

“Last Modified January 1996”: The Digital History of *RENT*

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Music Theatre scholarship, and indeed theatre history research in general, can be accurately described as a subset of media studies. As much as we might claim the contrary to our theater students, theatre scholarship is not, by and large, the study of live performance, but an analysis of our own reconstructions built from the traces theatrical events leave behind. We study not moments but materials, not what was live but rather what was left. Increasingly, these leavings are likely to be digital. Much has been written of late about the current and imminent challenges these “born digital” materials pose for librarians and archivists [1], and many are now developing processes and procedures for preserving and providing access to them, however, relatively little published scholarship has yet been done using these archives, and so the emerging practices have yet to be thoroughly tested by researchers. In this article I will narrate my experiences using the born-digital artifacts in the Jonathan Larson collection at the Library of Congress in an effort to provide an example of one form this sort of scholarship might take.

When Jonathan Larson, author of the musical *RENT*, died suddenly of an aortic aneurysm at age 35, he left about 180 floppy disks in his apartment that were gathered by his friend Jonathan Burkhardt and eventually donated to the Library. The disks contain many drafts of Larson’s lyrics and libretti written using various word processors, and digital music files mostly composed using Mark of the Unicorn’s software Performer (now called Digital Performer). When considered alongside the analog items in the

collection, the scholar can use these digital artifacts to reconstruct the development of *RENT* in remarkable detail.

The broad narrative of the early history of *RENT* is well known: Playwright Billy Aronson and Jonathan Larson decided to collaborate on the musical, Larson initially only as composer, and together they wrote three songs (versions of “Santa Fe”, “RENT”, and “I Should Tell You”) before going their separate ways. In the late autumn of 1989 Aronson and Larson agreed to produce a demo tape of these songs to send out to producers. Aronson told me in a phone interview that, the plan was originally to gather a few musicians to work for very low cost and rent a studio to record the songs for a total of around \$80. However, Aronson remembers that Larson became enamored with the work of sound engineer Steve Skinner and the possibilities of digitally produced sound. Aronson agreed to pay for half the costs, but was shocked to find that the total was not \$80 but nearly \$900. [1]

On January 31, 1990 Larson used his computer to compose an invoice requesting payment from Aronson for his share of the costs. The invoice lists three studio visits, one for 6 hours on December 21 to create “Music Trax for SANTA FE & RENT,” one for 4.5 hours on January 16 to create “Music Trax for “I SHOULD TELL YOU” and one for 7.5 hours on January 30 to “Record Vocals for ALL SONGS” and to create “Mix Trax for ALL SONGS.” Using the timestamps on the music files, it is possible to verify that Larson’s accounting was correct. On December 21, 1989 at 2:37 pm, Larson saved digital music file for “RENT” and at 5:29pm for “SANTA FE”. A music file of “I SHOULD TELL YOU” was last saved at 6:11 p.m on January 16. [2] That Larson sought out a digital studio so early in the creative process (and was willing to pay about \$300 per

session at a time when his primary source of income was part-time work at the Moondance Diner) suggests how important Larson saw digital technology for his creative process. Aronson remembers being initially skeptical about the cost, but acknowledges that he was impressed by the result. [3]

However, after recording the demo, it seems work on RENT was shelved for almost two years. On February 6 of 1990 Larson created a directory on one of his disks named “RENT”, and filed all of the work to date in it; he doesn’t seem to have touched the project again until January of 1992. [4] The reasons for shelving the project appear to have been, as such decisions frequently are, complex and varied. Producer Ira Weitzman is quoted by Barry Singer as saying of the collaboration between Larson and Aronson, “their lifestyles were so different. Billy was married with kids. Jonathan was living the Bohemian life. Clearly they were at odds” [5]. In December of 1989, Larson wrote to Stephen Sondheim asking for advice about artistic collaborations. In a letter, preserved electronically and dated December 28, 1989, Larson wrote to his idol:

I'm writing because I'm in the midst of discussing possible collaborations with playwrites, and I have a few questions that I thought you might [expound] on. Lately, it seems that playwrites get peeved when I try to nail them down as to what their intentions are for a certain piece. For example, Ira has introduced me to someone who wants to take a famous story and do a contemporary version of it. Although I think it's a good idea, he can't explain why he wanted to rework it-beyond, "it's a neat idea." [6]

