

Theater, Memory, and the HIV Crisis of the 1990s: An Analysis of the Musical *RENT*

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In the second act of *RENT*, a main character named Mark proclaims, “Why am I the witness?”¹ The outburst, although somewhat dramatic, certainly brings forth the question: not only why, but *how* are we “the witness”? What are we witnessing, and why is it important to remember? These questions, explored throughout both the plot and external events surrounding *RENT*, allow for a greater understanding of the ways in which memory is a pervasive motif throughout Jonathan Larson’s 1997 musical.

Although it is rarely explicitly addressed, the task of remembering, acknowledging, and memorializing people who were previously absent, silenced, and erased drives the plot of *RENT* forward perhaps more than the musical numbers. However, the story of *RENT*’s creation is just as unique as the musical itself. Larson had been working on a reboot of Puccini’s opera *La Bohème* for years, but after all of his work, the playwright never saw his show come to fruition. Larson died the night of the first performance from a sudden aortic dissection. Essentially, the show became Larson’s legacy. His contemporaries claimed that he would “change the American musical theater,”² and his rock opera certainly did. *RENT* was the first musical since *Hair* (1967) to address drug addiction. It arguably was the first musical to address drug addiction honestly, mostly avoiding the typical pitfalls of romanticizing drug abuse. The show, set in Alphabet City during the 1990s, follows a group of friends as they encounter love, death, disease, and addiction.

Although the musical is not entirely about disease, HIV/AIDS play a significant role in *RENT*. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the first documented case of severe immune deficiency among gay American men occurred in 1981. By the end of that year, the number of documented cases rose to 270 – and 121 of those individuals died. In 1982, the CDC first began to use the term “AIDS” (the acronym of acquired immune deficiency syndrome) and began exploring transmission to infants. In 1984 it became public knowledge that HIV could be transmitted through sharing needles, although the term “HIV” (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) was not used until 1986. By 1989, the

¹ Jonathan Larson, *RENT Libretto and Script* (New York: Melcher Media Inc., 1997): Act 2, Scene 36.

² Gilles Chiasson, “Leap of Faith,” interview by Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger. From *RENT Libretto and Script* (New York: Melcher Media Inc., 1997): 28.

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number of cases of HIV in the United States reached over 100,000. In 1992, AIDS was the leading cause of death among men aged 25-44. By 1995, the number of cases of AIDS in the United States had surpassed 500,000.³ It was during these formative years that Larson first began drafting *RENT*. In fact, Larson directly alludes to ACT UP⁴ (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), an AIDS advocacy group based in New York that aimed to represent people living with AIDS the way they wanted to be represented.⁵

Ultimately, the show is not about the AIDS epidemic or the drug crisis of the 1990s – instead, it is about people living with AIDS and addiction. This is part of what made it such an immediate success, both critically and among popular audiences. The script and libretto won a Pulitzer Prize and three Tony Awards in 1996, and the show was slated for Broadway within two months of its off-Broadway debut. It garnered so much success that fans began calling themselves “Rent-Heads.”⁶ Larson’s script was adapted for a film, which premiered in 2005. The show is currently touring nationally for its twentieth anniversary – and is consistently selling out.

Clearly, the show is important enough to be remembered and revived. Yet, the question remains: why is *RENT* such an important aspect of American culture? In order to explore the ways in which *RENT* has impacted American collective memory, one must first explore some relevant technical definitions. As Pierre Nora defines it, a site of memory refers to any place, object, or concept in the context of the historical aspects of collective memory.⁷ Through the lens of memory studies, a relic is defined as an object, memory, custom, or commemoration related to the memory of someone or something. I argue that *RENT* acts as a site of memory; that is, it is a relic that people use to remember the past.

Ultimately, *RENT* is a site of memory unique among other popular culture relics. The motif of memory parallels both in the plot and external factors surrounding the musical. This makes *RENT* an incredibly powerful agent of memory, because the musical is a site of memory both

³ All of the above information can be found on the United States Department of Public Health website about HIV. <<https://www.hiv.gov/>>.

⁴ Larson, *RENT Libretto and Script*, Act 1 Scene, 23.

⁵ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 154-155.

⁶ Judith Sebesta and Jessica Sternfeld, “‘I’ll Cover You’: An Interdisciplinary Duet on *RENT* and Collaborative Musical Theater Historiography,” in *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions*, ed. Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010): 267.

⁷ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” in “Memory and Counter-Memory,” Special Issue, *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24.

internally and externally. Characters within the show remember, which prods the audience to participate in what Alison Landsberg terms prosthetic memory.⁸ This essay presents a unique take on prosthetic memory; the concept has previously been limited to film, and never extended to the ways in which other art forms might cause prosthetic memories. The script itself is a powerful site of memory, but other factors surrounding *RENT* also provide insight into understanding memory.

A Brief Plot Summary

The show is chronologically complex, with the first act occurring over the course of Christmas Eve. The second act of the show begins on New Years Day and spans the following year until the next Christmas Eve. *RENT* is set in Alphabet City, New York during the mid-1990s at the height of the AIDS crisis. The musical has been described as a “reimagining of Puccini’s *La Bohème*,” albeit with a much stronger emphasis on disease than the opera ever saw. Ultimately, the show tells the story of “seven artists struggling to follow their dreams without selling out,” although much of the narrative is moved forward by HIV/AIDS.⁹

During the first act, the audience meets Mark, an aspiring cinematographer who records the majority of the musical’s events. Mark is present in nearly every scene; in the version of *RENT* that I recently viewed during the twentieth anniversary tour, Mark was depicted filming whenever he was present. Mark serves as the group’s token straight, white, cisgender male who does not abuse drugs, and is unlikely to contract HIV. All of Mark’s friends have HIV, and he spends much of the show lamenting his fate to witness their deaths. Yet, he is often his friends’ cheerleader, supporting them through various trials and tribulations.

