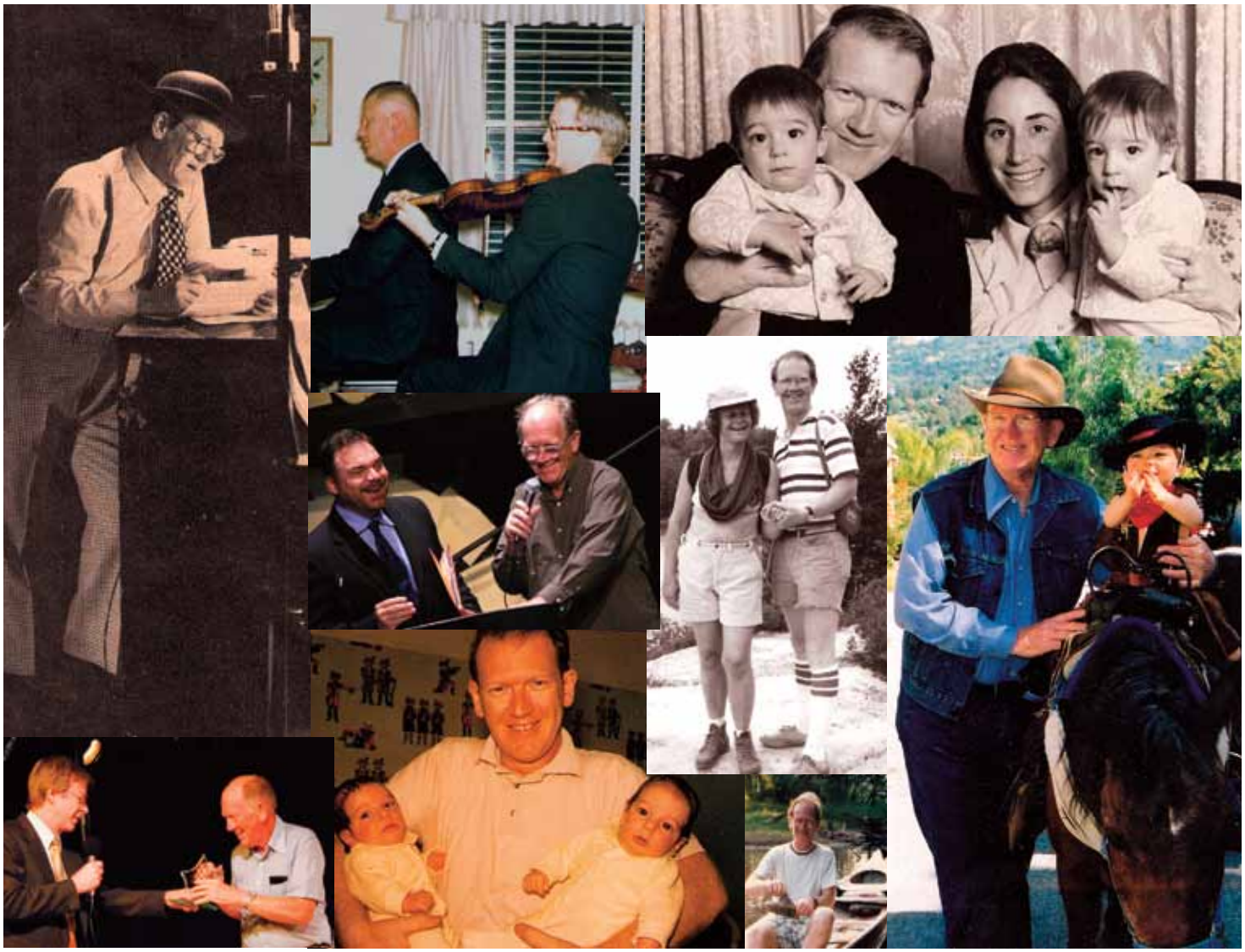
THE COLLECTED CURMUDGEON

by Richard Engquist

The Complete *Richard's Almanac* columns
as originally published in the
BMI-Lehman Engel
Musical Theatre Workshop Newsletter
(1998-2010)



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UNDILUTED ENGQUIST
by David Spencer

Content would be key.

The previous iteration of the *BMI Workshop Newsletter* was a hastily assembled, typed-up-and-Xeroxed affair, stapled in the corner, the product of an overworked department head who was, all things considered, being pretty generous with her time to do *that* much. But it was at best a utilitarian summary record of past and present members' recent accomplishments, more a lengthy in-house memo than a proud declaration of excellence and activity that could have a public, as well as private, face.

So when its maintainer moved on from BMI, and Jean Banks became Executive Director of Musical Theatre, the Steering Committee of the Workshop decided it was time to make the *Newsletter* a real publication, with the requisite look and material to be worthy of the description.

Everybody was game to contribute in some way, so the most logical next step was to assess what each of us was qualified for.

I'd had some experience as both arts journalist and drama critic in various periodicals (originally for the comps; then it became a more serious avocation), and Pat Cook had been digging into desktop publishing software both for fun and barter of services (e.g. he created flyers for a Health Club which gave him free access to its tennis courts). So with those "you-gotta-start-*some*where"-level credentials, it fell upon us to be editor and layout designer respectively.

Richard Engquist, a meticulous grammarian (as well as nurturing teacher and crackerjack lyricist),volunteered to copy-edit…but quickly withdrew the offer when we reminded him that all the production work would be done via computer; for he—to appropriate the title of a vintage *Twilight Zone* teleplay by Rod Serling—had "a thing about machines." Which he was never shy about claiming.

In fact, from his perch as the Committee and faculty's senior member (at the time, he was moderating the Second Year songwriter's group and would move onto moderating Advanced some years later), there wasn't much he *was* shy about claiming. Richard had always owned his opinions with pride: his liberalism, his dismay at the younger generation's disconnection with the past, his irreligiosity, his reverence for craftsmanship, his irreverence toward politicians and certain authority figures, his exasperation at language abuse, plus his unassailable right to—as he himself put it—play the age card. (And Richard loved the age card. For as long as I can remember, our mutual greeting was a ritual based on the following model:

"How ya doin' Spencer?"

"Pretty good, Engquist. How 'bout yerself?"

"Not bad for an old-timer.")

Which strangely threw into stark relief what he *was* qualified to do for the *Newsletter:*

Sound off.

The *Newsletter,* though only a quarterly, would need a constant influx of content, aside from the

member listings, and it would be challenging enough to come up with new lead and feature stories, especially as time wore on and the obvious musical theatre subjects became exhausted. Why not at least showcase a regular column that could dependably fill two or more pages per action-packed ish? And at that, a real *persona* column, in which Richard—as iconic a persona as one might imagine—could dispense his wisdom in as loving, generous, cranky, outraged, content or curmudgeonly a mood as he felt at the time. With license to write about anything. In fact, musical theatre might sometimes be merely the springboard for a broader philosophical view. No holds barred, no editing dared. Undiluted Engquist.

This seemed to please Richard.

He at first resisted Pat Cook's suggestion of calling the column *Richard's Almanac* for the very reason Pat proposed it: it was *so* obvious. But in the end, the punny catchiness of the trademark proved the deciding factor. (In fact, the only reason why this compilation has another master title is that, where a book is concerned, the Franklin-coined trademark is taken.) In devising the *Newsletter* layout, Pat made the final, facing inner pages the permanent home of Richard's column. Regular readers would always know where to find him without consulting a table of contents; and fittingly, it would give Richard The Last Word.

And Richard ripped into the opportunity with gusto. The pieces—all here, collected for the first time—are by turns nostalgic and timely, complimentary and critical, bemused and bedeviled, funny and fuming, always served up in grand style, with a generosity of spirit that transcended even his grouchiest pronouncements. In the end, he wanted only great things for us, and if that meant holding up a harsh mirror, well…*somebody* had to do it…

Writing the column may have helped motivate Richard to cautiously enter the electronic age too. Getting his first several entries to press presented a bit of a task. He would type up his manuscript—on a real typewriter—and fax the hard copy to Jean Banks' assistant, the noble Sylvia Santana-Vega, who would then retype the text into a Microsoft Word document and email that to me as an attachment; and without changing content, I would neaten and format for appearance. But there was among these columns one installment—I can no longer remember which—in which a short transition didn't quite read properly, something *literally* having gotten lost in transcription. For reasons I also forget, neither Richard nor his original typed manuscript was available to consult before press time, so I made my best guess as to what *might* have been the wording, and to press we went. I'm pretty sure I kept the sense, but apparently not the stylistic sensibility, for upon publication, Richard sent me an email to object to the tampering, claiming my "rewrite" to be "pure Spencer." (Now *he discovers email,* I thought.) I phoned him to clarify the circumstance, pointing out the margin for human error with hard copy once removed as the source. Richard thoughtfully accepted the convoluted delivery system as the culprit—

—and thereafter sent me each column *typed into the body of an email,* the way he'd previously typed onto a page, with manual line breaks and space-bar tabs—adding to the brew dozens of invisible characters of which he was unaware. It doubled my cleanup chores as I now had to move plain text to a word processing environment, remove the hidden extras and *then* reformat for publication; but it also rendered the Engquist locution pristine and unequivocal; and I figured any experience Richard forced himself to have with a computer was all to the good!

For over a decade, the process never varied much. Nor did I mind. It only made me spend more time appreciating the nuances.

The 33 pieces in this collection span 1998 to 2010, and are presented in their original, chronological order. A few of the illustrations herein also accompanied the original publication of their related columns, but most have been assembled especially for this tribute.

Richard titled very few of the columns (the exceptions being numbers 1,5, 12, 19, 30 and 31), but his varied musings assembled in one place seemed to warrant them, for easy reference; so where titles were absent, I searched each piece to locate its most quintessentially Engquistian phrase, topic-header or sentiment, and thus the titles emerged. (With luck, they're not even *im*pure Spencer.)

The columns' appearance in the most recent years being less frequent wasn't due to a slowdown on Richard's part, but mine and to some degree Pat's: as our life, career, and teaching obligations have increased, pumping out four *Newsletter*s a year has become that much harder; and we catch the opportunity as we can.

But Richard—however great or little the notice of deadline—was always there to lend his voice in full force, to provoke thought, elicit smiles, stir up controversy, yell at us a little and dare us to aspire toward excellence. It has always been my privilege to have the first read, and my honor to pass it on to the world. And never more so than with this book. And I'm happy to say, he got to see it in advance galleys, while this Introduction was still framed in the present tense.

If you know Richard's columns, I need not sing their praises further. And if you don't: I envy you their discovery.

Not bad for an old-timer…

1.
The Apostrophe

What a puzzling thing, the apostrophe!
It throws many folk for a lostrophe.
It floats here and there—
O'er the sea—through the air—
Till it lands on the page, a catostrophe.

Nothing in Standard English seems to give more trouble than the apostrophe, but its uses are so specific that anyone can learn them in five minutes.

But first, what is it not? It is not a decoration to be strewn willy-nilly across the page. It is not used to make a plural out of a singular noun. This is a phenomenon of the past thirty years, and if I could get my hands on the person who started it I'd…but never mind.

Why does the grocer replace a FRESH EGGS sign with FRESH EGG'S? Why does the deli menu, which once was content to announce BAGELS AND LOX now trumpet BAGEL'S AND LOX? (And next year will it be BAGEL'S AND LO'X?) Not long ago a manuscript crossed my desk which contained the phrase "a vase of rose's and lily's." (Translation: roses and lilies.)

Odder still is to see a sign on someone's house: THE SMITH'S. What does this mean? Presumably that this is the home of the Smith family—perhaps several Smiths. But what does it say? That one particular Smith owns something—the house, we infer. But go figure!

An apostrophe is used to create a plural only in the case of single letters and numerals. Examples:

Mind your p's and q's. Grade the paper with A's and B's, not 1's and 2's. Pioneer kids studied the three r's: 'readin' 'ritin,' and 'rithmetic. (Note that in that last case the apostrophe is also used to convey a regional dialect—dropping letters from the gerunds "reading" and "writing" and the noun "arithmetic.") Except in cases similar to these, apostrophes do not make plurals!

The apostrophe is also used in contractions, to take the place of a missing letter or letters: DO NOT becomes DON'T. DOES NOT becomes DOESN'T. IS NOT becomes ISN'T. ARE NOT becomes AREN'T. SHALL NOT becomes SHAN'T. WILL NOT becomes WON'T. Etc. Remember, these Duke Ellington titles: It Don't Mean a Thing if it Ain't Got that Swing (apostrophes for contractions) and I'm Cuttin' out—Goombye (an apostrophe also for dialect).

Finally, the apostrophe is used to denote possession, as explained in the following excerpt from Page 1 of *The Elements of Style*, by Strunk and White (and by the way, if you don't have that book—buy it):

FORM THE POSSESSIVE SINGULAR OF NOUNS BY ADDING 'S.

Follow this rule whatever the final consonant. Thus write, Charles's friend, Burns's poems, the witch's malice. Exceptions are the possessives of ancient proper names in -es and -is, the possessive Jesus', and such forms as for conscience' sake, for righteousness' sake. But such forms as Moses' laws, Isis' temple are commonly replaced by the laws of Moses, the temple of Isis. The pronominal possessives hers, its, theirs, yours and oneself have no apostrophe.

I would add: If a singular noun ends in two esses, you still add an apostrophe-ess to form the possessive: Jess's car. Betty Furness's refrigerator. If this seems confusing, remember that saying things can helps you figure out how to write them. One does not say "Jess' car" or "Betty Furness' refrigerator." (On the other hand, hearing how things sound can lead to more elegant phraseology: "The comedies of Aristophanes" sounds better than "Aristophanes's comedies." At least to me.)

To find the correct form of a PLURAL POSSESSIVE, go through the following process: first write the singular and plural forms of the noun. If the plural ends in "s," put the apostrophe after the "s." This makes the

Standard English possessive. For example

Singular	Plural	Plural Possessive
cat	cats	cats′
Jones	Joneses	Joneses′
crisis	crises	crises′
medium	media	media′s

Thus: My cat's whiskers are white. But: My two other cats' whiskers are of various colors.

Thus: Mr. Jones's hat is gray. While: The Joneses' home is comfortable.

Thus: One crisis followed another, none seeming to linger. But the various crises' ramifications were not fully felt for some time.

Thus: Traditionally, the medium of the press is most trustworthy. But the media's ability to report accurately is in every case subject to skepticism.

(A bit of local color; a small business in Brooklyn bears the sign CHRI'S TIRE REPAIR . It can't be read and it can't be pronounced, but let's give Chris credit for creative punctuation. He may have a future as an advertising copywriter.)

—Fall 1998

2.
Basically, I'm Like Totally Over It, Nome-sayn?

Anita Loos

50 years ago when my pals and I were driving our parents crazy with a form of teenspeak designed to be incomprehensible to grownups, it wouldn't have occurred to me that one day I'd lose patience with the rites of adolescence. Decades later the sound of rap music issuing from my sons' room drove me to the park for relief, and I began to get the message.

Jargon was always a part of puberty and always will be. But when that jargon lingers on in people pushing thirty—and past—doesn't it begin to seem like an affectation?

I suggest that the Workshop can be a place where we learn not only to write theatre songs but also to experiment with language which is precise, pithy, pungent, and—dare one hope?—touched by elegance.

There may be primitive fascination in a paragraph where nothing is what it is but is only "like" something; where "nome-sayn?" is a ubiquitous punctuation like the French *n'est ce pas;* and where the paragraph itself ends with a rising inflection, as if a plea for agreement or some other form of approval…

But while, in small doses, jargon can be funny and colorful, used incessantly, it's about as sparkling as general anasthesia. Let's aim for accuracy and taste, and leave the kidspeak to the kids.

Seet-um-sayn?

Anita Loos dreamed up some delicious things for her masterful comic creation Lorelei Lee to say back in the '20's: "Diamonds are a girl's best friend"… "Paris is really nothing"…"a girl like I…"

That last used to bring gales of laughter: "A girl like I." Such a perfect combination of ignorance and snobbery!

Nowadays would the line get a laugh? At least two generations of people, unschooled in standard English, say things like, "between you and I" in blissful innocence.

