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MATX 601 Texts and Textuality

11/08/07

Analysis of the Bohemian Motif in *La Boheme* and *Rent*

The Bohemian counterculture emerged from the collected experiences of writers, artists, students, and youth who were drawn to the left bank of the Seine in Paris during the mid-1800s (“Welcome to Bohemia” 1; par. 1 & 2). Bohemians rejected typical bourgeois values and created a lifestyle characterized by a denunciation of materialism and traditional moral values and by a devotion to work solely for artistic expression (“How Bohemians Lived” 1; par. 1). The Bohemian movement spread to the Grub St. area of London during the mid-1800s primarily because of the influence of British born writer and artist William Makepeace Thackeray (“Bohemian London” 1; par. 2). Elements of the Bohemian motif are found in the 1950’s beat culture in New York City and in the hippie movement of the 1970s (“Beat Culture: A Later Manifestation of Bohemia” 1; par. 1)

Puccini’s Italian opera *La Boheme*, first performed in 1896 in Turin, Italy, and Jonathan Larson’s rock opera *Rent*, first performed in 1996 in New York City, are both stories of a group of friends sharing the Bohemian lifestyle. For purposes of this paper, the author chose to use the 1999 performance of *La Boheme* by the San Francisco Opera and the movie rock opera version of *Rent* released in 2006.

Authorship and Audience Response

Despite the fact that a major theme of the dramas is the Bohemian counterculture movement, both operas are what Ikishawa would call “bourgeois or finished theatre” (Waldrip-Fruin 346). There is no real opportunity for co-authorship. It is possible that the actors could

inspire audience participation, but it is not really possible for the audience members to interact with the cast during the performance. This is unfortunate because controversial issues in *Rent* invoke strong reaction in audiences as they confront issues/behaviors with which they are not entirely comfortable.

Setting

The settings for both operas are the living spaces and public meeting spaces of each group of friends. *La Boheme* takes place in Paris in the mid 1800s and the scenes are staged primarily in a sparsely furnished garret and in a representation of the Café Momus. Cafes were places for Bohemians to meet, share ideas, and watch the bourgeois (Cafes 1; par. 1). *Rent* takes place in New York City in the early 1990s. Most of the scenes are shot in the warehouse shared by the friends, the meeting space for the AIDS support group (their modern day Café Momus), and the subways and streets of New York City. There are also scenes shot in a restaurant on New Year's Eve and in various other performance spaces.

Plot

Rent is a rewrite of *La Boheme* and thus, there are multiple intertextual parallels. Both *La Boheme* and *Rent* are linear narratives. *Rent* occasionally introduces flashbacks to share important historical information and/or heighten the affective impact for the reader. According to "Henry Murger and Scenes de *La Boheme*," *La Boheme* itself is a rewrite of Henry Murger's installments about Bohemian life in the journal *Corsaire-Satan*. The installments, known as "Scenes de *La Boheme*" were rewritten in 1849 as a musical drama and then published in written text as a collection of tales in 1851. Puccini's opera was first performed in 1896 and *Rent* was performed one hundred years later in 1996 (2; par. 3). Several of the characters in *La Boheme* and *Rent* have the same names or are clearly a rewrite of a specific character in the earlier text. Musetta was a character in the original "Scenes de *La Boheme*." Both hypotexts begin with a demand by the landlord for the payment of rent. This serves to quickly introduce the themes of

poverty and disregard for convention and law. Against the backdrop of conflict in both stories between adhering to Bohemian ideals or selling out for financial security, both *La Boheme* and *Rent* are primarily love stories. In both stories the character of Mimi symbolically enters the apartment of Rodolfo in *La Boheme* or Roger in *Rent* with an unlit candle. The conflict in *La Boheme* lies in whether Rodolfo can master his insecurity in time to commit to Mimi before he loses her, either to another lover or to her illness. Similarly the conflict between Marcello and Musetta in their tempestuous love affair lies in whether Musetta can ever commit to just one man. In *Rent*, Roger is afraid of commitment. He has been abandoned without warning before, and he is reluctant to trust Mimi. The suspense in both operas lies in whether the couples will commit to each other. The tension is heightened by our awareness that Mimi in *La Boheme* is ill with consumption. Mimi and Roger in *Rent* are ill with AIDS. Maureen is *Rent*'s Musetta, ever on the move from one relationship to another. She has affairs with both Mark and Joanne and flirts with various receptionists, bartenders, etc. – all at others' emotional expense. At various points in the rock opera, Maureen and Joanne seem near commitment, but they never quite come to terms with who they will be to and for each other. This mirrors the relationship of Marcello and Musetta in *La Boheme*.

