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DEADLINE: May 1st of each year

RENT:
Reinterpreting The Gospel of Mark
At the Close of the Millennium

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In this paper I do not want to suggest the specific focus I have chosen fully explores or defines the *Rent* experience or its multiple meanings. I wish to explore a few of the "Gospel" characteristics of *Rent* I have found in my experience of the show. I further wish to suggest there may be deeper structural reasons for some of the power and popularity of this musical than that which first meets the eye and ear.

My journey with *Rent* will serve as an introduction.

Prior to the last time the Association for Theatre in Higher Education was in New York I reserved tickets for several shows that I knew I couldn't get into by going to Tickets Tonight. At the time I knew little to nothing about *Rent* besides the usual information: that it was a contemporary reworking of *La Boheme* for the New York's East Village, that the characters that had Tuberculosis in *La Boheme* had AIDS in *Rent*, that it revolutionized the American Musical, and so forth, so I got a ticket to see it on Broadway.

During the production I was enjoying its energy, freshness, honesty, truthfulness, and joyous sense of life in the midst of death – when suddenly I found myself sitting in on a "Last Supper" scene as the climax of act one in the "*Viva la Vie Boheme*" sequence. This was further accompanied by a betrayal that betrays them all, by one of the former "company" members (Benny). I was unprepared for any such scene, or sequence of events by any of the "press" I had heard or read about the play. I had to rethink some of my impressions during intermission. When I came back in for the second act I was looking at it through a more consciously multi-focused (or multi-valiant) series of lenses.

The opening of Act II for me then became a statement of *Rent's* "Gospel of Love" as articulated in the song "Seasons of Love." It asked how one measures a year: 525,600 minutes – yes, fully living every minute of your life – yes, but mostly it states the way to "measure your life" is "in love." What followed was a series of visual statements referencing the "death, Pieta,

deposition of the body, burial, and resurrection" of "Angel." This series pretty well cemented the experience for me. I was then forced to think back through Act One to see if there was any "set-up" material that I had missed on first viewing. There was plenty, but I will let that rest for a while.

My daughter asked for the *Rent* CD sound track for her birthday so I, like a dutiful father, obeyed. She listened to the *Rent* recording nightly. I knew this because the sound would waft its way from her bedroom next to the sitting room, where my wife and I tend to spend much of our evenings together. One evening, after listening to her CD's on a regular basis in this manner, I tried out my emerging "interpretation" on her. Her response was something like a nice warm and appreciative "COOL." At some time during the gestation of this reading of *Rent* Lionel Walsh, then Focus Group Representative for the Lesbian and Gay Theatre Focus Group, and I talked about doing a joint panel between his group and the Religion and Theatre Focus Group (of which I was the Focus Group Representative). I committed both to the panel and to looking more closely at *Rent* as the prime possibility for me to tackle. As a Christmas present in 1997 my daughter gave my wife and me tickets to the touring production of *Rent* that came to Seattle the following spring. I went with my multi-valiant "religious" glasses on from the beginning of the show this time. I also had listened, inadvertently most of the time, to my daughter's *Rent* CD's for several months, read the Julie Larson McCollum book on the process of *Rent*, and read the libretto/book of *Rent* in the interim. That should provide more than enough information on my "journey" with *Rent*.

I want to go back to that AH! HA! moment for me at my first viewing: the Central Image of *Rent* -- The Last Supper. In Julie Larson McCollum's "Big Book" on *Rent* (p. 45) director Michael Greif states:

I think the design of the whole show was dictated by our desire to dance on tables in "*La Vie Boheme*." It just seemed like a wonderful way in such a small space to show that kind of exuberance – just a bursting through the seams. Also, the song begins in a religious frame: there's all this talk of Bethlehem. We staged a Last Supper, and it became this big feast, this big ceremony. And then I think we decided we needed the tables for everything else, that they could be everywhere.

There are several spin-offs from that Central Image:

At the opening of the show it is Christmas Eve (just like in *La Boheme*). It is Mark the cinematographer/narrator who records all the events of "the coming together of this community" of homeless individuals (or almost homeless since they are living in "free" housing). The community eventually includes both drug addicts and non-addicts, some with money but others who are impoverished, gays, lesbians, straights, ethnically diverse persons – almost all of whom would fall outside the traditional American notion of "the IN group." These people as a group are not a part of the "power" set, the moneyed class, or the politically, financially, or religiously powerful.