From a recent novel, "…but to take his own life, to leave Cordelia and I alone…" The speaker is a New York sophisticate of the early 1930's. Not bloody likely! No such person would have said, "to leave I alone." Another example, this from a review in no less a journal than *The New York Times:* "…on tape, for *we* lucky few, real live Garland concerts." Also from the *Times,* referring to Bill Clinton's sex life, "…that's between *he* and his family." Clinton *himself,* when first running for president, said things like, "The welcome for Al Gore and *I* is much appreciated." Hearing that, I'd mutter, "Learn English or keep your lip zipped," not yet aware that the man had trouble keeping *anything* zipped.

I suspect that in twenty years only very ancient people will react to such phraseology as if hearing a chalk squeaking across a blackboard. Or, for that matter, know what a chalk or a blackboard is—to say nothing of a preposition or an objective case. Will it matter? Beats me. Does it matter now? Oh, yes! In good writing, there's still a difference between *clunk* and *click.*

— Winter 1998

3.
Gorgeous Examples of Terrible Writing

Wouldn't it be loverly if the Muses hovered about, supplying us with the indelible motif, the deathless turn of phrase, the perfect punchline? Alas the Muses apparently expect us to do our own work—which includes the work of using language effectively. Groans, sighs, yelps and belches may convey emotion, but to convey meaning requires words and some thought.

English is wonderfully rich: maddeningly varied in spelling but with great logic in grammatical construction. To me there's no question that the writing of an effective song lyric, limerick, essay or whatever begins with the ability to construct a sentence containing the information the writer intends for it to contain.

Luckily, we are bombarded by gorgeous examples of terrible writing—even by highly-paid professionals. Luckily because not only are these examples amusing but also because they can help teach us how to avoid the twin pitfalls of ignorance and illogic.

Alex Witchel

Alex Witchel in *The New York Times:* "Ill-suited for the job, her 20-month tenure was troubled." Witchel probably means, "*Because* she was ill-suited for the job, her 20-month tenure was troubled."

Clive Barnes in a *New York Post* review: She enters, all body language, wearing a tragic, toy mask. Once removed, the mourning Zoë Wanamaker becomes Electra." Obviously, Zoë Wanamaker need not be removed to become Electra, but that's what Barnes's sentence says.

Clive Barnes

Edward Rothstein in the *Times:* "The book came to mind recently while watching Mr. Miller's new production." To track the sentence, we must infer "The book came to mind recently while I was watching Mr. Miller 's new production."

Edward Rothstein

Also from the *Times* (*Metropolitan Diary*): "While seated in a subway car that had no vacant seats, an elderly man leaning on a cane entered the car." Good trick!

From a Midwestern newspaper: "While raising her children as a single parent, money was tight." Money was raising her children? Well, perhaps, in a sense.

In all of these examples the writer begins the sentence one way, then switches gears and makes hash of the logic. I won't burden you with terms like dangling participle, but if you don't know what that means, please consult your Strunk and White, #7 under Elementary Rules of Usage.

Even if this is all mysterious to you, inept writing can be avoided if you are willing to think. Read your sentence over. What is its subject? Does that subject agree with whatever phrases, adjectives, or nouns in apposition you have used with reference to it? Common sense will see you through.

Department of Redundancy, Mogul Division

"Donald J. Trump Proudly Presents The Tallest Residential Tower Anywhere In The World." (Is there a taller one in outer space?)

The Case of the Missing Comma

From a church newspaper: "*Sex, Drugs and Fast Cars* is a high powered energetic discussion of sexuality, chemical abuse and high living designed for junior and senior high students and their parents. You do not want to miss this evening!!!" (Sorry: I'm too old and too tired. My heart couldn't take it.)

—February 1999

4.
Defining That's Confining

"In the newsletter of *The Loft*, a Minnesota writers' center that I support, you read about African-American writers, gay writers, Asian-American writers, hearing-impaired writers, physically challenged writers, as if membership in an approved group were their certification as writers. At the University, you can't walk ten steps without being required to stop and salute multiculturalism."

A few years have passed since Garrison Keillor made those observations in a *St. Paul Pioneer Press* editorial. Happily, the passion for such Orwellian gobbledegook as he cites has cooled somewhat. But it has not disappeared.

As if being a writer were not difficult enough, many of us feel the pressure to hyphenate ourselves, to worry about labels, and to wonder whether we adequately (not to mention nobly) represent whatever tiny cultural niche we find ourselves in.

Frank Craven, Martha Scott, John Craven in *Our Town*

Silly, isn't it? Writers shouldn't burden themselves with such distractions. After all, we have to "get into the heads" of an infinite variety of personalities in order to develop characters that seem real to the reader or the audience. True, I may find it easier to create the character of an elderly male Midwesterner with an expanding waistline and a receding hairline, but I must also people that character's world with myriad other characters, of every size, shape, age, color, gender, economic level, background and experience of life.

This is all so obvious; why bring it up? Because of a tendency—even in the ideal little world of our Workshop—to categorize one another with the various labels and hyphens; and to assume that, once a writer gets off the turf of his/her real life, the writing becomes problematical. As if we as *writers* were defined by the adjectives that describe us as *persons.*

Such defining is much too confining. And it is nonsensical. Can you imagine suggesting to Mark Twain or DuBose Heyward that he should write only about white people? Or to Langston Hughes or James Baldwin that he shouldn't let the world of his imagination reach beyond the world of Harlem? George Sand and George Eliot (regardless of the pen names) were women who created male characters as complex and convincing as their female characters. If Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee had written only about white gay men, we would not have had Blanche and Stanley or George and Martha.

Martha Scott & Willaim Holden in *Our Town*

The idea is not that we should each erase the specifics of our individual experience and somehow become bland—Everyman or Everywoman—but that we should *celebrate* those specifics and use them in our work to achieve universality. To create a new world in each work of art and thus expand the universe of our audiences.

We must resist giving way to the tribal mentality that seems to have taken over the world. Even in America, the great Melting Pot has become a seething cauldron of animosity. Slogans, uniforms, labels, hy-

Thornton Wilder

phens! What may begin as a celebration of diversity—or the recovery of self-esteem—becomes trivialized. We end up wearing lapel buttons proclaiming pride in the accidents of birth—our ethnicity, our pigmentation, our sexual orientation—as if these were achievements! In the process, we become not more than the sum of our parts, but less.

To me, even the political correctness of the '90's is a kind of straitjacket, and it has the same sour smell as the McCarthyism of the '50's: the smell of snobbery, self-righteousness, cynicism and censorship.

Writers can provide a corrective to this state of affairs. To do so we have to see labels and uniforms for what they are. In a grownup world where people think, feel, act and react, we can explore our roots, learn our history, make the most of what nature has given us, discover our uniqueness, celebrate our diversity without apology, and then move on.

In *Our Town,* Thornton Wilder created these lines of dialogue for the adolescent Emily Webb:

"I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said, Jane Crofut, the Crofut Farm, Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; The Universe; the mind of God—that's what it said on the envelope. And the postman brought it just the same."

How's that for a colossal vision? No hyphens—no lapel buttons—just a limitless scheme of things.

Want to make a difference through your writing? Think big!

—March 1999

5.
Once Upon a Time…

Is there a more bewitching phrase in any language? Those four little words grab our attention and invite us to flee the mundane and enter the magic world of story.

Let's be grateful for that early ancestor who—beside a clan campfire in a cave somewhere on a winter's evening ages ago—first began to embellish the account of the day's hunting or gathering, with details that may or may not have happened. What stirred in that primitive brain to prompt the notion that straight reportage could be improved upon with some imagination? Whatever it was, how fortunate for humankind that story-telling came to be; and that the factual was transformed into the mythical.

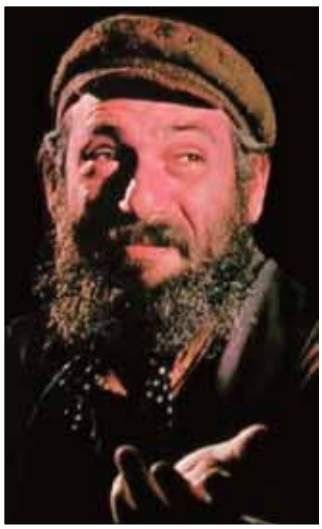
For untold generations, few people could read or write, and story-telling reigned supreme. From *Beowulf* and *The Iliad* to the present, narrative has dazzled, enchanted and illuminated. And recent decades have witnessed a tremendous resurgence of the art of story-telling. Garrison Keillor holds millions enthralled weekly with his tales of Lake Wobegon. Spalding Gray has perfected the autobiographical narrative in *Swimming to Cambodia* and other theatre pieces that have the weight of novelettes, if not full-scale novels. The one-person show is now ubiquitous, with countless actor/writers mining their life experiences and finding audiences with varying degrees of success.

Stories—usually in the form of monologues—are very useful to dramatists. At some critical point in the plot a character will reveal (in the form of reminiscence) crucial information that supplies backstory and brings the entire dramatic action into focus. A classic example now on view is Hickey's monologue toward the end of *The Iceman Cometh.* Or recall the bone-chilling narrative that provides the climax of *Suddenly Last Summer.* Planting a story in the middle of a dramatization can be a powerful device if done skillfully. (The current *The Weir* is, in fact, a collection of stories under the umbrella of a play. Whether it adds up to a play is a matter of debate.)

Jason Robards as Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh*

In films, something similar to dramatic monologue is accomplished with flashback, in which we have a scene played out in retrospect in lieu of linear narrative. Musical theatre too has often made use of interpolated stories in various forms, including flashbacks. I'm not referring to a piece like *Into the Woods,* which is entirely made up of folk- or folk-like tales. Nor do I mean "story theater," wherein actors narrate and act out simultaneously.

What I refer to is the case where the action stops and someone tells a story. Opera and operetta are full of such moments, either to supply backstory, to flesh out character, or simply to entertain. Where would Gilbert and Sullivan be without those moments when the comic baritone gives us (in patter) the story of his life? Brecht and Weill frequently have their characters reminisce, or simply tell stories in song form. These moments work because the material itself is dramatic, is used for a dramatic purpose, or comments on the action. For example, the Macheath-Tiger Brown duet in *The Threepenny Opera* clarifies their relationship, gives us information about their past, and serves up also a robust, cynical song that gets our feet tapping and our minds working.



Hershel Bernardi as Tevye in *Fiddler On the Roof*

In classic American musicals we find fewer examples of stopping-the-action-for-a-story. Mama Rose does not calm down long enough to favor us with an exquisite folk-song, as the Merry Widow does with *Vilia*. Nevertheless, we can still find a multitude of story-songs which accomplish a multitude of things: "My Mother's Weddin' Day" from *Brigadoon* delineates comic character. In *110 in the Shade,* Starbuck spins a yarn for Lizzie that changes the way she (and we) feel about him.

Similarly, Tevye and Quixote/Cervantes bring dreams to life in song-story form, as does Nicely-Nicely Johnson with "Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat" (*Guys and Dolls*). In Bock & Harnick's *Tenderloin* we get the hilarious parody of a Victorian tear-jerker, "Artificial Flowers," which may not have much to do with the story but certainly perks up the show. In Sondheim's *Follies,* Phyllis tells *The Story of Lucy and Jessie* (alternately *Ah, But Underneath!,* depending on which version of the show you listen to) which lays bare her soul and gives her a depth we would not see otherwise. And, of course, in any number of classic shows narrative monologues—both serious and comic—are all over the place. Can we imagine *The Music Man* without the story song "76 Trombones"?

The title song in *Cabaret* is a story song. Kander

Sandra Church, Ethel Merman, & Jack Klugman in *Gypsy*

and Ebb often use the device, as do Comden and Green (remember the witty urban tale, "What a Waste", in *Wonderful Town*?) and as did Rodgers and Hart ("To Keep My Love Alive", "Zip", "Johnny One-Note", to name just a few).

Story songs are a staple of the musical revue—the form is ideal: a self-contained narrative within a narrow space. Think of "Guess Who I Saw Today", "Have Some Madeira, M'Dear", "The Hippopotamus Song", and hundreds of others. Great revue songs are like great Country-and-Western narrative songs: short-short stories, each with a beginning, a middle and an end. Americans love short takes!

Storytelling is an exquisite art form which should be part of the arsenal of every theatre writer. To do it well, and to use it well—these are consummations devoutly to be wished. But when all is said and done, story-telling is *not* dramatization. By definition it is not "in the moment"—what we *hear about* is not as gripping as what we *see*. Like the flashback, the story song is a bit removed, a bit cool, to be used judiciously and not as a perpetual substitute for the white heat of the dramatic scene.

To me, those musicals which are "framed" by narrative have always been a touch less exciting than those in which I'm persuaded that the action is taking place before my eyes. Which has more juice: the old "Annie Get Your Gun" (however crude) or the new one with its distancing device? Am I alone in imagining that there is a striking difference?

As theatre writers, we've got to strive to be dramatists first and foremost. But it won't hurt if we also know how to tell a good story. Don't forget, a good story can accomplish everything from putting the kids to sleep to keeping the audience awake. Awake, alert and applauding!

—June 1999

James Coco, Peter O'Toole, & Sophia Loren in the film of *Man of LaMancha*

6.
Hope and Exasperation

This is being written a few days before the annual bloodbath known as auditions for the First Year Workshop. Skip Kennon tells me we're hearing ninety people this year. Sitting on the panel is arduous but rewarding—I'm amazed always at the number of people of every type who have been bitten by the theatre-writing bug. I wish all the members of the Workshop could have the experience of being an auditioner, at least once.

Beethoven

But along with the thrill of listening to hopeful writers comes the exasperation I've been feeling more and more in recent years—perhaps as I grow more curmudgeonly—the exasperation of auditioning people who want to write musicals but don't seem to have any notion of what the theatre is.

There's something endearing about the naïveté of someone aspiring to be a composer without knowing how to read music, let alone write it. Endearing but appalling. It's like aspiring to be Ambassador to France without knowing French, or wanting to be a ballet dancer without conditioning the body.

Or consider the starry-eyed newcomer who sees a performance of *Cats* or *Phantom of the Opera* and thinks, "Gosh! I can do that!" Of course the newcomer has never been involved with the theatre, on stage or off, and has no knowledge of the literature, but…Reality check, anyone?

Each year I read synopses of shows people want to write, synopses that reveal a total ignorance of what is possible to accomplish on a stage. Even worse, a woeful ignorance of English. Let's face it: for generations public education has failed to emphasize those skills that prepare people for careers involving music or the effective use of language.

On my more crotchety days I think back to the early years of the Workshop when most newcomers had an extensive knowledge of stagecraft, not to mention what was called a liberal education. Composers knew keyboards, at the very least, and many lyricists were also musicians. Everyone knew the classic musicals—and many knew opera as well.

For many generations it was usual for American kids—even poor kids—to have music lessons, to sing in choirs and play in bands, to participate in school plays and community theatricals, and to listen incessantly to music and dramatic shows on radio. Sadly, this is no longer the case.

In a nutshell, many of the bright and talented neophytes we welcome to the Workshop are not even at square one in terms of preparation for a career in the theatre. Does it matter? Yes, in the sense that we don't begin with a shared experience and a common vocabulary. No, in the sense that those who are driven will find ways to educate themselves and "catch up." Ambition is not a substitute for talent, but talent without ambition goes nowhere. With both talent and ambition, anything is possible.

Lately we've been insisting that composes and lyricists in the Workshop learn as much as then can about "story" and dramatic structure. I also beg people to study successful shows (reading scripts is not the same as going to the theatre, but it's better than nothing) and to listen to every conceivable kind of music. You can learn

Schubert

Beethoven

something about dramatic writing by experiencing a Bach *chaconne*, a song cycle by Schubert, a Beethoven string quartet, or even a tango by Astor Piazzola.) I recommend too that they try to get experience in stagecraft wherever they can (community theatres are an excellent training ground).

Finally, I recognize that my kvetching about the fact that times change is just that: kvetching. Despite my longing for "the good old days" (whatever they were), be assured that I have not lost my enthusiasm for this wonderful world we share—the world of musical theatre. Would I be happy if people did not have impossible dreams? No way! So people are joining our ranks without a clue as to what musical theatre is – is that a disaster? Aren't we here to clue them in? And isn't that a privilege and a kick?

A Postscript on Clear Thinking in Academia

Nancy Golladay (Librettists Workshop) found this course listing in a catalog of New York University: England and Scotland: Cities of Destiny.

Creative Journalism. Recently in the New York Times a reporter used the phrase "running the gambit." I think he meant "running the gamut"—but maybe not. Maybe the words have become interchangeable and no one knows what either one means.

