

RENT

**25TH ANNIVERSARY
FAREWELL TOUR**

STUDY GUIDE



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THE NATIONAL THEATRE FOUNDATION

David J. Kitto, Executive Director

Dave Steadman, Chief Development Officer

Olivia Kosciusko Tritschler, Director of Operations

Jamie Boller, Associate Director of Development

Emily Schmid, Program & Office Administrator

Written and Curated by Jared Strange, Dramaturg

Designed by Carolyn Donarski

1321 Pennsylvania Avenue NW Washington, DC 20004

www.nationaltheatre.org

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INTRODUCING

RENT

25TH ANNIVERSARY FAREWELL TOUR

If you checked out the official study guide, you will have learned a lot about how Jonathan Larson's *Rent* came together. However, there was a lot that had to happen before it could make a splash on Broadway—and there's a lot that's happened since. In this supplemental guide, we'll take a closer look at three subjects that help contextualize *Rent*. First, a brief overview of how theatre communities, performance artists, and activists responded to the AIDS crisis on the stage and in the streets. By the time *Rent* debuted, significant strides had been made in the mainstream representation of HIV-positive people, thanks largely to daring, sometimes provocative work

that challenged the government and the public to take the epidemic seriously. Then, we'll examine *Tick, Tick...Boom!*, Larson's autobiographical musical that preceded *Rent*. Thanks to the high-profile 2021 film adaptation helmed by Lin-Manuel Miranda, this incisive and heartfelt story about the ups and downs of the creative process is getting more attention than ever. Finally, we'll look past *Rent*'s Broadway debut and consider its legacy on the stage and off. Whether in launching careers, spawning imitators, or even earning its share of criticism, *Rent* has made an indelible mark on musical theatre and popular culture.



ACTING UP: THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE RESPOND TO AIDS

Today, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, or AIDS, is not as formidable as it was when the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) declared it an epidemic in 1981. “Now, people who contract human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and those who develop AIDS because of it, can live rich, full lives thanks to medical treatment. Furthermore, the stigma surrounding HIV transmission and AIDS has lessened significantly. Forty years ago, however, the situation was very different. Initial coverage of the epidemic was limited to the point that much of the public had little idea how quickly it was spreading. Those who became sick, meanwhile, were often neglected and ostracized, especially if they were gay men. Even when AIDS did receive coverage, disinformation was so widespread that some thought it was an exclusively “gay disease” or that it could be transmitted as easily as the flu. Exacerbating this problem was the Reagan Administration’s refusal to publicly acknowledge the crisis until 1987; that neglect, coupled with the slow response from government health agencies, only made things worse

While many politicians and public health officials were slow to respond, members of the theatre community acted quickly to raise awareness and pool resources. One of the earliest and most vocal critics of the government response to AIDS was writer and activist Larry Kramer, who co-established the Gay Men’s Health Crisis Committee in 1982 and helped organize the first major fundraiser for AIDS research. Follow-up fundraisers, including an evening hosted by Tony-winning writer and actor Harvey Fierstein and a massive spectacle produced at Madison Square Garden by Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, established show business professionals as significant players in combatting AIDS.



Poster for the AIDS benefit staged at Madison Square Garden in New York by Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Playwrights and performers around the country, meanwhile, were starting to confront the problem onstage in shows ranging from monologues, such as Jeff Hagedorn’s *One* (1983); romantic tales like Stephen Holt’s *Fever of Unknown Origin: A Kind of Love Story* (1984); and revues like *The A.I.D.S. Show* (1984), a series of skits and scenes created by the San Francisco-based troupe Artists Involved with Death and Survival (A.I.D.S.).

Offstage, members of gay communities across the country were struggling to come to terms with a grim new reality. Many grew familiar with memorial services for their deceased friends, some of which were turned into celebratory performances in their own right. James Howell, a former member of the Joffrey Ballet, even choreographed a piece to be played on video at his service. Meanwhile, candlelit vigils

and marches were organized all over the country, and were especially successful in New York, Houston, Chicago, and San Francisco. Unfortunately, DC's own 1983 vigil was poorly attended, leading to accusations of "AIDS apathy" within gay communities. Furthermore, the Dupon Circle club where the vigil was set to meet was accused of discriminating against people color. These controversies, among others, demonstrate that while anyone could be infected with AIDS, many people of color had to fight to be heard within predominately White spaces. Furthermore, many women were also sidelined in the movement, though some went on to fulfill significant leadership roles. Thankfully, there are always a diverse array of organizers working behind the scenes to make progress.

