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RENT

THE MOVIE

Making AIDS urgent for a vulnerable new generation—and bringing queer love to red-state moviegoers nationwide

PLUS LGBT DRIVERS LET THEIR TOPS DOWN

Original cast
The *Rent* movie's
Idina Menzel, Wilson
Jermaine Heredia,
and Anthony Rapp

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■ Mark (Rapp) looks on as his ex-girlfriend, Maureen (Menzel), romances her current love, Joanne (Thoms).

“East Village. Rock opera. AIDS. It could be the ultimate Cheez Whiz, or it could be something interesting,” recalls Anthony Rapp of his first peek at a synopsis of an unproduced stage musical called *Rent*. He was standing in an obscure office in the New York headquarters of the powerful ICM talent agency, but after a good run on the New York stage and playing teen roles in several films, including *Dazed and Confused*, he was about as far from the top of the heap as an ICM client could get.

“It was September of 1994. I was working at Starbucks—the first time I’d had to take a survival job in New York. There was a guy [at ICM] who got upgraded from an assistant to an agent’s job. I saw the *Rent* breakdowns on his desk. It was a three-week workshop, and [gay stage director] Michael Greif was directing it, and I knew who he was.” Rapp talked his way into an audition.

Meanwhile, would-be rock and roller Idina Menzel was between gigs as a wedding singer when she heard about the show and thought it sounded like fun. And the timing was perfect: *Rent* was going to be workshopped in January and February. There aren’t a lot of weddings in the dead of winter. “I was just happy to be doing theater,” says Menzel. “It was my first professional [acting] job.” It turned out to be much more. “That New Year’s Eve at the Four Seasons in Philly was the last wedding gig I ever did.”

Actor Wilson Jermaine Heredia was not interested in auditioning for some workshop production of a rock opera inspired by Puccini’s *La Bohème*. “It was downtown, it was only going to last a month, and I’d just got medical insurance,” he recalls. “I was working full-time as a dispatcher for a realty company, midnight to 9 in

the morning. They owned all these buildings and had their own maintenance crew. If there was a leak at 2 in the morning, I was the person they’d call.” Sending out plumbers was a secure gig. Singing and dancing in a musical about AIDS? Heredia recalls thinking, *You know what? I can’t afford that.*

But the power of *Rent* won him over: “When I got the music and the script, I got nervous because I loved the project so much.” He auditioned and was offered the pivotal role of Angel, a mischievous drag queen with AIDS and a great sense of rhythm. But he dithered, still worried about quitting his job. “My manager called me up and was infuriated with me. He said, ‘Listen, are you a dispatcher? Or are you an actor?’” Heredia says.

That question woke him up. And soon afterward, *Rent* woke up Broadway and the world. Created by a long-struggling writer-composer named Jonathan Larson, who wrote the book, music, and lyrics, it brought onto the mainstream stage the world of the lower east side in New York City—a universe populated with homeless people, drug addicts, aspiring performers, drag queens, and would-be filmmakers living on the streets or in dodgy lofts with no heat. In short, outcasts. But outcasts who had found their own sense of family, their own idea of home.

In Larson’s vision, the *La Bohème* characters were transformed into young New Yorkers, struggling artists, gay and straight [see sidebar]. Rapp played Mark, the filmmaker and narrator whose ex-girlfriend, Maureen (Menzel)—an amusing gloss on Laurie Anderson-style performance artists—is now dating Joanne, a smart, driven career woman. Mark lives in an illegal sublet with Roger (Adam Pascal), an HIV-positive rock musician and recovering ►

addict who falls hard for Mimi, the drug-addicted stripper who lives downstairs. Mimi is also dating the landlord, Benny (Taye Diggs), Mark's and Roger's one-time friend turned real estate mogul. Meanwhile another pal, computer hacker Tom Collins (Jesse L. Martin), meets and falls for Angel, a sweet presence who finds his true love just as the closing credits of his fabulous life are beginning to play.

The music—more than two hours of it—wove their stories into Larson's down-and-out tapestry, which also included a chorus of homeless folks and an HIV support group. Even as demos, songs like "I'll Cover You" (a heart-breaking same-sex love song), "La Vie Bohème," and "Seasons of Love" marked a major talent, redefining what a musical could be. Larson had turned New York's supposedly seamy side into a celebration of life and love, and *Rent* turned New York on its head, packing successively bigger theaters en route to Broadway, a fistful of Tony Awards, and the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for drama.