Today in the Post: "exploitive" instead of "exploitative." What the hell, it saves a syllable.

In every newspaper I read, as often as not "vocal cords" have become "vocal chords." Perhaps it looks more musical?

—September 1999

7.
Censorship and Taste

… it pains me more than I can say,
the lack of taste that they display.
Where is style?
Where is skill?
Where is forethought?
Where's discretion of the heart,
Where's passion in the art,
Where's craft?
—Stephen Sondheim

There's no doubt about it: I'm turning into the grandmother from *A Little Night Music,* muttering on about the deterioration of standards. If there's not one gross example of tastelessness about, there are a dozen, and I find myself wondering what happened to the notion of "that's simply not done."

The fiasco involving our mayor and his attack on the Brooklyn Museum of Art has been depressing and annoying me for weeks. I'm furious with the mayor. Why does he seem to relish making war on the citizens and institutions he's supposed to govern? But I'm equally furious with the museum. Obviously the *Sensations* exhibition is there not *despite* the fact that it's offensive, but *because* it's offensive. Clearly offensive to many people on many levels for many reasons, and if you don't believe that you've ignored the way the exhibition was planned, financed and promoted.

Still, when someone with political clout weighs

in against artists and their representatives, we are all (as fellow artists) expected to come to the defense of *whatever* on constitutional or ideological grounds. And we do. The alternative—censorship, official or otherwise—is unacceptable.

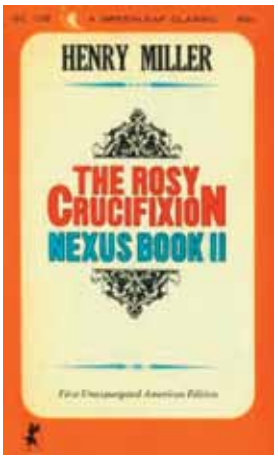
Nevertheless, the next time someone asks me to defend the right of a creative person or institution to write/paint/sculpt/produce/display whatever he, she, they or it pleases, can it be something that doesn't make me hold my nose?

I'm an irreligious person, but I'm embarrassed and chagrined when someone else's religious convictions are shat on. People get crazy when their gods, saints and icons are trashed, as in the art work *Piss Christ*. And those artists who go for those effects know exactly what they're doing. Gore Vidal's *Golgotha* novel is outrageous by design, not by accident. When the gifted and generous Terrence McNally writes *Corpus Christi*, he's aware that it will be repulsive to countless Christians. I'm glad he's free (and brave enough) to write what he pleases, but I also understand and to some extent sympathize with the reaction to it.

Piss Christ

Does anyone remember taste? Taste is what says that the place for pornography is your bedroom, not the walls of an art museum in Cincinnati. (I can't imagine that the late artist Robert Mapplethorpe ever meant for his private erotica to be publicly displayed.) Taste says the drug-drenched murderous fantasies of William Burroughs are not worthy to be published (and of late emulated in real life by people like Wayne Gacy, Dean Corll and Jeffrey Dahmer). Taste says that *The 120 Days of Sodom* is better left in the basement of a library than dumped onto a kiosk to inspire the sadistic passions of a Myra Hindley.

Taste says that chopped-up animals floating in formaldehyde, sculptures of children with genitalia sprouting from their faces, a bust made of human blood, and a painting of the Virgin Mary with excrement attached are all revolting. Intentionally so. Spare me the rationalizations.



None of which is to say that I think there is no place in our cultural life for irreverence. Political irreverence in particular can be very refreshing—as in *Wag the Dog* and *Dr. Strangelove.* Clerical irreverence, too, is a nice antidote to the pieties—think of *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You.* These pieces are all rich in humor: maybe that's why they don't get the troops called out while they're making their point. Humor can redeem almost anything, break down almost any barrier. I've known some terribly uptight, painfully pious folk who were reduced to helpless laughter by the robust vulgarity of Bette Midler or Buddy Hackett.

What's more, I'll happily go to the hustings again to defend a geniune work of art like *Lady Chatterly's Lover* or a superb piece of down-and-dirty erotica like *The Rosy Crucifixion.* But I'm too old, too fastidious and too impatient to get excited about someone's "right" to assault the world with garbage. What next will be paraded before us under the twin banners of artistic license and the First Amendment—coprophilia? Necrophilia? Child rape? Would you go to bat for a snuff film?

Oh, I'm glad to live in a free society. Freedom to be offensive is part of the package and part of the price. I've experienced (briefly) repressive societies — Franco's Spain and present-day Singapore—and they're not to be recommended. It's lovely to be able to say what you please.

It's lovely also to know when to shut up.

—December 1999

8.
The Music of Kurt Weill

German production of
The Threepenny Opera

Tunes go into my brain and stick there, sometimes years before I know who wrote them and under what circumstances. Therefore, by the time I was ten I knew several Kurt Weill songs without being aware of his name or the names of his collaborators: September Song from *Knickerbocker Holiday,* 1938, lyric by Maxwell Anderson; "My Ship" from *Lady in the Dark,* 1941, lyric by Ira Gershwin; "Speak Low from *One Touch of Venus,* 1943, lyric by Ogden Nash. Those ravishing melodies spoke to my soul in childhood, and still do.

In recent months I've heard two Weill concerts—one at Carnegie Recital Hall and the other at BAM—which have brought back a rush of memories while forcefully reminding me of the power of great theatre music. Which is to say, great tunes.

The three songs mentioned above I learned from the radio, of course. Then in 1955 came the Off-Broadway *Threepenny Opera* with an amazing cast: Scott Merrill, Jo Sullivan, Lotte Lenya, Bea Arthur, Jerry Orbach, Charlotte Rae and others. It went off like a skyrocket and led me to the other Brecht-Weill collaborations, available on record in fragments and rarely intact. (There was a 1970 production of *Mahagonny* with Estelle Parsons.)

Lenya (Mrs. Weill) had an album of her husband's songs from various sources which I listened to incessantly in the late 1950's. There was also Martha Schlamme, who sang Weill in cabaret and concert, as today we have the spectacular singing actress Angelina Reaux, whose Weill repertoire is enormous.

With some further digging, I became aware of gems from *Lost in the Stars* and *Street Scene*—the New York City Opera had a fine production of the latter—and failed shows like *The Firebrand of Florence* and *Love Life.* What a kick the other evening at BAM to hear "Green-Up Time" from the latter, sung by Nanette Fabray, who introduced it in 1948.

One of the highlights of my very spotty performing life came when I was cast in *Threepenny* at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis in 1963. I can still push a button in my brain and play that entire score whenever I like. Wow!

Weill was born March 2, 1900 and died April 3, 1950. Most of the young composers I meet don't know his work at all. On those rare occasions when I'm able to get someone to listen to his songs, the listener is usually transfixed. And why not? The tunes are indelible, as are the tunes of Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Harold Arlen and a dozen other masters of the craft. Yet they are almost all unknown to people in their twenties and thirties who aspire to be theatre writers. And have our young hopefuls ever heard the work of Sigmund Romberg, Victor Herbert, Rudolf Friml, Franz Lehar, Oscar Straus and other notable operetta composers who laid the foundations for the Broadway musical?

The point is, musicals live or die on the quality of their melodic material. (Of course, no musical makes it these days without a strong book, but that's another story.) Everywhere today one hears the cry, why don't people write tunes? Good question. The answer may be that pop music has been tuneless—or mediocre—for so long that people don't recognize a melody. Or don't see any reason to educate themselves in the canon of melodic compositions.

Kurt Weill

Well, I'm being a scold again, and what good does that do? Instead of taxing hopeful writers with what they haven't heard and can't know, why not take a more positive attitude: think what a thrill you have in store, hearing these masterworks for the first time. Make a short list of the great theatre melodists, get yourself to the library or the record store, and dive into an ever-flowing fountain of fabulous tunes.

Kurt Weill is a wonderful place to start. (Happy Birthday, Kurt!)

—February 2000

9.
Winners and Losers

In her *New York Post* column Danielle Crittenden writes:

"A father once told me about the forces of political correctness that had overtaken his son's local baseball league. The children were forbidden to keep score because the coaches felt it would be harmful to the self-esteem of the losers.

" 'So what did the kids do?' I wondered.

" 'They kept score in their heads,' he shrugged. 'They always knew who won.' "

Competitiveness is a troublesome issue for me, especially among writers who—I assume, no doubt incorrectly—should be mutually supportive without the need to "keep score." Must we really keep a list of winners and losers?

During my first years in the Workshop I was often shocked at the fierce atmosphere of competition: the obvious need of certain writers to keep "topping" one another in frequency of presentation as well as in quality of material.

But why should I have been shocked? Competitiveness seems to be a given in human nature, and it is not *per se* positive or negative. Positively, it can spur productivity and the pursuit of excellence. Negatively, it can result in misanthropy, self-hatred and despair, the end of which is the infamous quotation (ascribed to various people but perhaps originating with Gore Vidal): "It is not enough to succeed. It is also necessary for one's colleagues to fail."

This pernicious point of view is one of the things that make me uneasy about competitiveness. Another is my belief that comparisons are odious, and that the

proper motto is not, "Am I a better writer than those guys?" but, "Is my writing good enough to satisfy me?"

Yet as a youngster I entered every competition in sight that did not require athletic skill. Winning was wonderful and losing did not discourage me from signing up for the next contest. What changed my point of view later was perhaps the realization that I did not like nakedly competitive people. Or maybe the thought that there was something immoral about needing to win.

At any rate, I tried to turn my children into non-competitive people, but it didn't work. Early on they joined a play group involving both competitive and non-competitive activities, and years later one of my sons told me that at first he had feared and hated competition, but that he was now very grateful for it. His fears had been conquered, and a healthy competitive spirit had helped him through public school, college and law school, not to mention the reality of the business world.

The truth is I'm ambivalent about aggressive people: they both appall and fascinate me. Chutzpah is unsettling but it's also sexy. Would I like to be a shark? Maybe, on some level. But I want more to be a nice guy, though nice guys finish last. Doubtless this passive stance has done nothing to help fulfill my lifelong goals: success as a theatre writer. I look back in awe at my youthful ambition and the stack of plaques, blue ribbons, gold medals and scholarships that gave me an education and a poisonously inflated ego. Rueful awe, for I wish I had some of that back. But it ain't gonna happen: like the fella in *La Cage,* I am what I am, and an old dog doesn't learn new tricks or recover lost ones.

Where do you see yourself in this picture? Do you have enough competitive spirit to fuel your ambition and impel you to work ceaselessly, but not so much that you become a monster? Or are the monsters of show business the ones you want to be? As for me, I still keep running up against the ancient question, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" And that's a helluva note for a wholly secular person!

Achievement in theatre writing seems to be me to require three elements: talent, good luck and chutzpah. The first is from Mother Nature, the second from chance, and the third from…who knows? Maybe environment. Maybe hormones. Maybe karma.

What I wish for you is a nice balance of the three elements. Plus great collaborators!

—May 2000

10.
The Foolish Notion

Every year or thereabouts, someone laments—usually in the pages of *The New York Times*—that bright composers and lyricists from the world outside the theatre are not being recruited to create tomorrow's shows. An infusion of new blood (so goes the theory) would surely produce popular works unbeholden and unconnected to the moldering past. (In case you've forgotten, the American musical died on September 26, 1999, according to Albert Innaurato; a demise prominently noted in the *Times,* though, oddly, not on the obituary page.)

You know the kind of article I mean. Somebody declares that if Billy Joel or Paul Simon or Carole King or any of a hundred younger pop writers could be persuaded to write a musical, the form would be rescued from oblivion. And the fact that such writers are *not* ploughing the field is somehow the fault of The Establishment.

Here's Stuart Ostrow in the *Times,* August 27, 2000: "Just as musical theatre ignored cool jazz and bebop in the 50's, it hasn't encouraged today's hip-hop, rap and Latin music writers to create today's and tomorrow's musicals."

What leap of logic have we here? Expertise in one area—jazz, country-western, whatever—does not necessarily imply competence (or event interest) in another. Theatre writing is a craft, and the American musical a unique art form. The craft is not easily mastered, and even when it is that's just the beginning. Then comes the hard stuff: finding the right collaborators, properties, producers and opportunities.

Learning how to write a theatre score can be a long and painful process. It's not for the faint of heart, the dilettante, the lazy or the impatient. And even the most brilliant theatre writer needs great good fortune. Bad timing, bad casting, bad reviews, bad luck—*anything* can scuttle a beautiful piece of writing, years in the making.

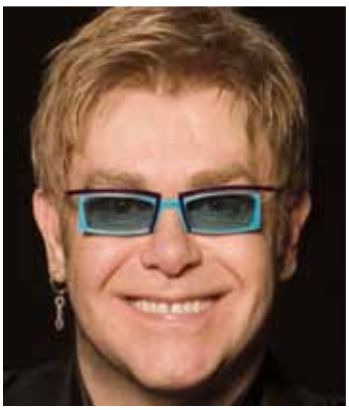
The notion that one could revitalize the musical theatre by recruiting writers from other fields is just that: a notion, and a foolish notion. Why should a successful rapper or rocker—earning perhaps millions of dollars a year—subject himself or herself to the discipline of learning a new craft that pays nothing? And that takes years of blood, sweat, tears and false starts?

Moreover, moving from an undramatic form (cool jazz, bebop) to a dramatic is more than a matter of wanting to. Theatre writing requires elements—melody, rhythmic and harmonic richness, sophistication—not generously supplied by the hip-hop world. And unlike rock music, theatre songs must convey thought, clearly and precisely, as well as passionately. Songwriting is songwriting, of course, but these various crafts don't overlap. An athlete is an athlete, but if Joe Montana is out with an injury you don't replace him with Serena Williams.

A few pop writers *have* produced acceptable theatre scores: Lucy Simon (*The Secret Garden*), Elton John (parts of *The Lion King*), Burt Bacharach (*Promises, Promises*), Roger Miller (*Big River*), Rupert Holmes (*The Mystery of Edwin Drood*). There have also been rock—or pseudo-rock—scores that pleased audiences: *Your Own Thing, Hair, Tommy, Rent.*

Lucy Simon

Conversely, theatre composers use elements from other areas to create unique effects: jazz is all over the place in Gershwin (and often in the work of Judd Woldin); blues in Harold Arlen (not to mention a liturgical flavor); pop/country sounds in Carol Hall (*The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*); folksy stuff in Robert Waldman (*The Robber Bridegroom*); everything in the world in Leonard Bernstein. Great scores synthesize and transcend their sources, but the sources are pungent and evocative.



Elton John

Another area in which pop writes are well served is that of the revue. The mega-hit *Ain't Misbehavin'* (songs associated with Fats Waller) and substantial successes like *Sophisticated Ladies* (Duke Ellington), *Eubie* (Eubie Blake), and *Smoky Joe's Café* (Lieber and Stoller) celebrate wonderful songwriting, but what makes them work *as shows* is the theatrical savvy that puts them together.

Similarly, in the book musical *Jelly's Last Jam*, Jelly Roll Morton's old material is reinvented and fused with new material by the theatre writers George C. Wolfe, Susan Birkenhead and Luther Henderson. It works. But Jelly Roll Morton never wrote a theatre score!

Good theatre writing draws from many wells. Composer and lyricist both need an instinct for the dramatic, story-telling techniques, variety, wit, and—dare one say it?—an encyclopedic knowledge of music and literature. With all that, they also need what Joni Mitchell and Randy Newman have in spades: the ability to construct a small self-contained, memorable moment. We still want those song moments within a score—what we'll remember and hum when the rest of the show blurs into a vague memory.

Rupert Holmes

It's a happy and fortunate person who finds the right metier and sticks to it. Long ago a very young

Roger Miller

Thomas Newman joined the Workshop to study theatre writing with Lehman Engel. He didn't stay long, but he went on to become a terrific composer of film scores. As far as I know, he hasn't written stage pieces, but why would he? Is Bob Dylan less a genius because he doesn't do Broadway shows? Is Kenny Rogers?

So the next time you read one of those *Times* pieces saying that what the musical theatre needs is a score by Puff Daddy, Pearl Jam or Loretta Lynn, you have my permission to say "Horsefeathers!" Another hundred people just got offa the train wanting to be theatre writers. The last thing we need is to pull non-theatre writers away from what they're doing very nicely, thank you. And getting paid for it.

