

2023 Study Guide



2023 costume design for Maureen by Ari Fulton.

What is Performance Art?

In the play we are introduced to the character of Maureen Johnson, who is a performance artist.

Performance art is an art form in which the artist uses their own body as the vehicle for story telling; this can include poetry, singing, dancing, comedy, circus, and magic.

This performative art is done live in front of an audience and can be scripted or improvised.

Famous performance artists include Yoko Ono, Joan Jonas, and Linda Montano.



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What is an Answering Machine?

Throughout the musical, many individuals will leave phone messages on an answering machine.

An answering machine was a small machine placed at the user's premises alongside—or incorporated within—the user's landline telephone and used for answering telephone calls and recording callers' messages.

In the 1980s, digital answering machines were introduced. These machines used microchips to record and play back messages, and they were much smaller and more reliable than earlier machines.

In the 1990s, voicemail systems began to replace answering machines. Voicemail allowed messages to be stored and retrieved from a central location, rather than on a physical tape or disk.



Jonathan Larson

JONATHAN LARSON

- Larson was an American playwright, composer, and lyricist; most famous for *Rent* and *Tick, Tick...Boom!*
- Larson tragically passed away from an aortic dissection ten days before *Rent* made its off-Broadway debut in 1996.
- Larson received multiple Tonys, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and several Drama Desk Awards posthumously.
- After his death, Larson's family began the Jonathan Larson Grant, awarded to emerging musical theatre writers and composers.

Before seeing/reading the play

1. *Rent* was originally produced off-Broadway at the New York Theatre Workshop on January 25, 1996, and made its Broadway debut in April of that same year. Music, lyrics, and book were written and composed by Jonathan Larson. These and other websites provide information: <https://broadwaymusicalhome.com/shows/rent.htm>
<https://americantheatre.org/legends/rent/>
2. *Rent* is loosely based on Giacomo Puccini's opera *La Bohème*. Find out more about *La Bohème* by visiting these and other websites:
<https://www.metopera.org/discover/synopses/la-boheme/>
<https://www.lyricopera.org/lyric-lately/opera-on-broadway-la-boheme-vs.-rent/>
3. *Rent* is defined as a rock musical. Research what makes up a rock musical. These and other websites provide information:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock_musical
<https://brightstarmusical.com/the-history-of-rock-musicals/>
4. *Rent* is set in the late 1980s/early 1990s, at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Find out more about the history of the AIDS epidemic in America by visiting these and other websites:
<https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline> <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/online/story-of-cdc/aids/index.html>



2023 *Rent* costume design for Mark by Ari Fulton.

5. *Rent* centers itself around the lives of young artists in the late 20th century, trying to make it in the city of New York, who call themselves Bohemians. The majority of the young characters in the musical *Rent* are impoverished and struggle to make ends meet. Research the lifestyle and struggles of Bohemians/artists. These and other websites provide information: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341656421_Performance_Art_After_The_1990s
<https://www.thecut.com/2014/06/rare-shots-of-new-yorks-1980s-drag-scene.html>
https://press.ici-berlin.org/doi/10.37050/ci-21/saurisse_performance-art-in-the-1990s.pdf
<https://denniscooperblog.com/15-downtown-new-york-performance-artists-of-the-80s-and-early-90s-pt-2/>
<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-takes-live-artist-new-york>
<https://thebolditalic.com/the-arts-are-dying-in-san-francisco-here-s-why-the-bold-italic-san-francisco-96caod85579a>

In what way does *Rent* live up to the definition of a rock musical?

6. The characters in *Rent* live in tenements near homeless encampments in New York City's lower East Side. Learn more about tenement cities and homeless encampments across the country in the late 20th century and today using these and other websites:
<https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/lgbtq/90s>
<https://www.nypl.org/blog/2018/06/07/tenement-homes-new-york-history-cramped-apartments>
<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/01/03/realestate/tenements-of-1880-s-adapt-to-1980-s.html>
7. Research the LGBTQ community, attitudes toward, and fight for rights in the United States and New York City in the 1980s/1990s:
<https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/lgbtq/90s>
<https://www.outthere.travel/the-queer-history-of-new-york-city/>
<https://filtermag.org/watch-how-unhoused-hiv-queer-people-resisted-nyc-gentrification-in-the-90s/>
8. What is gentrification? These and other websites provide information: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gentrification>
<https://www.curbed.com/article/lower-east-side-east-village-nyc-gentrification.html>
<https://www.urbandisplacement.org/maps/new-york-gentrification-and-displacement/>

