Tick, Tick… Boom!: A struggling artist at a crossroads

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Directed by Lin-Manuel Miranda; written by Steven Levenson; based on the stage play by Jonathan Larson.

Tick, Tick… Boom! is a semi-biographical musical film based on a 1991 stage play of the same title. It concerns the personal and professional difficulties of musical theater composer Jonathan Larson, who struggled to make a name for himself in New York City theater circles throughout the 1980s and 1990s before achieving major success with the 1996 musical *Rent*.

Larson did not live to see *Rent*'s popularity, as he died suddenly the night before the show's first public performance. The show's success spurred interest in Larson's earlier work, and in 2001, *Tick, Tick… Boom!* was adapted from Larson's original "rock monologue" into a three-actor musical by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright David Auburn. The musical, in turn, has been adapted into a film by first-time director Lin-Manuel Miranda (himself a theater artist best known for creating the popular Broadway show *Hamilton*). The film was released last year and is available for streaming on Netflix.

The year is 1990, and Jonathan Larson (Andrew Garfield) is at a crossroads. He has spent the better part of a decade writing a science fiction rock-and-roll musical without managing to attract the interest of Broadway producers. He struggles to make ends meet and spends his days waiting tables at a busy diner. His girlfriend Susan (Alexandra Shipp), a talented dancer, is unhappy in the city and is considering relocating to Massachusetts for a teaching job. His best friend Michael (Robin de Jesús) has given up his aspirations of becoming an actor in favor of a well-paying career at an advertising firm, which Larson regards with equal parts contempt and envy.

Worst of all, Larson is mere days away from turning—horror of horrors—30 years old! As Jonathan states early on, this is "older than [renowned musical theater composer and lyricist] Stephen Sondheim when he had his first Broadway show." Larson is overcome with a sense that he is running out of time to make a lasting mark on the world, and the sound of a ticking clock becomes a repeated motif throughout the film.

A theater company agrees to put on a workshop performance of Larson's musical, which could make or break its chances of being produced. However, Larson is suffering from a creative block and struggles to write a crucial final song for the piece. His fixation on his work creates a rupture in his relationship with Susan, deepening his personal crisis.

In order to earn extra money, Larson participates in a focus group at Michael's advertising firm, where he ends up mocking the proceedings. In an argument with Michael, Larson expresses distaste for Michael's corporate job and a lifestyle based on "caring about driving the right car and wearing the right suits and living in a doorman building." Michael (somewhat justifiably) chastises Larson's self-righteousness and asserts that, as a gay man, he is prevented from living the life he wants by "Jesse Helms and the Moral Majority," a reference to the fascistic former North Carolina senator and the Christian right. It is later revealed that Michael has contracted HIV, the virus that leads to AIDS.

Ultimately, Larson must decide whether to continue pursuing his artistic endeavors or give them up in favor of a more stable and secure life.

Larson was a gifted composer and lyricist, and his inventive blending of popular music styles with traditional musical theater won him a number of admirers (including Sondheim, who championed Larson's work when he struggled to get his shows produced). In his brief body of work, one can see certain healthy instincts: sympathy for outcasts, hostility to homophobic discrimination and right-wing religious bigotry, disdain for the wealthy and complacent, a type of (limited) opposition to the status quo.

Larson's lively melodies are well complemented by Miranda's visual style. The director films the musical numbers with an eye toward movement (both of actors and camera), rhythm and flow that harmonizes with and heightens the music. Miranda's own musical talents, on display in *Hamilton*, made him well-suited to the task of adapting the play to film. Particularly memorable are the

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sequences for “No More,” with its comically idealized depiction of luxury apartment life, and “Sunday,” in which a chaotic diner transforms into an otherworldly chorus.

However, talent and style can only get one so far, and the substance here is quite thin. In the first place, there is simply far too much self-pity on display. No doubt Larson, like many young artists, was frustrated with the degrading hoops he was forced to jump through in order to be noticed by the entertainment industry. But his constant self-fixation wears on one’s ability to sympathize.

When he isn’t navel-gazing, Larson takes far too much of the world (and his own circumstances) at face value. The miserable conditions that artists are forced to endure, the social and financial insecurity, are not only taken as a given but even romanticized to a degree.

Outside of a few comments about Broadway’s reliance on “mega-musicals” and a short rap sequence (“Play Game”) containing lyrics like, “Even off-Broadway it’s no guarantee that some MBA won’t decide what you see,” neither Larson nor Miranda subject the money-mad Broadway theater machine to serious criticism. In any case, Larson’s reservations don’t seem to impact his overwhelming desire to find “success” in the industry, nor do they lead to much introspection about what such “success” would really entail.

What motivates an artist to persevere in the face of rejection and hardship? The subjects of *Rent* (drug addicts, individuals with AIDS, people who have been abused and oppressed, the types of figures who had been demonized by the likes of Helms and others on the extreme right) imply that Larson had at least somewhat of an interest in social reality. But *Tick, Tick… Boom!* depicts him as being far more driven by a desire for personal recognition than anything else. One cannot say whether Larson was really so self-absorbed or just chose to dramatize himself that way, but overall, he comes off less like “the future of musical theater” (as he refers himself at one point) and more like a talented, but narcissistic young man with a lot of growing up to do.

Many of Larson’s dilemmas, both personal and artistic, were ultimately bound up with the times in which he lived and worked. The cultural climate of the US in the 1980s and ’90s was undoubtedly difficult, even painful and appalling, for sensitive and talented artists. The period witnessed the endless glorification of wealth and the stock market; the promotion of selfishness and greed to an unprecedented degree; the criminal governmental response to the AIDS crisis and mass death (Larson refers at one point to attending the funerals of three of his friends who died of the disease in a single year); the vicious right-wing assault on the National Endowment for the Arts and artists in general; the bipartisan attack on the working class; and capitalist triumphalism and proclamations of “the end of history” (especially following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991).

It’s to Larson’s credit that he seemed to have an instinctive revulsion for this atmosphere, or elements of it. But the limitations in his work were rooted in part in an inability to envision an alternative, or even to conceive in the broadest sense that one was needed. The pettiness and self-involvement of the times had a harmful impact even on those who were not by nature petty and self-involved. The artist was being told at every point by official society, the media, the entertainment industry itself, that certain themes or subjects (a better world, the conditions of the population, social reality itself, etc.) were taboo or ludicrously out of date.

The ability of any artist to sustain him or herself in trying circumstances is not merely a question of individual resilience or the level of compromise he or she is willing to stomach. Significant artists must be driven by a conviction that their work has meaning beyond themselves, that there is genuine value and purpose in cutting through prevailing illusions and working to expose harsh realities. The most advanced of such artists orient themselves to the socially progressive forces and causes of their day, or instinctively strive in that direction, drawing energy and inspiration from—and stiffening their backbones as the result of contact with—those forces and their struggles.

It was this universalizing approach and larger vision, for example, the products of a very different historical epoch, that endowed the work of Leonard Bernstein with such force and emotional power that still resonates with audiences to this day. Larson, on the other hand, lived in a time when the progressive forces in society were largely suppressed or discouraged, which inevitably had a negative impact on him and prevented the full realization of his talents.

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