

2020

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Recommended Citation

Thompson, Courtney. "LGBTQ+ Representation in Musical Theatre." *Merge*, vol. 4, no. 6, 2020, pp. 102-134.

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Courtney Thompson

LGBTQ+ Representation in Musical Theatre

Musical theatre has been associated with the LGBTQ+ community, especially gay men, for years. Because of this close association and how society's views have changed towards the community, LGBTQ+ representation has changed on stage as well. The stereotyping of all members of the community has made it to the stage at one point or another; with the most recent LGBTQ+ movements, these stereotypes have changed and are depicted on the stage fewer times in favor of a more realistic approach. While the stereotypes are still there and have not been excluded entirely from musical theatre, LGBTQ+ characters are now being portrayed more realistically and in a way that the community can be proud of instead of finding the characterization offensive.

Through a careful analysis of three musicals ranging from 1992-2015, this project shows exactly how the representation of LGBTQ+ characters has changed and defied the stereotypes placed on the community. Specific musicals examined include *Falsettos* (1992), *RENT* (1996), and *Fun Home* (2015). The timeline for the plays was chosen because it was during this time that the most well-known and mainstream LGBTQ+ musicals were released, and current audiences have more knowledge about this time period. However, the efforts of earlier LGBTQ+ plays and musicals from other generations are not excluded. In fact, without these groundbreaking plays and musicals paving the way, we would not have the popular Broadway musicals and character representations that we see today.

Although *Fun Home* is credited as the first musical with a lesbian lead, this distinction actually belongs to *The Captive* (1926) by Edouard Bourdet. The plot follows a young woman named Irene who refuses to leave Paris because she is in love with Madame Aiguines. Irene

marries a man hoping to be saved from being a lesbian, but the marriage does not work out, and she eventually returns to her lesbian lover. However, the women decide that they cannot be together and part from each other. *The Captive* celebrated a successful run on Broadway until being closed due to the cast being “arrested by New York City police for being immoral” (Abernethy). Despite having an antiquated view on lesbians, *The Captive* influenced *Fun Home* and other modern musicals by showing that American audiences can be affected by foreign subject matter if the storytelling is engaging.

Another important precursor to the musicals listed above is *La Cage aux Folles* (1983). Based on a 1973 French play of the same name, the music and lyrics were written by Jerry Herman with a book written by Harvey Fierstein. The play is important because it was the first musical to have a gay couple featured as the stars of the show. Not only does the play star a gay couple, but one of the men is also a drag performer. The main conflict of the show comes from their son, who is trying to get his fathers to act less gay in front of his fiancée’s conservative parents; however, the show ends happily as the son accepts his parents in front of his future in-laws, who are implied to have accepted the gay couple as well. Because of the nature of the show and the time period in which it was written, it left a mark and continues to be performed worldwide, with its most recent tour being in Barcelona in 2018. Without *La Cage aux Folles*, later musicals such as *Falsettos* and *Fun Home* would not have succeeded with LGBTQ+ characters as the leads. In the words of Harvey Fierstein, the librettist for *La Cage aux Folles* and an out gay man,

Gay sensibility was always in the theater. But whether we go seen by large groups of people or not, there’s a difference. This is America, and unless you can make money it

don't count. So *La Cage aux Folles*: hardly the first gay musical on Broadway, but the first gay musical to make money. And that's what makes it count! (Stempel 662)

The importance of *La Cage aux Folles* making money comes with the distinction that making money puts the musical into the mainstream and not just part of a subculture. The mainstream success of *La Cage aux Folles* deemed it "okay" to be gay on stage and represented on Broadway. Had it not been such a hit, the Broadway shows today that represent LGBTQ+ culture would not have survived in the mainstream world of theatre.

However, *La Cage aux Folles* is not the only precursor to this musical era; one straight play¹ worth mentioning is *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1993) by Tony Kushner, an out gay man himself. Though it was not the first play to feature AIDS as its subject matter, Kushner's play is considered to be the "most famous AIDS drama" (Sorrells 4). The story follows a gay couple living in New York as well as attorney Roy Cohn's denial that he is gay and has AIDS. By using the famous attorney's story, Kushner helped bring AIDS out of the homosexual subculture and into the mainstream, which paved the way for Jonathan Larson's mainstream hit *RENT*, a show that features other groups of people with AIDS, not just gay men.

For *Falsettos* and *Fun Home*, it is important to note the changes happening during the 1970's, when both of these musicals take place. The Stonewall Riots in 1969 sparked a movement in LGBTQ+ history in which people within the community began demanding "total acceptance instead of accepting meager tolerance for their lives" (Sorrells 11). Because of this need for acceptance and equality, America in the 1970's was a time of transformation for the LGBTQ+ community, which revolved around visibility as a community. During the 1970's, America saw the "first gay television movie (*That Certain Summer*), a sexy on-screen kiss

¹ Straight play meaning that play has no music. This definition has nothing to do with sexuality.

between two men in *Sunday, Bloody Sunday*, and the release of *Cabaret*, which has been hailed as the first movie that ‘really celebrated homosexuality’” (Rosen). Politically, Edward Koch in the Congress was one of the first officials to publicly assist the gay people of Greenwich Village. In the 1970’s, the United States celebrated its first Gay Pride Week, and the American Psychiatric Association voted “to remove homosexuality from its list of psychiatric disorders” (qtd. by Rosen). These changes inspired a New York television station, WNET but known today as Channel 13, to air a live special entitled “OUTREACH: LESBIANS AND GAY MEN.”

In the theatre, we began to see the first LGBTQ+ characters in this era. In 1969, *Coco* premiered and featured the first openly gay character. However, this character was a “hateful caricature of a gay man” (Abernethy) and followed all the stereotypes associated with rude gay men. The first likable gay character, a hairdresser named Duane, came in 1970 when *Applause* premiered. As well as having the first likable gay character, *Applause* also featured the first time a scene was placed in a gay bar. In 1974, *A Chorus Line* became the first Broadway musical to have gay characters talk about sex, “whereas previously gay characters were restricted to the stereotypical personality traits of gayness” (Abernethy). Because of this, *A Chorus Line* heavily influenced all three musicals discussed later as they all discuss the sexual nature of their LGBTQ+ characters.