A new element introduced by Larson in *Rent* is the couple of Collin and Angel. An unlikely pair, they are able to commit to each other and tenderly care for each other despite AIDS, poverty, homosexuality, and Angel's transvestitism. Their love serves as a model for Roger and Mimi, Maureen and Joanne. The conflict in their story is the conflict between life and death as Angel also copes with the ravages of AIDS.

The climax in *La Boheme* occurs once Mimi leaves her new lover and returns to Rodolfo. Ill and near death, she has decided that this is where she will spend her last days/hours. She dies after having the opportunity to proclaim her love and to know, once and for all, that he loves her as well. Musetta also returns to Marcello, though we are never quite sure how long this will last.

Larson repeats these scenes in *Rent* almost verbatim. He has Mimi near death asking Maureen and Joanne to help her return to Roger. She appears to die but miraculously has a near death experience, facilitated by the deceased Angel who encourages her to return to life and to Roger. The denouement or resolution in all three relationships is that love does survive, despite fear, insecurity, affairs, and death.

Characters

The main character in *La Boheme* is the poet Rodolfo who falls in love with his seamstress neighbor, Mimi. Rodolfo shares a garret apartment with three other men: Marcello, a painter; Colline, a philosopher; and Schaunard, a musician. Marcello also is involved in a turbulent affair with his female lover, Musetta. The main characters in *Rent*, as in *La Boheme*, are young and impoverished because in true Bohemian fashion, they choose to devote themselves to their art forms. Larson adds to *Rent* additional characters representing the modern day art forms of film and dance. Roger is a songwriter/guitarist; Mark, a would-be film producer; Mimi, a dancer in a sex show and a drug addict who becomes Roger's girlfriend; Benny, a former roommate of Mark and Roger who married the landlord's daughter; Maureen, an actress who is Mark's former girlfriend; Joanne, a lawyer who is now Maureen's lover; Collins, a computer genius/sometime university instructor who is also close friend and former roommate of Mark and Roger; and Angel Shunard, a male transvestite street musician who becomes Collin's girlfriend.. All of the characters in *La Boheme* are poor. Larson introduces class issues within the group of friends in *Rent* by having Benny marry into a wealthy family and by having Maureen date Joanne, a lawyer educated in an Ivy League school who is from a wealthy family.

Diversity is an important difference/rewrite in the two texts. All of the characters in *La Boheme* appear to be Italian. The main characters in *Rent* are ethnically diverse, i.e. Caucasian, African American, and perhaps Latino. Characters are also from multiple age ranges, sexual orientations, and even gender identities. Gender is a particularly important concept in the two

texts. According to “Bohemian Women,” young women in Bohemia played multiple social roles that were markedly different from those proscribed for bourgeois women (1; par.1). One role that figures prominently in *La Boheme* is that of the grisette or mistress, a working class woman who came into the city to find work and settled in the Latin Quarter because of the cheap lodgings available there. Grisettes were pretty, independent, and flirtatious young women, intent on climbing the social ladder in order to find wealthy husbands (Manchin, 2000 cited in Grisettes 1; par. 4 and 2; par. 2). Mimi in *La Boheme* is such a young woman. However, Musetta is the queen of grisettes, flitting from lover to lover, “unfettered by ‘bourgeois morality’” (Seigel as cited on Grisettes 3; par. 2). She clearly fits Manchin’s (2000) description of the grisette who lives on her “own terms with her own agenda. She has no concern for formalities, customs, or norms – all in stark contrast to the restricted, formal, passive bourgeois women” (cited in Grisettes 2; par. 2-3).

