

# INTERVIEW

Original cast member  
**Anthony Rapp**  
“Mark Cohen”

**A**nthony Rapp is best known for his creation of the character of Mark Cohen in *Rent*. In addition to being an original cast member, Anthony had the privilege of being part of the production from its inception as a workshop piece to its debut on Broadway as well as the subsequent film version. StageNOTES sat down with Anthony to hear his earliest impressions of the musical, its creator Jonathan Larson and his thoughts on why the show has become the success that it has.

**StageNOTES:** As an original cast member of *Rent*, you were involved with the workshop that created what we experience today. What was that like to be in it from the beginning?

**Anthony Rapp:** By the time I got to the workshop, on a very personal level, I was just needing a job so I was happy to have the work. That was the first thing. Second level up was that I knew Michael Greif and I was really a fan of his so it was exciting to get to work with him. Another level for me was that I hadn't done a musical professionally since I was in my early teens so that was fun for me too to get to show people that I could sing again. The first thing that we did on day one was learn “Seasons of Love” and before that I had to learn the song “Rent” for my audition but that was all I knew.

**SN:** Was that the first time you had done a workshop for a show?

**AR:** I had done readings of plays but it was the first workshop of a musical that I had done.

**SN:** In your initial meeting with author and composer Jonathan Larson what was your first impression?

**AR:** We were onstage at the New York Theatre Workshop and Jonathan was sitting in the audience. He was a pretty gangly, tall guy and sort of hunched up in one of the seats chewing on a pencil. He had that curly hair and big ears and I thought he seemed a little young to have written a show by himself. He was youthful in all of the best meanings of that word. In getting to know him he was very open, very collaborative. Really driven

and committed.

**SN:** Was he set on the book and music the way he wrote it or did he allow you, as actors, any creative input in terms of defining the characters?

**AR:** Certain parts of certain songs he was open to slight changes in phrasing or a little melodic turn if we had an idea. He wrote “Take Me or Leave Me” for Idina [Menzel, the original Maureen] and Fredi [Walker, the original Joanne] to run with it. The reprise for “I’ll Cover You”, by design, gives Collins [originally played by Jesse L. Martin] the chances to adlib and do things with it to make it his own. There were other things that he was pretty strict about so it was a mixture. He definitely wrote with voices in mind. Once I had done the workshop, he wrote “Halloween” for me with my voice in mind. A lot of composers start to do that when they work with people developing a piece. They start to know who’s going to sing it so it influences how they write it.

**SN:** Did you see yourself playing any character other than Mark?

**AR:** No. It was the part that fit. I get asked a lot about what kind of roles I love to play. My answer is that I never would have said “I want to play a documentary filmmaker in a rock opera based on *La Bohème*. And yet, it turned out to be the most incredible experience of my life. It changed my life in every respect.

**SN:** From the initial workshop to what is seen onstage today, are there any significant differences in the score?

AR: Lots of things changed. It was part of the process as the show moved on. A lot of the big numbers like “Seasons of Love”, “I’ll Cover You”, “Light My Candle”, “Out Tonight” and “Without You” were in both versions. But then there were whole songs that were entirely new like “What You Own” and “Tango: Maureen”. The lyrics of “Rent” were entirely new.

SN: So it was a very fluid piece until it got to Broadway?

AR: Yes. Even when it went from off-Broadway to Broadway we changed some things. Everyone knew that the musical wasn’t finished when Jonathan died. Part of what you do when you start previews is that you get feedback from the audience and you see what’s working and not working and you make changes. We kept working on it but with the added task of trying to figure out what we could change and still fit with Jonathan’s vision since he wasn’t there to tell us. It was hard.

SN: Who was Jonathan’s target audience for *Rent*?

AR: When Jonathan wrote *Rent* he had young people in mind. He wanted theater to matter to young people beyond just the spectacle. He didn’t want young people to just say “ooh. . .aah. . .look at that chandelier falling.” He wanted them to connect to the story and the characters.