Though the progress in 1970’s America was great, the LGBTQ+ movement still had its setbacks including a “successful campaign in Miami to repeal a gay-rights legislation and the assassination of Harvey Milk, one of America’s greatest advocates for gays and lesbians and one of the first openly gay men elected to public office” (Rosen). Despite these obstructions, by the 1980’s, progress was being made again as corporations and cities began to prohibit discrimination laws and restrictions based on sexual orientation. In 1979 on the tenth anniversary

of the Stonewall Riots, two boys attended prom together, which was probably the first time that happened in America. However, the progress of the 1970's would soon be overlooked and reversed as the AIDS epidemic came onto the scene in 1981.

As the AIDS epidemic swept through America and began to gain a reputation as a “gay affliction” (Sorrells 3), several works about the virus were being introduced to the theatrical world. Amongst these was the first play to feature AIDS as its subject, *Night Sweat: A Romantic Comedy in Two Acts* (1984) by Robert Chesley. However, this is not a positive representation of the virus or the men afflicted with it as it takes place in an S&M/suicide fantasy club. In the story, AIDS is used as an excuse to commit suicide because all of the characters believe that they will die regardless. The plays of the 1980's, such as *The Normal Heart* (1985) by Larry Kramer and *As Is* (1988) by William M. Hoffman, brought AIDS to the forefront of theatre but only showed gay men with AIDS, which helped promote the stereotype that only gay men could be affected by the epidemic.

By the 1990's, America had fallen behind on the progress that the 1970's had made and reverted back to its earlier homophobic and discriminatory ways, especially politically. In 1993, President Bill Clinton signed “Don't Ask, Don't Tell,” a policy that prohibits openly gay and lesbian people from joining the military (CNN Library). In 1996, the same year that *RENT* made its premiere on Broadway, Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act, which allowed states to deny same-sex marriages. The following year James C. Hormel was nominated by President Clinton as an ambassador and would become the first openly gay US ambassador; however, his nomination was stalled as other politicians began to discredit him because of his identity as a gay man. Nebraska senator Chuck Hagel, for instance, said that “I think it is an inhibiting factor to be gay – openly aggressively like Hormel – to do an effective job” (qtd. by Franke-Ruta).

However, the 1990's also signified the end of the homophobic era of Ronald Reagan, and the general public began shifting from simply tolerating the LGBTQ+ community to accepting homosexuality. This newfound acceptance amongst the general public would "set the stage for a new AIDS drama² that would appeal to more people" (Sorrells 145). This shift in the general public's ideas about homosexuality and the AIDS crisis would also help set up *Falsettos* and *RENT* for success as they premiered in this era of more acceptance.

Written by William Finn and James Lapine and set against the backdrop of the 1970's, *Falsettos*, opened on Broadway in 1992 and closed the following year in 1993 when it went on a United States (US) tour. It received a Broadway revival in 2016, and the show's second US tour began this year on March 12 and will run through the month of July; it is interesting to note that James Lapine directed both of these recent revivals. For analysis purposes, I examined the 2016 revival soundtrack and their Lincoln Center performance. I also looked at the original libretto, and in Michelle Gail Dvoskin's PhD dissertation "*Listen to the Stories, Hear it in the Songs*": *Musical Theatre as Queer Historiography*, she describes specific performance elements from the original 1992 performance that I also use in comparison to the 2016 version to show how performing LGBTQ+ characters has changed over time.

The play follows Marvin and his unconventional and dysfunctional family that includes his ex-wife Trina, their son Jason, Marvin's psychiatrist and Trina's new husband Mendel, Marvin's gay lover Whizzer, and "lesbians from next door" Charlotte and Cordelia.³ Act I takes place in 1979 New York City and revolves around the first five characters as Marvin tries to create a "tight-knit family" despite everyone's flaws and frustrations. Act II takes place two

² The "new AIDS drama" would be *Angels in America*, as discussed earlier.

³ It is interesting to note that we do not learn their names from watching or listening to the musical. Charlotte and Cordelia are called everything from "friends," "neighbors," and "lesbians from next door" but never by their given names.

years after the first act and begins with preparation for Jason's upcoming bar mitzvah, but that storyline becomes secondary when Whizzer is diagnosed with AIDS.

Though the storyline for Act II centers around the disease, it is important to note that AIDS is never once mentioned by name during the course of the musical; however, it is clear to the audience that this is the disease affecting Whizzer and several other men in the New York area. We are aware that Whizzer has contracted AIDS due to our knowledge of the AIDS epidemic that happened during the 1980's when this play took place, but we also learn about the crisis through lyrics in Act II songs:

Bachelors arrive sick and frightened.

They leave weeks later, unenlightened.

We see a trend, but the trend has no name. (Finn and Lapine 141)

As the title of the song implies, "Something Bad is Happening" is sung by Dr. Charlotte where she tells the audience of a virus that is affecting the gay population in New York. In its portrayal of AIDS, *Falsettos* follows a stereotypical narrative on the epidemic that ends with a gay man dying due to the disease while the straight characters are seemingly unaffected, establishing AIDS as a gay man's disease. Creators Finn and Lapine make Whizzer, the gayest and most promiscuous character, the embodiment of AIDS in the show to further this narrative. In Act I, Marvin tells the audience,

Whizzer screws too much to see

What a joy is chastity,⁴

What a joy is saving his joys

⁴ In the 2016 soundtrack, "chastity" is changed to "monogamy." While in the 1992 version, Marvin is saying that Whizzer should, by definition, refrain from all sexual intercourse, the 2016 Marvin is saying that Whizzer should refrain from sex with anyone that is not Marvin.