Finally, Larson’s characters in *Rent* are diverse because they are not simply impoverished Bohemians. He introduces some of the most marginalized groups of our society – drag queens (transvestites), homosexuals, drug addicts, persons with AIDS – forcing the audience members to deal with their prejudices and judgments as they are drawn into relationship with Angel, Maureen, Joanne, Mimi, and Roger. Noguee (2003) cautions that such characters might easily remain stereotypes if they are not fully developed. Mitchell states that stereotypes are an ordinary “necessary evil,” and states that “we could not make sense of or recognize objects or other people without the capacity to form images that allow us to distinguish one thing from another, one person from another, one class of things from another” (296). The characters in *Rent* are multifaceted and touchingly memorable, sharing their joys, fear, sadness, pain, and love with each other. The point of view in both stories is objective as we are watching all of the characters as they live out their conflicts. However, in *Rent* Mark gifts his friends with his film tribute to

their history together. Mark's point of view then is embedded in his choice of what and who to film.

Themes

Four themes inherent in both texts are 1) the loyalty to counterculture, 2) the rejection of societal norms, 3) the theme of love, 4) the theme of loss and dying. According to "How Bohemians Lived," Bohemians rejected the values of the bourgeois, in particularly the values of materialism and ownership of private property (1; par.2). They often lived in poverty, without heat or food or sometimes shelter. Their apartments might be sparsely furnished if at all. Bohemian youth lived life on their own terms, they lived for their art, and they had no concern for financial stability or the future (2; par. 4). Work did not have to be productive; in fact, work was for the "pleasures of the heart and the intellect" ("Bohemia: A Day in the Life" 1; par. 1). None of the men in *La Boheme* work full-time. They work primarily at their art and at odd jobs here and there designed to provide food and wine for the table. Their ideals are embodied in the lyrics of Colline's ode to his overcoat – "You never bent your threadbare/ back to the rich and powerful./ You have sheltered in our pockets/like peaceful caves,/philosophers and poets." (*La Boheme*) In *Rent* Mark's loyalty to the idea of art as freelance work is challenged by his offer of a job with Buzzline. He has a great deal of difficulty going to the interview, nearly turning back as he enters "corporate America" (*Rent*). He is rightly concerned about losing artistic control and his helplessness is underscored by the visual image of a skyscraper, shot from the point of view of someone looking up from ground level. He is dwarfed by the height of the building towering over him.

Bohemians ascribed to nontraditional moral values, embracing alcohol and drug abuse and overt promiscuity ("How Bohemians Lived" 2; par 3). They had little respect for laws and "flaunted their marginality" (2; par. 5). In *La Boheme* Musetta is perhaps the best example of outrageous disregard for propriety and for concern for others. In one scene, she is accompanied

by a wealthy older gentleman who is loaded down with hatboxes and various other packages that it appears he has just bought for her. She sees Marcello in front of the café and shamelessly begins to flirt with him. They eventually leave together, but not before she tells the waiter to give her companion the bill for the dinner of Rodolfo, Mimi, and Marcello!

The Bohemian bond and identity was formed from the collective experiences of the lifestyle (Bohemian Identity 1; par. 2). In both *La Boheme* and *Rent*, the characters share living space, work space, and take most of their meals together at clubs. They essentially live a communal lifestyle, sharing the *Rent* (when they pay it), contributing food, wine, money for the use of everyone. Their interactions with each other are characterized by acceptance, caring, and abiding friendship. They are not judgmental and are intolerant only of the bourgeois. The love and acceptance they develop for each other is a love that challenges, changes, and ultimately heals them.