Following Mark, we are introduced to Roger, a struggling guitarist. Roger and Mark are roommates in Alphabet City, and Roger is processing his HIV-positive diagnosis by attempting to write his own eulogy in the form of a song. He rarely leaves the house and has closed himself off from human contact outside of Mark. Later in the play, it is revealed that Roger is afraid of commitment largely due to his ex-girlfriend’s suicide following her diagnosis of HIV that resulted from

⁸ Allison Landsberg, “Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture,” in *Memory and Popular Film* ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003): 149.

⁹ Quoted from the official *RENT* 20th Anniversary Tour website, <<http://rentontour.net/>>.

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drug abuse. Eventually, Roger overcomes his fear of love and finally accomplishes his goal of writing the perfect song.

Roger finds the strength to fall in love again through his neighbor, Mimi. Mimi is a drug addict and a sex worker, and it is eventually revealed to Roger and the audience that she is also HIV-positive. Mimi seduces Roger, determined to live her life to the fullest. However, Mimi also has a serious secret: she used to date Mark and Roger's old roommate, Benny. During one of Roger and Mimi's various breakups, Mimi actually reunites with Benny in order to gain money to fuel her drug addiction.

However, that is not the first time the audience meets Benny. Benny, Mark and Roger's old roommate, has escaped a life of uncertainty and poverty by marrying a woman from an upper-class family. Prior to the show, he used his father-in-law's money to purchase the building where he once lived and forgave Mark and Roger of their rent for a year. However, early in the first act, Benny returns and demands a year of paid rent with the threat of eviction unless Mark refuses to shut down a protest against Benny's unethical treatment of the marginalized groups who live in and around the building.

While Benny is threatening Mark, a mutual friend named Tom Collins is beaten. Collins, as he is referred to in the script, is a gay man living with HIV. He is also a former professor of computer science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; however, he was let go due to his involvement with activism supporting people with AIDS. Collins is mostly remembered for his emotional performance following the death of his partner, Angel.

While Collins is being beaten, he is rescued by Angel, an HIV-positive drag queen. Angel is arguably the most controversial character in *RENT*. For the purposes of this essay, Angel will be referred to with they/them/their pronouns; however, in the script, he/him/his and she/her/hers pronouns are used interchangeably.¹⁰ Angel is the character who tightens the bond between the group members through their value of life in the face of disease and death. Angel develops close friendships with all of the characters, bridging them together even during times of tension. However, it is ultimately Angel's death that splits the group apart and the memory of Angel that brings them back together. Angel

¹⁰ At the time of *RENT*'s publication, the politics of gender studies were formative. Larson is no longer alive to comment on the use of pronouns with respect to Angel, but in the script, Angel self-identifies both masculinely and femininely. I'm using modern gender-neutral pronouns (they/them/their pronouns) because Angel's gender is ambiguous, and there is some speculation that Angel was not a drag queen but actually a transgender woman or gender-fluid person.

also encourages Roger to leave the house for various events including a support group and Maureen's protest.

After the support group meeting, all of the characters venture to a protest put on by Mark's ex-girlfriend, Maureen. Maureen dumped Mark to pursue a relationship with her current partner Joanne, and is protesting Benny's abuse of artists, homeless people, and otherwise marginalized people. She is a promiscuous woman who wields her sexuality as a weapon. Maureen is the drama queen of the group; she often makes herself the center of attention even in the face of various life-or-death experiences the group encounters. She frequently vies for the attention of both Joanne and Mark, putting them at odds. Yet, Mark's naturally understated talent often outshines Maureen's gaudy performances, even as he records them.

Mark's talent is noticed the most when he films footage of a riot that follows Maureen's protest. This riot is the final scene in the first act and is a response to the padlocked doors of Mark and Roger's apartment complex - which occurred on Christmas Eve. During the second act, Mark receives a phone call from Alexi Darling, a representative from a sleazy media company that is trying to capitalize on Mark's footage. After relentless phone calls, Mark finally submits to their demands in the days following Angel's death.

Angel's death, early in the second act, represents an extremely difficult time for the group. Various couples make and break up, and eventually Roger moves to Santa Fe in search of his perfect eulogizing song. In his absence, Mimi succumbs to disease and addiction while she is living on the streets. Mark becomes increasingly isolated from the group and acknowledges the difficulty in his role as the witness to his friends' strife. Finally, Mark quits working for Alexi Darling and decides to finish the film of his friends. Mark's first attempt at displaying his final product is intense: Roger has returned from Santa Fe, having completed his song, and is ready to watch the film with Collins. However, they are interrupted by Maureen and Joanne, who enter carrying a collapsed Mimi. Roger rushes over to her and sings the song he wrote (which was not in fact a traditional eulogy, but rather a love song) as she "dies" - and awakens as soon as the song ends, claiming that Angel told her to turn away from the light and listen to Roger's song. The show ends with a bittersweet moment as the characters remember Angel and their adventures while watching Mark's film.¹¹

¹¹ Larson, *RENT Libretto and Script*. All of the information in this section can be found in the *RENT Libretto and Script*.

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Historiography and Theory

In order to properly address the role of *RENT* in theater history, one must analyze the current state of theater historiography. To say that the politics of theater history are complex would be an understatement. In fact, one of the main historiographical debates of theater history is whether or not the very field should exist – and if it does, how does it exist? This discussion is played out by various academics; historians and those who study theater have all weighed in on the extent and ways in which theater history should be analyzed.