—October 2000

11.
The Need for Song

A December rain is falling on Brooklyn and the sky. What I can see of it—through curtains very much in need of a holiday laundering—has the look of unpolished pewter. But inside all is warm and fuzzy. An old dog and his old human are drying out, the breakfast coffee is digesting (if that's what coffee does), and from the CD player comes an uninterrupted flow of wonderful old tunes. Irving Berlin, rendered with taste and humor by the ever-reliable Joan Morris, with William Bolcom at the piano.

When that disk has run its course I'll put on the l965 version of *Carousel,* with John Raitt and a superb company. What melodies! What passion! What a tonic for a dreary day, a dreary month, the end of the dreariest political campaign in memory! Thank goodness for music, which not only has charms to soothe the savage breast but also to restore the flattened soul and stir embers of hope in the most cynical of sensibilities.

Come to think of it, the presidential race in 2000 was a lot like some of the scores one has had to endure in recent years: a little motive repeated *ad nauseam*; a fragmentary idea wandering here and there never developing into anything engaging or persuasive; the drone of sung dialogue that somehow doesn't lead to the heightened emotions of an actual song. The show ends, eventually, as everything must. The curtain comes down, the house lights go up, the Supreme Court makes a decision, everyone sighs and goes home. You know it's over because you're exhausted, but you can't remember the climax. Did you doze off in the middle of all that convoluted, attenuated, unfocused effort? There were notes, there were harmonies, rhythms—but where was the music?

Never mind. It's Sunday afternoon. Toss something delicious onto the record player and let your spirits soar. Choose an artist who knows how to give full weight to both words and music—Ella Fitzgerald, Fred Astaire, Joe Williams, either Ethel (Merman or Waters), Sammy Davis, Bobby Short, Bernadette Peters, the peerless Barbara Cook. Sure, the material will be old, but it will be good. Melodic and memorable.

Think of all the old shows that have been presented anew in recent years, not because they're old but because the scores are terrific: *The Music Man, Kiss Me, Kate, Carousel, Annie Get Your Gun, Guys and Dolls, The Most Happy Fella, Damn Yankees, Cabaret, Chicago, A Funny thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, Gypsy, The Sound of Music, The King and I.* For the future we're promised *Oklahoma, South Pacific, Bells Are Ringing* and who knows what else.

Why not? Why shouldn't each generation have a chance to experience these classics "live"? It's not like revisiting a beloved old movie—rent a tape and pop it into the VCR. Theatre demands that you *be there* for maximum impact. A good Broadway score is always welcome, even if you have to put up with a hopelessly outdated book, as in some of the choices of the blessed "Encores!" series and similar ventures.

Max & Richard

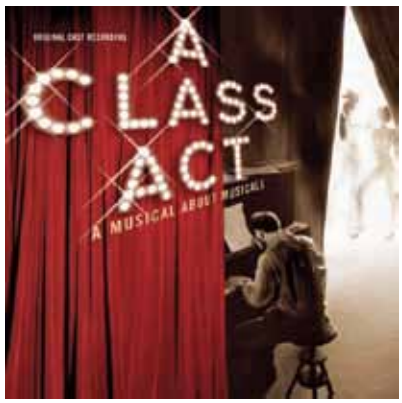
The need for song has become more and more obvious along with the lack of song in a number of productions in recent years. *The New York Post* reporter Michael Riedel, in a February 1999 screed, wrote: "Tuneless shows…are become the norm…There are composers [who] actively resist melody. Rather than a collection of theatre songs, their scores are a collage of angst-ridden arts music, some of it pretty, but much of it utterly unmemorable—or…downright dreary."

Reidel went on to quote the veteran Broadway bookwriter Joe Masteroff: "I think they are frightened that if they write a good song they will be called old-fashioned…They have talent, but you wish somebody would slap them over the knuckles and make them write a melody."

Michael Riedel

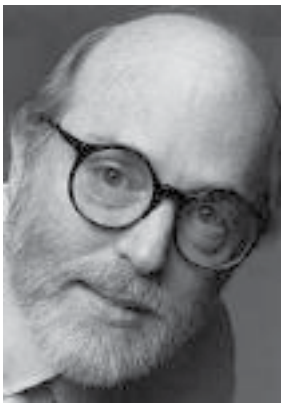
Well, that article is almost two years old, and today there are signs that someone was paying attention. The new hot ticket *The Full Monty* is full of songs. First-time Broadway composer David Yazbek has said, in effect, that Frank Loesser was his muse for this score. Not a bad muse for music.

The Manhattan Theatre Club's hit, *A Class Act*—to move soon to Broadway—is also a collection of actual theatre songs, by the late Edward Kleban, who learned and honed his craft right here in our very own Workshop. Skip Kennon's score for *Time and Again* (in rehearsal as this is written) is richly melodic. Tunes are making a comeback.



Not that they ever went away. Go to any pricey cabaret in town and hear Rosemary Clooney, Michael Fienstein *et al* singing the great standards, as they always did and always will. Not long ago I went to a classy benefit at Carnegie Hall and what was being sung by artists ranging in age from the twenties to the seventies? Harold Arlen, Johnny Mercer, Jerome Kern and Stephen Sondheim (from his melodic period). Bliss!

A satisfying tune is forever. "I Hear Music"…"Strange Music"…"Love's Old Sweet Song"…"Play a Simple Melody"…"It Seems to Me I've Heard That Song Before"…"The Song Is You"…"With a Song in My Heart"…"All of a Sudden My Heart Sings"…"I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart"…"The Song is Ended But the Melody Lingers On"…somebody stop me!



Ed Kleban

So it's been a disagreeable autumn. It's over. The USA will survive four years of an unpresident. Some of the money you lost in Nasdaq will come back. And all those charmless, tuneless, overstuffed shows will fade from memory while a new age of theatre melody dawns. Count on it.

Hey, it's time for Jonathan Schwartz on WNYC. I wonder what he's got up his sleeve today—some gem from Dietz and Schwartz, Hoagy Carmichael, Duke Ellington, Jimmy Van Heusen, or by Cy Coleman and Dorothy Fields? And if today's program doesn't scintillate, I can always sing some Christmas carols. Heaven knows *they're* durable, and even yours truly Ebenezer Grinch has been known to thaw if you push the right buttons.

Rosemary Clooney

So happy holidays, children, and happy 21st Century. May it be a cornucopia of song.

—January 2001

12.
What Do You Listen To?

I'm convinced that what you put into your brain in the way of musical nourishment has a lot to do with what comes out when you sit down to write a song or a score. And I'm convinced also that a rich and varied musical experience will greatly enhance your compositional palette.

David Yazbek, composer of *The Full Monty,* is quoted in the current *The Dramatist*: "…I have an allergy to conventional Broadway musical ideas. I'm very sensitive to the vocabulary of composers and lyricists who I think don't listen to other than theater music. The composers I like—Adam Guettel and Cy Coleman—clearly love all kinds of music and can talk about [Thelonious] Monk or the Beatles or Nirvana or world music, anything, including theater music."

David Yazbek

That rings a bell with me, but I'd go much further. I grew up, fortunately, in the pre-TV era, and the range of music that surrounded me could probably not be duplicated today.

On the battery-powered radio (no static!): The Big Bands, Grand Old Op'ry, The Metropolitan Opera, the Hit Parade, The Longines Symphonette, Phil Spitalny and His All-Girl Orchestra, jazz, operetta, The New York Philharmonic, polka-time, you name it.

On the wind-up Victrola: a potpourri of 78's from the 20's through the 40's—an unimaginable variety. (My brother still has the collection and the machine still works.)

At home and at school: old standards around the piano, music lessons (the classics and semi-classics and salon music—anyone remember that?), band and choir and campfire singalongs—boy, am I dating myself!

Frank Loesser

At church: everything from Byrd to Buxtehude to Bach—on through the great 19th-century hymnwriters, not forgetting gospel (the real stuff *and* the sentimental, watered-down white imitation).

But that's ancient history. Let's talk about now. I don't know how much music you budding theatre-writers absorb, or what kind, but I suspect it's not enough. You may have a passing knowledge of the work of the great living theatre composers—Sondheim, Bock, Kander, Strouse, Herman, Coleman—and of our colleagues Alan Menken, Maury Yeston, Nancy Ford et. Al—but what about the departed titans: Kern, Porter, Loesser, Rodgers, Arlen, Bernstein—not to mention the nearly-forgotten Vincent Youmans and Harold Rome?

I believe you'd get more and better ideas from listening to ten minutes of Irving Berlin or Geroge Gershwin than from ten hours of the so-called New Age product or any amount of Euro-trash. And, if

you're serious about theatre-writing, you owe it to yourself to do some catching up. When I ask a roomful of writers if they're familiar with *One Touch of Venus* and two hands go up, my heart sinks. Not know Kurt Weill? To someone of my generation, that's inconceivable.

But—you say—who has time for all that? My counter-question: how much time do you spend on the Internet or watching sit-coms? What are your priorities?

All my life I've been lucky to have great teachers, including Lehman Engel, whose knowledge of music was encyclopedic and whose taste was impeccable but very broad. Skip Kennon tells me that in Lehman's last years he turned more and more to the glorious complexities of Richard Strauss and Richard Wagner—*Parsifal* in particular. I like to imagine that he was weaning himself from the banalities of terrestrial existence, since he was well aware of his impending death. At any rate, he gravitated toward the sublime!

The other day while visiting my year-old grandsons I was delighted to hear what my son was playing for them as they played on the rug: Mozart, Rachmaninoff, Schumann and Brahms. Since my son pretends to have no interest in serious music (or theatre music) I was gratified to know that he'd gotten my message nevertheless: It's never too early to start listening to good stuff.

But, hey! It's also never too late. A rich musical diet won't make you fat, so don't starve yourself. Dig in!

—March 2001

13.
Alive and Well

People who moan and grumble that the American musical is dead or dying must be in some dark dream world.

Today, May 18, 2001, is as good a time for lovers of the musical theatre to be alive and in New York as any day in my memory. On Broadway we have seven classic scores (in alphabetical order): *Annie Get Your Gun, Cabaret, Chicago, Follies, 42nd Street, Kiss Me Kate* and *The Music Man.*

Add to that two new smash hits, *The Full Monty* and *The Producers.* And to that the long-running crowd-pleasers *Beauty and the Beast, Rent* and *The Lion King*. Need we mention the everlasting tourist attractions *Les Misérables* and *The Phantom of the Opera?* Could we overlook the oddities, each with strong appeal for a particular audience: *Aida, Contact, Fosse, The Rocky Horror Show,* the very classy *A Class Act,* and the substantial revival of a 50's favorite, *Bells Are Ringing*?

And that's not to mention Off-Broadway, where we could begin with *The Fantasticks,* still bouncing along after more than forty years, and give a nod to the bizarre newcomer, *Bat Boy.*

Far from looking moribund, the American musical seems more alive than ever. These are great days for fans with a lot of free time and very deep pockets.

Today's *New York Times* announces that the Off-Broadway musical *Urinetown* is moving to Broadway in July. It will be interesting to see if this oddly wonderful new piece finds a mainstream audience. I was much taken with it for several reasons: the score and the book are robust and off-the-wall, the performance dazzling, and the show is actually *about* something important.

Watching it took me back to a lot of thesis shows of decades ago—*Of Thee I Sing, Bloomer Girl, Finian's Rainbow, The Cradle Will Rock,* and supremely *The Threepenny Opera. Urinetown* has the high energy of pop culture coupled with a social conscience and served up with a generous dollop of burlesque and a dash of *Grand Guignol*—what a weird and witty combination!

Satire? Of course, with the twin aim of all good satire: to poke holes in human folly and to preach. That *Urinetown* succeeds in both of these aims is a tribute to the two writers. Hats off to them!

(On a parochial note, the composer/co-lyricist Mark Hollmann "did" Skip Kennon's First Year workshop here, and part of the Second Year workshop as well.)

Musicals which deal with serious themes in a comic way are so rare nowadays that to encounter one is like getting a jolt of adrenaline. I spend a lot of time telling writers, "Don't preach!" Propaganda in the theatre is usually deadly. But *Urinetown* reminds me that preaching can be very stimulating.

It's also intriguing to trace the antecedents of a piece like *Urinetown,* which clearly owes a lot to *The Threepenny Opera* of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. But that masterpiece was modeled on John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera,* which was a take-off on Italian opera of the period, mixed with popular ballads and political satire. I suppose, with a bit of effort, we could tie inspiration all the way back to Aristophanes, or even the acerbic writer of the Biblical book of *Jonah.*

At any rate, the re-emergence of shows that take pot-shots at corruption pretension and conformity is a welcome sign. Thanks, Mel Brooks, for trashing political correctness! Now if we had a new crop of writers and performers who could put on the mantle of Mort Sahl, Tom Lehrer, E. Y. Harburg, Marc Blitzstein, Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor and (supply your own list), wouldn't that be fun?

Where is W. C. Fields, now that we need him? Where are Charles Chaplin, Dorothy Parker and Mae West? Oh, well, perhaps their spiritual successors are in the wings, getting ready to puncture the latest lies and pieties with a razor-sharp turn of phrase or an insouciant tilt of the eyebrow. Let's hope!

Some months ago in this space, I commented on the—to me—inexplicable emergence of a new construction in English, substituting nominative-case pronouns for objective case, as in "between you and me" metamorphosing into "between you and I." It was my idea that younger writers with a more casual grounding in the language might want to know about THE-OBJECT-OF-THE-PREPOSITION, ETC., in order to have a better understanding of Standard English.

Well, kids, forget it! It's too late! It's not just young people who are turning English on its head, but professional writers of a certain age and other professionals as well. Here are some recent quotes from *The Dramatist*:

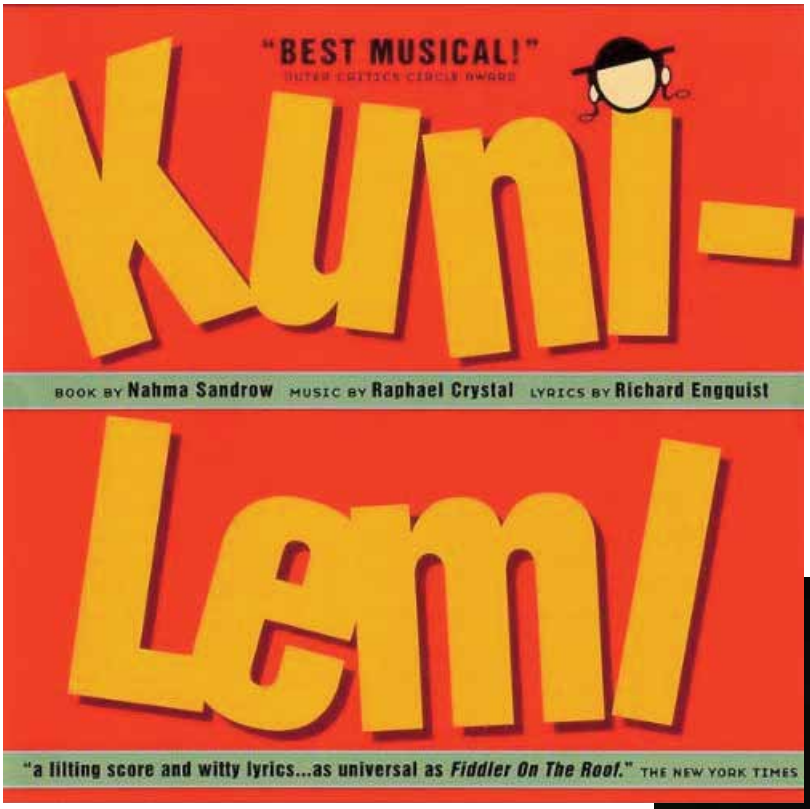
"I'd rather do a draft, then let D--- and *I* come back with a rough version…"

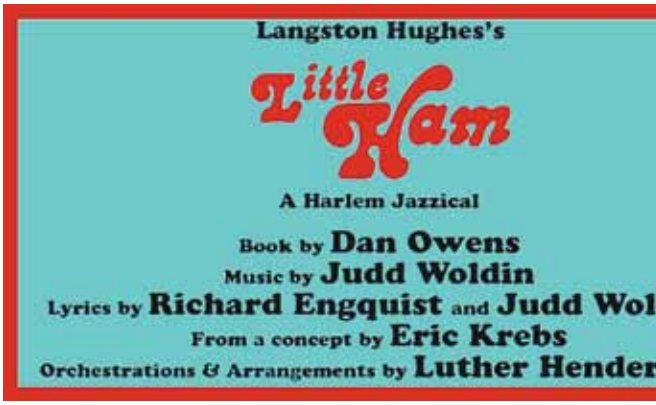
"I've known J--- for a long time, and like T--- and *I,* J--- and I have been trying to work together…"

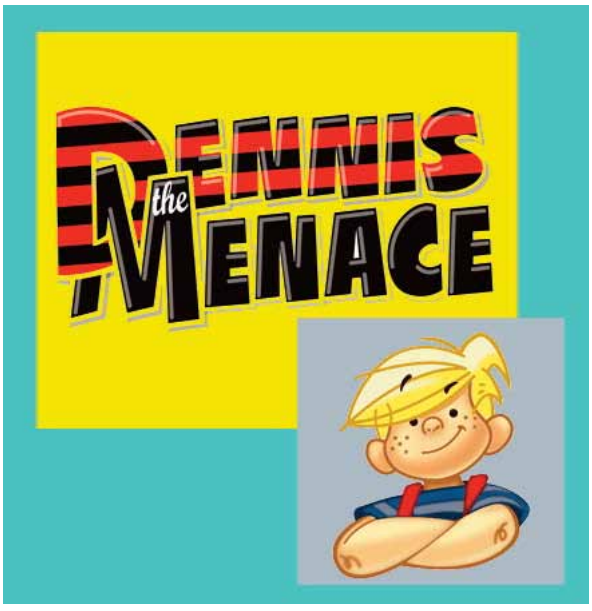
Let *I* come back? Like *I?*

Here's one from *The Times,* a lawyer speaking: "…would make a decision on behalf of you or *I."* What I'm trying to say is that in few years the only people who will even know the difference between nominative and objective will be dinosaurs like me. When that has taken place, I suppose some wonderful old songs will be given new titles: "Here's to We"… "For I and My Gal"…"Someone To Watch Over I"… "Come Fly With I"…"Hey, Look I Over"…"A Hymn to He"…"They Can't Take That Away From I"…"You Took Advantage of I"…and so on and so on.