1985 was a pivotal period in the history of AIDS-related art and activism. Two plays debuted in New York that year which brought the subject to increased public and critical attention: William Hoffman's *As Is* and Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*. *As Is* tells the story of Rich, a man dying of AIDS, who struggles to find a proper support system. Despite his challenges, Rich finds romance again with his former lover, showing it was still possible for gay men to fulfill their desires after an AIDS diagnosis. *The Normal Heart*, meanwhile, follows Ned Weeks, a writer, based on Kramer, who establishes an advocacy organization to raise the alarm over a mysterious disease killing gay men. While often criticized for not being a particularly well-crafted work of art, Kramer's direct style



Members of ACT UP stage a "die-in" outside the FDA headquarters in Rockville, Maryland. Photo by Peter Ansini/Getty Images

played a major role in raising the profile of the fight against AIDS. These very different plays, both of which inspired their fair share of acclaim and controversy, are just two examples of how theatre was used to assert the humanity of gay men struggling with AIDS and communicate the dangers the disease presented.

While *As Is* and *The Normal Heart* brought AIDS closer to the mainstream, vital, sometimes provocative work was still being done on the fringes and the frontlines. In 1987, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), arguably the most significant political voice in AIDS activism, appeared on the scene. ACT UP was a diverse coalition of activists, artists, and thinkers that adopted radical methods in their public demonstrations. A list of their most (in)famous protests might include wrapping the home of North Carolina senator Jesse Helms in a giant yellow condom, staging a "die-in" at the Food and Drug administration building, and dumping the ashes of their deceased friends on the White House lawn. While many members of ACT UP were committed to these demonstrations, some devoted their attention to the so-called "Science Club," a group that sought to leverage expertise to create change in the medical system." Meanwhile, theatre artists were bringing more diverse stories audiences around the country. Performance artists such as the members of Pomos Afro Homos (Eric Gupton, Brian Freeman, and Djola Bernard) drew from postmodern aesthetics to tell innovative stories drawn from Black gay life. Writer-activists such as Luis Alfaro created art and organized protests to mobilize Latinx communities and combat stigma against queer Latinx people. Santa Monica's Sodomy Players, meanwhile, earned laughs for their edgy,

Original production
of *The Normal
Heart* at the Public
Theatre. Brad
Davis and Phillip
Richard Allen.

Photo by Martha Swope



Brad Davis and
D.W. Moffett.

Photo by Joan Marcus



Today, there are several memorials honoring those who have died from AIDS. Among them are the National AIDS Memorial Grove in San Francisco (left) and the New York City AIDS Memorial (right). The NYC Memorial is located on the site once occupied by St. Vincent Hospital, the first in the nation to establish an AIDS ward.

campy show *AIDS! The Musical!* (1991), demonstrating that comedy and satire could tackle harsh realities and stimulate political action.

By 1993, new hope was on the horizon. The political landscape had shifted following the election of President Bill Clinton, the first candidate from a major party to campaign on promises to support LGBTQ+ civil rights. Clinton's election promised to overturn the failures of the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations by treating AIDS seriously. By that point, NBA legend Magic Johnson had already shocked the world by revealing his own HIV diagnosis, proving once and for all what those who were paying attention already knew: that anyone could contract the virus. Clinton's ascension to the White House also coincided with the debut of another major theatrical milestone: Tony Kushner's epic two-parter, *Angels in America*. Across the two plays (*Millennium Approaches*

and *Perestroika*), Kushner explores such complex themes as gay identity, religious conservatism, economics, and political exploitation as main character Pryor Walter struggles to come to terms with his AIDS diagnosis and mysterious encounters with an angel. The success of the play signaled increased acceptance of (mostly White) gay men in mainstream culture and included them in the vision for a new, more prosperous America.

Aggressive political action and theatrical innovation paved the way for *Rent* (1996) to tell a story about characters living with AIDS on Broadway, the most prominent stage in America. This very brief history leaves out many artists and activists who contributed to this fight. It does show, however, that theatre and performance can help change the landscape of a health crisis by raising awareness and defending the dignity of those who are sick.