A large portion of the discussion of the historiography of theater is if it deserves to be studied in an academic discipline. Professors of popular culture obviously believe it to be worthy. However, the marginalization of theater as an upper-class activity both stigmatizes and promotes the academic worth of the field of theater historiography. This argument is particularly prevalent in Loren Kruger's "Our Theater? Stages in an American Cultural History," in which he discusses theater as a form of popular culture that is often only affordable for upper-class viewers. Kruger blames earlier theater historians for allowing the marginalization and "taming" of theater.¹² However, Kruger's analysis appears to be directed at Cold War-era historians and can only be applied to the late 1990s in theory. This is increasingly obvious as Kruger's argument advances – he claims that theater historians encouraged the taming of theater into a field lacking in political or social statements in an era when peacekeeping and the prominence of middle-class values claimed social priority. This is largely true of theater in the early-mid Cold-War era, but as early as the 1980s, politics had made their way back into the performing arts.

In contrast to Kruger, *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions* edited by Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen presents the field of theater historiography with a positive perspective. The editors are both scholars in the field of theater history, which uniquely qualifies them when juxtaposed with many of the other academics referenced in this paper. The editors published pieces supporting the historiography of theater in a modern perspective, often with work about contemporary productions or a fresh interpretation of older performances.¹³ Additionally, the book does not shy away from a second historiographical debate in the field of

¹² Loren Kruger, "Our Theater? Stages in an American Cultural History," *American Literary History* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 701.

¹³ Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen, *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

theater history: determining an acceptable use of methodology. In "Against Plausibility," Ellen MacKay scrutinizes the argument that theater history requires more discipline in order to be accepted by the academic community. MacKay discusses how theater history is still waiting for a perfect methodology, as it is difficult to re-contextualize past productions in modern day perceptions.¹⁴ Ultimately, it is her work that begins to hint at the history of memory in theater.

Another scholar who touches on memory studies in theater is Sanja Bahun-Radunović. In her work, "History in Post-Modern Theater: Heiner Müller, Caryl Churchill, and Suzan-Lori Parks," Bahun-Radunović discusses the significance of the representation of history in theatrical works. Her article evaluates the following subjects: theater as a critique of written history, a re-enactment of events, and a juxtaposition of historical events with personal experiences. Although Bahun-Radunović uses case studies that are not all contemporary to *RENT*, the musical still provides valuable contributions to analysis in each of these areas. The author questions the devaluation of historical events when they are memorialized in theater. This raises the question of the ways and extent to which theater is complicit in the silencing and erasure of history. Bahun-Radunović also introduces the topic of "hyphens," or divergences of typical creative frameworks in time and discusses how representation of history becomes practice through these hyphens.¹⁵ This concept, while seemingly disparate to other historiography, is actually quite useful when addressing musical theory.

The historiography surrounding *RENT* is small, although it certainly exists. Most analysis of *RENT* is not explicitly historical; much of the research is under the umbrella of Gender and Women's Studies, Theater Studies, Performance Studies, and Music. Historiography of *RENT* with a memory perspective barely exists. However, in "'No Day But Today': Queer Temporality in *RENT*," Sarah Taylor Ellis discusses how HIV and AIDS impacted the timeline of the musical.¹⁶ She points to the fact that most of the characters in *RENT* would likely die within the span of a few years, and explains how Judith Halberstam's notion of "queer temporality" can be applied to the collective of people with AIDS

¹⁴ Ellen MacKay, "Against Plausibility," in *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 22-31.

¹⁵ Sanja Bahun-Radunović, "History in Post-Modern Theater: Heiner Müller, Caryl Churchill, and Suzan-Lori Parks," *Comparative Literature Studies* 45, no. 4 (2008): 448.

¹⁶ Sarah Taylor Ellis, "'No Day but Today': Queer Temporality in *RENT*," *Studies in Musical Theater* 5, no. 2 (2011): 198-199.

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in Alphabet City during the 1990s.¹⁷ Although most of Ellis's work is limited to technical musical and stage analysis of time, her exploration of absences in "Seasons of Love" is particularly relevant. Ellis writes about musical rests, explaining, "These audible gaps echo the absence of loved ones in a community wracked by AIDS. In fact, Angel's death is visually translated as a gap in the line of actors during a 'Seasons of Love' reprise; an empty beam of light marks her former position."¹⁸ These absences are critical to understanding Bahun-Radunović's concept of hyphens as a moment in time in theater during which characters and the audience can reflect on the past. Hyphens can imply memories when they are applied to musical rests and empty spaces in *RENT*.¹⁹ This perspective on Ellis' work reveals the ways in which musical rests provide opportunity for reflection.

In addition to technical theory analysis, *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions* provides perhaps the most relevant secondary source to this paper: "I'll Cover You: An Interdisciplinary Duet on *RENT* and Collaborative Musical Theater History." The authors Judith Sebesta and Jessica Sternfeld are professors of theater history and musical arts. This essay, which uses *RENT* as a case study, discusses the impact of place on performance. The authors argue that "instead of asking, 'What is the musical?' a more pertinent question today might be 'Where is the musical?'"²⁰ Ultimately, the authors assess the significance of setting and authenticity in creating a production. They address the importance of *RENT*'s journey through off-Broadway venues, and the necessity of creating an authentic environment so that both actors and audience members receive a genuine experience. The authors claim that due to its popularity in these areas, *RENT* was wildly successful, both critically and among audiences who felt that the show told their stories. Unintentionally, the authors refer to memory studies by claiming, "The show seemed to capture the zeitgeist of the decade."²¹ The authors eventually digress, claiming that the show may have lost some of its original edge, but they do discuss the significance of the musical's live DVD recording as a potential model for future theater historiography.

¹⁷ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Ellis, "'No Day but Today': Queer Temporality in *RENT*," 201.

¹⁹ Bahun-Radunović, "History in Post-Modern Theater: Heiner Müller, Caryl Churchill, and Suzan-Lori Parks," 448.