For one man (Finn and Lapine 25)

This promiscuity has been associated with gay men by those in and out of the LGBTQ+ community; when AIDS was first discovered, promiscuity became linked as a cause to the AIDS epidemic though we know now that is not the case. In Whizzer's final solo, "You Gotta Die Sometime," he alludes to his old promiscuous habits and his sexuality and their relation to his illness when he sings,

I don't smoke, don't do drugs,

And then comes the bad news...

It's the chink in the armor,

The shit in the karma,

The blues (Finn and Lapine 164)

Aside from having AIDS, Whizzer was a healthy man with an active sex life, which had previously been mentioned in the show. During the 1970's where *Falsettos* takes place, "sex became a means of empowerment to homosexual men... the explosive 1970's allowed homosexuals to express freely their sexuality" (Sorrells 12). It is ironic that this newly found sexual freedom would ultimately be what confines Whizzer to a hospital room and later kill him.

Along with Whizzer's declining health, Marvin's own health is questioned near the end of the play when Dr. Charlotte sings a reprise of "Something Bad is Happening" and tells Marvin,

Something bad is happening.

Something very bad is happening.

Something that kills.

Something contagious.

Something that spreads from one man to another. (Finn and Lapine 162)

In the 1992 performance, Michael Rupert, playing Marvin, “plays the moment stoically” (Dvoskin 183). When Charlotte tells Marvin that the disease spreads between men, “he responds with a slight gasp, followed by a muttered ‘oh, fuck...’ before walking away, offstage left (away from Whizzer in his hospital bed)” (Dvoskin 183). This moment is played differently in the 2016 version; Christian Borle, playing Marvin, makes no verbal cues. His posture becomes stiffer on the same line that affected Rupert, and Borle nods slightly in acknowledgement of Charlotte’s words before also walking away from Whizzer. Another clue that Marvin might be infected comes after Whizzer’s death in the final duet between Marvin and his dead lover. The two men sing together, “Once I was told / That good men get better with age” to which Marvin responds with, “We’re just gonna skip that stage” (Finn and Lapine 173). The “we” could be a broader statement that covers all gay men in the early stages of the AIDS epidemic, or it could imply that Marvin is going to suffer the same fate as his lover.

In contrast to Marvin’s ambiguous health, neither the lesbian couple nor the heterosexual characters appear to be in danger of being physically impacted by AIDS. In Dr. Charlotte’s reprise, she says that the disease “...spreads from one man to another” (Finn and Lapine 162). In a broad sense, “man” could dictate all of mankind, or it could be used quite literally to mean only people who identify as male, which appears to be the case in *Falsettos* since only the two gay male characters seem to be affected by the disease. This is interesting to note considering in Act I Trina tells Mendel about her exposure to other STD’s such as syphilis and hepatitis due to Marvin’s own promiscuity. In this way, *Falsettos* is showing that heterosexual women can be infected with other STD’s, but AIDS is specifically set apart to only affect the two gay men in the play.

While it can be argued that *Falsettos* conforming to a stereotypical narrative for the AIDS epidemic does a disservice to the LGBTQ+ community, it is important to note that there is one crucial way in which the musical challenges certain ideas of the AIDS crisis. Noted by Douglas Crimp, people with AIDS were represented in the 1980's media as being "ravaged, disfigured, and debilitated by the syndrome; they are generally alone, desperate, but resigned to their 'inevitable' deaths" (*Melancholia* 86). Whizzer, as the person with AIDS in the show, represents most of these qualities, notable in his song "You Gotta Die Sometime." This is the first song since Whizzer's diagnosis that he is not seen exclusively in the hospital bed. Though Whizzer spends the majority of the song lying in the hospital bed, he decides to move from the bed to the chair with Andrew Rannells, portraying Whizzer in the 2016 cast, making a noticeable effort to sit up and then move from one piece of furniture to another. Once he sits in the chair, he does not move again until the other characters enter and help him stand. From this point on, he is shown on his feet but always with someone holding him up because he is too weak to stand without help. Not only is he physically showing the audience his illness, but he also shows us in this solo that he is resigned to the fate that has been chosen for him, specifically in his last verse when he sings,

Give me the balls to orchestrate

A graceful leave.

That's my reprieve:

To go out

Without care,

My head high

In the air. (Finn and Lapine 164)

Despite hospitalization and the high hopes of his friends and lover, Whizzer knows that “Death’s gonna come” (Finn and Lapine 163), and though he is unhappy about it, he knows that there is nothing he can do but go out gracefully.

However, the key difference between the typical AIDS representation and how Finn and Lapine chose to represent Whizzer’s diagnosis is that Whizzer is never alone once he is diagnosed. When Whizzer enters the hospital, he is shown to be surrounded by loved ones, including Trina, even though she has shown her displeasure for Whizzer and Marvin’s relationship from the beginning of the show. Even when he is alone on stage for “You Gotta Die Sometime,” Rannells sings much of the song directly to the audience. This breaking of the fourth wall, which is mostly absent for the entirety of the musical, creates a community for Whizzer that goes beyond the other six characters in the show.

Falsettos continues to defy the notion of people with AIDS suffering alone in its final moments before the show ends by creating an illusion of what could have been during the actual years of the AIDS epidemic. Instead of portraying the world as it was when many people with AIDS suffered alone, *Falsettos* shows on stage “a vision of community and support for PWAs [people with AIDS]” (Dvoskin 196). After Whizzer exits the stage, symbolizing his death, Marvin remains alone on stage, but not for long as the rest of the characters enter to embrace him, and show their support as he grieves the loss of his lover. In the original 1992 version, Marvin attempts to follow Whizzer offstage, possibly to symbolize his own death, before being stopped and embraced by his son.

In the 1992 and 2016 version, Mendel at some point separates himself from the other characters to speak directly to the audience as he sings “Falsettoland (Reprise)”:

Homosexuals.

Women with children.

Short insomniacs.

We're a teeny tiny band.

Lovers come and lovers go.

Lovers live and die fortissimo.

This is where we take a stand.