They are not the Biblical equivalent of the Pharisees or Sadducees of the Markan Gospel text. They are rather the equivalent of the Publicans, tax collectors, wine-bibbers, prostitutes, and the poor. They are the more generally designated "sinners" that the Biblical Jesus was rather wont to "hang out with," and out of whom he formed a community. These were also the people for whom Jesus claimed he came, and by and large they are the ones who accepted his gospel of Love and forgiveness. They were also the people he claimed were closer to the kingdom of God than the "power groups" of his day, which were the obviously wealthy, and may I say, ostentatiously religious Pharisees and Sadducees. It was these "religious" groups that Jesus not so politely called "whited sepulchers" and "blind guides." It was of such "powerful" people that he made the butt of some of his most stinging parables. It was on these "righteous" (or self-righteous) "in groups" that most of Jesus' attacks on false spirituality were leveled.

Into this loose group of "outcasts," bohemians, and "sinners," comes Angel, a messianic figure who also arrives on Christmas Eve. It is "Angel" who cares for, gives love to, and in many ways solidifies this "ragamuffin" group of individuals into a consciously caring community. The musical progress through a series of multi-valiant visual images:

1. the end of Act One and the Last Supper affirmation of *La Vie Boheme*,
2. the betrayal by Benny of the whole group,
3. the Act Two opening gospel of the "Seasons of Love," which leads to,
4. the death of Angel (on one of the three beds/crosses),
5. the Pieta picturization, and

6. the deposition of the body (Collins and Angel) in the central bed/tomb,
7. Angel's "resurrection" (the dance of life and death with the rest of the cast - with Angel's dance spotlighted after his death),
8. Angel's "disappearance" from the center "table/cross/ tomb" enshrouded in, and trailing the huge "sheet" used in the group dance (a la Jesus Christ Superstar?), as he exited up center stage.

All of these images spring from that central "Last Supper" image. Angel dies on Halloween. All Hallows' Eve is the Church's designation of that holiday (holy day). Because Angel's friends cannot afford to pay the undertaker Benny pays for the burial. Benny the betrayer/Judas figure now becomes the Nicodemus figure, (this rich member of the Sanhedrin earlier had come to Jesus by night and at his death provided the unused tomb for Jesus' burial).

The organized religious leader – the pastor – chases Collins off with a preemptory "off the premises Queer." – The "religious establishment" is not often presented in very positive lights in the Gospel of St. Mark either.

[Roger and Mark suggest that while "The film-maker cannot see and the song-writer can not hear," and "we're dying in America," that is not the end of the story. They also affirm that "we're dying in America" but it is "to come into our own." They further sing, "when you're dying in America you're not alone – I'm not alone."]

The musical *Rent* brings us full circle, and we are back to the Advent season, with the street people singing, "Christmas Bells are Ringing." In this "waiting season of the Church Year" there is still no room in the (Holiday) Inn (for outsiders) and "How time flies when compassion dies."

Mark is set to celebrate Christmas Eve a year after Angel came and formed a community of this group of "outsiders." He is going to celebrate by reviewing his filmed record, or "Gospel," of the past year. The shattered, or "rent" (torn apart) "community" arrives by ones and twos as if Mark is going to call the company back into cohesive existence.

Collins arrives with cash since he has miraculously "rewired the ATM at the Food Emporium/ to provide an honorarium to anyone with the code A-N-G-E-L." A "BIRD," or an "angel" has arranged for Benny's removal from the East Village location, and Maureen and Joanne bring in Mimi in very bad condition. She and Roger share a short reprise of "I should tell you," with Mimi's confession of "I love you" before she fades. Roger's response is to sing her the song ("Your Eyes") he has been able finally to write, before Mimi's "head falls to the side and her arm drops limply off the edge of the table."

They think she had died, but suddenly Mimi's hand twitches. Incredibly she is still alive and sings,

I jumped over the moon! . . . I was in a tunnel. Heading for this warm, white light, . . . (Maureen: Oh, my God!) And I swear Angel was there – and she looked good. And she said, 'Turn around, girlfriend – and listen to that boy's song.'

Mimi (Mary) is the first person Angel (Jesus) appeared to after his "resurrection." Her fever breaks and they all join in singing the "Finale B – No Day Like Today:" an affirmation of living life "in the moment."