²⁰ Sebesta and Sternfeld, "'I'll Cover You': An Interdisciplinary Duet on *RENT* and Collaborative Musical Theater Historiography," 262.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 267.

Externally to the show, AIDS and HIV have been present in scholarly work, especially during the height of the crisis. Although studies of the disease are often limited to the hard sciences, the history of the 1990s HIV epidemic is slowly being published. However, the historiography surrounding HIV/AIDS has not been significantly updated in recent years. Marita Sturken's 1997 monograph *Tangled Memories* provides insight on the ways people living with HIV were represented in the media. Her work also provides much needed discourse on the intersection between race and HIV; Sturken underscores the connection between racial and economic discrimination and HIV.²² Additionally, Carole Blair and Neil Michel discussed the commemoration of people with HIV in their work on the AIDS Quilt. Yet, their work on memory focuses mostly on how the AIDS Quilt behaves as a model for future memorials.²³ Of course, Susan Sontag's work on the construction of AIDS as the most stigmatized disease (following her writing on cancer as a highly stigmatized disease for another era) is incredibly prevalent, albeit somewhat outdated. In her work, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Sontag discusses the ways in which the stigma of HIV is metaphorically resonant in society. However, Sontag only alludes to the memorialization of people with HIV/AIDS and does not explicitly address it.²⁴

There are additional sources about the memorialization of people with AIDS outside of the United States. An example of this is Kate Bride's discussion of Toronto's memorials to AIDS victims in her published work, "Remembering Well: Sexual Practice as a Practice of Remembering." In this work, the author discusses memorials to people with HIV/AIDS in Canada. She provides in-depth analysis of public places and public homosexual sex as a memorial to LGBT+ people who have died from HIV/AIDS, as well as details on the policing of the memory of marginalized collectives and the physical bodies of people who belong to those collectives.²⁵ Following Bride's sudden death in 2013,

²² Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 158.

²³ Carole Blair and Neil Michel, "The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Contemporary Culture of Public Commemoration," in *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2007): 595-626.

²⁴ Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (Toronto: Collins Publishers, 1989). The book was published in 1989, when the HIV crisis was so new that victim-shaming was still common in scholarly work (including hers). It has been criticized by most of the US HIV/AIDS collective and remains a controversial (but relevant) source. Additionally, Sontag was inspired to write *AIDS and Its Metaphors* after her surviving cancer and penning her first major work on disease, *Illness as Metaphor*, about her experience.

²⁵ Kate Bride, "Remembering Well: Sexual Practice as a Practice of Remembering," in *Drain*, no. 2 (2016).

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there was an upsurge in honoring her memory by continuing her goal of creating a “community of memory.”²⁶

Bride’s death and subsequent memorialization raises the question: how do people without HIV/AIDS commemorate those with the disease? Perhaps the most relevant example is the musical itself: Jonathan Larson was not HIV-positive but wrote a musical that primarily memorializes people with the disease. Additionally, Larson wrote a character without HIV/AIDS who attempts to memorialize his friends with the virus. However, when discussing the memorialization of characters with HIV/AIDS with real friends who had the disease, Larson realized that his attempts were somewhat misguided. The playwright was not memorializing people with AIDS the way they wanted to be remembered.²⁷ Victoria Leacock, a friend of the playwright, fondly remembers Larson’s HIV-positive friends Gordon Rogers and Pam Shaw scolding the playwright for presenting depictions of people with HIV without consulting actual victims first. In fact, Pam and Gordon told Larson, ““Fuck you, you don’t have AIDS...” Shaw later followed up by claiming that Mimi’s participation in Life Support (found in preliminary drafts of the script) would be unrealistic, saying, ““How can you have her up there when she’s still a drug addict? It’s like having someone spout AA who’s drunk.”” Rogers added, ““You don’t have AIDS, so you can’t just say that at the end of the day all that matters is love.””²⁸ Ultimately, these ideas apply to the historiography of HIV; how can the history of people with HIV truly be represented if the victims are not part of the narrative?

When accounting for the victims of HIV and AIDS in the context of *RENT*, one must also address the intersections of disability studies and memory studies. This aspect of HIV has been historically erased and absent from the modern narrative surrounding the disease.²⁹ However, HIV is beginning to enter the consciousness of popular culture consumers; a prevalent example of this phenomenon is Oliver and Connor’s relationship on *How to Get Away With Murder*.³⁰ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s work on the depiction of disabled people in the

²⁶ Amber Dean, Prologue of “Remembering Well’: Sexual Practice as a Practice of Remembering,” by Kate Bride, found in *Drain* 13, no. 2 (2016).

²⁷ Victoria Leacock, “Leap of Faith,” interview by Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger. From *RENT Libretto and Script* (New York: Melcher Media Inc., 1997): 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁹ Michael Oliver, *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*, 2nd ed. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

³⁰ Peter Nowalk, *How to Get Away With Murder*, produced by American Broadcasting Company and Shonda Land, first aired on September 25, 2014.

media is particularly relevant to understanding the representation of people with HIV/AIDS; she discusses how people with disabilities sometimes view themselves as “untouchables” (as several characters did in *RENT*) and discusses the ways in which this impacts the larger collective of people with disabilities.³¹ Although Garland-Thomson does not explicitly touch upon memory, her analysis of relics such as photographs is certainly applicable to the field of memory studies. I argue that Garland-Thomson’s scholarship is pertinent to the collective of people with HIV/AIDS, which (at the time of *RENT*) almost always manifested as an impairment, and more often than not as a disability.³² Garland-Thomson claims:

Such routinization of disability imagery not only brings disability as a common human experience out of the closet but enables people with disabilities – especially those who acquire impairments as adults – to imagine themselves as part of the ordinary world, rather than as a special class of untouchables and unviewables. Images of disability as a familiar, even mundane experience in the lives of seemingly successful, happy, well-adjusted people can reduce the identifying against oneself that is the overwhelming effect of oppressive and discriminatory attitudes towards people with disabilities.³³

People with disabilities are largely absent or erased from memorials – and are almost entirely absent from the field of history of memories – even though their presence throughout history is undeniable. As this generation of historians continues to explore the histories of disabled people living with and dying from HIV, scholars must strive to historicize them appropriately and realistically.