After Seeing/Reading the Play

1. What is the significance of the title? Who is struggling to pay rent? Who can pay? How is rent and the ability to pay or not pay rent an obstacle within the play?
2. Refer to your research on Bohemian lifestyle, tenements, and homeless encampments. The play begins on Christmas Eve—how does the holiday set the tone for the play? How do different characters feel about Christmas? Which characters are able to enjoy the holiday, and why? Which characters are not able to enjoy the holiday, and why? Although the play begins on Christmas Eve, the story spans the entirety of the year and features various holidays. How are holidays like Christmas, Easter, and Halloween used within the musical? What does the backdrop of holiday seasons contribute to the play?
3. Refer to your research on rock musicals. In what ways does *Rent* live up to the definition of a rock musical? Why might this genre be suited to this story?
4. “Seasons of Love” is a large choral number midway through the show. What is the song’s message? In what ways is this a song of hope? In what ways is this a song of despair? As the song asks, “How do you measure a year in the life?”
5. Love is a theme within the play. What kinds of love are in the story? What are the different ways that love helps the characters? Mark? Roger? Mimi, Joanne, Maureen? Tom Collins and Angel? The parents? In what ways is love an obstacle, and for whom? What do the characters do out of love?
6. Why does Mark feel great after the tango with Joanne? What does Joanne feel, and why?
7. Refer to your research on the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s/1990s and on the LGBTQ community in the 1990s. In what ways does the AIDS epidemic affect the characters in the play? How does it affect Roger? Mimi? Angel and Tom Collins? What tone does the music give to the group sessions of characters with AIDS, and what does it tell us about how the different participants are living with AIDS? How does it affect the characters who do not have AIDS? How does the virus contribute to the world of the play? What are the characters learning about life by living with such a deadly virus?
8. Refer to your research on young artists and Bohemians in New York City at the end of the 20th century. Who are the young artists and Bohemians in the play? What are the joys and challenges of being a Bohemian? In the song “Santa Fe,” the characters talk about leaving the life in New York. Why? What does this song say about life as a Bohemian? Some characters make life-altering decisions to change their circumstances— who does, and why?
9. Discuss the statement in the song “La Vie Boheme,” “The opposite of war isn’t peace but creation.” What do the characters create? Mark? Roger? Maureen? Benny? Why is creation so important to the characters in the play?



2023 *Rent* set rendering. Designed by Arnel Sancianco

- Benny is considered a sellout at the beginning of the play by his friends. Why? What is Benny's counter argument? In what way does Benny affect the end of the play? In what ways does Benny help? Who is Benny helping? In what ways does he not help? For Benny, in what ways does the end justify the means?
- Refer to your research on tenement cities and homeless encampments. How do the characters navigate living in these communities? What do the characters do to help keep these communities alive? In what ways are the characters a part of these tenement cities and encampments, and in what ways are they separate? How do these communities, encampments, and characters speak to the world today?

There is no future there is no past I live this moment as my last.

Mimi

- Speculate on whether the various relationships in the play will last and why or why not. What is the core reason that Joanne and Maureen's relationship lasts or does not? Roger and Mimi? Angel and Tom Collins?
- Refer to your research on the LGBTQ community in New York in the 1980s/1990s. What are the obstacles for the LGBTQ characters? For Tom Collins? Angel? Joanne? Maureen? How do they overcome the obstacles in their world?
- In the story, Mark films an unhoused person, who is offended. Why? In what ways are Mark's actions offensive? What does Mark learn from this encounter?
- How do Angel and Tom Collins influence the other characters? What do characters learn from Angel and Tom's relationship? What do the characters learn from Angel's death?
- Refer to your research on gentrification, which appears throughout the play. Who profits from gentrification, and who is hindered by it? What does gentrification do to the community in the play?

- Discuss the ways in which Mark might or might not hide in his work.
- Refer to your research on the opera *La Bohème*. "La Vie Boheme" is one of the most famous songs from the show. Why is this musical number important? What are the characters trying to tell us as an audience with this song? How does this number connect to the original opera?
- Love, community, and art are major themes that Larson uses to tell this story. Where do these themes appear in *Rent*? How are these themes reflected in the set, costumes, and movement of the play?
- In what ways is this musical relevant to an audience in 2023, more than 25 years after its original Broadway debut?
- If you are also seeing this year's OSF production of *Romeo and Juliet*, in both productions there are characters who are houseless. How does houselessness affect the characters in *Rent*? How does houselessness affect the characters in *Romeo and Juliet*? In what ways do the characters in the two shows share similar struggles?



2023 *Rent* costume design for Angel by Ari Fulton.

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