

December 8, 1994

Steve Sondheim  
246 East 49th Street  
New York, NY 10017

Dear Steve:

I have a feeling you may already have the current tape and text as part of the Rodgers submission pile, but if not, I've enclosed them in case you wanted to refresh your memory.

After sifting through the notes I made when we spoke, the main themes of your critique appear to be that A. I haven't been clear in my thesis- which should be demonstrated through the main story B. There are too many storylines which take away focus from what you think is the main plot- ROGER and MIMI. C. I should abandon making the majority of the principles HIV+, as it numbs the audience when they should feel something. D. rather than "otherness", RENT should be about "Love and Art" and "how love survives". Now that I have some distance, I'd like to communicate my goals better than I did on the phone that day. Then I'd like to share my rough plan for a new draft.

When I said that I wanted to "celebrate otherness", what I meant was celebrate "counterculture" (a loaded word these days!) And although as you pointed out, I'm not depicting dwarves or ugly people etc., I don't see those groups being vilified by the Right. I do see homeless, drug users, HIV+ people, homosexuals and liberals lumped into this one demographic "them"- who have replaced the Communists as the Right's fear-poster boys. My aim is to humanize and celebrate this kind of "otherness" so that although the audience may be put off by some of these characters at first, they come to care about them since their love stories are universal.

To me, ROGER and MIMI represent the inability to connect in our culture- fear of commitment, etc. ROGER can only express his love for her when a. he realizes she too is HIV+ and b. he's about to lose her. ANGEL and COLLINS are pure "love at first sight"- the ideal- even though, to the mainstream audience, their lifestyles might be most unpalatable. Yet if you draw the parallel to Puccini, They're the modern equivalent of Rodolpho and Mimi. MARK, MAUREEN and JOANNE are comic relief as the on again-off-again bickering lovers. (True, your point that JOANNE's jealousy is a red herring. It used to be that Mark and Maureen did in fact get back together for a time, and when I cut that out, I neglected to resolve Joanne's jealousy)

Regarding the AIDS aspect of the show, I wanted to write against the now cliché "tragic" story (see "Falsettos") of AIDS which I feel reinforces the idea that PWA's are less than "normal". Instead I chose to make almost everyone HIV+ to show them simply living their lives.

Although I want this to be more of a collage than a traditional musical, I agree that by pumping up the other couples, I may have drawn attention from ROGER, who I have been assuming was my main character. (his story being- A man who has shut down from feeling falls in love and does everything he can to avoid loving her in fear of being hurt again)

One question that I've been pondering... Do you think that part of the reason we didn't totally care about him was because the actor portraying him wasn't giving a fully physicalized performance, married to the opposite problem that the woman playing MIMI was totally "in her body" yet didn't have the vocal chops on the ballads? (He's a voice-over guy who I felt acted exclusively with his voice, but not his face and body- she comes from a dance/pop background)

Those are my thoughts on what I was attempting to achieve. Now let me tell you what I'm planning... One thing I said to someone who was more of a traditionalist like yourself was that I was going for a messy, explosive reflection of bohemia, a la HAIR. (which I seem to recall you don't like) But I was reminded that even HAIR has a concise dramatic question- "will Claude go to War?" - at best my question is- "will ROGER open up and feel something?" She didn't think that ROGER was the protagonist and that MARK was the most "everyman" of the characters.. It's a very intriguing idea, which has led me to a new scenario which I think might work as a context to my collage idea....

What if the play opens two years later in an film editing studio. Everyone has died and MARK is sifting through the "scenes from la vie boheme"? He has a deadline, his purpose for making the film is to show the film during an upcoming political convention- The dramatic question being- can he finish the film? His conflicts- running out of money and having to do extra shit work (which would answer your comment about never depicting the "how we gonna pay rent" aspects of the show)- also his fear of betraying his friends by exploiting their lives for his film and most deeply- his fear that by finishing the film, he'll be letting go of them.

Even in the present version, Michael staged the show with Mark giving stage directions and addressing the audience. I've considered opening with a scrim and we're in a screening room and Mark is showing a rough cut to someone seated in the back of the house. This would allow us the convention of him addressing the audience. He tells a projectionist to roll film but the film breaks and burns, so he has to tell us what we would've seen, and that gets us into the show. At the end, we learn that the person in the back of the house is JOANNE- the only other survivor. (In which case I will build their rivalry even more into the play)

As I mentioned, I liked much of what I did, and got an overwhelmingly positive response from audiences and people in the business. I'm mortified to go down the wrong track. Thoughts?

Best,

Jonathan