Rent was never just a hit musical. *Rent* mattered. It amplified the urgent desperation of the late '80s and early '90s, when AIDS was rampant, no one seemed to care, and people struggled to get by. It took place and was first performed long before drugs like the protease inhibitor cocktail would lull people into a false sense of complacency about this plague. It put queers and drug addicts and people with AIDS at the heart of a big-hearted musical. This wasn't Cheez Whiz: *Rent* spoke to audiences worldwide with the emotional appeal of, say, *Les Misérables* or *The Lion King*, but it wasn't a noble fantasy of long ago or far away. This show celebrated the lives of the very people audiences stepped over outside as they made their way into Broadway venues.

Young people in particular lined up around the block, often showing up the night before, to be able to buy \$20 tickets in the front two rows, which were sold just hours before each curtain.

Now a big-budget film musical—due out nationwide November 23—*Rent* still matters, even if the "Rentheads" who were teens when the show began are now pushing 30, and the Broadway cast members who re-create their roles in the film—Rapp, Menzel, and Heredia along with Pascal, Martin, and Diggs—needed a little movie magic to once again embody their 20-something alter egos. "We had a nutritionist working with us on the movie to keep us healthy and make us look younger and a little hungrier," says Rapp. Adds Menzel with a laugh: "Even back then, we were never that young."

The actors knew they had to recapture the sense of desperation that infused the show when it premiered. "It was all raw [energy] and spontaneity," says Menzel. Even now, Rapp insists, "urgently" is the only way to play these roles, because the stories *Rent* tells, although set 16 years ago (from Christmas 1989 to late 1990), have lost none of their immediacy in an America—

The rest of the *Renters*



ROSARIO DAWSON

ROLE: Mimi
FITS IN HOW: HIV-positive drug-addicted stripper. In love with Roger

ORIGINAL CAST:
No

The New York City native is a sought-after film star. Wowed audiences in *Sin City*, *Men in Black II*, and *The 25th Hour*.

TAYE DIGGS

ROLE: Benny
FITS IN HOW: Friend turned landlord. Dating Mimi

ORIGINAL CAST:
Yes

Film roles include *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. Played the lead on UPN's *Kevin Hill*. Married fellow *Renter* Idina Menzel in 2003.

JESSE L. MARTIN

ROLE: Tom
FITS IN HOW: Lover of Angel (Wilson Heredia) Friend of Mark and Roger

ORIGINAL CAST:
Yes

Since 1999 has played a detective on TV's *Law & Order*. Sang and danced in a 2004 TV musical production of *A Christmas Carol*.

TRACIE THOMS

ROLE: Joanne
FITS IN HOW: Lawyer, lover of Maureen

ORIGINAL CAST:
No

Charmed gay TV aficionados as a costar of the short-lived *Wonderfalls*. Currently filming *The Devil Wears Prada*.

ADAM PASCAL

ROLE: Roger
FITS IN HOW: Roommate of Mark (Anthony Rapp). In love with Mimi

ORIGINAL CAST:
Yes

Starred on Broadway in *Aida*, released two CDs, toured with his rock band. Sang in 2003's *School of Rock*. —Anne Stockwell

and a world—where tolerance and respect are still hard-won.

"We can see that in the last election," says Menzel, talking about how important it is to take *Rent's* message to movie houses all over the country. "We as New Yorkers—been there, done that. But the rest of the world needs to see people of different ethnicities, women loving women, men loving men. The movie is still extremely relevant because a lot of people still need to be educated."

And after all, movies have often turned to the recent past to comment on the present: Think *Shampoo* (a 1975 film set seven years earlier), *The Deer Hunter* (a 1978 film largely set in 1968), or even *Longtime Companion* (a 1990 film that begins in 1981). "It's not going to feel like a dated piece," says Heredia. "It's still happening and we have to realize that. HIV is not gone. There are casualties every single day."

What will separate *Rent* the movie from *Rent* the stage show is the medium itself. Onstage *Rent* was performed on a nearly bare stage, with some scaffolding standing in for the grime of the East Village, the sterility of a hospital, and the funkiness of a downtown café. Filming the movie on location in New York and San Francisco and on an elaborate backlot in Los Angeles adds a verisimilitude that the filmmakers hope will offer a different kind of power.

