

# Famous New Yorker Jonathan Larson

As a playwright, Jonathan Larson could not have written a more dramatic climax than the real, tragic climax of his own story, one of the greatest success stories in modern American theater history.

Larson was born in White Plains, Westchester County, on February 4, 1960. He sang in his school choir, played tuba in the band, and was a lead actor in his high school theater company. With a scholarship to Adelphi University, he learned musical composition. After earning a Fine Arts degree, Larson had to wait tables, like many a struggling artist, to pay his share of the rent in a poor New York City apartment while honing his craft.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Larson worked in nearly every entertainment medium possible. He won early recognition for co-writing the award-winning cabaret show *Saved!*, but his rock opera *Superbia*, inspired by George Orwell's novel *1984*, was never fully staged in Larson's lifetime. Scaling down his ambitions, he performed a one-man show called *tick, tick ... BOOM!* in small "Off-Broadway" theaters. In between major projects, Larson composed music for children's TV shows, videotapes and storybook cassette tapes.

In 1989, playwright Billy Aronson invited Larson to compose the music for a rock opera inspired by *La Bohème*, a classical opera about hard-living struggling artists in 19th century Paris. Aronson wanted to tell a similar story in modern New York City. His idea literally struck Larson close to home. Drawing on his experiences as a struggling musician, as well as many friends' struggles with the AIDS virus, Larson wanted to do all the writing himself. He agreed to give Aronson credit for the original concept and a share of the earnings in the unlikely event that the show ever played on Broadway.

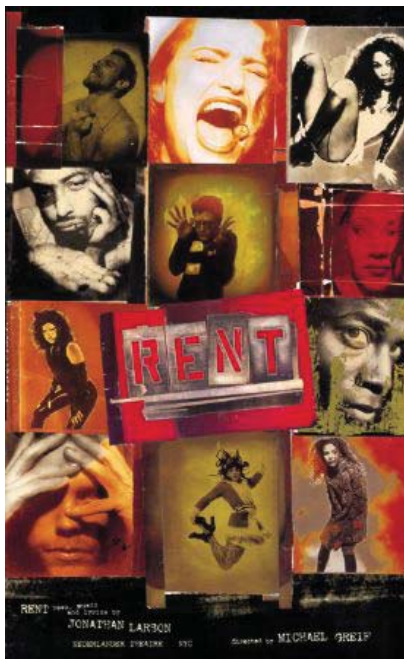
Larson called the show *Rent*. Years of hard work remained as he constantly revised the script, music and lyrics. The first staged readings were held in March 1993 at the New York Theater Workshop. Potential producers were more impressed by an award-winning workshop staging the following year, but questioned the popular appeal of a story in which the AIDS epidemic loomed large.

Finally, a fully-staged Off-Broadway production of *Rent* was scheduled to begin preview performances on January 26, 1996. That morning, the cast and crew learned that Jonathan Larson had died of a heart ailment the night before. In the great theatrical tradition, the show went on at the insistence of Larson's family. The plan was to limit it to a "sing-through" without stage direction or choreography, out of respect for Larson's memory. By the second act, the cast decided that a full performance was a better tribute.

After receiving rave reviews from theater critics during its sold-out Off-Broadway run, *Rent* opened on Broadway on April 29, 1996. It ran for the next twelve years and remains one of the most popular musicals of our time. *Rent* earned Jonathan Larson a posthumous Tony Award for Best Musical and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. His family created an additional legacy through the Jonathan Larson Grants, which give future creators opportunities to create and succeed like he did.

To learn more about Jonathan Larson and his work go to <http://www.playbill.com/article/20-years-after-rent-jonathan-larsons-family-reflects>. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA Newspaper In Education Program. All rights reserved 2017.

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The original Broadway *Rent* poster



**White Plains** is a city that serves as the county seat and commercial hub of Westchester, located about 25 miles north of midtown Manhattan.