Welcome to Falsettoland. (Finn and Lapine 174)

In the 2016 revival, Brandon Uranowitz as Mendel addresses the audience but also looks directly at Borle, who plays Marvin, as he delivers the line, "This is where we take a stand," as if to tell his former patient and now friend that what happened to Whizzer will not happen again. While *Falsettos* is not an activist piece, this reprise and Mendel's character certainly have activism undertones. In this reprise, Mendel, both Chip Zien from the 1992 cast and Uranowitz, call the audience and the characters on stage to action in his final song.

Of all the characters, why would Finn and Lapine choose to make the straight male adult the activist for the AIDS crisis, which up until this point was treated as a gay man's disease? One possible answer can be traced back to Mendel's appearance in "A Day in Falsettoland," which takes place five songs into Act II; in this song, Mendel is shown on stage with a patient and is disgusted by the apathetic attitudes of his patients, who he describes as "Yuppie pagans. / Modeled on the/Ronald Reagans" (Finn and Lapine 122), establishing his anger at the Reagan administration and the world created by the people in power, which becomes important once AIDS is introduced to the story since the Reagan administration was unwilling to help people diagnosed with AIDS during the 1980's. Another answer lies in Mendel's identity as a heterosexual male in a society dominated by straight white men. Mendel's identity gives him a

status that allows a “certain authority in US culture” (Dvoskin 198) that the other male characters in the show would not have received. Allowing Mendel to be the activist of the group and stating that the characters and the audience should “take a stand” against AIDS, “Finn challenges the idea that AIDS is solely a gay issue and puts straight male power to work supporting PWAs, instead of ignoring or denouncing them” (Dvoskin 198).

Although Marvin’s relationship with Whizzer is an important part of the show and this project, Act I focuses heavily on Marvin’s relationship with his son Jason and is an important part of the conflict in the first act. At the top of Act I, Jason is ten years old and clearly expresses his anger with his father. In “Love is Blind,” which is only the second song in the show, Jason is quoted saying, “Daddy is a prick / Daddy isn’t mine” (Finn and Lapine 18). Jason does not even want to claim his father as his own, and this is only the beginning of Jason’s disapproval of Marvin’s sexuality; two songs later in “Marvin at the Psychiatrist,” Marvin and Jason exchange words as Marvin tells Mendel about their relationship:

JASON: He loves another.

MARVIN: I agree.

JASON: I love my mother.

MARVIN: Why not me? (Finn and Lapine 37)

In this particular section of the song, Jason is openly admitting to not loving his father, or at the least loving his mother more than his father, because of Marvin’s feelings towards Whizzer, which caused Marvin to leave Jason’s mother. Though Jason expresses his anger towards both of his parents throughout the musical, Act I hones in specifically on Jason’s feelings about his father.

MARVIN: We go to ball games.

JASON: The ball is tossed.

MARVIN: The pitcher's handsome.

JASON: Yeah, and our team lost.

MARVIN: Is that my fault though? Should I be blamed for that? (Finn and Lapine 37)

Marvin goes on to tell Mendel that even when the two spend time together Jason finds a way to turn bad situations onto his father and specifically on his sexuality. In this section of the song, Jason blames Marvin's attraction on the pitcher as the reason that their team lost, which sounds ridiculous but makes sense to a ten-year-old boy having issues coming to terms with his father's sexuality.

Jason's anger towards his father and issues with his sexuality most likely stem from his fear that he will end up exactly like his father. In the next song aptly titled "My Father's a Homo," Jason shows his anxiety and concern for the first time in the musical over whether he will be gay like his dad when he asks questions such as:

What about chromo-somes?

Do they carry?

Will they carry?

Who's the homo now? (Finn and Lapine 39)

These lyrics are sung in the direction of his father before he takes the questions out to the audience, as if asking us to answer these life altering questions for him. It is important to note that Jason uses the term "homo" as opposed to "gay" or "homosexual." Jason uses this shortened term as a slur towards his father with the intent to hurt and make his displeasure of the lifestyle known. When Jason is convinced to go to therapy, he confides in Mendel:

I get apoplexy thinking of my father.

I resemble him in far too many ways...

He and Whizzer live like...

Well, I think it's clear...

Love isn't blind.

Whaddo I see? (Finn and Lapine 59)

Because of his resemblances to his father, Jason is frightened that he will be gay, which he clearly does not want since he cannot even finish his sentence about Whizzer and Marvin's relationship. Anthony Rosenthal from the 2016 cast portrays Jason as a panicked and anxiety ridden child when having this conversation with Mendel before having to be physically stopped by the psychiatrist.

At the end of Act I, Jason admits to loving his father for the first time during the song ironically titled "I Never Wanted to Love You." The final song in the act is between only Marvin and Jason called "Father to Son" where Marvin gives Jason advice on love and apologizes for how his relationships have hurt his son. However, it is Jason who opens the song by saying, "I think girls are the most / Beautiful thing" (Finn and Lapine 93). This is the first time that Jason does not sing about chess, and it is the first time that Jason confidently confirms that he prefers girls over boys. In a sense, Jason "comes out" to his father at the beginning of the song, and Marvin's response is to chuckle and smile clearly accepting his son and informing him that he can be whoever he wants to be: "I've made my choice./But you can sing a different song" (Finn and Lapine 94).

What is interesting about Jason's character is that he spends the entire musical being angry with one or both of his parents, including his stepfather Mendel, but he never once turns his anger on Whizzer, which is interesting considering Jason is angry with his father because he

is worried about being gay just like his dad. However, with Whizzer, Jason treats him warmly and even asks for Whizzer when his parents are trying to get him to go to therapy. It is Whizzer, under the advice of Jason's parents, who convinces Jason to see Mendel. In Act II, their relationship is explored further when it is revealed that Jason invited Whizzer to his baseball game despite no longer being in a relationship with his father; it is between the baseball game and the next song that Whizzer and Marvin begin dating again, so it is as if Jason was acting as his father's wingman. Once Whizzer falls ill, Jason is as affected by the news if not more so than the adults because he is even more unsure of what is going on and worries about the man that he considers a friend.