The cast felt it, even craved it. Menzel showed up on the set even when she wasn't scheduled for that day. She went to support Pascal when he was performing "One Song Glory" late at night on a rooftop in downtown New York. It was lit so beautifully and the city was such a inspiring backdrop, Menzel says, "It just seemed right."

Rapp had the wonderful and bizarre experience of shooting ►

COVER STORY

scenes just blocks from where he used to live. "There was something about being on Seventh Street between [avenues] A and B at night with the big movie lights and the camera on me," says Rapp. "I lived just the other side of Tompkins Square Park from where we were. And I was singing this song Jonathan had written with my voice in mind. That was the most out-of-body experience where I thought, *Oh, my fucking God, I can't believe this is happening.*"

The translation to film also adds intensity of some intimate moments, says Heredia. Angel's death from AIDS complications was beautifully stylized onstage, at a time when the harsh physical suffering of people with the disease was more prevalent in queer New Yorkers' lives and more visible in the media. Now, when the brutality of AIDS is largely glossed over, the movie drives home the reality.

"The death of Angel is not pretty. It's a real hospital scene—lesions and all," says Heredia, now 33 and recently divorced. "I have to quote Tupac. I can't do it verbatim, but he said that the only way people react to anything is if you show them. Vietnam only stopped because people saw it on television. So we show it in the film. The only way anything is going to get better is to put it in your face. It's not pretty, is it? It's real."

How well the cast's experience will translate to moviegoers remains to be seen. The completed film was not made available to *The Advocate* at press time, but it is by all reports no carbon copy of the stage show. Songs were cut to lower the running time, including "Christmas Bells"; the steamy, Bob Fosse-inspired "Contact"; and two more Rapp says he's not yet allowed to name. And the production has been dogged by questions—whether director Chris Columbus (of *Home Alone* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*) can make *Rent* gritty enough to match its subject and setting; whether the actors are too old to reprise their roles.

Rapp is the first to come to Columbus's defense. He had his first feature role in 1987's *Adventures in Babysitting*, Columbus's debut as a director, and says he never doubted for a minute that 18 years of experience had prepared the filmmaker for just this project. "Having worked with [Chris], I knew he had more fire in him, a darker sensibility, and edgier sense of humor than he'd shown in his films," Rapp says. "One of the things he said in our meeting that was eye-opening to me was, 'This is going to be the most important film I ever make.'"

"Chris's movies are about community and family," says Heredia. "*Rent* is the same thing. It's not about AIDS, it's not about homosexuality, it's not about homelessness—it's about family."

As for casting six of the eight original principal actors—only Daphne Rubin-Vega (Mimi) and Fredi Walker (Joanne) were replaced—Rapp says the movie's cast is so immersed in the roles that they readily tapped in once again to the sadness and joy inextricably tied up in *Rent*. And no one else shares these six actors' experience of the show's dramatic birth and its creator's shocking death: Larson died suddenly the night after the final off-Broadway dress rehearsal—January 25, 1996.

"We gathered together in the theater that day in shock and not knowing what to do," says Rapp, now 34 and in the fourth year of a relationship. "We were supposed to have a preview [performance] that night [with a paying audience]. The decision came down pretty quick from Michael and Jim [Nicola, the artistic director of the New York Theatre Workshop] that we were going to do a sing-through of the show because we didn't want to leave the theater silent and Jonathan's family was flying in."

The cast and crew invited friends and family to what was supposed to be a sing-through with the cast seated at tables onstage.



■ Clockwise from top: Heredia and Martin pledge their love; Thoms puts Menzel on a pedestal; Rapp, the filmmaker, is alone with his camera.



"But by [the act 1 finale] 'La Vie Bohème,' we were up and dancing," Rapp says. "Doing it that night brought home, more than it had, that there was so much joy and life in the piece, and there is also incredible loss and sorrow. And both things are true, and both things are as fully realized as the other. To me, part of what the story is saying is that in the face of these circumstances you can still live your life as fully as possible."

"Jonathan's father, Al, said to me after that performance, 'This has got to be a hit. You've got to make this a hit.'"

The ironies piled up. Larson, on the cusp of a career-making success with a musical that drew its fire from the tragic loss of so many talented young people, had died of an untreated aortic aneurysm that went undiagnosed after several visits to the emergency room. If he'd had the medical insurance Heredia gave up to be in the show, he might be alive today. Rapp, the very queer show's sole out gay actor in a lead role, was playing the straight narrator. And ▶

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Rent to own

Thank you so much for writing such an in-depth story about the movie version of *Rent* [*Rent Gets Real*, November 8]. As I have read many other articles regarding the upcoming release, they all seemed like sound bites compared with the history that was put into your story. As a self-proclaimed Renthead, I can't tell you how excited I am to see this life-changing story brought to the big screen. With most of the original cast in place, I believe it will do exactly what the original play set out to do—open eyes, pull the heart strings, and preach the power of love.