Prosthetic Memory and Theater

³¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Popular Disability Photography,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 368.

³² Oliver, *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*. It should be noted that the social model of understanding disability, first coined by Michael Oliver, defines impairment as a variation in physical, cognitive, or mental condition. Oliver argues that disability occurs when society fails to account for and support people with impairments.

³³ Garland-Thomson, “Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Popular Disability Photography,” 368.

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It is important to note that prior work on prosthetic memory by Landsberg has exclusively pertained to film. Therefore, the term “prosthetic memory” with respect to theater studies must be redefined. Landsberg defines prosthetic memories as widespread sympathetic memories created by responses to media; however, her examples of prosthetic memory are limited to film.³⁴ Through the lens of *RENT*, I argue that prosthetic memories need not be limited to film.

RENT is a musical uniquely situated in its ability to unveil prosthetic memories. The show was created with the intention of both reviving an opera and addressing the AIDS crisis during a time when the stigma against AIDS was a significant part of society.³⁵ Discussion of AIDS was so taboo that audiences might only gain a glimpse into the culture and lives of people living with AIDS, people who identified as LGBT+, and people who abused drugs by viewing a show like *RENT*, or another avant-garde piece such as the AIDS Quilt.³⁶ However, unlike the Quilt, *RENT* is a direct view into the life of people in these collectives. Viewers easily become emotionally attached to the characters and their plotlines – especially when they realize that all of the characters (except Mark) will die in the near future.³⁷

In addition to simple attachment to characters, I believe that the musical aspect of *RENT* significantly increased its potential for facilitating the formation of prosthetic memories in viewers. There is no research similar to Landsberg’s to support my claim, but it is clear that music and memory are incredibly intertwined.³⁸ There is a dissertation that alludes to prosthetic memory outside of film, but the author does not provide a working model for theater as a facilitator of prosthetic memories.³⁹ Alternatively, there is an abundance of psychological and sociological work that supports the connection between music and memory.⁴⁰

If the theater-centric definition of prosthetic memories is applied to *RENT*, analysis reveals that prosthetic memories are present in the

³⁴ Landsberg, “Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture,” 149.

³⁵ Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger, *RENT Libretto and Script*, 7.

³⁶ However, that is not to say that scientific articles about the AIDS Crisis did not exist – and the argument of whether or not science can create prosthetic memories will not be discussed at this time.

³⁷ Jonathan Larson, *RENT Libretto and Script* (New York: Melcher Media Inc., 1997).

³⁸ Bob Snyder, *Music and Memory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

³⁹ Amila Becirbegovic, “Mediated Memory: Visual Culture and Prosthetic (Re)Memory in Post-War German Culture,” (Davis: University of California Press, 2017): 17.

⁴⁰ Michael Pickering and Emily Knightly, *Photography, Music and Memory: Pieces of the Past in Everyday Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015).

music of *RENT*. For example, if Landsberg's theories are connected to Ellis' musical analysis, it stands to reason that the rests in "Seasons of Love" and the gap in the reprise are designed to create empathy and prosthetic memories.⁴¹ The memories created in "Seasons of Love" are not collective because the audience of *RENT* is extensive, and does not belong solely to one community; yet, the memories evoke feeling in the audience. Therefore, they are prosthetic memories which have the effect of encouraging the audience to feel loss on a more personal level and to think about the ways AIDS could affect their lives.

Memory Sites external to *RENT*

It is important to note that sites of memory external to the plot and music of *RENT* play a significant role in understanding memory as it pertains to the musical. As previously mentioned, Jonathan Larson died of an aortic dissection only hours before the opening preview of *Rent*. Upon the discovery of his death, the show was cancelled, and instead the cast performed a sing-through of the script without choreography, costumes, and lighting. In interviews, the cast clearly considers this first performance of *RENT* to be a funeral for Larson. Gilles Chiasson, a cast member, claimed in an interview that "They brought a bunch of food, juice and bagels, and everyone came to the theater and was just there. A lot of Jonathan's friends didn't know what to do, so they went to the theater too."⁴² In this case, it is evident that the physical theater was the place where Larson's memory was embodied. Additionally, the food and presence of friends adds to the funeral environment. Jesse L. Martin, who played Tom Collins, declared, "It was like doing a musical at someone's funeral."⁴³ Indeed, Eddie Rosenstein stated:

I think many people have a fantasy of writing their own little funeral, and I think Jonathan did that. It's startling, and an explanation for how he felt about things at the point where he leaves. I'm a documentary filmmaker, and when life imitates art and art imitates life that closely,

⁴¹ Ellis, "'No Day but Today': Queer Temporality in *RENT*," 201.

⁴² Gilles Chiasson, "Measure in Love," interview by Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger. From *RENT Libretto and Script* (New York: Melcher Media Inc., 1997): 52.

⁴³ Jesse L. Martin, "Measure in Love," interview by Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger. From *RENT Libretto and Script* (New York: Melcher Media Inc., 1997): 52.

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when anything lives in a beginning, middle and end, those are the perfect moments that we live for.⁴⁴

Following the initial preview, there was a formal memorial and funeral service for Larson. Ultimately, it was revealed that the cause of death, an aortic dissection, is 80-90% treatable.⁴⁵ The cast and production crew were heartbroken at the loss of their leader. Yet, the show had to go on.

