

## “No Day But Today” --- the Musical ‘Rent’ and Its Influence on the Development of Broadway Musicals

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**Abstract:** the Broadway Musical ‘Rent’ is One of the Most Popular Musicals in the History of Western Culture. Its Influence Lies Not Only on Its Popularity But More on Its Groundbreaking Perspective of the Theme of Musicals, as Well as Its Profound Portrayal of the Struggles and Relations among Young American People At That Time. the Main Character Angel Represented the Ideas of Bohemia and Conveyed Her Great Admiration Towards Friendship and Love, Which Struck Massively Responsive Chords in the Hearts of the Audience of This Musical.

### 1. Introduction

Western Musical Incorporates Many Forms of Stage Performance from the 19th Century. It Originated from European Style of Opera and Developed in the Adaption of American Popular Culture and the Establishment of Broadway. through a Half-Century Growth, Musicals Gradually Acquired the Integration of Music, Dance and Drama. in the Great Family of Western Musicals, There Are Many Types of Stage Performances. in Terms of Its Performance Forms, There Are “Book Musical” Which Focuses on the Plot, Including “Musical Comedy” and " Musical Play” or “Musical Drama”. in Terms of the Performance Form of Musical, There is “Vaudeville” and “Revue”, Which Are Mainly for Show Performance and Audio-Visual Enjoyment. by the Middle of the 20th Century, Musicals Have Become a Unique Form of Dramatic Performance, Composed of Music, Song, Dance, Choreography and Other Elements. to Sum Up, Musical Drama is an Art Form Supported by Simple and Creative Plots and Based on Dramatic Performances of Actors. in This Way, Music and Dance Can Give Full Play to Their Potentials and Integrate All Factors into a Unified Art Form.

### 2. The General History of Western Musical and Its Bottleneck in 1990s

Throughout the Whole Development of Western Musical in the 20th Century, We Can Divide It into Several Different Historical Stages: the Beginning of Broadway Commercial Theater; the Founding Period of Broadway Musicals; the Golden Age of Broadway Musicals; the Broadway Musical Revolution; Broadway's Period of Concept Musicals; the Age of the Great European Musicals;the Decline and Revival of Broadway. the Various Stages and Types of Broadway Musical Development Are Closely Related to the Times and Social Psychological Factors. Broadway Musical is a Flower Growing in the Soil of Capitalist Society, So We Should Regard Its Changes and Diversity as the Reflection of the Political, Economic and Cultural Life of Western Society. the Development and Changes of Broadway Musicals Are in Line with the Needs and Choices of American Social Psychology. the Changes of Music, Dance and Theme in Musicals Are Also a Proof of the Changes of the Times. the Entertainment and Artistry of These Musicals Show Their Unique Charm At Every Stage of musical’s Development.

Even Though the Development of Broadway Musical Has Gone through Several Stages, There Are Some Common Things in It. Entertainment, Comic-Oriented, Popularization, Commercialization and Standardization Are the Main Characteristics of the Mainstream Broadway Musicals. Throughout the History of Western Musicals, Entertainment Can Be Said to Be the Main

Purpose of Musicals. No Matter in What Kind of Music, Dance and Stage Design of the Musical and the Entertainment of Characters Are Quite Important. People Like to See Happy Stories and Fantastic Stage Show for the Pastime of Their Normal Lives, Therefore the Purpose of Entertainment Largely Effectuated the Trends of Broadway Musicals. Comedies Are Always the Mainstays of Broadway Musicals Until Today. There Are Various Types of Comedies and Various Factors to Make People Laugh as Well, No Matter If It Can Be Sarcastic, Humorous, Emotional, Hilarious or Simply Just Chaotic.

When It Comes to the 1980s, Broadway Musicals Faced a Series of Challenges from ‘outsiders’, and Was in the Crisis of Original Design and Play. Andrew Webber and His Phenomenal Musicals ‘Cats’ and ‘Phantom of the Opera’ Along with His Other Works Knocked Down the Gate of Broadway with Its English Cultural Attractiveness. They Also Showed a Way for Some Other Excellent French Musicals Such as the Sensational ‘Les MisÉrables’ and ‘Miss Saigon’. the Market Was Thrilled for the Three Aspects of New Ideas Brought by a Series of European Musical Writers and Producers Like Webber: the Stage Effects, Commercial Propaganda and Marketing Manage. They Turned Musicals into a Huge Performance That Traditional American Styles of Show couldn’t Compare. under the Attack of the Influence and Success of European Musicals in the Mid-80s, the Broadway Musicals Were in Urgent Need of Find Their Own Style of Art and Characteristic Stories.