—May 2001


"BEST MUSICAL!"
OUTER CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD
Kuni-
Leml
BOOK BY Nahma Sandrow MUSIC BY Raphael Crystal LYRICS BY Richard Engquist
"a lilting score and witty lyrics...as universal as Fiddler On The Roof." THE NEW YORK TIMES


Langston Hughes's
Little Ham
A Harlem Jazzical
Book by Dan Owens
Music by Judd Woldin
Lyrics by Richard Engquist and Judd Wol
From a concept by Eric Krebs
Orchestrations & Arrangements by Luther Hender


DENNIS
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The Original New York Cast

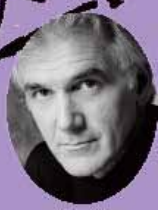
Abie's Island Rose

Heather MacRae
Keith Lee Grant
Steve Rosen
Carla Woods

Book by Ron Sproat
Lyrics by Richard Engquist & Frank Evans
Music by Doug Katsaros

LORENZO

Elizabeth and Essex



14.
When We Are Most Needed

Acts of unimaginable cruelty like the terrorist attacks of September 11 leave us shocked to the very core of our beings. Then begins a long process of grieving, and sometimes the reexamination of long-held beliefs and illusions.

Enormities such as this murderous attack have been usual throughout human history—only the scale varies—but because we've not seen them "up close and personal" until now, it's difficult even to grasp what has happened and what may ensue.

In this chaotic situation, creative artists have been so shaken that many have questioned the importance of their life's work. A typical reaction: "With so much horror in the world, it seems frivolous to [sing, play, dance, clown, write, laugh, etc.]." As if the existence of barbarity should lead to the death of creativity.

We've got to get beyond this negative thinking, and fast. Humanity's need for joy and beauty is as great as ever—perhaps greater—and there is joy and beauty to be found in every one of the arts, from the grandest to the most elementary. Remember the Preston Sturges comedy *Sullivan's Travels* (1942)? A filmmaker decides to do only "serious" work because of a world at war. Only when his life is virtually destroyed does he understand the healing power of laughter—laughter inspired by a silly animated cartoon.

There's no need to apologize for what we do, for the breezy and insubstantial, the popular and escapist and sentimental. "I'll be seeing you in every lovely summer's day/In everything that's light and gay,/I'll always think of you that way…" (Irving Kahal, 1938; one of the great Broadway lyrics that saw us through World War II).

Veronica Lake & Joel McCrea in *Sullivan's Travels*

Majestic requiems like those of Mozart, Verdi, Bach, Brahms, Britten and Faure—works which come out of enormous faith and pain—have almost limitless therapeutic power, but so may a simple Sondheim song like "Not While I'm Around."

Painful times, in fact, are precisely the times when we are most needed—those of us who understand the transforming power of music and words. Beautiful things *do* spring from ashes and rubble. If you've forgotten this, go back and read Anne Frank's diary. Listen to music written in death camps. Try to find a copy of the TV movie *Playing For Time.* Think about Myra Hess playing Beethoven in a London concert hall as bombs rained down all around. Check out the movie *Privates on Parade,* which can make you laugh until you cry. Hum a tune from *Hair.*

Vanessa Redgrave in *Playing For Time*

I guess what I'm trying to say is that there's nothing about being a creative artist that doesn't matter. To be creative is, of course, difficult—especially when we're stunned and mourning—but the difficulty of being creative is far preferable to the ease of being critical. To build requires talent, craft, hard work, optimism, dedication, love. To destroy requires nothing, not even thought. Especially not thought.

So if someone says to me, "I can't get back to working on my little musical farce. It's so frivolous," my reply is, "What's bad about frivolous?"

If we can't sustain the ability to live, love and laugh, then what's the point?

Ev'ry time it rains, it rains
Pennies from heaven...
So when you hear it thunder,
Don't run under a tree,
There'll be pennies from heaven
For you and me.
—Johnny Burke, 1936

I used to walk in the shade
With my blues on parade,
But I'm not afraid,
This rover crossed over...
—Dorothy Fields, 1930

Walk on, walk on with hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone...
—Oscar Hammerstein II, 1945

People who need people
Are the luckiest peopl in the world.
—Bob Merrill, 1963

—September 2001

15.
If I Did Indulge in Resolutions…

I don't make New Year's resolutions because I'm reluctant to makes promises I know I'm going to break. However, if I did indulge in resolutions, here's what I'd set for myself in 2002:

1. I will no longer be surprised or dismayed that when I quote Scripture, Shakespeare, Dickens or Dickinson (et. al.. etc., *ad infinitum*) I am greeted with blank looks. Nor will I feel left out when people talk about their machines or about TV shows. I'll simply say to myself, "That was then and this is now."

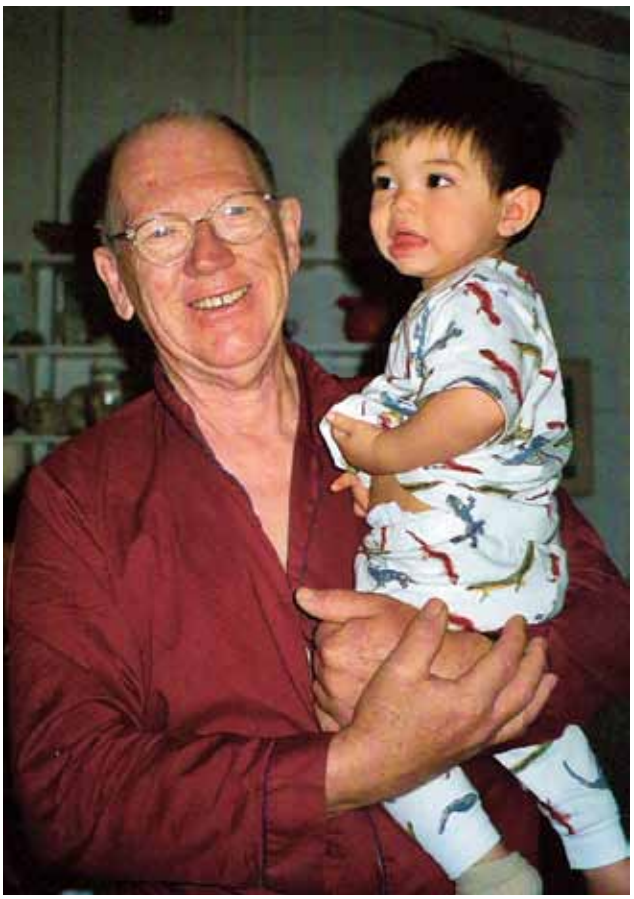
2. With the deterioration of my hearing, I will stop feeling nostalgic about the experience of going to the theatre and hearing unaltered, unamplified human voices. Ethel Merman and Ethel Waters are dead, and so is the special world they inhabited.

3. I'll try to accept the fact that some people find New Age music attractive. I will make a mantra of *chacun a son gout* and when forced into a situation where I must listen to tuneless, unvarying, undynamic or endlessly repetitive music I will put my mind in another place and think Mozart.

4. I'll make an effort to enjoy the whirlwind changes taking place in the language, and swallow the fact that Standard English is now no more than what one finds in a library or museum. Specifically, I'll acknowledge that "access" and "reference" have become verbs; that "infer"—once the antonym of "imply"—is now its synonym; that "bad" can mean "good"; that no one under the age of sixty knows the difference between "lie" and "lay," "its" and "it's," "your" and "you're," "who" and "whom," "substantive" and "substantial," "shinny" and "shimmy." And

I will keep saying to myself, "It doesn't matter."

5. I will stop dreaming that producers will come up with suitable vehicles for musical comedy stars like Donna Murphy, Vanessa Williams and Bernadette Peters—none of whom should ever be off the boards.



Old Year, New Year

6. I will admit that Ben Brantley and John Simon are not going away, and think about something pleasant.

7. If at all possible, I'll try to read *The Dramatist* (and everything else) without copy editing as I go along. There are more important things than grammatical clarity. (And I won't sneer to see *prix fixe* misspelled on a menu, or *roommate* turned into *roomate* on a bulletin board notice.)

8. When someone I care about lights a cigarette, I'll recall that I spent fifty years as a nicotine addict, and I won't scream.

9. I'll consider unlikely projects for at least six months before saying "It will never work." (Which I once said about *Little Shop of Horrors*.)

10. I'll be glad I lived in the l930's and 1940's, when democracy was very much alive in America—despite the Great Depression and a ghastly war—and realize there's nothing I can do now to stop its fading away.

11. I will try very hard—at least in the workshop—not to make disparaging remarks about religion.

12. And finally, I resolve to use every human being as my neighbor and—to quote Martin Luther—"apologize for him, speak well of him, and put the most charitable construction on all that he does."

All of the above—it's understood—*if* I made New Year's resolutions. But don't hold your breath.

Happy 2002, everybody!

—December 2001

16.
Daring To Be Different

Everybody says don't get out of line.
When they say that, then,
Lady, that's a sign:
Nine times out of ten,
Lady, you are doing just fine!
—Stephen Sondheim

This lyrical bit of nonconformist enthusiasm, circa 1964, can be imagined to apply to any number of endeavors, among them, the very creation of musical theatre works. Those like Mr. Sondheim, who attempt to enrich the form by stretching it in various ways, may not end up with popular or commercial success, but their efforts are almost always provocative and interesting, and often make further experimentation possible.

Some innovative pieces are rewarded financially and with immediate acclaim—*Show Boat*, *Oklahoma, A Chorus Line*—but others take years or even decades to be recognized as the masterworks they are: *Porgy and Bess, Pal Joey, Follies*. The highly original *West Side Story*, with its gritty subject matter and revolutionary narrative devices, was anything but a blockbuster in its original run: now it's universally acknowledged to be a classic. *Company, Pacific Overtures* and *Sunday in the Park with George* were seen as elitist. *Allegro, Merrily We Roll Along* and *Passion* all failed. But each of these works (and many others we might mention) changed the way we thought of musicals, and the world is better for them.

Obviously, daring to be different is risky, and the chance to get something risky produced often depends on the track records of the creative team. But sometimes the bigger the reputation the bigger the risk: Oscar Hammerstein dared to be challenging with a piece like *Allegro* rather than play it safe. (And let's face it: no one is always right. *Allegro* is bad not because of its groundbreaking conception but because it's an unpleasant story with an unsympathetic protagonist.)

Hammerstein was famously provocative. He tackled unsuitable subject matter in *ShowBoat, Oklahoma, Carousel, Carmen Jones, South Pacific, Pipe Dream;* even *The Sound of Music* and *The King and I* raised eyebrows among the conventional (Nazis in a musical?! Polygamy?!) But all these odd choices (except *Pipe Dream*) found their audiences. Only when Hammerstein devoted himself to obvious choices like *Me and Juliet, Flower Drum Song* and *Cinderella* was he less than interesting.


Oscar Hammerstein

Musical innovation is harder to pin down, but to me it's tied to quality and complexity. A great piece of music (*Candide, The Merry Widow, Kismet*) long survives an unworkable or old-fashioned libretto. We're still happy to hear the music of *Cabin in the Sky, St. Louis Woman,* and anything by George Gershwin, regardless of the books attached thereto. Admittedly, *Porgy and Bess* is more ambitious than *Funny Face,* but is it more enjoyable? For that matter, who's willing to say that *Candide* has better music than *On the Town*? When two things are superb, comparisons become odious, and perhaps the whole question of being daring is moot. *Magdalena* (Villa Lobos) was musically daring, but who remembers?

What makes something innovative? It can be (1) topic (*The Knife, Philemon, Finian's Rainbow*); (2) technique (*I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking it On the Road;* the recent *Cabaret*); (3) style (*Hair; Jesus Christ Superstar*). A show that's fresh in all three ways is *Hedwig and the Angry Inch.* In other words, what we don't expect—and there it is. To see a kind of staging one has never seen before—*South Pacific, Pippin, The Fantasticks*—is to be transfixed and, in some aspects, transformed. The parameters have changed, the horizon expanded. To hear a breathtaking score—*Carousel, Gypsy, The Most Happy Fella*—is to be made less will-

Will Gartshore & Harry A. Winter in a scene from *Allegro*

ing to settle for the humdrum, even absent the avant garde.

Well, this piece started out to be about innovation, but it has become about quality, which may not be far off the mark. Lately I'm stunned to hear anything of real quality, to the extent that *good* sounds almost like *revolutionary.* (*The Full Monty, The Producers* and *Urinetown* are miles from revolutionary, but they're all good, so who's complaining?) There's been so much mediocre out there in the recent past: bland, bombastic, boring scores in shows that millions of people are happy to see. I'm ready to admit (on one level) that the public is never wrong, and happy to acknowledge that there is room for every taste. Hey—I love polkas, accordions, honky-tonk pianos, Glen Campbell, Bette Midler and Michel Legrand!

But if you can come up with something startling and also classy, I'll be there with the rest of the world to cheer you on. Everybody says don't? Don't pay attention. It's always possible to "do do do what you did did did before, baby"—but why not try doing it different, and better? Then it's only a small step to the unheard of.

Sound challenging?

We're waiting!

—February 2002

17.
No Answer but Perseverance

A member of the Workshop who recently gave birth tells me that now—and I'm paraphrasing—the hours she manages to find for her writing are "the fun" and not "the work." This will strike a responsive chord in anyone who's done a lot of childcare. Childcare is necessary, rewarding in many ways and ultimately pleasurable, but not intellectually stimulating. Not "creative" in the sense of coming up with a brilliant lyric, a ravishing melody or an electrifying vamp. Luckily, years pass quickly, soon the kids are in school much of the time and pressure eases.

But writers who have no children and few domestic chores may also find it difficult to carve out the hours and space to devote to "the project." What if you have a day job that drains your creative juices? What if the traditional 40-hour week turns out to be 60 or 70, and you still haven't tackled that thorny through-line problem?

If you aspire to be a theatre writer, which takes a lot of time and effort as well as good ideas, it helps to be born rich. It also helps if you have a supportive, high-earning spouse. Ditto a sugar daddy or a Mrs. Simpson. I know a few truly blessed people whose parents don't mind subsidizing their impossible dreams year after year—in some cases for decades!

