Rent Decrease

The end of the long-running Broadway show creates a vacancy of HIV-positive characters.

October 1, 2008 By Bob Ickes

The AIDS-themed musical *Rent* is scheduled to take its final Broadway bow on September 7. (Mind you, this is the second time they've announced the doors will close for good.) The Tony Award–winning show, which follows scrappy bohemians living and loving amid HIV and injustice, first shocked Broadway in 1996. *Rent's* characters were created just before protease inhibitors revolutionized AIDS treatment; the two leads were shown taking AZT. Indeed, the show's depiction of HIV meds and mortality became dangerously obsolete over the show's 12-year run.

The musical has also been panned for its typical show-tune happy ending—spoiler alert!—in which a character who has died of AIDS undergoes a magical resurrection. But the show was remarkably prescient, too. At a time when AIDS was primarily portrayed as a gay white man's disease, *Rent* dared to focus on gay men of color and a heterosexual Latino woman, now two of the demographics most affected by HIV. (This year's Tony winner for Best Musical, *In the Heights*, set entirely in a Latino neighborhood, includes not a single mention of HIV/AIDS.) *Rent's* cast was also youthful, a reminder that many new infections occurred then—and continue to do so now—in those younger than 30.

Few in the AIDS community have noted that *Rent's* own death ends an era. When *Rent's* final curtain closes, HIV will be absent from the Great White Way. Since 1993, when *Angels in America* stormed Broadway and Philadelphia won Tom Hanks an Oscar, HIV awareness has been largely left waiting in the wings—or on the cutting-room floor. In a sanitized, Disney-ized Broadway world of little mermaids, where a spoonful of sugar helps our AIDS meds go down, where are the artists challenging and educating a modern audience about the villain virus that refuses to die?

As for movies, AIDS has become a foreign language—literally. The only recent fictional film releases to address HIV with any intelligence or artistry hail from France. *Before I Forget* concerns a former male escort, now 60, living with HIV and med side effects in Paris; *The Witnesses traces* French friendships in 1984, when the virus took root in that country. Both films are available on Netflix, joining that service's list of worthy AIDS documentaries (typically screened only in film festivals) and its even longer list of stigma-fueled thrillers (such as *No One Sleeps*, in which a serial killer poisons HIV-positive men in San Francisco gay bars).

Here's hoping that a new generation of writers, directors and producers finds ways to give *Rent's*

wisdom and inspiration a longer lease on life.

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