### **3. ‘Rent’: the Dawn of Broadway**

‘Rent’ Was Born through a Collaboration between Billy Aronson and Jonathan Larson At the End of the 1980s, and It Was Originally Planned to Update Puccini’s ‘La

BohÈme’ to a Modern Setting. It Was Larson Who Suggested to Set the Action in Alphabet City, in the East Village, a Neighborhood Traditionally Associated with Immigration and Working Class Inhabitants. in the Early 1990s, Larson Started to Develop the Musical on His Own through Workshops At the New York Theatre Workshop, Which Had Recently Relocated to the East Village and Was Looking for a Play That Would Speak to Their New Neighborhood. the Show Premiered There on January 26, 1996 to Generally Positive Reviews and Sold out Performances, Transferring to Broadway At the Nederlander Theatre the Following April, Where It Stayed Until Its Closing Performance on September 7, 2008. to everyone’s Grief, Larson Died the Night Before the First Off-Broadway Preview.

Adapted from opera ‘La Bohème’, ‘Rent’ tells a story of a group of young people living in a rented house in New York City, struggling with relationships, the meaning of life and AIDS, along with their ambitions and efforts for their dreams. Despite the hardship of life, the threat of death and even the death of friends, they never forget to pursue their dreams and share their happiness. ‘Rent’ is a truly epoch-making musical with both passion and emotion. It is recognized as having a very profound impact on the American society at that time. ‘Rent’ is also the most award-winning drama in the history of musical theater. The actors’ clothes and the settings on the stage are all very simple. The musical focused more on expressing the emotions of the characters, and tried to be quite close to the real lives of the audience.

The story occurred around Christmas. Christmas is supposed to be perfect, however, for those young people who have no money to pay their ‘Rent’ and only have candles to keep themselves warm, Christmas Eve can be a sad time. Their tragedies are magnified by the cheerful backdrop of Christmas to make it more theatrical. Despite their seemingly hopeless condition, they still have their own dreams.

‘Rent’ has received excellent reviews, and has been regarded as the light shining on the road to the future of Broadway musicals. Of course, there are critics who think that ‘Rent’ is a hit, but its style and structure are so popular and kitsch that its artistic achievements are somewhat compromised. But isn’t ‘Rent’ a reflection of the lives of struggling young people on Broadway? ‘Popular kitsch’ is exactly the style language that suits them best.

The success of the Pulitzer prize-winning ‘Rent’ lies more in its core. It is fair to say that ‘Rent’ has the artistic heritage to challenge Broadway’s glorious history. “Don’t you hate the word ‘musical’?” ‘Rent’ is written in a different way and with its discussions of love, sexuality,

homosexuality and decadence, is more of a warning to Broadway than a hope. As the pride of the sensational American musical circle in the 1990s, 'Rent' was given the title of "future tide of musical" when it was first performed. The sense of crisis generated by the decline of musical drama over the years was diluted by the victory of 'Rent'. Perhaps in this sense, 'Rent' is so important and influential that it could be another 'Oklahoma', a milestone in the history of western musicals and a representative of American local art creation.

In fact, this is a musical that American people have never seen. It's fresh and inexperienced, even reckless. Just like the burning flame, with the unprecedented power and shook the conservative culture of American society, broke the Broadway production situation at that time. Also it let the kind of art form 'musical' be accepted by the young generation for the first time. The play is an epoch-making masterpiece of the combination of realism, profound themes, popular stories and popular music. In the past 23 years, it has attracted audiences of all ages from all over the world, and has performed more than 12,000 performances worldwide, covering more than 150 cities in 21 countries. It has been translated into 25 languages and performed twice a day on average, demonstrating the love and power of "transcending time and place".

'Rent' is not only a musical, but also a phenomenon and a cultural symbol.

#### **4. How the Main Character Angel in 'Rent' Struck Responsive Chords in the Hearts of Its Audiences**

The musical focuses on the living conditions of these poor artists in an ordinary apartment in New York City, just like ordinary young New Yorkers at that time. No money to pay rent, no pleasure to ease, suppressed, misunderstood, as if their work and dreams cannot find a way to be achieved, and friends always seem to be doomed to be separated. They struggled along the road to freedom and love, speaking up for themselves and other inclusive groups, and denouncing hypocrisy at the same time. They walk down a street like ordinary people, feeling and celebrating the love, friendship, dreams, and life. They are not perfect, but nobody is perfect, and people love their imperfections. The problems everyone is facing in the musical are very close to our life. The audience can see themselves in every character in the play.

We can analyze that power of empathy within the creation of some key characters.

Every audience who has seen the musical 'Rent' will fall in love with Angel. She is always gentle and kind, and she will pass on her purest feelings to the people around her. She always wears a curly wig and heavy makeup. She often wears a red Christmas coat and skirt, dancing in the street with high heels and looking very energetic and happy. On a cold Christmas Eve, she took Collins home. She was friendly to the homeless on the street and good at creating friendly atmosphere among friends as well. People will always remember the scene when Angel jumped happily from the long table with a barrel in high heels. The song of this scene is called "Today for u". Angel happily beat the drum to tell her friends that she met a kind lady. She solved a dog that was always barking and annoying, so she was paid 1000 dollars.

