It is seeing life

through another's lens, capturing a moment, bottling a lifestyle. It is a guttering candle flame in a freezing flat. It is a rock concert on the rooftop. It is witnessing art, love and life collide.

It is living the Bohemian Life.

IMAGE/METAPHOR

A flickering Bolex 16 mm camera



(NOTE: I don't plan on providing the following description to the designers; I trust them to glean their own sensory information from the picture. Just to provide you with a sense of why I chose this object, I have provided some of my sensory responses below. I also didn't want to muddy the water by showing an image connected to Mark with Roger as the protagonist).

The camera is black, hard, bumpy, and stark, punctuated with metallic accents. It is angular, with lenses of various sizes, shapes, and scopes, peering into the distance. It is vintage and artsy; a relic repurposed for today. Placed on end, the telescopes resemble skyscrapers jutting into the sky. Despite its cold appearance, this device is transformational. It is bottled magic, a way to bear witness and force perspective. It allows one to focus, to zoom, to preserve. It is memories in action. It is life captured.

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