BEFORE THERE WAS *RENT*, THERE WAS *TICK, TICK...BOOM!*

While Jonathan Larson is still best known for creating *Rent*, it was not the first show to put him on the map. That honor goes to *Tick, Tick...Boom!*, an autobiographical musical about a man...named Jon...struggling to write a musical. The show began as a monologue performed by Larson himself in 1989. It found moderate success Off-Broadway and drew the attention of producer Jeffrey Seller, who later became an early supporter of *Rent*. Following Larson's death and *Rent*'s success, the show was retooled with the help of playwright David Auburn into a three-person show. Thanks to a new film based on Auburn's version now streaming on Netflix, *Tick, Tick...Boom!* is getting more attention than ever.

Tick, Tick...Boom! unfolds in the days leading up to Jon's 30th birthday. Even with the workshop of a new musical on the horizon, Jon feels like he has nothing to show for himself at this pivotal age. It doesn't help that his best friend Michael has left the theatre for a cushy job in advertising and his girlfriend Susan wants to leave New York City for good. During the day, Jon works at a diner to make ends meet and compulsively writes songs about anything that comes to mind. One day, Michael attempts to change Jon's circumstances by signing

him up to help with a new advertising campaign. Jon reluctantly agrees but is resistant to "selling out," even if it does mean gainful employment. Later that night, Susan tries to pull Jon away from his musical; Jon refuses, and his unwillingness to focus on their relationship triggers a massive argument. The following day, Jon makes a mess of the advertising campaign pitch, leaving Michael frustrated and disappointed. Feeling dejected, Jon stops at a local store for his sugar fix and meets up with Karessa, an actress slated to appear in the workshop of his musical. Susan sees the two of them together later, but instead of dwelling on her suspicions, she tells Jon she has a teaching gig in upstate New York that could turn into something more. When Jon asks her if they can talk about it after the workshops, Susan gives up and leaves him.

With Karessa's help, Jon's workshop turns out to be a success—and is even attended by Jon's personal hero Stephen Sondheim, the musical theatre legend. Unfortunately, as his agent Rosa explains, the show wouldn't fit either on Broadway or Off-Broadway, meaning producers are much more interested in seeing what Jon comes up with *next* than they are in producing the show he has already worked so hard on.



Left: Jonathan Larson performing the solo version of "30/90," the opening number from *Tick, Tick...Boom!* **Right:** Andrew Garfield performing the role of Jon in the film directed by Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Jon meets up with Michael later, threatening to quit the theatre once and for all. The two get into an argument, during which Michael reveals that he has contracted AIDS. This revelation puts Jon's own struggles into harsh perspective, leaving him to wonder how this horrible thing could have happened to someone he loves so much. Thankfully, he patches things up with Susan and Michael well enough that they both appear at his birthday party bearing gifts and best wishes. The biggest gift of all, though, is a voicemail from Sondheim, who congratulates Jon on his work and offers him an opportunity to meet up. Jon's story ends on a high note as he and the cast sing about the need to make their actions count, both for themselves and for the greater good.

The three-person *Tick, Tick...BOOM!* debuted Off-Broadway in 2001 with Broadway star Raúl Esparza in the role of Jon. In the show, one man plays the role of Jon while the other two cast members portray the rest of the characters. The score includes a litany of rock-inflected tunes like "30/90," "No More," "Therapy," and "Louder than Words" that hint at what was to come with *Rent*. The story is true to life in that it depicts

Larson's efforts to create his failed show *Superbia*, his brief apprenticeship under Stephen Sondheim, his desire to live a kind of "bohemian" life in the city despite being the son of middle-class parents from suburban White Plains, and the fact that many of his friends, including the friend who inspired the character of Michael, were struggling with AIDS. In the three-person stage musical, the character of Jon narrates the story while his two castmates shift from character to character in the blink of an eye. The 2021 film, directed by Lin-Manuel Miranda and starring Andrew Garfield in the lead role, sets part of the action in a crowded theatre, where Jon narrates his own story, and part of it following Jon around through his everyday life. Instead of having two actors play all the roles, the film employs a full cast, including Robin de Jesús as Michael, Alexandra Shipp as Susan, Vanessa Hudgens as Karessa, Bradley Whitford as Stephen Sondheim, and cameos from several major Broadway stars in the diner where Jon works. The film received critical acclaim and earned several award nominations, including an Oscar nomination for Garfield. While obviously very different from the stage version, the film captures the joys, challenges, and complications of pursuing an artistic vision.