RENT was so successful that it quickly outgrew its small venue on the lower-east side. Despite the fact that moving locations was imminent, the cast and crew argued that *RENT* would be rendered inauthentic if it lost a gritty, genuine performance space. In fact, Larson's father quietly protested the move to Broadway, claiming that his son "wasn't writing for Broadway, he was writing for downtown."⁴⁶ Yet, others close to Larson believed that the move was in the show's best interest and a part of Larson's final vision. The cast and crew argued amongst themselves over whether audiences on Broadway would take to *RENT*. Some, like cast member Taye Diggs, believed that it was necessary to move to Broadway in order to share the memory of Larson and the message of the show.⁴⁷ Others believed that the upper-class audiences of Broadway would be closed-minded and unlikely to attend.

Ultimately, the real reason for the move was more poignant than simple logistics: Adam Pascal claims, "Downtown was Jonathan's house, so there was a lot of pain and heartache in that run; I think when we moved uptown we left a lot of the pain and heartache down there, where it needed to stay."⁴⁸ This relates to Julie Stone Peters' work on the history of memory and theater. Her analysis that the theater is a physical and mental encyclopedia to memory aligns with the narrative of *RENT*'s move to Broadway.⁴⁹ Peters' claim that the theater is a physical space for remembering correlates with the cast and crew's perspective, albeit not in the sense the author put forth in her discussions of script. Instead of the theater representing a space for remembering events memorialized

⁴⁴ Eddie Rosenstein, "Measure in Love," interview by Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger. From *RENT Libretto and Script* (June 1997): 52.

⁴⁵ Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger, *RENT Libretto and Script* (New York: Mechler Media, Inc., 1997): 52.

⁴⁶ Al Larson, "Glory," interview by Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger. From *RENT Libretto and Script* (New York: Melcher Media Inc., 1997): 56.

⁴⁷ Taye Diggs, "Glory," interview by Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger. From *RENT Libretto and Script* (New York: Melcher Media Inc., 1997): 57.

⁴⁸ Adam Pascal, "Glory," interview by Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger. From *RENT Libretto and Script* (New York: Melcher Media Inc., 1997): 57.

⁴⁹ Julie Stone Peters, "Theater and Book in the History of Memory: Materializing Mnemosyne in the Age of Print," in *Modern Philology* 102, no. 2 (2004): 179-206.

through script, the theater became a space for remembering a person who wrote the script.⁵⁰ The memory of Larson and his work was present in the space, which ultimately transformed it into a site of memory, in addition to the site of memory of the opening performance.

The production went ahead with the move to Broadway, and *RENT* opened at the Nederlander Theater on April 29th, 1996.⁵¹ The cast described opening night as a frenzy of press, family, music, and emotion. The night was bittersweet – it was Larson’s dream, but he was not there to see it happen.⁵² The event was televised, mimicking the plot, although the press was not allowed to record the show. When the musical finally began, it was incredibly emotional. Anthony Rapp, who plays Mark, opened the show by saying, “We dedicate this and every performance to the memory of Jonathan Larson.”⁵³ The opening night on Broadway was a site of memory of its own – it was a dedication and memorial all in one. This declaration essentially stated the obvious to the cast and crew, but also served a greater purpose: it publically acknowledged loss in a way that mirrored the script of the show. Rapp’s announcement encouraged the audience to face reality in the same way that the characters in the show encouraged the audience to address “actual reality” by “act[ing] up / [and] fight[ing] AIDS,” which doubles as an allusion to ACT UP.⁵⁴ Daphne Rubin-Vega, a cast member, recalls opening night as “the moment when Jonathan’s absence was so loud and pathetically ironic.”⁵⁵ This also mirrors the show’s take on absence, and how Angel’s death due to AIDS left a void in the lives of the characters. Although Larson’s death was unexpected and unrelated to AIDS, the uncanny parallel in the responses of the cast and the characters reveals the role that memory played internally and externally to the musical.

Following the rampant success of the Broadway run, the show toured nationally and internationally. Including the current twentieth anniversary productions, the play has toured a total of twenty-five times. Although each tour stop is a site of memory of its own, it is not only the actual tours that are significant; the names of the tour are also telling.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 203.

⁵¹ Scott Miller, *Rebels with Applause: Broadway's Groundbreaking Musicals* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001).

⁵² Don Summa, “Glory,” interview by Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger. From *RENT Libretto and Script* (New York: Melcher Media Inc., 1997): 63.

⁵³ Anthony Rapp, “Glory,” interview by Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger. From *RENT Libretto and Script* (New York: Melcher Media Inc., 1997): 64.

⁵⁴ Jonathan Larson, *RENT Libretto and Script*, Act 1, Scene 23.

⁵⁵ Daphne Rubin-Vega, “Glory,” interview by Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger. From *RENT Libretto and Script* (New York: Melcher Media Inc., 1997): 64.