Aronson himself remembers that the partnership was always somewhat difficult because, he says, at that stage in their careers neither of them was especially good at responding to the others' work. [7]

And so RENT languished for about a year. Jonathan Burkhart remembers Larson expressed interest in continuing work in January of 1991 while the two were on a road trip in the southern United States, but it does not seem Larson considered it an active project during that year. In August of 1991 Larson created a "catalog" of his works, but he took credit only for the music of RENT. On December 5, 1991 Larson created a sort of year-end retrospective for a holiday party for his friends detailing, as the file name puts it "What we did." Larson's own summary of the year lists *Tick, Tick Boom; Billy Bishop Goes to War*; but not *RENT*. However, Larson does seem to have decided to work on RENT in earnest by the end of the year. On December 19, 1991 Larson wrote to Sondheim, "I'm working (passionately) on my next piece, a rock opera." [8]

Although there is no evidence of musical or textual work on RENT in 1991, Larson does appear to have been researching the musical in the latter part of the year. A folder labeled RENT STUFF created in March of 1992 contains a subfolder labeled "MISC/NOTES" which contains two files generated in October of 1991 in which records Larson's summaries of Susan Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors* and a pre-publication version (probably a lecture) of the ideas presented in anti-nuclear activist Helen Caldicott's 1992 book *If you love this planet: A Plan to heal the earth*. [9] Larson's interest in these works suggest his own uneasy relationship with modern technology. Caldicott was and is famously suspicious of it (claiming, for instance, that space shuttles are destroying the ozone layer) [10], and Sontag observes, with not a little anxiety, the

effect of technology on AIDS era sexual practices. She writes, “Machines supply new, popular ways of inspiring desire and keeping it safe, as mental as possible” and cites as an example “The commercially organized lechery by telephone” [11]. Larson makes special note of this paragraph in his “notes” file, summarizing: “Machines replace sexual contact. Phone sex, for example.” [12] It is perhaps worth noting that while both works examine ideas that are thematically important in *RENT* (present in the song “Contact”, for instance), it is only the file structure on Larson’s disk that suggests that Larson himself saw the connection.

A file last modified on January 24 and named “!Outline 1:23” appears to mark Larson’s return to *RENT* after a two year hiatus. By July a file named “\*TEXT” contained a draft of act one that is recognizably similar to the version eventually performed on Broadway. Sometime between 10:34 am and 12:38 pm on January 16, 1996, just ten days before he died, Jonathan Larson made the last change to the text of *RENT* recorded in the digital archive in the Library of Congress. The change was arguably inconsequential—Joanne’s line in “We’re Okay” was changed from “Steve-Go Home/No you cut the Styrofoam” to “Steve-you’re great/No you cut the paper plate,” but the fact that Larson made the change digitally 2 hours after he had saved the previous draft, and further, saved the draft as a new file, suggests the way Larson used his computer in his creative process [13]. Larson seems to have understood, in a way many authors even today do not, that maintaining a revision history of one’s digital work, rather than simply saving over old drafts can be very useful if ever one wishes to revert to an earlier version. One result is that the

history of RENT's compositional process is exceptionally well documented in the digital archive.

This history might have been lost, however, had the Library of Congress not been exceptionally flexible in serving the collection. When I first encountered the disks, they were accompanied by a few, informal, human-generated descriptions of their contents, but in the twelve years since Larson's death no attempt had been made to migrate the data on the floppies to a more stable storage medium. The disks were 800K double-density 3.5 inch floppies which, due to differences in the strength of the magnetic head and the speed at which the disk was turned, cannot be read by the high-density 3.5 inch floppy drives commercially available today. In order to read these disks, I used a Powermac G3 Wallstreet edition laptop (which came with the appropriate drive and could also accept a PC card to enable a USB port). Using the DD program installed by default on the version of Ubuntu Linux I was running on the laptop, I created bit for bit copies of all of the data on the disks (including, if present, deleted files and data saved to the clipboard when editing Microsoft Word documents).

This process required specialized technical expertise that was not present in house at the music division Library of Congress. I do not in any way fault the institution for this; it would be unreasonable to expect that, in addition to their unassailable content expertise, the Library's subject libraries should have intimate knowledge of the eccentricities of every piece of obsolete digital media the library acquires. In the future, such artifacts may be handled in much the same way as

obsolete video and audio media formats are now—media specialists at labs like the Library of Congress's Culpepper facility will preserve and migrate the material and copies will be curated and served by the content specialists. Indeed, it is my understanding that an approach such as this was the long-term plan for the Larson disks.