Arthur Laurents

Those who have none of these fortunate circumstances, and who must support themselves in one of the highest-priced cities in the world while trying to write, have all my sympathy. Lehman Engel used to advise us to find jobs that didn't require a lot of thought: maybe brawn but not necessarily brain. Then there might be energy left in the wee small hours to do our "real" work. He suggested that we not look for positions as advertising copywriters, journalists or orchestrators—jobs which require the same kinds of thought processes necessary to songwriting or playwriting.

I tend to grow impatient and judgmental when I see people plodding away at the same project year after year, never seeming to get through even a decent draft. But then I stop and think: what if *I* had a nine-to-five, or collaborators who were infrequently available, or a fiendish commute? Honestly: how does *anyone* find the time and strength to write a respectable new show each year, again and again? And is it simply a question of being financially comfortable?

I've been reading biographies of some very successful theatre writers who early in life (and throughout life) earned plenty of money. All of them continued to work extremely hard. (Moss Hart perhaps shortened his life through overwork.) Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers, Arthur Laurents—all immensely gifted, ambitious, *driven*, regardless of their economic origins. Noël Coward was obliged to earn a living from childhood and had little formal education; Cole Porter was born to immense wealth. They were alike in the blood, sweat and tears they poured into their effortless-seeming creations. Porter, the silver-spooned Yalie, and Berlin, the poor immigrant kid, both did draft after draft after draft of their songs until there was nothing left on the page but what was essential. And that's not easy.

Cole Porter

Work methods varied greatly. Oscar Hammerstein was methodical, painstaking and sometimes slow. Rodgers was very fast, and so was Lorenz Hart when he was sober enough to work; they wrote the songs for *Pal Joey* in fifteen days. And speaking of speed, Coward claimed to have written *Private Lives* in a matter of a few days. (According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Music,* Handel composed *Messiah* between August 22 and September 14, 1741. Do we really believe that? All those hundreds of thousands of notes, with a quill pen? Oh, well; legends are wonderful!)

Lorenz Hart

There's no simple answer to any question about the arcane craft of theatre writing. There's no pattern. There's no guidebook guaranteeing success. There are only guideposts, whether you have a monthly check from grandpa's trust fund or the need to find a second job just to pay the rent. Somehow, if you mean to make it happen—and if you have the goods—you will find a way or die trying. Look at the masters: no dilettantes among them. Rich or hungry, old or young, glamorous or drab, they had one thing in common besides genius…

Noel Coward

They simply never quit.

—April 2002

18.
Class and Nerve

I'm writing this a few days after the opening of the Broadway musical blockbuster *Hairspray.* What good news!—a big, fat, unqualified hit. It can only help the business and everyone who toils in it. The composer, Marc Shaiman, is known to me from his movie scores—I especially liked *Bogus*—and it is clear he knows theatre music. He also brings to it (like David Yazbek of *The Full Monty*) a pop sensibility. This is also good news.

Those of you who have been following this column for some time know what a purist I can be. My life-long love affair with great theatre songs has made me, if not a perfectionist, something of a snob. If a piece can be beautifully crafted (in my view), why settle for less? And why should we expect pop songwriters, who have different standards, to conform to the particular demands of theatre writing?

But you will also know that I am crazy about many genres of music—jazz, swing, country-and-western, folk, gospel, movie music—not to mention opera and most forms of "serious" music. But only the best in each of these disciplines! There's never enough time for mediocrity.

The question then becomes how to get the best of the best of any genre into forms that will work in and enrich theatre pieces. The answer seems to be: put the material into the hands of seasoned theatre professionals who know how to structure a show. When that happens, you get a mega-hit like *Ain't Misbehavin'* — no dialogue, no flab, all songs, all wonderful.

Try to duplicate that pattern and you may get the good-but-not-sensational: *Sophisticated Ladies, Eubie.* From there the copycats go downhill to the inept, embarrassing and forgotten.

Consider another distinct success: *Smoky Joe's Café.* I've been listening to this lately, and watching the videotape, with renewed admiration. Frankly, I'd forgotten what fine songwriters Lieber and Stoller are—funny, witty, dramatic and passionate. They are also craftsmen, with a wide range of interests. Very impressive. Could they write a book show? Why not, with the right librettist?

A scene from *Smoky Joe's Cafe*

Another example (don't laugh): ABBA. My wife is a major ABBA fan so I've been perforce listening to their stuff for decades, and you know what? I think it's terrific. I mean the best of it. Not only do Andersson and Ulvaeus come up with great hooks and vamps, but they have also created quite a body of memorable melodies. And there's something about their relentless professionalism that finally erodes all resistance—I listen today with more pleasure to "Fernando" and "Dancing Queen" than I did when they were new. One cannot make light of ABBA's hold on the public

ABBA

imagination, and why would one? What's wrong with popularity?

When I was a child, the great pop songwriters were also the great theatre and movie writers. Not until the 1950's did a gulf begin to appear and then widen. Pop writers were not interested in the discipline of theatre writing, and some theatre writers forgot about things like tunes and strong, simple emotions. Countless theatre songs never had a chance to become popular, and countless pop songs were such dreck they could never have engaged a theatre audience.

This "either-or" was a most unfortunate development. Pop songs need to have class, and theatre songs need to hit a nerve. When you get "both-and," then you know the piece is going to be around for generations.

Today at breakfast in the local diner and later in the barbershop I heard *Beauty and the Beast, Mack the Knife, I'll Never Fall in Love Again, I'm a Woman, Blue Moon, I Get a Kick Out of You, Send in the Clowns.* Get the picture? A wild variety, from many sources, but every one sturdy enough to hold a stage anytime, any place. These ideas, rhythms, melodies and moods are a blend of the idiosyncratic and the universal, and each of these compositions has enormous sophistication along with a breathtaking simplicity.

(Admittedly, the diner and the barbershop feature radio stations that cater to people of a certain age. And admittedly, also, I'm not listing what I "tuned out.")

In the right hands, stand-alone songs and revue material can contribute significantly to the musical theatre. *And the World Goes 'Round,* for example, is a knockout. So is *Side by Side by Sondheim.* And think of a period piece like *Tintypes* or a skillfully contrived sermon like *"A" My Name Is Alice.* Isn't it lucky that there's such a range of tastes, and something for everyone? Because when all is said and done, all you need is an idea and excellence. And—oh, yes—collaborators who are all in sync, plus inspired casting, plus producers who know their business…

That's not asking very much.

—September 2002

19.
The Curious Case of Bruce Weber and *Little Ham*

Just before Christmas in 2001, *Little Ham* was nearing the end of its run at the tiny Hudson Guild theatre under the ægis of Amas Musical Theater (non-profit) and the commercial producer Eric Krebs. A few reviews had appeared—mostly positive, including a rave in *The New Yorker*—but hopes were dim for a future, bigger production.

Then, unexpectedly, *The New York Times* critic Bruce Weber caught the show, loved it, and wrote the kind of review that theatre writers and performers dream about. His first paragraph described *Little Ham* as "a jazzy musical bauble with nothing to recommend it but fine songs, a cast with sass and charm and an attractive, modest production….It deserves the celebratory noise of a few bells and whistles."

Of Judd Woldin's music Weber wrote:

"…(it) doesn't seek an original sound, but merely plumbs a great tradition with skill and joy…"

"The level of sophistication in *Little Ham* is through the roof, which ought to say something encouraging about the jazz idiom as a continuing source of theatrical material…."

"Not incidentally, the lyrics by Mr. Woldin and Richard Engquist are also terrific, expressive and facile without ever showing off or yielding to sophomoricisms."

Bruce Weber

Further he wrote:

"There's not a soft spot, really, in the 14-member ensemble, which exudes the invaluable virtue of being collectively attuned to the spirit of the show, a tribute to the wielder of the tuning fork, the director Eric Riley."

As everyone knows, if the future of a show is in doubt the only review that matters is the one in *The New York Times.* In 1984, the first (minuscule) production of *Kuni-Leml,* at the 99-seat Jewish Repertory Theatre, was unanimously praised; but not until Richard Shepard of the *Times* joined in the praise did it become possible to finance an off-Broadway run, which lasted long enough to engender dozens of regional and amateur productions and publication by Samuel French. Therefore, Bruce Weber's Christmas Eve valentine made *Little Ham* a new ballgame (forgive the doubly-mixed metaphor). Over the next few months, Eric Krebs was able to raise enough money for an off-Broadway production—not the bigger, glitzier show everyone wanted but, given the investment climate of 2002, not something to be sneezed at. The cast size would remain the same, as would the band, but there would be a new set and more glamorous costumes. In the medium-sized Houseman Theatre, we thought our baby would look grown-up enough. At any rate, as grown-up as we could afford.

The show would be basically what it had been at the Hudson Guild. There was some rewriting in an attempt to solve problems in logic and flow, some restaging because of the different house, some expanding of the dances, and some inevitable recasting since several of our actors had moved on to other assignments.

But we still had our Little Ham, of whom Mr. Weber had written: "Certainly in the title role, André Garner couldn't be better cast. A lithe and agile performer with a Ben Vereen smile and the slithering, piping tenor of a precocious con artist, he's perfect for the role…." During the hiatus between the Hudson Guild and the Houseman, Bruce Weber's interest in *Little Ham* resulted in a further Times piece by him (January 25, 2002), and yet another on September 8—but now he was beginning to hedge his bets:

"It's interesting—and a little nervous-making—for a critic to revisit the source of an enthusiasm. The relish of anticipating the repeat of a pleasurable theatre experience is mitigated by worry that the first time around I was in an overly generous frame of

The cast of *Little Ham*

mind or just feeling thickheaded or tolerant." Reading that, I thought "Uh-oh." But Weber's enthusiasm over the months meant that the *Times* gave us great publicity, the kind one cannot buy (especially on our bare-bones budget). A long article by Marjorie Rosen in the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday *Times* (September 22), along with three photographs, made us seem like the new girl in town.

Then we opened officially, September 26, and the next day Bruce Weber's new review appeared.

"…the second time around, alas [the] experience is tepid….the show never jells, and though it is possible that the ingredients are still simmering on their way to a boil, at a recent preview it reached the table uncooked..."

"…the score by Judd Woldin doesn't exactly feel new" (refer back to what Weber wrote in December, 2001).

No mention now of lyrics which are "terrific; expressive and facile…" but an offhand "It still has half a dozen fine songs." (Question: aren't half a dozen fine songs as many as one finds in a major hit?)

André Garner's sterling performance had been similarly downgraded: "His sleek build, grace afoot and pretty-boy smile [no longer a Ben Vereen smile] somehow don't add up to a leading-man performance."

Finally, the director, earlier praised, is summarily dismissed. What are we to make of all this? I don't question Weber's original good will, and I'm sure he was disappointed that the changes he advised, both in print an in private conversations, could not be made. Certainly he missed the leading lady who had taken another job. Probably he was miffed that the larger production he had envisioned was one we could not buy. (One can wonder also why the *Times* assigned Weber to re-review the material. Usually when a show closes and reopens, the paper simply reprints the original review, or whatever parts of it are still appropriate.)

In any case, one cannot read the two reviews side by side without realizing that the first is designed to stir up interest in the show; the second says clearly, "stay away." Does it surprise you that a review is never simply a review? That it is a piece of journalism with a point of view and a specific goal? That an unfavorable piece can be written in such a way as to sell tickets, while a notice full of positive values can be framed in such a way as to throw cold water on the entire enterprise?

Critics or reviewers—whatever one calls them—are human beings. Writers, with a need to satisfy themselves and their employers, as well as to inform the public. Many years ago John Simon put it this way in a *Drama Review* piece:

"…If [the critic's] a serious critic [he] is an artist. . . like any other talent, his responsibility is first and last to himself…That's first and last, but in between there is an audience and an audience that matters… .They are to be provided a piece of reading that will

be pleasurable enough for them to enjoy…."

To be blunt, there is no such thing as a completely fair and impartial review, though some journalists try hard to achieve objectivity. It's infuriating that *The New York Times* review is the only one that carries weight, but that is the case. A quarter of a page in a daily paper can kill you—or give you life. I'd have been more than happy to trade all the wonderful notices *Little Ham* got for a rave in the *Times*, which might have given us weeks of profitability and enough momentum to build an audience.

In fact, we never found an audience during two-and-a-half months of previews and performances. Finally we could no longer run at a loss and closed on December 1. Would it have been different if we'd had funds for a TV commercial? If there'd been an Oprah or a Rosie to go to bat for us? Who knows?

It's hard, of course, to see another dream die. I should be used to it, but I'll never be. If I could only keep in the forefront of my mind a lyric I wrote in another connection for another show:

Who ever said life was perfect?
Who ever said life was fair?
As sure as you're born
You will find there's a thorn
On the roses you weave in your hair...

P.S. Happily, *Little Ham* was videotaped by The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and will be available for viewing. And there is a studio recording of virtually the entire score, performed by the first cast with one substitution; go to www.littleham.com, or buy it at Footlights, 113 East 12th Street in Manhattan.

—November 2002

Editor's note: As of March, 2010, the Little Ham *website is defunct and the physical Footlights shop long since closed and transformed to an online service that no longer carries the out-of-print CD, which seems to be priced as a collectible by third-party vendors selling through the usual outlets such as Amazon.com.*

However, a little web-trolling reveals that it is still available via the website for Samuel French (who license the show for stock and amateur productions) from their backlog of copies sold as demonstration recordings. The price is $17.95 and the direct link is:

http://www.samuelfrench.com/store/product_info.php/products_id/6584?osCsid=undefined

And the script, published under the Samuel French imprint, can be purchased for $8.50 here:

http://www.samuelfrench.com/store/product_info.php/products_id/2654?osCsid=undefined

20.
Zorina's Obituary

Two popular films, *Zelig* (1983) and *Forrest Gump* (1994), amusingly explore the idea of the innocent nonentity as a witness to, and inadvertent participant in, key moments in history. Not surprisingly, these stories resonate with audiences everywhere. They cleverly explore the longing many of us feel for connectedness with great events and colorful personalities, a theme which is also key to the play *Six Degrees of Separation,* and the film based on it.

This phenomenon came vividly to my mind as I read the obituary for Brigitta Lieberson, known professionally as Vera Zorina, who died in April at the age of 86. She was a good friend of Lehman Engel, which is the excuse for my using her death in this connection, but—bear with me—maybe there's something here of significance *vis-à-vis* the place of the individual (seemingly insignificant) in time and space.

So, here (as I read Zorina's obituary) are my snapshots of the 20th century, with trains of thought to social changes and developments in popular culture. (Anything I know to be available, in print or on film, videotape or records, is in **bold** print.)

"Vera Zorina, born Eva Brigitta Hartwig, on Jan. 2, 1917, in Berlin, to Norwegian parents…" Snapshot: World War II, The German occupation of Norway. John Steinbeck's novel, ***The Moon Is Down***, made into a film in 1943, scenes of which are still etched in my memory. At age 10 I got a vivid impression of totalitarianism.

"…Joined the Ballet Russe in 1933," performing in New York and London, among other places. Entered into a romantic liaison with the dancer-choreographer Leonide Massine and his wife. " Snapshot: social change. In the world of the dance, unconventional life styles are merely titillating, not scandalous. It would take the rest of society some time to catch up.

References: Noël Coward's play ***Design For Living***, in which Coward, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne played a heterosexual(!) *menage a trois.* From the same period, the film ***These Three*** (1936), a bowdlerized but still fascinating version of Lillian Hellman's ***The Children's Hour***. Hellman, a friend of Lehman Engel, was a deep-dyed Marxist until her death, while Lehman was an undoctrinaire, left-leaning liberal. But all these people were outside the mainstream in their private lives.

"…in 1937, in London, Samuel Goldwyn saw her performing in ***On Your Toes***" (score by Rodgers and Hart), and hired her and George Balanchine for ***The Goldwyn Follies***. She married Balanchine and starred on Broadway in ***I Married an Angel*** (1938, also Rodgers and Hart); later filmed without Zorina—a terrible movie.

Snapshot: Balanchine, pioneering ballet in film, with a number of imitators. The form reaches its zenith in 1948 with ***The Red Shoes***, in which you may enjoy the aforementioned Leonide Massine in a major role. Ballet in Hollywood musicals can be wonderful, as in ***An American in Paris*** (1951), but fades after the failure of Gene Kelly's ***Invitation to the Dance*** (1954).