This song does not forget those haunting questions of being able to control their destiny, and whether they will lose their dignity, and whether someone will care at the end of their lives. These are questions we all must ask as we move through our lives.

This scene is performed while Mark's filmed version of the events of the past year is shown on the back wall. Two other projectors also show "Scenes from *Rent*." Are these other video versions suggestive of the two other synoptic Gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke? Perhaps it is just an effective theatrical complication for visual effect, or perhaps it is only a way to tell the story more completely within a minimum time frame. Perhaps it is "all of the above." Perhaps it is just a "mystery." Who can tell?

Once again I wish to state clearly that in the following section, as in the whole paper, I do not want to suggest the specific focus I have chosen, in any way, fully explores or defines the *Rent* experience or meanings. I merely wish to explore a few of the "Gospel" characteristics

I have found in my multiple experiences of *Rent*, which I feel reinterprets the Gospel of Mark for the end of the Millennium.

Some questions naturally present themselves because of this reading of the musical. Is *Rent* a "Christian" Gospel? Well, . . . No, . . . and then again perhaps, . . . Yes! Is *Rent* just a safe retelling of the "old, old story of Jesus and his love?" No! Is it a crypto-Christian "message" play? No! Do I believe Jonathan Larson was a "crypto-Christian" writing to convert his audience to this theological point of view? No! Jonathan Larson was raised in a Liberal Jewish family, whose tradition he honored. In his theatrical journey, however, both *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* were significant influences.

It is entirely possible, perhaps even probable, all the observations I will make (or have already made, or intimated) can be attributed to no more than this influence, . . . but then perhaps not. Perhaps the "Gospel" of *Rent* is Jonathan Larson's response to the version(s) of the Christian Gospel with which he came in contact.

Fredi Walker (who played Joanne) in her bio in "The Big Book" referred to Jonathan as having given,

"his life for what is one of the best spiritual messages available in the form of entertainment. The spiritual message of *Rent* is all about love, accepting the imperfections of others, being human. That's what *Rent* is about, and it's what we in the cast have allowed ourselves to do with each other." (150)

My reading of *Rent* suggests that while it may have begun as a rethinking of *La Boheme* transposed to contemporary New York's East Village, the production in its final version takes the audience farther back in time than that opera. If the sub-text of *Rent* is to be found in a reworking of *La Boheme*, I submit that its "UR" text is to be found in the Synoptic Gospels, particularly in the Gospel of Mark (but with the understandings of the Gospel of Luke).

The Gospel of Mark, as the first written Gospel, is often called the "essential" Gospel. (Yes, I am aware of the "Q" text, but it has not come down to us as a Gospel.) From the Gospel of Mark the writers of Matthew and Luke take more than 50% of each of their texts, and while

they do not contradict the Mark text, they add their own spin in their versions. While Mark is assumed to have been written by a Jew, and written to Gentiles, the Gospel of Luke definitely both was written to Gentiles, and also was written by a Gentile - a doctor. Being such an "outsider" (a Gentile) himself Luke had a strong affinity for the "outsider." His Gospel is written to anyone who considers her or himself an outsider. In Luke's world and time these "outsiders" were the poor, the homeless, the women, the "Samaritans and tax-collectors," the common laborers, the prostitutes, the "enemies" of the religious "establishment," the gluttons and "wine-bibbers," and most of the rest of those kinds of "sinners." In short it included those with whom Jesus constantly ate and drank, and those whom he accepted as part of the family of God. Does this sound like our contemporary world at the end of this millennium? Does it sound like any of your friends and family? It certainly sounds like some of mine.

Where then do I want to go with this loose telling of the Gospel of Mark?" I would like to suggest that many of us find in the Gospel Story a power of mythic proportions. (I mean mythic in a very positive and religious way. I am suggesting that it transcends our personal stories. It exists on a larger than life dimension, one that transcends time and place. It is a story, an event that has power throughout time.) The story of the specific life, death, and resurrection of one Jesus of Nazareth carries with it continuing power that we can continue to feed upon, even at the end of the 20th century. (Put in slightly different terms; for many the "punctual" Jesus-event has over-arching "durative" meaning and power as "Christ-event.") As with *Rent*, it is not a story of the "privileged class," or the politically and financially powerful. It is on the contrary a story – a life in which the poor, the despised, the marginalized, the "unclean," the publican, the disenfranchised, the sinner, can in fact find "home." I would also argue that for most of us who have been "rent" in our lives, here we can find belonging, community and love – can in fact find "home." It is from this story that Jonathan Larson finds a good deal of the power of his Gospel story, his story of "good-news." It is from this story that audiences sense a presence of mythic proportion.