This is particularly true of those relationships characterized by romantic love. In *La Boheme* the love between Mimi and Rodolfo is a tempestuous love. She complains to Marcello about Rodolfo's rages. He loves her but shuns her. He is eaten up with jealousy. He flies into rages and tells her, "You're not for me! Get yourself another lover!" In desperation she plans to separate from him, though she loves him. Rodolfo initially tells Marcello that he wants to part with her because she is "tedious now." He claims she is a flirt. But as he discloses to Marcello, he eventually gets to the truth of the matter—he loves her but he is afraid because she is ill. He feels he cannot provide for her. The characters in *La Boheme* and in *Rent* are in a battle with their own internal demons to become persons capable of loving. As Baudelaire wrote in *My Heart Laid Bare*, "[t]here exists in every man at every moment two simultaneous postulations, one toward God, the other toward Satan" (cited in "Baudelaire" 1; par. 1). At times characters are capable of great insight and caring for one another, for example, Musetta when she buys the dying Mimi a

muff to keep her hands warm. At other times they are self-absorbed and disrespectful of those they pretend to love, for example, Maureen in her altercations with Joanne.

For a while Mimi and Rodolfo do part. But love in Bohemia was characterized by the myth of the Bohemian woman always longing for and returning to her soul mate, the Bohemian man, even if she married into the bourgeois (Manchin , 2000 cited in Grisettes 1; par. 2). After Mimi returns to Rodolfo, on her deathbed she confesses, “I’ve so many things to tell you . . . /or rather only one, but that one huge as the ocean,/as deep and infinite as the sea./You are my love and my whole life.” While she is singing, his head is on her bosom. He then raises his head and looks at her. The two of them then sing the remainder of the aria with their faces pressed against each other.

In *Rent* several characters have lost relationships and respond with longing (Mark for Maureen), anger and distance (Roger for his former girlfriend). Some have insecure relationships and are continually threatened with loss (Joanne and Maureen). Some know that they will lose relationships through death (Collin and Angel, Roger and Mimi, members of the support group). The issues of loss and dying challenge and sometimes empower them to risk rejection in order to give and receive love.

Visual, Aural, and Performative Elements

Both *La Boheme* and *Rent* have visual, aural, and dramatic performative elements. But *Rent* includes two alternative modes of cultural communication and artistic literacy – dance as an additional performance media and film. At times all five rhetorical elements are intertwined. They augment one another in several scenes of power and beauty.

One notable visual element is scenery. The living spaces and furnishings in both *La Boheme* and *Rent* are spare and somewhat dilapidated. In *La Boheme* the youth live in a garret; the living space in *Rent* is in an abandoned warehouse. Near the end of the opera, the men have returned to the garet, after having lived with Mimi and Musetta for some time. In this scene the

garett is cleaner, cozier and the inhabitants appear warm. The scenery is a literal representation of their poverty and their circumstances as their fortunes change. The café in *La Boheme* and the meeting place for the AIDS support group in *Rent* serve more as signifiers of their friendship. It is not so much the café or the room itself that we remember, but the events that took place there.

Costuming is also an important visual element in both hypotexts. The clothing of the typical Bohemian was often out-of-date and inappropriate for the weather (Bohemian Fashion 1; par. 2). In *La Boheme* characters are dressed in heavy coats and scarves to signify the lack of heat and the need to keep warm. However, in the San Francisco production of the opera, the clothes are not really an accurate reproduction of those worn by impoverished bohemians. Instead, they are made of very elaborate fabrics in a variety of textures (silks, tweeds, woolens, heavy lace). The colors are not garish but earth-toned and jewel-toned. The costumes have been impeccably matched with those of other characters and matched against the scenery. In one scene Musetta's enters, wearing an outfit of French blue and burgundy, which is juxtaposed against a blue-gray building in the background lit by gas lights. In a later scene outdoors, we see street sweepers freezing at the gate against a backdrop of blue-gray columns and blue-green Lombardy trees off in the distance. The effect is barely noticeable and quietly elegant. The costuming supports the emphasis on the beauty of the singing and the dramatic characterizations. At no point in the production is any of the clothing unbecoming except in the final scene with Mimi. When she is very ill and near death, she wears a pale gray-blue dress and her hair is unkempt. With no color in her makeup, she looks ashen.