Vera Zorina

My first memory of Zorina is ***Star Spangled Rhythm*** (1942), in which she dances to ***That Old Black Magic***, by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer, two names that open my mind's eye to a thousand other snapshots, set to music.

"After her divorce from Balanchine, she married Goddard Lieberson, president of Columbia Records." Now we're in the great days of show albums, with recordings of the best musicals by the best writers with the best conductors (after Lehman Engel) and, of

course, the original casts. Without Goddard Lieberson, this treasure trove would not exist, and his wife, Brigitta was intimately involved in his life's work. She also became a music consultant and record producer. And she appeared in concert halls narrating works by Stravinsky, Hindemith, Honegger and Walton, as well as directing opera companies in New Mexico and Norway.

Brigitta Lieberson was one of the speakers at Lehman Engel's memorial. She spoke warmly and wittily of their long friendship, and referred candidly to his sexual adventures. A few years earlier that would not have been possible, but by 1982 gay liberation had happened. No one in show business needed to stay inside the closet any more, though some chose to do so and still so choose, which is their own affair.

A sad sidelight: one of the Liebersons' sons died of AIDS, like thousands of others in our community, including many Workshop members. Yet in 2003 AIDS can seem like ancient history as we confront another hideous surprise from Mother Nature.

But where was I? Oh, yes—Zorina's obituary.

Here was a person, born during World War I, died during the Second Gulf War, directly and/or tangentially linked to hundreds of major figures in the arts and commerce, personally involved in the enormous changes in social mores of the 20th century. What can we learn from this: that anyone who is not afraid to live can leave an interesting legacy? That nothing need go to waste? That everything is worth remembering?

Hell, I don't know. I only know that as I enter my 8th decade, I'm very glad to have known Lehman Engel, who knew Richard Rodgers and Lillian Hellman and Gene Kelly and Goddard Lieberson and Vera Zorina—who was married to Balanchine and had an affair with Massine, who knew Nijinsky, who worked with Stravinsky…

Connect the dots.

—June 2003

21.
Getting Out and Hanging In

"Have I Stayed Too Long at the Fair?" asks the old song lyric, and one can imagine the singer trying to stir the ashes of an old love in hopes of finding a live ember. Getting out when the getting is good is quite a trick in affairs of the heart, in business or politics, and in many areas of the performing arts.

How many keyboard artists can still dazzle in old age, as Rubenstein, Horowitz and de Larrocha could? How many string players?—damn few. What concert singers continue to spin golden tones into their sixties? (Think Christa Ludwig, Birgit Nilsson, Placido Domingo.) True, a singer can extend a career by sheer force of personality long after the natural beauty of the voice has diminished. Remember Mabel Mercer? Have you checked out Bobby Short or Julie Wilson lately? On the other hand, Sinatra toward the end was painful to listen to, but who can fault him for wanting to keep on?

For actors who stay in shape and whose memories are intact, the problem is usually one of finding suitable roles, which accounts for the dubious rewards of one more tour of *Hello, Dolly!* with Carol Channing, *The King and I* with Yul Brynner or *Zorba* with Anthony Quinn. Watching Mae West in *Sextette* at age 85 is a grotesque joke that only Mae seems not to be in on. Actors who are able to find age-appropriate vehicles avoid the poignant sighs of too long at the fair.

Then there are the artists who make a good-natured virtue of the never-ending farewell tour, when the audience's pleasure may be tied to nostalgia or the

Susan Birkenhead

questions, "Can he still do it?" "What is she going to wear?" I well remember Marlene Dietrich's last New York appearance—alternately commanding and drooping, but still worth the price of admission.

Admittedly there are stars who manage to retire at their peaks, whenever that may be: Deanna Durbin in her twenties, Greta Garbo, thirties, Sonja Henie, forties, Jane Fonda, fifties. But to do that requires being very rich, very secure, very tired, or all three. Most performers hate the thought of hanging it up. How will they replace the charge of a job well done, the thrill of public adulation?

Writers, of course, face none of these issues. No one cares what we look like or how old we are as long as we can cut the mustard. Can "too long at the fair" apply to us?

I thought of this when Susan Birkenhead moderated one of our summer sessions and expressed the conviction that people should not stick around in the Workshop beyond a few years. "Too long at the fair" and you become a Workshop junkie. Susan did not, I hasten to add, suggest that we stop writing, but that we stop relying on the group dynamic and get on with our creative lives.

She has a point. New York (and L.A.) are full of theatre writers who joined the Workshop, got what they needed, and moved on. Some, like Susan Birkenhead, got hooked up almost immediately with established writers (Mary Rodgers, Jule Styne). Others relied on their collaborators for constructive criticism. Still others felt that continuing to present their material in a "classroom" was no longer productive. Only a few—Ed Kleban, notably—relied on the workshop throughout their writing careers.

Captain Courageous

The difficulty in leaving the Workshop, even long after we have ceased to be productive, is that it has become a warm cocoon, a safe haven, a second family—not to mention an interesting way to spend a few hours a week, listening to songs and scripts and then hanging out with pals. These are important considerations, not to be denigrated. Hey, am I not still hanging around? This is my 31st year in the workshop, my 21st as a moderator. Admittedly, I rarely presented my own material after I started getting produced (1980), but maybe I should have! Maybe I'd have had a better track record!

"Too long at the fair" was very much in my mind a year ago, for I intended to retire at age 70, but how could I pass up the opportunity to do the Monday group?

So here we are. I'm still delighted to be exposed to young talent, and to enjoy the leaps ahead many of you are making in terms of craft. And I hope that all of us—especially me—will have sense enough to figure out when it really is time to say "So long, and thanks for everything."

—September 2003

22.
Share Something with the World

Here's a win-win proposition.

How'd you like to (1) get your work into a place where it will be available to hundreds of thousands of people; (2) perform a valuable public service; and (3) get a nice tax deduction at little or no cost to you? (I guess that's win-win-win.)

This all started because I'm a library freak (it's free). The main branch of the Brooklyn Public Library is my source of books, videotapes, DVDs, CDs and it has a terrific collection of scores and libretti. But—here's the rub—not many recent acquisitions.

Surprise, surprise! Budget cuts have not only reduced the library's staff and hours, but have also made the acquisition of new works very difficult. That's not right! As New York's most populous borough, Brooklyn should not have to suck the hind teat, to use an old country expression.

Moreover, the huge numbers of young people who hang out at the library might expand their knowledge and broaden their taste if there were more exciting new stuff on the shelves. Your stuff, for example—scripts, scores, cast albums, spin-offs, whatever.

What's needed? Plays, musicals, operas, orchestral and choral works, film sound tracks, jazz, DVDs and videotapes of movies, TV specials, "gala" performances and documentaries, and revue material.

CDs (no audio tapes and nothing pirated, please!) of every kind of music from rock to Rachmaninoff, hip-hop to Hohvaness. Anything within the bounds of good taste.

What might you contribute in addition to your own scripts and scores? Virtually any published (or at least performed) material that is in good condition and of professional quality, whether for reading, listening or viewing.

Maybe there are CDs, Videotapes or DVDs in your collection that you are ready to part with; got an extra copy of *Gypsy* or *Parsifal?* Billie Holiday, Billy Taylor, Billy Eckstine, Billy Joel, Billy Barnes, *Bill Bailey*, *Billy Jack*, *Billy Elliott* or *Billy Budd*?

Why not share something with the world and make room in your study for something new?

Think about it. Why shouldn't your work be out there with that of Satie, Sondheim, Kander and Ebb, Carole King, Rimsky-Korsakov and Lil' Kim? And here is the icing on the cake: enclose a note with your contributed material as to its retail value, and the library will send you thanks and tax-deduction receipt. It's legal, it's moral, it's sensible.

The Brooklyn Public Library

Is there a down side to any of this? I can't think of one.

Send your material to:

Brooklyn Public Library
Grand Army Plaza
Brooklyn, NY 11238-5619
Att: Jack McCleland

(Jack is a playwright and member of the Dramatists Guild. He will make sure that your gift is treated with respect.)

One caveat: The library will add to their catalog and their shelves many contributed items, but it does reserve the right to dispose of items that are redundant, in poor condition, or that are inappropriate, at its discretion.

P.S. You should know that Brooklyn Public Library is the fifth largest public library system in the entire U.S. of A. It is completely independent of its neighbor across the East River. In addition to the Central (main) Library there are 58 branches, so every neighborhood in Brooklyn will benefit from your contribution.

P.P.S. If Brooklyn doesn't interest you, find a library that does. Get involved. Get your "dream children" out there where they can be discovered, enjoyed and reproduced. Why do we write, if not to be heard? The public library is the logical place to start.

—March 2004

23.
Long Term Memories

If you live long enough, short-term memory starts to go. That's the bad news. The good news is twofold: *What do you expect of someone my age?* And *Long-term memory stays.* An old friend in my home town said, dispiritedly, "I can remember things that happened ninety-five years ago, but not yesterday."

Long-term memory really matters if you love songs. By the time I started school I had acquired a large repertoire merely by listening to my parents, who often sang as they went about their work. Their taste in music was eclectic and spanned centuries, and I soaked it all up—hymns, pop songs and show tunes from Eubie Blake to Harry Warren, silly vaudeville stuff, sentimental wartime ballads, you name it. Picture me at age five, trudging off with lunch bucket in hand, disturbing the Minnesota morning with "You go home and get your scanties, I'll go home and get my panties and away we'll go! Ohohohoh, off we're

gonna shuffle, shuffle off to Buffalo!" followed by my heartrending interpretation of "Just a Baby's Prayer at Twilight." Anyone care to hear me channeling my dad channeling Fanny Brice and Al Jolson? Or my mom's version of "Doodle-do-do"? There's a lot of trash rattling around in my brain along with treasure!

But back to business…

Late in May, a *New York Times* critic wondered in print which of the Tony-nominated musicals might point toward theatre songs of the future. What might prove to be influential? What will be popular fifty years from now as a result of what's written today? It would be foolish to predict, but you young folks make a mental note: when 2054 comes, see what you're still singing from 2004.

I'm forever singing show tunes, usually without making a sound. Rodgers and Hart by the hour; Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer; Dietz and Schwartz. Maury Yeston's "New Words" starts looping through my mind and I have a hell of a time replacing it. Today I've been obsessing on two great standards by Sammy Fain and Irving Kahal, and I can't even name the shows they're from. (Okay, I'll look it up: "I Can Dream, Can't I?" and "I'll Be Seeing You," from *Right This Way*—1937.)

Ah, Nostalgia!

Yes, there are literally thousands of songs I'll happily take with me to my grave, but how many shows in their entirety would I listen to without growing restive? I've made a list, starting with my earliest recollections.

Show Boat (Even in its longest version.)
Porgy and Bess. (I prefer the Broadway version to the full opera.)
The Wizard of Oz (The film, of course.)
Carousel
Annie Get Your Gun
Kiss Me, Kate (Without the recent interpolations.)
Guys and Dolls
The Threepenny Opera (The Blitzstein version.)
The Most Happy Fella
West Side Story (Though I could now do with out the dialogue.)
The Music Man
She Loves Me
A Little Night Music
Sweeney Todd

And one operetta—*The Merry Widow*—which has never failed to delight me in any of its incarnations.

What do these pieces have in common, besides the high quality of the songwriting? Each has a compelling story.

My guess is that what will endure and perhaps be trend setting are those theatre pieces which have strength in all three elements: book, music, lyrics. I'll bet that some—perhaps most—of the masterpieces listed above will still be performed a hundred years from now. What do you think?

—June 2004

24.
Wildly Improbable Things

Ortiz - American League

The end of the American League's Championship Season struck me as a metaphor for something; I'm not sure what. How to face a seemingly impossible task? Whether to keep fighting against overwhelming odds? The Red Sox lose three playoff games against the Yankees, then incredibly come back to win four in a row and take the pennant. Who would have thought that possible?

Apparently there's still something to be said for never-say-die, it ain't over till it's over, and so forth. I'm no Pollyanna, but I must accept that if miracles don't happen, wildly improbable things do. At least they happen to those who don't know when to quit. As Dorothy Fields wrote for one of her characters, and perhaps herself: "Nothing's impossible I have found/ For when my chin is on the ground/ I pick myself up, dust myself off/ And start all over again."

She also wrote about "The Sunny Side of the Street," which is a song one hears far more often than "Gloomy Sunday."

Recently I attended a class reunion, my fiftieth from Hamline University, and was stunned and elated to discover a whole bunch of schoolmates who still have the ideals, optimism, humane values and hope of half a century ago. Amazing! Here are people unashamed of a liberal arts education and liberal political positions, despite having been bruised, vilified and defeated for decades—even accused of treason because they dare to criticize the government—and hopelessly out of fashion in both major parties. Yet they believe that the pendulum will swing back, that reason will triumph over ideology, that the Gospels will trump Leviticus. Are they crazy? Too stubborn to face facts? Or maybe—just possibly—a tiny bit correct?

Time will tell, and I'm not holding my breath, but I'm here to say that those hopeful old timers (my generation) gave me the same absurd kind of joy I got from watching "The Motorcycle Diaries," the story of a privileged young man who is spiritually transformed when he is confronted with the world's suffering, injustice and exploitation.

At the same school event I stopped by the theatre, found a photo of myself on the wall (as George Antrobus in *The Skin of Our Teeth*), and listened in on a colloquy between current students and the retired actress Coleen Gray, also a Hamline alum, class of '43. She had a decent career in films, radio and television and now, in her eighties, does volunteer work among prison inmates (talk about New Testament!). What fun to hear her reminisce about working with Frank Capra, Edmund Goulding, Stanley Kubrick, John Wayne, Bing Crosby—not to mention how she managed to avoid Darryl Zanuck's casting couch. At any rate, Coleen Gray is not about to slow down, The students were eating it up and I sat there hoping I might have that kind of enthusiasm a dozen years from now. Not bloody likely!

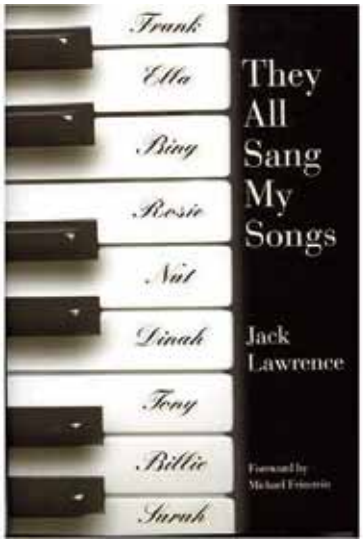
For all of us who wanted—and still want—to be writers, it's easy to become discouraged because the odds against success are so enormous. Even good work may have a struggle to be heard. Judd Woldin and Robert Brittan wrote a wonderful score for *Raisin,* then waited ten tense years for a production. Listening to it now (a concert presentation late in October, beautifully sung, brings this to mind), one can only regret that this excellent piece of work is not universally celebrated.


Jack Lawrence

Still, despite the odds, delays and frustrations, success does happen, through a

hard work, good luck, circumstance—and, of course chutzpah. I've just finished reading *They All Sang My Songs*, a memoir by the songwriter/producer/shrewd businessman Jack Lawrence, who had the first of his dozens of song hits in 1932, and who still writes, hoping to add to his vast catalog—songs I've known and sung throughout life, often not knowing who wrote them.

Let me recommend his book, published by Barricade (www.barricadebooks.com). It candidly discusses Jack's two failed Broadway shows, from conception through production to closing, in a way that makes it clear that writing is only a part of what it takes to make a hit. And the book recalls Jack's many standards: how they happened, what obstacles had to be overcome, how persistence paid off. Not to mention the cutthroat aspects of the business, the shady publishers, the nuisance lawsuits and all the rest. It's a veritable history of the songwriting life from



1930 on—a world that no longer exists, but, hey, history is fascinating. And it's nice to think of Jack Lawrence, age 92, rolling in royalties and not counting himself out.