In "Cancelling the Bar Mitzvah," Jason asks Mendel and Trina, "Can't we wait till Whizzer gets better? (Finn and Lapine 154). When told by Mendel that "We can't be sure when / He'll get better, / When or if / He'll ever get better" (Finn and Lapine 154)," Rosenthal as Jason walks offstage in defeat and sadness while Jonathan Kaplan of the 1992 cast runs offstage angrily. The next time we see Jason he bargains with God for Whizzer's life, and it is the first time that he refers to Whizzer as a friend though we do not need him to verbally say "friend" in order for us to understand their relationship. When Jason's bar mitzvah does occur, in Whizzer's hospital room, Mendel gives the toast and refers to Jason as the "son of Whizzer," which is the first time that Whizzer is acknowledged as being a part of the family by someone other than Marvin. Whizzer's last spoken words on stage are towards Jason when he tells him, "Thank you" before collapsing in Marvin's arms and being led offstage by Charlotte. Rosenthal plays the moment sadly as he realizes that Whizzer will not be saved from death and even tries to follow Whizzer and Dr. Charlotte before being stopped by his parents and escorted offstage by Trina. During the "Falsettoland (Reprise)," Jason is the one who helps Mendel place Whizzer's

headstone; while the adults are embracing and consoling one another onstage, Rosenthal's Jason places the king chess piece on Whizzer's headstone before joining the others.

Possibly the most popular musical in this paper, *RENT*, by Jonathan Larson, is loosely based on Giacomo Puccini's opera *La Bohème*. *RENT* tells the story of a group of artists struggling to survive in New York City's East Village during the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The show began workshop productions in 1993 and premiered on Broadway in 1996, where it would stay for twelve years before closing in 2008. After the Broadway closing, *RENT* continued to be produced in numerous foreign productions and national tours and was adapted into a movie in 2005 with most of the original cast reprising their Broadway roles. Most recently, Fox produced a live version of *RENT* that premiered on January 27, 2019.

Larson's musical rose to popularity with its representation of LGBTQ+ characters and its treatment of the HIV/AIDS crisis, specifically within communities outside of the LGBTQ+ community. Of the eight main characters, four of them represent a group of people within the LGBTQ+ community. Maureen Johnson is a bisexual woman that cheated on the lead character, Mark, with her current girlfriend and lesbian, Joanne Jefferson. Tom Collins is a gay man with AIDS and later in the show begins dating Angel Dumott Schunard, who also has AIDS and is a drag queen that uses she/her pronouns while in drag and he/him pronouns when out of drag. It is important to note that Angel is the only named character to die from HIV/AIDS. Though Mimi, a straight drug addict, is HIV positive and temporarily dies long after Angel's own death, she is brought back to life in the musical, possibly sending a message that straight people are able to survive during the AIDS epidemic and that gay men are more susceptible to death.

While Larson states that his inspiration for *RENT* came from Puccini's opera, Sarah Schulman accused Larson of stealing the gay content, particularly in Act I, from her novel

People in Trouble as all of the characters in *RENT* bear a striking resemblance to her characters. The main difference between Larson's musical and Schulman's novel revolves around the main character. While all seven of the primary characters in *RENT* are given the distinction of "main character," only Roger, Mark, and Mimi, all straight characters, can be considered as the leads since the plot of the musical heavily centers on Roger and Mimi's relationship and Mark documenting and essentially narrating most of the musical. In *People in Trouble*, however, the main character is Kate, a bisexual artist, who shares a similar storyline to Maureen in *RENT*. Maureen and Kate both leave a man and enter a relationship with a lesbian, Joanne and Molly, respectively. However, Maureen and Joanne's relationship is strikingly different from Kate and Molly's relationship; throughout *RENT*, Maureen and Joanne are seen fighting and bickering more often than they are portrayed as a loving couple. It is because of this characterization that Schulman even accuses Larson of admitting that lesbians exist only if their relationship is portrayed as toxic and unstable (Schulman 34-35, 71).

When we are first introduced to the idea of Maureen and Joanne as a couple at the beginning of the show, it is already implied that their relationship will be one based on arguments, some of them about Maureen and Mark's past relationship. In their first interaction, Joanne is on the phone with Maureen explaining that she does not understand how theatre equipment works; when Maureen suggests that Mark could help, Joanne tells her not to call him because of their former relationship. However, Maureen does not listen and hangs up on Joanne to call Mark about fixing the equipment. This is not the last time that Mark sparks an argument between the couple; in fact, the first time they break up in the show is because Joanne sees Maureen playfully kiss Mark during "La Vie Boheme."

In Act II, the couple is still broken up, but Maureen attempts to call Joanne and tells her, “I lose control / But I can learn to behave / Give me one more chance / Let me be your slave / I’ll kiss your Doc Martens / Your every wish I will obey,” to which Joanne responds, “That might be okay / Down girl / Heel . . . stay” (Larson “Happy New Year”). Not only does Larson give the lesbian couple a toxic and unstable storyline, but he also seems to be saying that the lesbian storyline is only applicable if they are active in the BDSM scene.⁵ This type of scene is brought up again in the couple’s song “Take Me or Leave Me,” in which they have gotten back together but are still fighting:

JOANNE: You were flirting with the woman in rubber.

MAUREEN: That’s what this is about? There will always be women in rubber flirting with me! (Larson “Happy New Year”)

Although the couple ends up together at the end, Larson seems to insist throughout the show that lesbians engage in relationships that are based on kink culture or are purely unstable and toxic to the people involved. There are, undoubtedly, more scenes with the two women fighting than there are with them as a happy couple. In fact, they fight again shortly after Angel’s death and provide us with some of the most telling evidence about their relationship. In describing her relationship with Maureen, Joanne says that “She’d never admit I existed” and “She’s in denial” (Larson “Goodbye Love”). This fight coincides with a fight between Mimi and Roger, where Mimi and Joanne both agree, “I’d be happy to die for a taste / Of what Angel had / Someone to

⁵ BDSM is defined as “sexual activity involving such practices as the use of physical restraints, the granting and relinquishing of control, and the infliction of pain” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/BDSM>).

live for – unafraid / To say I love you” (Larson “Goodbye Love”). In this last line, we are told that Maureen seems to have commitment issues and has never told Joanne that she loves her.