Angel's debut was not the Christmas dress of a drag queen that we are familiar with, but had a clean and warm boyish appearance, sitting on the stairs, playing drums, and picking up her "poor dear" in the chilly winter night. Collins who was robbed and injured. Collins is a college teacher and an AIDS patient. Angel took him in, took him home to take care of him, haggled over clothes for him, and took him to the party of

'Life Support', and she asked for a thousand sweet kisses from her lover in return. There is no misunderstanding or dispute between these two lovers. They love and cherish each other, also trying to maintain the friendship between friends.

In many scenes, they are so happy that nobody could imagine they're suffering from huge difficulties in their lives. Collins says he's going to open a restaurant in Santa Fe. They were poor and ragged. Angel was playing drums with a bucket, Collins had holes in his pants. However, the expressions on their faces were full of hope as if they have a happy life. The abundant performing factors within musicals, including songs, dances, conversations, facial expressions and body languages, allow the 'Rent' to reach a high level of the expression of emotions. They had such an

infectious enthusiasm for everything that every time the audience can feel that they can pull themselves out of the mire as well and struggle a few steps. 'Santa Fe' means

'Holy Faith' in Spanish. It is sunny and has a pleasant climate. It was once a dream of two lovers. The audience admire the people even more when they are still blessed in a world full of chaos. No matter how hard life is, they are still in love and beloved.

If we put an end here, it would be a happy story, but maybe not a good one. God called back his Angel, and Angel went back to heaven. When she left, she was dressed in white on the stage. She walked up the stairs with Collins singing for their good old days, taking the last glance back at the world again. Then she went to heaven.

Happiness was all she left for her friends and this world, and so did Larson.

At the funeral, friends said they missed Angel, "you always said how lucky you were that we all friends. But it was us, baby, who were the lucky ones." Collins held the coat Angel bought for him and tears poured down his eyes. The song "I will cover you" rang out with deep sadness. Nearby the end of the song, the main melody of a previous song came up again and the connection of the two melodies symbolized the love and thankfulness from her friends. After Angel died, Collins tried hard to live while missing his lover. He took out the money from the ATM and distributed it to everyone. The password was 'Angel'.

As Mimi was dying while the story goes on, she said, "I was in a tunnel, headed for this warm, white light. And I swear, Angel was there. And she said: Turn around, girlfriend, and listen to that boy's song." So Mimi let go by death. People will not define Angel only by "charming". She is optimistic, sunny, brave and strong, enjoys what she has at present and gives without any return.

Angel is the most prominent character about the theme of love in this musical. Her love to lover, friends, passers-by in the community, and vagrants, the love that influences others, has become the turning point of all characters' relationships when she passed away. It was Angel who reminded us that love cannot come again it's gone.

All we can do is to cherish each other and enjoy the life.

Everyone in this musical is carrying a hefty cross, slowly and arduously toward the destination. One of these unbearable hardships is AIDS. But they didn't lose the courage to live, on the contrary, they still hope for the future. Although they have been through a difficult period of time and have a lot of uncertainties about their future, they still choose to live for today. There's a character named John Coffey in 'The Green Mile', who is imprisoned for unjust convictions. He is clumsy and ugly but has the ability to cure diseases. He helped so many people that he still had hope and love for the world even at the last moment before he was executed. He is the embodiment of a medical, an angel who came to this world to bring salvation. This character is similar to Angel in 'Rent'. Prisoners and marginalized people are in extreme despair and distress, but they all keep their hearts pure and are still willing to help others.

## 5. Summary

Although still rooted in queer subculture, the musical 'Rent' has made it safe for the mainstream. The 'Bohemian spirit' pursues uniqueness and pride, independence and freedom. Audiences love their attitude towards life, optimistic, positive, and upward. Mimi in the 'Rent' sings, "No day but today". This line is also the belief of all the characters in the play. It's not only a relief for the characters suffering from AIDS, but also a call for empathy and care from the audience. One of the greatest things about this musical is that the audience is crying not because of the sadness and sorrow among this tragedy, but because they are inspired by the spirit of the characters. Life is too short to just get by. People have a limited number of days on this Earth. It enables them to live with kindness and love.

Thus, this community represents an alternative to dominant culture but still part of capitalism. As noticed in the "New York Times" review, this idea of Bohemia is utopian in believing that friendship and emotions could be more important than money and profit in the present world. It might sound cynical, but it actually reflects the shifting context in which the play and the film were produced and came to fruition, reflecting a different socio-historical context and the mainstreaming

of queer subculture itself.

The essence of 'Rent' - "no day but today" - is to live in the present moment.

The musical is not about making every day the best day ever. We can't always make every day better than yesterday, and that's not how life is. The musical is about living in the moment and being grateful for our life at this moment.

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