The costuming in *Rent* is markedly different from *La Boheme* and more representative of traditional Bohemian fashion. All characters are in modern day dress with no attempt to match colors or styles. Each character is free to express his/her individuality. Mimi wears her black dominatrix outfit for dancing. Angel wears her Santa Claus costume and flowered tablecloth

turned miniskirt. Benny wears his three piece suit now that he has married into the bourgeois. The costumes (or lack of them) frequently are used to shock and poke fun at the bourgeois.

Throughout the recording of the production of *La Boheme*, there is only one visual special effect. This occurs when Rodolfo and Mimi are discussing (singing) about whether to separate. Here each of them is facing away from the other. Suddenly, a split screen is used to place him slightly in front, she slightly behind him as they individually consider what to do – . . . “In winter one can die of loneliness – Loneliness is too unbearable which as spring awakens we have the sun.” (She then runs to him and they embrace.) Meanwhile in the background Marcello and Musetta are fighting. The aural, visual, and performative elements combine here, juxtaposing the argument in the background and the words of love in the foreground. The four voices are synchronous, a symphony of soaring musicality.

Rent is replete with visual images that serve as signifiers. In the first scene we know that we are propelled into the midst of anarchy. As the characters decide that they will not pay rent, they set their papers afire and throw them into the street. Within seconds the sky is raining fireballs as they sing their opening manifesto – “we’re not gonna pay/we’re not gonna pay/we’re not gonna pay . . . Last year’s rent/ This year’s rent/ Next year’s Rent/ Rent, Rent, Rent, Rent, Rent/ We’re not gonna pay rent” (*Rent Libretto* 8).

In *La Boheme* and *Rent*, the unlit candle serves as a signifier of each Mimi character’s needs for emotional intimacy. Each enters the apartment of Rodolfo or Roger to ask that he light her candle. We can imagine each man asking himself as he looks at the candle and the woman in front of him, “What do the images want from us? Where are they leading us?” What is it they lack? That they are inviting us to fill in? What desires have we projected onto them, and what form do those desires take as they are projected back at us, making demands upon us, seducing us to feel and act in a specific way?” (Mitchell 25) Additionally, the character of Mimi in *Rent* seductively dances to the rhythms of a tango as she sings, “Light My Candle.”

A special effect used in *Rent* is the technique of time lapse photography to punctuate the loss of friends due to AIDS. As members are dying, he shows them sitting in their chairs in group, talking with other group members, then gradually fading out to an empty seat. We watch as 1-2-3 group members disappear. In between these scenes he intersperses scenes of Mimi shooting up, Collin holding Angel in the subway when she becomes ill, Roger carrying a very ill Mimi to his apartment, Angel lying in her hospital bed with Collin beside her both surrounded by the group of friends.

After Angel's death, Mark goes to work in corporate America as a film photographer. Roger buys a car and a new guitar and leaves town. The scene is edited in such a way as to move back and forth between the images of Mark and Roger. Each is pursuing his dream though each has made a different choice about the best way to do it. The juxtaposition of these two choices underscores the importance of individual choice and freedom in pursuing one's art.

Perhaps the most powerful visual technique used in *Rent* is Mark's use of the film montage to capture a series of images of his friends. The collection serves as a tribute to the bond they have developed. Brockelman (2001 as cited in Emme and Kirova) would call this whole that is great than the sum of its part a "collage consciousness." "The cycling between an awareness of fragments and original on the one hand, and a unified meaning on the other, goes beyond static representation to a dynamic, almost animated sense of the relationships between meanings that is both the heart of the college experience and the idea of 'uncertainty as knowledge'" (Brockelman 187 qtd. in Emme and Kirova). The film is entitled "Today 4 U," a title which speaks to the importance of their focus on their relationships with each other *today*. The loss of Angel has emphasized the importance of living in the moment. Also, the film signifies his coming out as a producer; in the list of credits we see "A Mark Cohen Film."

The final image in the film is a breathtaking headshot of Angel, sans wig, makeup, and clothing. Emme and Kirova would describe this photograph as "fetishistic" or "linked with

magic” (). Angel is completely natural and is in profile. As she focuses her gaze on us, she moves her hand out toward us and seems to draw us in toward herself. As Mitchell says, “images seem to come alive and want things” (9). There is something other worldly and completely memorable in this image. “The punctum, or wound, left by a photograph always trumps its stadium, the message or semiotic content that it discloses.” (Mitchell 9).

