

By LISA BRAMEN
lbramen@poststar.com

GLENS FALLS ♦ On Jan. 24, 1996, promising young playwright Jonathan Larson was on the eve of his first big break. Three months earlier, he had finally been able to quit his job at a diner to concentrate on finishing a rock musical based on the Puccini opera, *La Bohème*. That night, he watched the dress rehearsal of his show.

PREVIEW

Then he went home to his tiny Manhattan apartment and died of an undiagnosed aortic aneurism. He was 36. The show was "Rent," which eventually went on to become one of the most popular Broadway musicals of all time and have a profound impact on musical theater. Martha Banta, artistic director of the Adirondack Theatre Festival, was artistic associate at New York Theatre Workshop while Larson was working on "Rent" there. ATF was in its early years, and Banta approached Larson about developing a

piece for the festival.

He died before that could happen. But now, ATF is producing "Tick... Tick... Boom!" the autobiographical musical he wrote before "Rent." It will be the festival's final production under the leadership of Banta and her husband and co-founder, David Turner, as they prepare to step down at the end of the season.

"It feels very close to us in some way," Banta said last month in New York City, where she was rehearsing for the upcoming season.

She resisted doing the show earlier, she said, because it felt "too personal."

"It felt like capitalizing on his success with 'Rent,'" she said. "It's been enough time now. But I knew I couldn't direct it."

Instead, Gabe Barre is directing the ATF production, which is based on an Off-Broadway version that had a run in 2001. Larson wrote the play as an extended monologue in the mode of Spalding Gray's "Swimming to Cambodia," with the accompa-

niment of a rock band. Following his death, Larson's family didn't like the idea of an actor "replicating" Jonathan, although they wanted to see his work produced.

"It's a very personal story that he tells," said Al Larson, Jonathan's father, in a phone interview from his home in Los Angeles. The writers adapted the play to have three characters — Jonathan, his best friend, Michael, and his girlfriend, Susan.

"It pulls it a little bit away from the overly intimate," Larson said.

Jonathan Larson wrote "Tick... Tick... Boom!" in the late 1980s, as he approached his 30th birthday. It tells the story of a promising young composer who has poured all his energy into writing a futuristic musical that didn't go anywhere. On the eve of his 30th birthday, he wonders whether he's on the right track or if he should "sell out" like his best friend, an actor-turned-adman. At the same time, his girlfriend, a dancer, is pressuring him to get married and move out of the city.

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ATF play emotional

♦ ATF

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"It's about assessing where he is in life — Why isn't everyone agreeing with me? I'm great," Barr, the director, said. "It wasn't that he wasn't great. But, is that even what you want? That's the ultimate question. There's a lot to relate to. When you add to that the phenomenon of 'Rent,' and the obvious tragedy of Jonathan's death, it certainly adds a poignancy to the lessons he learns."

Nancy Diekman was managing director at New York Theatre Workshop when it was producing "Rent."

"What I remember most is going to his apartment to hear an early version of 'Rent.'" It needed work, she said, but "it was clear that he was a unique talent."

When Larson died, the theater management and the actors weren't sure they could go on with the show. "We didn't even have a signed contract," she said. "But his father said, 'you have to do it.'"

Eleven years later, Diekman still tears up when recalling that day. She's grateful, she said, that Larson at least saw the dress rehearsal and "saw that he was going to make his mark on musical theater."

Among Larson's many posthumous accolades were a Pulitzer Prize for drama, numerous Tony awards and other awards. "Rent" also became a financial success.

"There's this psychological sense that this is not my money, this is Johnny's money," Al Larson said. The family used part of the proceeds to establish the Jonathan Larson Performing Arts Foundation, which gives grants to deserving musical theater artists. Diekman is the director.

"He (Jonathan) was one step away from starvation," Larson said. "I know there are many thousands of people out there in that same boat. Not all of them are as talented as Jonathan was, but some are. They need not just financial help but encouragement ... You need that emotional food."

People still sometimes write to the Larsons to tell them how important Jonathan's work is to them.

"On the one hand, I'm always happy to hear that Jonathan had that kind of an impact on somebody," he said, "and at the same time I'm unhappy that they're writing to us about it because it should be him ... There's more bitter than sweet there."

Larson was hoping to come to the Glens Falls production of "Tick...Tick...Boom!" but won't be able to.

"No one will know quite how sad I am I can't make it," he said. "Part of the price of this 'advanced middle age' is that I can no longer jet around as easily."

He is 81. "I'm very, very grateful to Martha and David that they saw that talent there and were willing to put money behind it — and I don't think they had much more than Jonathan."