However, the first two lines appear to be deeper and suggest that Maureen’s bisexuality keeps her from admitting that she is in a monogamous lesbian relationship. In fact, a common theme in bisexual literature revolves around the idea that the bisexual character must be shown in relationships, usually sexual, with members of both genders in order to be validated as bisexual characters. This is a harmful character trope as it implies that all bisexuals are cheaters simply because they prefer both genders. In “Tango: Maureen,” Mark and Joanne discuss Maureen’s habits of constantly flirting with other people while still being in their respective relationships:

JOANNE: Did she moon over other boys - ?

MARK: More than moon -

JOANNE: I’m getting nauseous (Larson “Happy New Year”)

Not only do Mark and Joanne discuss Maureen’s flirtatious behavior, but they also outright say that she has cheated on Mark and is actively cheating on Joanne with the repetition of, “She cheated. Maureen cheated. Fucking cheated” (Larson “Tango: Maureen”). By his characterization of Maureen as a bisexual character, Larson is succumbing to the trope that says Maureen must be a cheater in order to be validated for her sexuality.

Unlike *Falsettos*, *RENT* shows that people other than gay men can contract AIDS; however, only the gay men are shown to be the victims of the AIDS crisis while all other characters are seemingly not affected by the virus. *RENT* does feature two straight characters infected with HIV/AIDS, but it is Angel, the gay Puerto Rican drag queen, who suffers the most from the virus and eventually dies because of it, establishing AIDS as a gay man’s disease despite the other types of people contracting the virus. The only straight character to die in the

show, not including Mimi's brief death later in the show, is Roger's ex-girlfriend, who gave him AIDS before committing suicide⁶. Even then, *RENT* continues the "gay disease" narrative, since the ex-girlfriend took her own life and did not actually succumb to the AIDS virus. The fact that the main characters are straight and surrounded by LGBTQ+ subplots straightwashes the AIDS epidemic and is "ultimately the problem," says Schulman (qtd. by Bendix).

Furthering this narrative and proving to be a problematic character in *RENT* is Mark's character, specifically when he attends the life support meeting with Angel and Collins. Mark, the straight white male character, enters the meeting late and when asked to introduce himself, he stumbles through saying, "Oh – I'm not - / I'm just here to - / I don't have - / I'm here with - / Um – Mark / Mark – I'm Mark" (Larson "Life Support"). Mark represents the majority of the United States in this scene when he shows his discomfort at being mistaken for someone with AIDS, and "throughout the rest of the play, [he] compassionately objectifies the persons with AIDS, observing them from behind the safety of his 8mm movie camera" (Sorrells 9). During a fight between Mark and Roger, Roger even accuses Mark of hiding in his work in order to ignore his failures and insecurities in which Mark responds with "Perhaps it's because I'm the one of us to survive" (Larson "Goodbye Love"), establishing himself as the straight hero that will be able to survive the AIDS epidemic.

Though *RENT* was written during the 1990's when there was less vocabulary available to define gender and sexuality, there is a lasting debate now over the gender identity of Angel Dumott Schunard. It is possible that she is simply gender non-conforming or nonbinary, or it could be that Angel is a transwoman. She is written into Larson's script and libretto as a drag queen, but there is actually little evidence of identification that comes from Angel herself.

⁶ This death occurs before the events in the show, so we never meet Roger's ex-girlfriend during the show.

Looking at the daily life that we see Angel live throughout the play, her experience does not fit that of a drag queen's daily life experience. For instance, Angel appears in full drag for the simplest of tasks, such as hanging out in Mark and Roger's apartment or going to life support meetings. It is also notable that she is in full drag for her first intimate scene with Collins. The only times Angel is not in drag during the show are at the beginning when she saves Collins and while on her deathbed. Because of this, it can be interpreted that Angel is actually a transgender woman because getting into full drag takes a lot of time, and during this time, it was rare for drag queens to be seen as their drag persona during the day since they had an active nightlife, and the purpose for most drag queens to get dressed up is for entertainment purposes. Nowhere in the play is it implied that Angel might be a part of that scene since she develops such a close relationship with the other characters of the play, so her insistence on appearing in full drag all the time could have a deeper meaning for her (Incarnate).

When discussing pronouns, it is important to note that Angel is only referred to using "he/him/his" pronouns at the beginning of the show when she is not in drag and after her death; aside from these instances, only "she/her/hers" pronouns are used to describe Angel, and that seems to be what the character prefers. When discussing Angel post-mortem, Mark goes back to calling Angel by "he" pronouns before correcting himself. Though we get little evidence of Angel's identification as anything other than a drag queen, there are two important lines in the show that may suggest Angel is actually on the nonbinary or gender nonconforming spectrum. From Angel, the only line we get about her identification is when she says, "I was a Boy Scout once / And a Brownie / 'Til some brat got scared" (Larson "Happy New Year"). However, the most telling line about Angel's identity comes after her death when Mimi is reminiscing about Angel and tells a story of Angel confronting a homophobe. According to Mimi, Angel responded

to the man's homophobic remarks by saying that "she was more of a man than he'd ever be and more of a woman than he'd ever get" (Larson "I'll Cover You: Reprise"). In this line, Angel seems to be acknowledging that she feels as if she is both a man and a woman or that she at least identifies with both genders, making her more than simply a drag queen, as she is stated to be in Larson's libretto.