In some scenes, aural poetics are the primary medium. Puccini’s choice of the bel canto style of opera is an emotionally powerful medium to deliver the narrative. According to Theirs (2002), the Bel Canto style relies upon “continuity of tone. . . with little to no interruption, ” including noticeable breathing. Bel canto is characterized by “perfect evenness throughout the voice, skillful legato, a light upper register, tremendous agility and flexibility, and a certain lyric, ‘sweet’ timbre” (Wikipedia). In *La Boheme* Rodolfo is played by Luciano Pavarotti and Mimi, by Mirella Freni. Pavarotti’s voice can be tender and inspired while at other times thunderously powerful without ever losing his lyrical quality. Freni’s face is full of hope as she sings in tender but strong crescendos punctuated by long, gentle notes – “the rays of sun belong to me: and the first kiss of April is mine” (*La Boheme Libretto*)

Similarly, Larson’s use of the hyperbole available in the medium of rock opera allows audiences to revel in the raw power of Mark’s rough voice and to be soothed by the silky ballads of Mimi. Noguee notes that Larson utilizes multiple musical styles including soul (“I’ll Cover You”), Latin (“Tango Maureen”), gospel (“I’ll Cover You Reprise” at Angel’s memorial). The use of all of these styles underscores the cultural and ethnic diversity of the musical artists as well as their appreciation for and adoption of each others’ music.

The lyrics of *La Boheme* and *Rent* are an aural element that further develops the characters in each opera. We gain insight not only into their discourse with each other but into their private thoughts and feelings. Rodolfo sings “ . . . I love Mimi more than anything in the world,/I love her, but I’m afraid!/Mimi is so very ill!/Every’day she grows weaker./ The poor

little thing is/ . . . doomed!” The previously mentioned scene where Rodolfo and Mimi consider separation is especially poignant against the backdrop of Marcello and Musetta’s argument. The lyrics of each song in *Rent* are equally instructive. They not only illuminate the characters but instruct the audience. For example, in the finale the male chorus sings, “There’s only now/There’s only here/Give in to love/Or live in fear/No other path/No other way/No day but today” (*Rent Libretto*).

The performative element is present in both texts but its use is more varied in *Rent*. Both texts offer dramatic interpretation as well as comic relief. The men in *La Boheme* dance a parody of a minuet. In *Rent* Maureen leads a chorus of protesters in a series of moos. Mimi performs a sex dance. Maureen chooses her own engagement party to confront Joanne about her controlling nature. While singing “Take Me or Leave Me,” she removes her jacket, places it on the lifesize ice sculpture, climbs onto the table with it, and dances around it, pulling up her blouse as she goes to reveal her navel. Perhaps nothing is so representative of the Bohemian need to shock as the groups’ riotous dance to “La Vie Boheme” on the tabletops of a restaurant on New Year’s Eve. This time Maureen drops her pants to moon shocked sedate onlookers in three piece suits.

The climax in both texts revolves around Mimi’s illness and death. In *La Boheme*, she does eventually die. In *Rent* she has a clinical death experience. The hand figures prominently in both death scenes. In *La Boheme* her hand falls away from the muff and there is an ominous long note played on the trumpet in the background. In *Rent* her hand falls off the table and seems to signify her death. However, after Roger sees her fingers move, he is hopeful that she will revive.

Conclusion

The multiple mediums used in both text nourish and inspire the modern artist. The nineteenth century Bohemian is to some extent a prototype for the modern artist. The artistic life is a life of reflection, a being part of, yet not a part of, society in order to find that place of

studied objectivity, introspection, and perspective. The modern day artist does not have to choose poverty to practice his art. However, he does need to be a careful steward of his time. The gift of Bohemianism is mindfulness and choice. The artist may choose to live without regrets and to make every minute count – “There’s only now/There’s only here/Give in to love/Or live in fear/No other path/No other way/No day but today” (*Rent Libretto*).

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