

## SIMILARITIES BETWEEN *RENT* and *LA BOHÈME*

The 1996 rock-opera *RENT* is loosely based on the Puccini opera *La Bohème* of a century before. Composer and writer Jonathan Larson wished to update the setting and story of the classic opera to modern day, in order to tell a story of the tragedies of bohemian existence in America. While many plot details and themes are changed from the inspirational source, *RENT* and *La Bohème* possess many connecting similarities, which enrich performances of the modern musical for fans of the original opera.

*RENT* and *La Bohème* are both set in cities considered as havens for artists, New York and Paris. The reality behind the romantic tourist images of both cities are clearly proved false by the two stories. In early scenes in *RENT* and *La Bohème*, characters are forced to burn manuscript pages in order to stay warm, not being able to afford firewood, or in the modern version, the heating bills.

Both *RENT* and *La Bohème* describe the devastation of a disease considered a feature of lower-class or artistic existence. In *La Bohème* one of the main characters, Mimi, is afflicted with tuberculosis, a deadly and highly infective disease still common throughout the world today. In *RENT* the plague is AIDS, and has spread to many of the characters, half of whom are infected with the illness.

Many character names in *RENT* and *La Bohème* are similar or identical, and modern characters often share similar, though updated, jobs. Musetta, in the original opera, is a flamboyant singer. Her modern counterpart, Maureen, is a performance artist who uses song as part of her repertoire. Mimi has the same name in both *RENT* and *La Bohème*, but is a seamstress afflicted with tuberculosis in the original, while in the modern version she is a stripper infected with AIDS.

Musically, *RENT* and *La Bohème* share many similarities in style and theme. The well-known "Musetta's Waltz" from *La Bohème* is repeated several times throughout *RENT*, finally becoming the clearest in the song "Your Eyes." Both shows frequently rely on recitative singing, a form of rapid dialogue exchange in song, to show people arguing or heated discussions.

One of the closest similarities between the two shows occurs early on, when Mimi meets and is attracted to one of the main characters, called Rodolfo in the opera and Roger in *RENT*. The meeting occurs under near identical circumstances, as Mimi knocks at the door, hoping to receive a match for her burned-out candle. Some of the dialogue between the two characters is actually the same, as they fumble to find matches and discover they like one another. However, the *RENT* version follows its considerably darker tone, with Roger remembering seeing Mimi stripping and realizing she needs the candle for drug use.

*RENT* and *La Bohème* both focus on the plight of artists in cities that are reputed to celebrate them. Both shows focus on the poverty and dangers of a life lived away from conventional standards, but *RENT* shows an even bleaker existence in 20th century New York. Many theater critics consider the experience of *RENT* heightened by familiarity with the original opera, although both pieces have come to be considered individual masterpieces of their genres.

<b>RENT vs. LA BOHÈME SIMILARITIES</b>	
<b><u>RENT</u></b>	<b><u>LA BOHÈME</u></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Main characters are:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Mark, a filmmaker</li> <li>○ Roger, a composer</li> <li>○ Mimi, a dancer - Roger's love interest</li> <li>○ Collins, a philosopher</li> <li>○ Angel Schunard, a musician - Collins's love interest</li> <li>○ Maureen, an actress - Mark's former girlfriend</li> <li>○ Joanne, a lawyer - Maureen's new girlfriend</li> <li>○ Benny, the landlord</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Main characters are:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Marcello, an artist</li> <li>○ Rodolfo, a painter</li> <li>○ Mimi, a seamstress - Rodolfo's love interest</li> <li>○ Colline, a philosopher</li> <li>○ Schunard, a composer</li> <li>○ Musetta, Marcello's former girlfriend</li> <li>○ Alcindoro, Musetta's new boyfriend</li> <li>○ Benoit, the landlord</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mark and Roger warm themselves in the first scene by burning Mark's screenplays and Roger's music posters.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rodolfo and Marcello warm themselves in the first scene by burning Rodolfo's five-act drama.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mimi enters Mark's and Roger's apartment during a power outage, looking for a light for her candle. Her first song ends with the words "They call me Mimi."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mimi enters Marcello's and Rodolfo's apartment looking for a light for her candle. Her first aria begins with the words "They call me Mimi."</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roger is mesmerized by Mimi's "hair in the</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rodolfo sings of Mimi's "sweet visage bathed in a soft</li> </ul>

moonlight."	lunar dawn."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maureen sings: "Every single day, I walk down the street I hear people say 'Baby's so sweet.' Ever since puberty, everybody stares at me Boys, girls, I can't help it, baby."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Musetta sings: "When I walk alone through the street people stop and stare, and all seek in me my beauty from head to foot."</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Angel is hired to kill an annoying dog by drumming incessantly.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schaunard is hired to kill an annoying parrot by "incessant musical performance" (Groos and Parker, 14)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Roger says he wants to leave town because Mimi has renewed her relationship with her previous boyfriend, but Mark encourages him to admit that he is afraid that she will soon die and does not want to grow too close to her.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rodolfo says he wants to stop his relationship with Mimi because she is flirtatious, but eventually reveals to Marcello that she is also deathly ill.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>After Roger and Mimi's separation, Maureen finds Mimi "freezing" in a park and brings her to Mark and Roger's.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>After Rodolfo and Mimi's separation, Musetta meets Mimi, who is "so cold," on the street and takes her to Marcello and Rodolfo's.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As Mimi lies dying, she says to Roger, "I should tell you - I love you"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As Mimi dies, she says "I have so many things I want to tell you ... you are my love and all my life!"</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mimi nearly dies of AIDS at the end of the musical.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mimi dies of tuberculosis at the end of the opera.</li> </ul>