While the other two musicals focus on the AIDS epidemic and gay men, *Fun Home* stars a lesbian protagonist and ends before the AIDS crisis began. *Fun Home* began as a graphic novel by Alison Bechdel, where she told the story of her life growing up as a lesbian and discovering her queerness as well as discussing her relationship with her father, who was a closeted gay man and died⁷ while Alison was in college. The musical, with lyrics by Lisa Kron and music by Jeanine Tesori, expands on Alison's graphic novel and represents her in three separate parts of her life: childhood, young adulthood, and adulthood. Adult Alison, originally played by Beth Malone, narrates the story, which is told in non-linear vignettes, as she tries to unlock the secrets of her father's life. *Fun Home* began previews in 2013 before moving to Broadway in 2015; the show closed the next year in 2016 but continues to tour around the world with the most recent openings being in Japan in February of 2018 and an expected opening in London this June. *Fun Home* is the first musical to feature a butch lesbian as its main character and explores Alison's identification as a butch, meaning that her appearance and behavior are associated with qualities that are traditionally seen as being masculine.

Alison's identity as a butch lesbian is first alluded to in the stage directions when it says that she "finds a ring of keys" (Kron 9) at the top of the show. Though this may not scream "butch" to most people, the ring of keys has history in LGBTQ+ culture and appears later in the

⁷ Though the musical treats Bruce's death strictly as a suicide, it is debatable if his death was a suicide or an accident.

musical as its own song. Historically, a ring or carabiner of keys has been used as a way to spot lesbians since the 1960's and has its origins in fashion and functionality. Lesbians were more likely to have jobs in past eras since they did not have men in their household to be the breadwinner, and butch women have a history of "being attracted to the masculine aesthetic of blue-collar jobs" (Cauterucci), especially since they did not follow stereotypical gender roles. With these types of jobs, it was essential that keys be easily accessible, hence the birth a ring of keys being a lesbian flagging device. Alison Bechdel is quoted by Cauterucci as saying that key rings are "a phallic symbol – they're all about potency, agency, capability" and were a prevailing fashion trend among the lesbian community when Bechdel moved to New York in the 1980's. In today's culture, the ring of keys does not necessarily carry the same weight that it did when Bechdel was growing up; however, they are still used as a reliable identifier in the lesbian community today as "lesbians are way less likely than straight women to carry purses around, but women's jeans don't allow much pocket room for a bundle of keys" (Cauterucci).

In the song "Ring of Keys," Small Alison sees a butch lesbian while eating at a diner with her father. Alison confronts her own gender identity while finding similarities between herself and the deliverywoman, who is wearing a ring of keys. During this song, Alison admires the woman and says, "It's probably conceited to say / But I think we're alike in a certain way" (Kron 57). It is during this section that Alison first begins to wonder about her own gender expression. Judging from her reaction and blatant admiration of the butch, this is probably Small Alison's first experience with a butch woman. Through this encounter, Alison begins to realize that it is acceptable to wear "boy shirts and pants" (Kron 37), which we see when she says, "I thought it was s'pposed to be wrong / But you seem okay with being strong" (Kron 56). Instead of portraying butch women as a stock character, *Fun Home* creators use this song to appreciate "the

butch aesthetic viewed through an object that's helped lesbians find one another for generations" (Cauterucci).

Like Jason from *Falsettos*, Alison in *Fun Home*, specifically Medium Alison, worries about her sexuality and expresses her discomfort at identifying as a lesbian. Throughout her initial meetings and conversations with Joan, who later becomes her college girlfriend, Alison is constantly flustered and stumbling over the right things to say. In their first meeting in front of the Gay Union door, Joan gives Alison a "lesbian nod" (Kron 25), also referred to as the "dyke nod" and another identifier within the lesbian community. Following this embarrassing interaction with Joan, Alison prays, "Please god, don't let me be a lesbian. Please don't let me be a homosexual" (Kron 26). Without even knowing that her father is gay, Alison shows her anxiety about being different from her family. However, unlike Jason, Alison comes out as part of the LGBTQ+ community and goes on to become a pioneer of the lesbian community.

The father-child relationship in *Falsettos* and *Fun Home* share similarities as well. As discussed earlier, Jason worries about his sexuality because of the similarities between him and his father, Marvin, who is an out gay man. In *Fun Home*, Alison's father, Bruce, is a closeted gay man and never formally comes out to Alison; Alison finds out from her mother, Helen, that Bruce is gay shortly after her own coming out. However, from the beginning of the show, Adult Alison wonders if she and Bruce are similar and is brought up again in Medium Alison's narrative. In "It All Comes Back (Opening)," Adult Alison is shown drawing and recalling memories from her childhood, which introduces Small Alison and Bruce as they reenact a scene from Alison's memory. Regarding her position in life presently, Alison says,

But now I'm the one who's forty-three

And stuck

I can't find my way through

Just like you

Am I just like you? (Kron 11)

From the soundtrack alone, it can be heard in Beth Malone's voice, as she plays Adult Alison, that Alison is not fond of being like her father. As she looks back on her life, it makes sense that the older and out version of Alison does not want to find similarities between herself and her dead father. Following the opening song, Alison goes on to say that "My dad and I were exactly alike" (Kron 12) followed by "My dad and I were *nothing* alike" (Kron 12). However, in the next song entitled "Welcome to Our House on Maple Avenue," Adult Alison ends the song by saying,

Caption: My dad I both grew up in the same small Pennsylvania town

And he was gay.

And I was gay.

And he killed himself.

And I . . . became a lesbian cartoonist." (Kron 17)

In this small section of dialogue, Adult Alison tells the audience a few ways in which Alison and Bruce were similar and different with their sexuality being one of the main similarities. Because Adult Alison knows her father's sexuality, unlike her younger counterparts, she seems desperate to think of a difference between herself and her father before finally settling on "lesbian cartoonist" (Kron 17).