JASON STODDARD [San Jose, Calif.](#)

No excuses

Jerry Davis states that gay Spokane mayor James West is being asked to “step down” because of his “hypocrisy” [First Person, November 8]. Wrong. He's being asked to step down because he attempted to sell City Hall jobs for sex. That's illegal; hypocrisy isn't. I despise West's antigay bills, and I wish society were tolerant enough to allow him to feel comfortable living his life openly. But to blame society for West's wrongs is silly. His wrong is illegally using his government position, not being gay or being a hypocrite.

SHANE ABMA [Portland, Ore.](#)

In the pink

The use of Baker-Miller pink as a calming influence is well-known in the criminal justice and psychology fields [*Locker Room Dustup*, November 8]. It is not surprising that an athletic coach chose to

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—**JASON STODDARD**, [San Jose, Calif.](#)

use it in the opponents' locker room. It's called the home field advantage. It has nothing to do with gays or women but rather with the subliminal ability to calm or defuse those in its presence. Any knowledgeable colorist is well aware of its psychological properties. The research is well-documented.

MERLE H. SYKORA [via the Internet](#)

Of course pink is being used to imply femininity or weakness, but let's show a little more sense of humor and rise above P.C. bullshit so we will be taken more seriously about the real issues facing all of us.

SAM MOLLOY [Lexington, Ky.](#)

If the color pink angers visiting teams, it only serves to make them more adversarial, not less. The University of Iowa is not homophobic, being the first public university to offer partner benefits and the first to offer a gay studies course (which always had a waiting list). I attended U.I. during Hayden Fry's tenure, and we had a good football team. Big deal. His supporters threatening [Erin] Buzuvis [a visiting law professor who accused the school of perpetuating negative stereotypes] with rape and death? Get a life, morons.

DOUGLAS MAAG [via the Internet](#)

Road rage

I was feeling proud and uplifted after reading “We're Here to Help” [November 8] about gay and lesbian relief workers in New Orleans. Then a few pages later I wasn't feeling so proud anymore and my heart sank after reading “Why I Love My Car.” In addition to the owners saying how great their cars are, you should have listed the gas mileage for each vehicle. Of the four late-model cars pictured, only the VW Beetle gets somewhat decent gas mileage. Jennifer Macey has the right idea about looking forward to hybrid and more environmentally conscious models, but in the meantime her vehicle is getting senseless and horrible gas mileage.

There's nothing “hot” or “sexy” about

driving a gas-guzzling vehicle. Where was the Mini Cooper convertible (which has the highest EPA rating for gas mileage) in your road test of convertibles? We in the gay community should be setting examples of responsible and intelligent vehicle choices and not getting caught up in the SUV size wars (size queens, indeed) and the myth that “bigger equals better,” since in reality “bigger equals more irresponsible” and is totally not “hot.”

BRENT REED [San Francisco, Calif.](#)

Church and state

Regarding your November 8 Cross Country item that reads, “Catholic leaders launched a petition drive in churches across [Massachusetts] on October 2 in an effort to gather the 65,000 signatures necessary to get a same-sex marriage ban proposal on the 2008 ballot”—has anyone called the IRS to check on when the Catholic Church's tax-exempt status in Boston was being withdrawn for getting involved in politics to this degree? All they do is collect money for those fat cats who hate us, and now this!

MICHAEL O'DONNELL [Tucson, Ariz.](#)

Baby steps

After reading Chris Rice's column titled “Friends Like These” [November 8] I felt overwhelmingly compelled, but perhaps not in the sense he'd like his readers to be.

Perhaps many younger gay men and women feel as he does, that the gay marriage movement has been “thrust” on the national stage, but I disagree. For us folks who are a bit older, this sudden identification on a large scale isn't something that I've seen appear out of thin air. What I have seen is a marriage movement that has been created by thousands of small stories massed to bring on a movement. To disregard that fact is to devalue the efforts of thousands of us who have for many years been pushing for equality.

What compelled me even more than this sudden phenomenon theory was ▶