Through two millennia of visual art the picturizations of Jesus have changed to fit each of the communities to which the artist has belonged. Ethnically Asian artists have depicted Jesus as Asian, African artists as African, Indian artists as Indian, and as in Salman's "Head of Christ," Swedish artists as Swedish. In each of these depictions there is no attempt to claim that Jesus was historically Swedish, or African, or Asian. I believe rather that these artists are

more closely identifying with the power inherent in the person, life, and work, of this Jesus, and in so doing they make Jesus in their own images. Depictions of Jesus as woman (as in the "Christus" sculpture in Berkeley – which is an absolutely wonderful and powerful sculpture in my estimation) have drawn fire from some quarters. (I try not to worry overmuch about those quarters too often, but unfortunately am affected by them to some degree.) I believe something similar is true of this Christus sculpture. The artist was not claiming that historically Jesus was a woman. For many women to identify more strongly with the power of that salvific life, and to sense the connections between them and Jesus, there is the need, or desire to see the similarities between the two. In this Christ as a crucified woman they can see their own crucifixions embodied. Stephen DeStabler's more ambivalent male/female crucifix in the Newmann Center in Berkeley is another powerful artistic identification with Christ, not an attempt at historical equation.

I think something of this nature is happening with *Rent* as well. I think *Rent* is a wonderful example (if somewhat over-amplified and under-articulated for my poor ears) of another art form that borrows of the power of that Gospel story for another era, for another generation, and for another audience. This audience includes those represented in the play, which includes me. It also includes an awful lot more of us than some of us are comfortable with, or even willing to admit. I think a good deal of the power of *Rent* comes from this sub-textual structure and allusion, whether we realize or acknowledge it or not.

Once again, I am not suggesting that Jonathon Larson was some kind of "crypto-Christian," or that he was trying to preach a "Christian Gospel" so that his audiences might "repent and be saved." Other Jewish artists, however, have been able to use such "Christian" images to make their own points. These include Chaim Potok in his novel "*My Name is Asher Lev*," Simon and Garfunkel in some of their recordings (including some very specifically "Christian" Christmas songs and prayers), and of course the great Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber in his construct of "Jesus as Brother" (and whose theological understanding of the cognate "I/Thou" has significantly influenced my own understanding of "loving God and neighbor).

As a person raised in a liberal Jewish family Jonathan apparently was able, and open to using images, insights, and the power of another religious tradition outside his own to

communicate his vision. His "Good News" is a story of love found in an accepting community that was brought together by Angel. This "Good News" can celebrate LIFE, even in the midst of death. This play is not about a narrow, or pinched and restrictive vision of life. It is about LIFE writ large, even to the point of being profligate in its inclusiveness. In that sense it is akin to what I think the Christian Gospel is at its core. It too claims to be open to all. It too does not keep score as to who "deserves" love and graceful acceptance. It too is not about "Cheap Grace." It is about FREE GRACE (or to hearken back to my Bible School years in the Saskatchewan Prairies: it is "free gratis"). It too is profligate in its redundancy. It is free free!! It is available to anyone who wants to join the party.

When told fully, one of the powerful strengths of the Gospel story, as told by St. Mark (and especially by St. Luke), is that incarnated in the life, death, and resurrection of this Jesus of Nazareth, is such an inclusive Gospel, a "Good News" story that everyone can hear and live in it, not just those who already "have it together," who are already part of the "in group," or are part of the power brokers of the world. It is the outline and power of this earlier story Jonathan Larson hit upon in the construction of his Angel and the community of love and acceptance found in *Rent*. This is especially true for those of us who do not feel we are in any of those "in" categories. We -- the outsider, the powerless, the marginalized -- are the privileged ones in this telling of the Gospel story. I think that is significant, whether it is in St. Mark's, or St. Luke's Gospel, or Jonathan Larson's Gospel found in *Rent* at the end of the millennium.