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Typically, shows will name their tours based on their destinations. However, the production instead named tours after characters in the show. Tours were named after Angel, Collins, Benny, and Mark.⁵⁶ It is interesting that these were the characters that were chosen as the faces of the tour. Angel dies, so a tour in their honor could represent a memorial of that character. It is significant that the AIDS Memorial Quilt, perhaps the most famous relic of AIDS memory, was first displayed on the National Mall a month before the Angel Tour began. Additionally, a tour named for Collins could honor the people struggling in the fight against AIDS. The decision to honor Benny with a tour in his name is interesting; after all, he is widely agreed to be the villain of the story. Additionally, the Benny tour is the longest of the national tours: it ran from September 1997 until July 2001. The 2009-2010 United States tour is sometimes referred to as the Mark Tour, although this is not always the case.⁵⁷ Currently, *RENT* is in its Twentieth Anniversary Tour in both the United States and the United Kingdom. It is interesting that there was not a tour celebrating the ten-year anniversary of *RENT*; instead, the cast reunited for a benefit concert at the Nederlander Theater.⁵⁸ Perhaps this is why the Twentieth Anniversary Tour has been so widely publicized. Each stop on the tour is a site of memory; in an age when AIDS is highly treatable, some purposes of the tour are to spread Larson's vision, remember those who died when treatment options were not so optimistic, and simply enjoy music and theater.⁵⁹

Additionally, individual performances of *RENT* act as memorials. Besides the overarching dedication to the playwright, there is room for memorial within the very script of *RENT*. Act 1, Scene 13, titled "Life Support," presents Mark videotaping a meeting of an AIDS support group. Larson's stage directions are poignant: in them, he addresses the need to memorialize real people who died from AIDS. Larson writes, "Note: The names of the support group members should change every night and should honor actual friends of the company who have died of

⁵⁶ Internet Broadway Database (accessed on November 27, 2017), <<https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/rent-4791>>. According to the Internet Broadway Database, the three official tours for *RENT* are the Angel Tour, the Benny Tour, and the Mark Tour.

⁵⁷ *RENT* tours have different names throughout popular culture. It is difficult to quantify this anecdotal data because there are various online sources claiming contradicting tour titles.

⁵⁸ Kenneth Jones, "RENT's 10th Anniversary Celebration Will Reunite Past Bohemians, for Three Good Causes," in *Playbill* (Playbill Inc., 2006).

⁵⁹ Alice Park, "There Is No Cure for HIV - But Scientists May Be Getting Closer," in *TIME Magazine* (Time Health, March 19, 2018). Although there is not yet a cure to HIV, the disease is highly treatable for individuals with access to Western healthcare systems.

AIDS.”⁶⁰ Some of the given names of members of Life Support are significant to Larson. The placeholder names memorialize his friends, Ali Gertz, Pam Shaw, and Gordon Rogers, who all died of AIDS by the time *RENT* went into rehearsals.⁶¹ Essentially, this transformed each Life Support member into a memorial each time the show was performed – whether or not the original names were used.

Mark as the Designated Rememberer of *RENT*

The character of Mark is incredibly important to understanding the role of memory in Larson’s depiction of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Mark, a struggling cinematographer, plays the role of what I am calling the “designated rememberer” of his peers. Throughout the play, Mark and his friends acknowledge the likelihood of Mark outliving them all because he is a heterosexual male who does not use drugs – and is less likely to be exposed to HIV. Mark takes on a large role in the musical, but his camera is perhaps the most important accessory to his character. Mark films nearly every line of every scene in which he is present except for his monologues. He often neglects to make eye contact with his friends, choosing to record their lives instead of directly interacting with them. This creates a separation between Mark and his friends, which appears to be an intentional choice. The knowledge of his impending loneliness encouraged Mark to take on the role of the group’s memorializer, although it would seem that Mark considers his responsibility to have a deeper meaning than simply memorializing fun moments with his friends.

This responsibility is exemplified through Mark’s initial repulsion to the idea of selling his footage of protests surrounding marginalized people. Mark’s interactions with Alexi Darling, a character who attempts to capitalize on the memory of others, are superficially viewed as mere comic relief. However, these interactions are revealing of Mark’s character. For example, when Mark is first contacted by Alexi on New Years Eve, he calls her show, *Buzzline*, “sleazy.”⁶² However, in her monologue, Alexi’s persistent repetition of “ker-ching, ker-ching,” and her emphasis on the potential professional gains for Mark prove to be attractive.⁶³ Alexi repeats her requests at various other points in the show, until a worn-out, depressed Mark finally submits to her demands. After

⁶⁰ Larson, *RENT Libretto and Script*, Act 1, Scene 13.

⁶¹ Leacock, “Leap of Faith,” 21.

⁶² Larson, *RENT Libretto and Script*, Act 2, Scene 27.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Act 2, Scene 27.

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Alexi's final request that Mark "sell [her] his soul," he yields to her and signs a contract.⁶⁴ This moment appears to be a reflection of all of the characters in the musical; Roger sells his guitar, Mark sells his film, and Mimi continues to sell herself. However, Mark's monologue, "Halloween," is the best example of Mark's inner conflict about his decision to capitalize on the memory of others. Ultimately, Mark regrets and rescinds his contract with Alexi, vowing to respect the memory of his friends and people with HIV.⁶⁵

It would not be a large stretch to say that Mark at least subconsciously creates prosthetic memories when he films his friends.⁶⁶ Mark's videotaping, which cumulates in the final moments of the musical with a film, reveals the duality of his intentions. Primarily, he hoped to remember his friends; secondarily, his character desired to create an experience where memories of his past were projected onto the audience. Mark's purposeful engagement with media as an agent for spreading the truth fits with Landsberg's theories on prosthetic memory. The filming allows anyone who sees Mark's movie to form prosthetic memories, and indeed, the audience of *RENT* views Mark's movie in the final scene.⁶⁷ Additionally, when taking into account the external factors of the play, Mark represents Larson's personal desire to memorialize his friends with HIV. Therefore, Mark is both an active and passive agent in the creation of prosthetic memories; he creates them within the structure of the play, and his character induces them in the audience.

One Song Glory as a Microcosm of Memory

A second site of memory that resides within the script of *RENT* is "One Song Glory." In this soliloquy, Roger discusses his attempts to eulogize himself. Inherently, this sung monologue acts as a site of memory; the song behaves as the creation of a future memorial. "Glory" explores Roger's journey into acceptance of his diagnosis, but also ironically details his dying wish: to write one last song that will represent his legacy when he has passed.