Of the three texts analyzed, *Fun Home* is the only one with a direct coming out narrative. In fact, Medium Alison's narrative focuses mostly on her identity and how it felt to come out when she was nineteen years old. During "Party Dress," Medium Alison speaks while Small Alison is singing and officially comes out to her parents in a letter: "Dear Mom and Dad, I am a

lesbian” (Kron 37). When her parents finally respond to her letter, it is with mixed emotions. Alison’s father, Bruce, is the one who responds to the letter for himself and Helen, Alison’s mother. He explains to Alison that Helen is “pretty upset though – not surprisingly, I guess” (Kron 55) but that he is “of the opinion that everyone should experiment” (Kron 55). Alison does not yet know of her father’s hidden sexuality, so she does not catch that Bruce is probably insinuating that since Helen does not approve of his gay relationships then she will not approve of Alison’s relationships with women. It is implied in his response that Helen is upset because she does not want Alison to turn out like Bruce. Medium Alison does not catch this though and focuses on Bruce’s response instead, which makes her agitated and distressed. She is “grossed-out” (Kron 55) that Bruce sees her sexuality as experimentation and goes on to say that Bruce is trying to be an expert “about things he doesn’t know anything about! I’m gay. Which means I’m not like him, and I’ve *never* been like him, and he can’t deal with that” (Kron 55). Because of how little she knows about her father, Alison in this moment seems to think that Bruce does not want a lesbian for a daughter.

After dropping the letter in the mailbox, Alison meets with Joan and tells her that she has come out to her parents and feels confident and sure of herself. However, when Joan suggests they go to the Women’s Collective together, Alison shrinks back and confesses to Joan that she does not feel like she fits in with “the real lesbians” (Kron 39). On top of realizing that she is a lesbian, Medium Alison confides in Joan that “I’m asexual. I am. I’m not attracted to men but that doesn’t necessarily mean I’m attracted to women” (Kron 39). At this point in the show, Alison and Joan have sex, and Medium Alison sings “Changing My Major,” where she praises Joan’s body and decides that she will not leave Joan’s bed for the rest of the semester. After this song describing Alison’s newfound sexuality, the idea that Alison might be asexual is not

mentioned again in the show. In fact, it is almost as if engaging in sex has voided her argument that she is asexual.

Concerning Bruce's sexuality, everything we know about him and his preferences is told through Alison's perspective and childhood memories. However, from reading the script, we know about Bruce's feelings towards men from the stage directions when we meet Roy, a "young, handsome" (Kron 17) man that helps Bruce with the yardwork and also babysits the children. Roy enters the stage during "Welcome to Our House on Maple Avenue" and the stage directions read that "Bruce posed with his family and gazing at the young man" (Kron 17). Later in the show, Bruce and Roy are alone in Bruce's study, and they flirt with each other, although Bruce appears to be into it more than Roy. When offering Roy a glass of wine, Bruce withholds it from him until Roy unbuttons his shirt, who "decides, why the hell not" (Kron 31) before doing it. Roy is actually the only man in the show who gives us a sense of what Bruce is like with other men and even says,

I know this type

This type of married guy

I could just give him the slip but why

It's not a big deal

I know he wants me. (Kron 31)

Though Bruce's other conquests are referred to in the show, and there are several others in Bechdel's graphic novel, Bruce's interaction with Roy is the only one in the show that gives us a sense of Bruce as anything other than a father and husband.

What is particularly notable about Bruce is how often he is referred to having relationships with men much younger than him, some underage. In fact, one of the biggest

conflicts between Helen and Bruce regards his court appointed therapy sessions after he was charged with “‘furnishing a malt beverage to a minor,’ which I believe is what they call a euphemism” (Kron 47). This is a quote from Adult Alison in which she is telling the audience that her father had a possibly sexual relationship with a minor and got arrested for it. Bruce’s relationship with underage boys is brought up again by Helen in her song “Days and Days,” in which she says of Bruce’s affairs, “and boys, my god, some of them underage” (Kron 64). From these two instances, we know that Bruce has had several affairs with underage boys. Though not discussed in the musical, there is a scene in the graphic novel where Alison’s youngest brother is left alone in New York, and their dad is worried about “chickenhawks” a term used to describe “guys who prey on young boys” (Bechdel 192). It is interesting that Bruce is so concerned about his son when he is doing the same thing and following a narrative that stereotypes gay men as predators and pedophiles. Despite including this harmful stereotype about gay men, *Fun Home*’s legacy lies with its characterization of Alison and bringing lesbian characters to mainstream Broadway, which would have a direct effect on later musicals, such as *The Prom*.

Though the musicals discussed above are important to LGBTQ+ history, none of them take place in the 2000’s. As far as premiere dates are concerned, *Fun Home* opened the most recently in 2015, a month before the US Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in all fifty states. Between the years of *RENT* and *Fun Home*, Barack Obama was sworn into office as the President of the United States and repealed several discriminatory laws against the LGBTQ+ community and designated the first national monument to LGBTQ+ rights, known as the Stonewall National Monument, and encompasses the areas that the Stonewall Riots occurred in 1969.

Since *Fun Home*'s debut in 2015, the most recent LGBTQ+ themed musical is *The Prom* with music by Matthew Sklar and a book by Bob Martin and Chad Beguelin, who also wrote the lyrics. The musical made its debut in Atlanta in 2016 before moving to Broadway in October 2018 and officially opening on November 15. It is based on an original concept by Jack Viertel and follows Emma as she tries to take Alyssa to their high school prom. However, the school will not allow that and tries to cancel the prom. With the help of Broadway stars, the students eventually convince the school to put on an inclusive prom that allows LGBTQ+ students to bring their same-sex dates to the prom. The musical performed as part of the 2018 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, where they made history as the first LGBTQ+ kiss to ever be featured at the parade. Though the kiss "sparked homophobic remarks on social media" (Romano), it also brought joy to the LGBTQ+ community and received praise for its choice at the parade.

We have come a long way in our years of representing LGBTQ+ characters on Broadway; as we gain a more accepting audience, more faithful representations of these characters will continue to be brought to the stage. The AIDS epidemic is used less as source material these days, and we are beginning to see characters that the LGBTQ+ community find realistic and not offensive or stereotypical. Just as *La Cage aux Folles* and *Angels in America* did for the three musicals analyzed, *Falsettos*, *RENT*, and *Fun Home* are influencing current musicals, as shown by *The Prom*'s general success. They have inspired a new generation of LGBTQ+ artists and show the world the ups and downs of the LGBTQ+ community and will continue to do so as we grow and develop as a society.

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