However, until such digital preservation labs are common, an interim approach is needed, and needed immediately. In the past century, digital media has changed far more quickly than other storage technologies. Twenty years ago, for instance, although vinyl records and magnetic tape were still sold in many stores, the compact disc was an increasingly common medium for the distribution of recorded sound. At the same time, 5.25 floppy inch disks were common and could be purchased for the still commercially available Commodore 64 and Apple IIe computers. The difference between these formats is striking; even if MP3 players and digital downloads have displaced the compact disc as the dominant sound technology, I doubt many would consider a CD as definitively anachronistic as a Commodore 64 floppy disk. At the very least, it is far easier today to purchase the all of the necessary technologies to read a compact disc than it would be to locate everything necessary to play a music file from a Commodore floppy generated, perhaps, by some now forgotten music composing software.

Library staffing and procedures, which tend to be defined by necessarily methodical and slow bureaucratic processes, are ill equipped to respond to rapidly changing media formats, computer hardware, and software in a way that will ensure

they can adequately care for and migrate the born digital data in their collections. Scholars, however, can be much more agile. If it is unreasonable to expect librarians responsible for very large collections to have detailed knowledge of every media format they hold, it also seems unreasonable that a scholar studying a single author or work should not be expected to have or develop the necessary technical expertise. A scholar who wants to examine the earliest extant witnesses to the texts of Euripedes or Aeschylus should know Greek, a scholar who wants to study RENT should know about 1990 Macintosh computers. We do not assume that the keepers of classical text are the only ones who should attempt to translate them, nor should we assume archivists have the sole responsibility for transferring our born digital heritage.

There are challenges, to be sure. Concerns that providing open access to unprocessed and fragile materials risks irreversible damage are legitimate, as are fears that such access might expose sensitive and private information in ways that violate donor agreements. There are, of course, ways to mitigate these risks. Libraries can provide access to unprocessed born-digital materials only to scholars who have demonstrated their trustworthiness and qualifications, and who are further approved by the donor or their representatives. Well-designed contractual agreements can limit the likelihood that a scholar will make publicly known sensitive information should she stumble upon something unexpected in the archive. However, it is unquestionably easier and safer to take the path of caution and simply deny all outside access to unprocessed digital collections. Such an approach may prevent lawsuits and guard against certain kinds of damage, but it

also almost certainly ensures that bit rot will destroy a good deal of our born digital heritage.

There are presently about 5 disks in the Larson collection that I have as yet been unable to read. Digital media fails, and even when it does not, constructing the technical dependencies necessary to read it becomes more and more difficult as the time between the “last modified date” on a file and the present increases. I hope that I have demonstrated that the born-digital record is a uniquely rich one for theater historians, but it is also uniquely endangered. Theatre libraries and archives must therefore to develop policies and expertise to safeguard this record, but for now, the best policy is to invite those with the greatest expertise--often representatives of those for whom the collection is being preserved—to join the library community, not just as users but as fellow stewards of theatre history. For a moment we have the choice. There is, as Jonathan Larson might say, “No day but today.”

## Notes

1. For example: Bryan P. Bergeron, *Dark Ages II: When the Digital Data Die* (Prentice Hall, 2002)
2. For example: Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, et. al. *Approaches to Managing & Collecting Born-Digital Literary Materials for Scholarly Use*. (Whitepaper produced for the Office of Digital Humanities at the National Endowment for the Humanities, 2009)

3. Bill Aronson, phone interview with author, Silver Spring, MD & New York City, 4 January 2010.
4. Jonathan Larson Collection, Library of Congress.
5. Aronson interview.
6. Jonathan Larson Collection, Library of Congress.
7. Barry Singer. *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theatre and Beyond* (Hal Leonard Corporation, 2004), 104
8. Jonathan Larson Collection, Library of Congress.
9. Aronson interview.
10. Jonathan Larson Collection, Library of Congress.
11. Jonathan Larson Collection, Library of Congress.
12. Helen Caldicott, *If You Love This Planet: A Plan to Save the Earth* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 5
13. Susan Sontag, *Illness as metaphor ; and, AIDS and its metaphors* (Macmillan, 2001), 167
14. Jonathan Larson Collection, Library of Congress.
15. Jonathan Larson Collection, Library of Congress.