The musicality of the song echoes Roger's search for meaning. The song embodies a haunting, repetitive guitar refrain. This melody repeats throughout both the song and the musical – especially with respect to Mark and Mimi's character development. The almost monotonous quality

⁶⁴ Ibid., Act 2, Scene 33.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Act 2, Scene 28.

⁶⁶ Landsberg, "Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture," 149.

⁶⁷ Larson, *RENT Libretto and Script*, Act 2, Scene 42.

of the verses in the song represent the preconceived futility of Roger's ambitions. The repeating tones imply both that Roger is no different from the thousands who die of HIV/AIDS and that attempting to differentiate himself is futile. Yet, the break in the chorus of the song, with angry guitar strumming and aggressive vocals, represent a breakthrough in the struggle to be remembered. If the song solely consisted of the verse, listeners would not remember Roger's point. However, the contrast makes both the song and Roger's goal interesting, unique, and worth remembering.

Additionally, the song's lyrics add to the motif of remembering and being remembered. The word "glory" is particularly significant – it is repeated thirteen times throughout the course of the song.⁶⁸ The word "glory" is what separates Roger's superficial goal of writing one song before he dies from his true desires: to be glorified and remembered in death. Although Roger only alludes to death and HIV, it is clear to the listener that his true concern lies in legacy as opposed to simply writing a song. "One Song Glory" is also somewhat autobiographical, as we learn later in the script that Roger begins writing his song about the woman who gave him HIV and ultimately writes a song about the woman who helped him accept his diagnosis. Roger refers to these women when he sings, "He had the world at his feet / Glory / In the eyes of a young girl / A young girl."⁶⁹ Prior to this song, the audience does not know of Roger's HIV status or sexuality, and this song provides a platform for Roger to discuss these topics while coping with his diagnosis.

Ultimately, this song discusses a eulogy written by and for Roger while he is still alive. Yet, it does not specifically memorialize Roger, although it begins to explore his need to be remembered. Therein lies the site of memory – Roger's voice amplifies the thousands of people who died of HIV who were silent, absent, or erased – but he does not explicitly mention them. The monotony of the lyrics and music represent the sheer numbers of deaths and reveal Roger's desire to distinguish himself. This goal represents a thematic desire of terminally ill patients to leave a legacy post-mortem.⁷⁰

This song acts as a site of memory in multiple senses of the word. Superficially, Roger remembers his life and the woman he loved. However, on a deeper level, the song acts as a site of memory for people external to the musical. Throughout this process, the people in the audience who are intimately aware of HIV/AIDS could be reminded of

⁶⁸ Larson, *RENT Libretto and Script*, Act 1, Scene 7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Act 1, Scene 7.

⁷⁰ Ellis, "'No Day but Today': Queer Temporality in *RENT*," 201.

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their struggles, while audience members who have no previous connection to the disease might begin to develop prosthetic memories. Essentially, people who previously could not truly empathize due to their own health or lack of connection to people with HIV/AIDS now feel personally involved in the process of living with disease.

The song explicitly and implicitly addresses the struggles of people living with and dying from AIDS. For example, the song only addresses death with respect to time but not to people dying. For example, Roger claims, "Time flies - time dies," but his only references to death are implicit, such as when he says, "I'm writing one great song before I..." and, "Before the virus takes hold / Glory / Like a Sunset." These implicit discussions of mortality in the face of illness address fears of death and succumbing to disease, which publicly address HIV in a realm where it was previously silenced and absent.

In addition to the implicit, Roger also verbally addresses some of the more banal aspects of life for a person with HIV. Garland-Thomson's perspective is present in the musical narrative of *RENT* and Roger's storyline at large; her argument that people living with disabilities should not be reduced to their impairments is a significant motif in Roger's characterization. For example, "One Song Glory" is not the only representation of Roger's overarching goals throughout the musical. The musical and lyrical refrains of the piece are recycled into various other songs in the show. In fact, Roger's desires are not forgotten when other narratives are introduced later on in the plot; rather, they are incorporated into his relationships with other characters. This reveals that disease is not erased simply because a person without HIV is present. Additionally, it reveals that the individual's personal priorities remain relevant in spite of the progression of disease. Roger's goals are present throughout the entire story, even during his hospitalization, until he finally writes his song. Ultimately, *RENT* allows for connections between multiple collectives while bringing their absences to the forefront of the viewers' consciousness.

Conclusion

The great debate remains: is theater historiography a viable field of study? I certainly think so. The current academic writing surrounding theater, memory, HIV/AIDS, and *RENT* reveals the slow development of an intentional consciousness when remembering the AIDS crisis and its relation to the theater. Yet, the history surrounding *RENT* as the intersection between memory, theater, and HIV/AIDS is so unique that it deserves a place in academia. *RENT* is a pop culture phenomenon that

pushed memory into the consciousness of the American public. The nature of *RENT* as both a work of performance art and a memorial uniquely situates the musical in a position that deeply resonates with the audience, ultimately creating prosthetic memories. In the previous discussion, I explored how the character of Mark facilitates the development of prosthetic memories; I then demonstrated that “One Song Glory” reveals the extent to which people with HIV/AIDS insist on declaring their presence in the face of absence and silence, even following their deaths.

Ultimately, the parallels between the memory surrounding the history of the production and plot of *RENT* render it a more powerful cultural relic than it would have been if only one aspect of memory was present. This is what makes *RENT* such an important site of memory: both the internal and external sub-sites of memory created an agent of memory so powerful that it has resulted in ongoing productions of *RENT* twenty years after opening night. *RENT* truly exemplifies a case of art not only mimicking life, but actively recording it for future generations to explore. In “Halloween,” Mark questions, “Why am I the witness?” Larson’s *RENT* answers that question: because this story is one worth remembering.

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