The Off-Broadway cast of *Tick, Tick...Boom!* From left to right: Jerry Dixon, Raúl Esparza, and Amy Spanger. Photo by Sarah Krulwich/The New York Times.

THE LEGACY OF *RENT*



A film adaptation of *Rent*, directed by Chris Columbus, was released in 2005. Anthony Rapp returned to his role as Mark, while Rosario Dawson took over the role of Mimi.

By the time it won the 1996 Pulitzer Prize and a host of Tony Awards, *Rent* was well on its way to becoming one of the most influential musicals of its age. In addition to making creator Jonathan Larson a legend (a status enhanced by his tragic and untimely death), it also launched the careers of several original stars. Among the most prominent *Rent* alums is Idina Menzel, who later went on to win a Tony for originating the role of Elphaba in *Wicked*, provided Elsa's voice in the award-winning *Frozen* films, and has a successful recording career

in addition to her many film, TV, and theatre credits. Menzel was among the six original cast members who appeared in the 2005 *Rent* film directed by Chris Columbus. Original stars Anthony Rapp and Adam Pascal also appeared in the film and headlined one of the show's many national tours in 2008. In addition to elevating artists to new heights, *Rent* was also the first rock musical to find significant success on Broadway since *Hair* in 1968. Among the shows that later took a musical cue from *RENT* are *American Idiot*, based on the Green Day album

of the same name, and *Spring Awakening*, a story of teenage love and rebellion “set in late-19th century Germany. Many artists also credit Larson as a significant influence. Among them are Lin-Manuel Miranda, a fellow Tony and Pulitzer Prize-winner, who found success with *In the Heights* (2008) and *Hamilton* (2015). In addition to directing the recent film of *Tick, Tick...Boom!*, Miranda has also appeared in the role of Jon in a 2014 Encores! concert production of the show.

Apart from its influence on Broadway creators, *Rent* occupies a unique place in pop culture. Serious fans of the musical, especially those who were early admirers, are known as *Rent*-heads. Their love of the show was so huge that they would line up around the block to get cheap “rush” tickets to see the original production. *Rent*’s rush program was so successful that it prompted other productions to adopt similar low-cost ticket policies. While not every fan is a full-on *Rent*-head, even casual listeners are likely familiar with some of its signature numbers, such as “Seasons of Love,” “Rent,” and “La Vie Boheme.” Since departing Broadway, *Rent* has become a staple in regional, collegiate, and even high school theatres, ensuring its influence extends well beyond New York. While it continues to gain fans, it has also been the subject of spoofs and loving homages, including in the film *Team America: World Police*, which includes a satirical version of the show called *Lease*.

Despite all the love it has garnered over the years, *Rent* is sometimes viewed today as a relic of its past and a piece that has suffered from over-exposure. Certainly, it grew out of the moment that produced it, and today’s moment is different not only stylistically but politically. For example, while the show’s portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters was significant for the time, it still centers the story on two straight White men. Indeed, *Rent* was criticized by author Sarah Schulman for commodifying queer culture. Schulman also accused Larson of lifting plot material from her novel *People in Trouble*; ultimately, while she continues to be a critic of the show, she chose not to pursue charges of copyright infringement. Certainly, today there is greater demand for stories that speak truthfully to the experience of marginalized communities by ensuring they occupy the foreground. Yet as Amanda Prahl wrote on the eve of the television special *RENT: Live*, the show may have its flaws, but it endures because it is “about the hope that, just once, life wins out over death, community wins out over loneliness, and passion wins out over drudgery.” As she argues, the show’s “statement of seizing the present because tomorrow isn’t guaranteed resonates through the years.” Whether in new productions or new works that pay homage to it, *RENT* is likely to have an influence on American musical theatre for years to come.



A shot from the film *Team America: World Police*, which includes a spoof of *Rent*, titled *Lease*.

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