SN: At the time, did you think that *Rent* would become such a phenomenon and have the longevity that it has?

AR: You just never know when you go into that situation whether it’s going to be any good or interesting. The first thing we did on day one of the workshop was learn “Seasons of Love” and then I knew within seconds that this was very special but because of the subject matter, it seemed pretty unlikely that it would become a mainstream smash. The words that I kept using when I would describe it to my friends after I began the ‘94 workshop was that it was going to be an event and make a splash. I thought it would be a “downtown” event, a cool thing that had the chance to develop a following but I didn’t think it would become a mainstream smash. One of the genius choices that Jonathan Larson made in creating this piece was to make the

music very accessible. The score is very melodic and catchy. It’s filled with hooks. It says to the audience “Welcome”. This music will let you into this world.” They are good rock songs but they are also good theater songs. Your ears open up, your heart opens up to these people that you may not ordinarily open up to. Michael’s approach to the aesthetics of the show was very barebones. It was like “here we are”. There were no trappings. All of that and the way we approached our performances created an integrity and an authenticity that people really responded too. At the same time, as a new show that was unknown, we still needed the embrace of the critics and we were lucky in that sense because most of them loved our show and that really helped us. After that it was the awards and everything built off of that.

SN: Considering much of the show’s subject matter, were you surprised at its acceptance by the public, many of whom could have been thought of as conservative?

AR: Yes. We did the New York Theatre Workshop and that was for 10 performances and they were just done for people in the know. It didn’t get any reviews but we did sell out. The word spread through the community and most of the people who came were young artists who were



impressed and very moved by it. So I knew it was something special then. You never know what's communicating until you start getting the feedback and the feedback was really strong. But even then even once we knew we were going to do a real production a little more than a year later I never would have predicted a kind of mainstream embrace. In the mid 90s it was still pretty rare for anything in the mainstream to deal with AIDS and HIV let alone gay and lesbian relationships, drag queens or interracial romance. The Tom Hanks movie *Philadelphia* had come out and *Angels in America* had happened on Broadway but for the most part it was still pretty rare. When word of the show spread it was really surprising but in looking back, it seems to me that we filled a void. Whenever there's a void and you start to feel it, energy rushes in. It seems like that's what happened to us. We were reflecting a part of life, stories of people whose lives hadn't been told and stories that audiences wanted to talk about. In theatre, people want to want to feel something real - to them and for them and with them and with the people on stage.

SN: Did you enjoy making the film version of *Rent*?

AR: I loved getting back together with the cast but it was different. Being in the Broadway show was amazing and exhausting and intense. We had lost Jonathan. We were so busy with publicity and awards and recording the cast album and traveling. On a personal note, it was a time when my mother was very ill so on my days off, I was going back to visit her in Illinois. Going back for the movie and when Adam and I got back together to do the show last summer allowed us to just do the story.

The external pressures weren't there so it was a great pleasure.

SN: You're reprising your role of Mark in the national tour of *Rent* beginning in January 2009. Is it bittersweet to see the show close on Broadway?

AR: Yes it is. It's a touchstone. It's a part of my life that will be gone. There are a lot of things that happened at the Nederlander Theatre that were meaningful that will be gone.

SN: When audiences see *Rent*, what is the one thing you'd like to know that they walked away with?

AR: Jonathan very intentionally wanted to tell the story of people living with HIV/AIDS, people struggling with drug use and gay and lesbian relationships in a way that wasn't ordinarily dealt with in mainstream culture. He didn't want to comment on it but simply present it as the lives that these people live and the loves, heartbreak and loss that they share. He wanted to present it and then basically wanted the audience to talk amongst themselves afterwards. I think it's great if people can walk away from the show asking themselves the questions that the show asks. How do you measure your life? What do you do with the time you have? Who are you to the people in your life? What do you spend your life doing? In our lives, we don't know how much time we have so how are we going to spend that time. Hopefully audiences will walk away from the show realizing that you should try to live every moment in your life as fully as possible.