So if you find yourself in the doldrums and need a shot of optimism, brush up against (or read about) someone who's still a believer. It may be just what you need to get you back to the drawing board. If the Red Sox can do it…

—October 2004

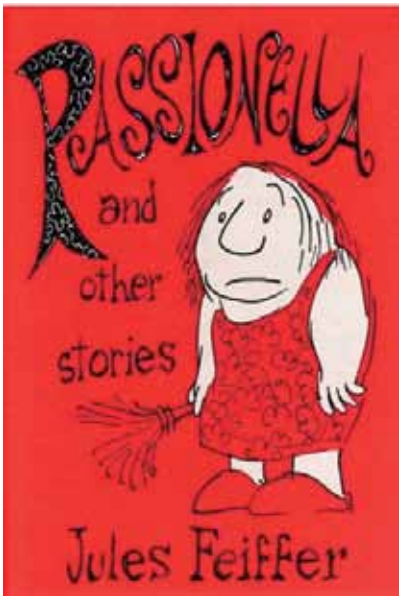
25.
Cinderella

The patron saint of musical theatre is Cinderella.

Whoever concocted the original story bequeathed to the world of popular culture a gift that never stops giving. *Cinderella* is the engine that drives more than a hundred movies, more than a few stage plays, operas and operettas, and countless TV shows including the "makeover" models, the "queer eye" transformations, and even the redecoration of houses.

The process of turning a sow's ear into a silk purse—or merely bringing out its hidden beauty—has universal, undying appeal. Just as no one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public, no one ever went wrong by waving a magic wand over a kitchen slave and watching a princess emerge. There's a touch of the miraculous bout it, like watching a monarch butterfly emerge from its husk(or whatever that is) and spread its wings.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the world of musical comedy that we love. The many months of



grueling work it would have taken in reality to transform the gutter-snipe Eliza Dolittle into the belle of the ball are telescoped into a few brilliant strokes of words, music and stagecraft and—*voila*! We don't see the magic wand, but it's there.

The real-life awkward teenager Louise Hovick did not turn into the graceful, witty Gypsy Rose Lee overnight, but on the stage it happens gloriously before our eyes in the space of a musical sequence. Magic!

Who learned this lesson better than Jerry Herman and his collaborators? We see the ordinary Albin recreate himself into a powerful diva. The grieving widow Mame comes back to life in a spectacular way. The hardworking matchmaker Dolly Levi puts on a red dress and is resurrected into her youthful self. Irene Molloy tries ribbons down her back. Other working-class people know the power of "elegance" and are not reluctant to put on their Sunday clothes. Gooch in *Mame* takes off her glasses, puts on a girdle, and thus revolutionizes her life.

Kander and Ebb did variations on the *Cinderella* archtype. Their characters may be stuck in prison or other unappealing locales, but the power of imagination creates a kind of glamour that astonishes us. Whatever happened to class? There it is in the image of the Spider Woman, everyone's fairy godmother.

Imagination turns Aldonza into Dulcinea and Lizzie into Melisande. Arthur Laurents is responsible in part for *Gypsy* (see above); for Leona in *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, a very ordinary woman transformed by love; for Maria in *West Side Story* who "feels pretty" (with an assist from Sondheim and Bernstein) when she's loved by a pretty wonderful boy.

Even when characters don't change physically or undergo ego-enhancing experiences, they can affect us dramatically simply by getting dressed up: Tracy and her mother in *Hairspray.* The instantaneous, extreme makeover of Passionella in *The Apple Tree* is dazzling.

If you'd like to see some striking examples of this scene in various forms, check out the following films: *Lady for a Day* (1933) in which the aged May Robson is transformed from a drunken bag lady into a society grande dame. Repeated, with Bette Davis, in *A Pocketful of Miracles* (1961). The same scene in reverse: Jan Sterling takes off her face in *The High and the Mighty* (1954). Shirley MacLaine, having taken her face off, puts it back on in *Postcards from the Edge* (1990).

All of these are variations on the Cinderella moment. But in musical theatre, it's more than a moment; it's a *raison d'être.* Consider what Frank Loesser did in reinventing Sidney Howard's play, *They Knew What They Wanted.* The heroine gets a new name and a new glow. The dialogue gets poetry and gorgeous music. A drab, depressing play becomes a thrilling, life-affirming event. *Cinderella* sleight-of-hand on a grand scale.

Ah, change, unexpected and uplifting! An illiterate country girl becomes the star of a wild-west show and gets to sing like Ethel Merman! Another illiterate girl marries a miner who becomes a millionaire and then she becomes *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*! A prostitute becomes the first lady of Argentina! An orphan is adopted by the richest man in the world and gets to meet the president of the United States!

Hope, magic, miracles—not to mention glamour. But let's tackle that tangential subject another time around.

—March 2005

26.
Too Young the Curmudgeon

We all know that criticizing fellow writers is simply not done; especially in public; never in print. When someone is cheeky enough to break this rule, as Michael John LaChiusa did in his *Opera News* diatribe, *The Great Gray Way* (August issue, pp. 30-35) one can only wonder, what is going on here? A grudge coming out into the open? A bilious attack? A demonstration of the notion that there is no such thing as bad publicity?

If you haven't read the article, find it and do so at once. There's much therein with which you'll agree—as I do. Much that will make you think, much that will make you proud (on matters of craft, standards and taste). So let's skip all that good stuff and get to the juicy parts, the parts I consider gratuitous, deliberately provocative ("The American Musical is dead." Oh, really? Folks been sayin' that long as I can remember), or just plain tilting at windmills.

Michael John seems furious that there is a lot of dumb stuff out there. Hello! There's *always* been dumb stuff, there always will be, and it doesn't matter. If Three Stooges fans don't dig Bob Newhart, what difference does it make? There's room in the world for *Hellzapoppin* and *Regina*, for Robert Service and Gerard Manley Hopkins, for Fats Waller, Ruth Wallis and J. S. Bach. If something bores or offends you, close the book, turn the dial, change the channel, leave at intermission. Why waste time and energy complaining about mediocrity? What's more, one man's Mede is another man's Persian: I know people who loved *Tommy,* others who insist that they enjoy the concert works of Elliott Carter. Shall I call them liars?

Michael John says it's not the commercial success of what he calls "faux" musicals that bothers him, but one can't escape the feeling that it does. Since he seems not to be interested in commercial success for himself—if he were he would choose different properties—why lambaste those who have had it? Do I detect a whiff of sour grapes? Was that a green-eyed monster flitting among the flats?

Another thing: why "faux?" The word suggests ersatz, manufactured, unreal. I think it's the wrong word. *The Producers* and *Hairspray* are as real as anything I know, and deliciously enjoyable—the products of genius. A genius different from that which gave us *Messiah* and the Sistine Chapel, but genius nonetheless.

Michael John LaChiusa

There's a story that on the opening night of *Annie Get Your Gun,* one of Irving Berlin's friends said, "But it's so old-fashioned," to which Mr. B. replied, "Yes, a nice, old-fashioned hit." Is popular a problem?

One of the *Hairspray* writers, Marc Shaiman, did strike back, making use of a website (talkinbroadway.com), but I can't imagine he was seriously annoyed. How could he, or Thomas Meehan, or—for that matter—Mel Brooks be injured? Their work needs no defense, explanation, justification or apology.

In my devout youth I aspired to the attitude, "I've nothing to prove and nothing to defend; only a life to live." It still sounds good. I also like the bit of doggerel Norman Vincent Peale used to quote when he heard people sneer at success which was—shall we say—less than highbrow:

I hate the guys
Who criticize
And minimize
The other guys
Whose enterprise
Has made them rise
Above the guys
Who criticize
And minimize.

It also seems futile to grouse—as Michael John does—about producers who mount catalog shows (collections of pop songs under the guise of musicals).

The people who finance such as Lennon, The Buddy Holly Story" and Good Vibrations are not, absent those properties, going to raise money for *Lulu, Assassins* or *Marie Christine.* They're just not. Get over it.

Mr. LaC. admits that catalog shows can be good: he admires *Movin' Out,* but he classifies it as a ballet, not a musical, so perhaps some of his outpouring of anger comes from semantics. A catalog show is not ipso facto inferior: think of *Ain't Misbehavin'* and *Smoky Joe's Café.*

Of course, there *are* terrible shows of every type. Even competent writers have bad days. *Bye Bye Birdie* is a delight; *Bring Back Birdie* is dismal. *Whorehouse* is wonderful; its sequel is not. But as Carol Hall reminds us, no one writes bad stuff on purpose. Sometimes you don't know what you've got until it's too late.

Hey, Michael John, I'm glad you got it off your chest, but you're not going to change the world. Everything you write is going to be produced, so relax. Lighten up. Do us a favor and give us a musical comedy!

Meanwhile, it isn't cool to throw darts at people who don't write what you write. Your *First Lady Suite* is terrific, but so is *Hairspray.* You're too talented and still too young to come across like some cranky old fart. Leave that to those of us who've earned the right.

—October 2005

27.
Adaptation

Lehman Engel

Lehman Engel believed and taught that adaptation was the way to go in choosing material for musical shows. But he suggested choosing flawed plays, books or films that would be improved by changes in the story and the addition of songs.

He wouldn't have recommended adapting something that seemed near perfect—*Casablanca,* for example, or *The Grapes of Wrath.* Had he lived to suffer through the musical version of *Sunset Boulevard,* I imagine he would have snapped, "What did I tell you? Don't try to improve on a classic!"

Mostly I think he was right. Trying to make a musical out of *Gone with the Wind, Anna Karenina,* or *Great Expectations* is asking for trouble. But there are exceptions: I liked *Oliver* almost as much as *Oliver Twist,* and *Raisin* better than A *Raisin in the Sun.*

Tinkering with a classic does not necessarily end in disaster. *She Loves Me* is wonderful; so is the film on which it is based. *My Fair Lady* and *Pygmalion*—both marvelous. *Silk Stockings* is not *Ninotchka,* but it's not bad.

But Lehman's view that it is better to work with material that needs help is bolstered by the triumph of shows which are based on moderately successful, or seemingly unsuitable for adaptation, sources.

The Most Happy Fella—a glorious, touching romance from a rather drab, unpleasant play. The characters are made more likeable, the comedy is added, and, of course, the score is gorgeous.

Cabaret—head and shoulders above its source material, which was pretty good. Reimagining it, creating the world of the cabaret and the character of the Master of Ceremonies, and having two scores side by side—wow! Joel Grey, Lotte Lenya and Jack Gilford helped.

Chicago—thrillingly better than the film *Roxie Hart* or the play on which that was based. The concept, along with the terrific score, made the difference.

(Let's add that both *Chicago* and *Cabaret* became superb movies, in both cases through a process of reinvention. The moral seems to be, if you're going to do something again, do it different. And better.)

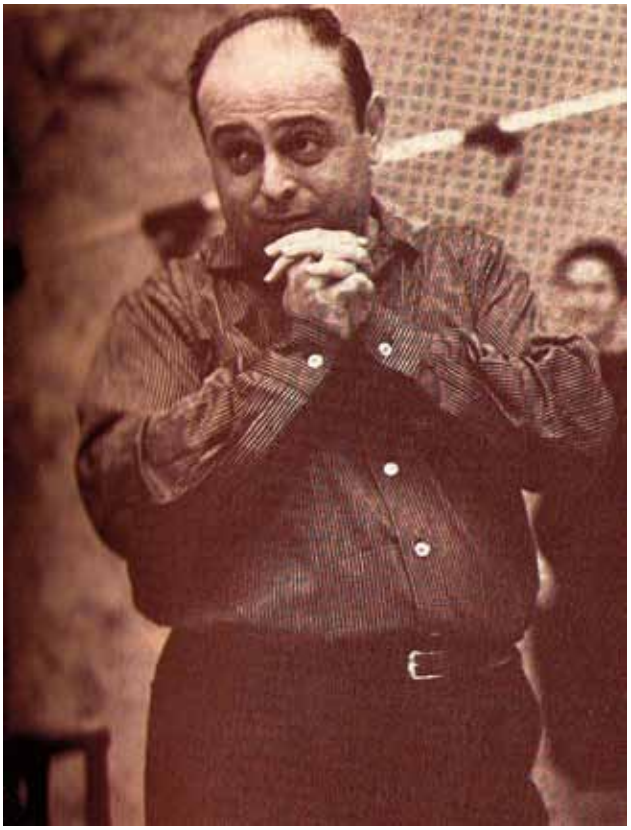
Carousel—from a famous but depressing play. Hammerstein seemed to know just what to use and what to discard, what to change and what to leave alone. And then those Rodgers melodies!

Little Shop of Horrors—a delicious dark comedy from a tacky cult film. I thought it was a dreadful idea until I heard those songs in front of an audience. Then I got it.

It seems to me that too much reverence to an underlying property is not helpful: *Big* and *My Favorite Year* were not bad shows, but were they needed? *The Goodbye Girl, Footloose, Saturday Night Fever*—why?

And what can be gained by adapting properties that are simply worshiped in their original form: *The Red Shoes, Cyrano, Dracula, Doonesbury*? Or where the subject matter is patently unsuitable: *Carrie, The Wild Party*?

But you never know. Some inventive person or persons will come along and prove me wrong in every instance. Can't make a stage piece out of the animated film *The Lion King*! (Yes, you can, and a good one.) Can't do a stage version of *Billy Elliott* as good as the original! (Apparently you can.) As for *Lestat, Tarzan* and *Lord of the Rings,* we'll soon find out.



So maybe someday we'll have a Broadway musical version of *The Ten Commandments,* starring Mel Gibson as Moses. In Hebrew. With music and lyrics by Eminem. And it'll be a hit.

At this point, I'm beyond astonishment.

—April 2006

28.
The Curmudgeon Rants

He Who Rants

Being a curmudgeon is so satisfying. It's like playing the age card: it makes me feel I have license to say all sorts of unpleasant things without consequences. Of course that isn't true—no one has license to be disagreeable—but I pretend. Herewith, a few rants I've got off my chest before but need to do again:

I. Introducing your presentation in the Workshop: Write it down. Rehearse it. Keep it brief. Don't tell us more than we need to know. Remember, we've been doing this a long time; we're smart and intuitive. We get it. Do not shoot yourself in the foot by boring us or condescending to us. One minute is more than enough to set up your song. You need not, and should not, summarize the whole show.

II. Commenting on presentations: Lately, when I'm not moderating, I hear long, self-indulgent commentaries rather than to-the-point comments. Pick the most important observation you want to make, say it succinctly, move on and give someone else a chance. We're not there for autobiographies but for helpful advice.. Also, if you hate something, say nothing, because if you hate something and say something, however veiled, we won't be fooled.

III. Standard English: Talk like a grownup! If you've reached the age of 25 or 30 and still sound like a Valley Girl, something is seriously wrong with your maturation—or you're perpetuating a tedious affectation.

Anyone who can learn calculus, operating a computer, or writing music or lyrics can learn to construct and deliver a simple declarative sentence. That is, a sentence uncluttered by "basically," "actually," "sort of," "know what I'm saying?"

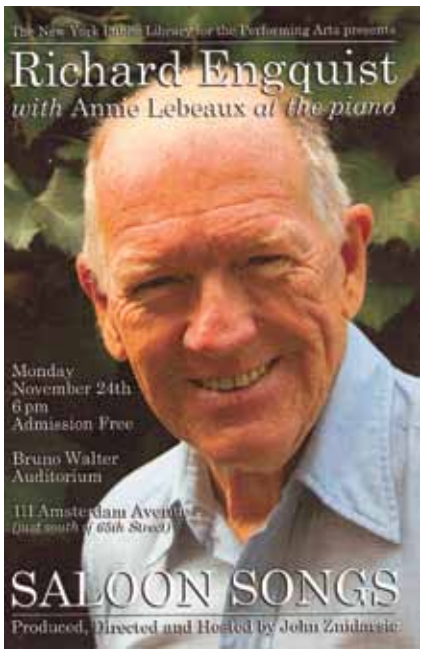
Remember that theatre writing involves expressing yourself clearly. That means identifying objects and actions accurately. To say that something is "like" something is not to say what it is. Call a spade a spade.

"We're, like, crossing the street and he's, like, on my case and I'm, like, is it any of your business? And then we're, like, in each other's face and about to have this, like, awesome fight..."

Gibberish! Paralyzing! And what does it mean?

If you can't break the teenspeak habit on your own, run to a speech therapist and get some help. It will be a worthwhile investment.

(On the other hand, twenty years from now there may not be such a thing as Standard English. But I won't be around to suffer.)



IV. Loyalty: What is it with people who apply to the Workshop, get accepted, go through the program, stick around until they get started on a professional career, and then affiliate with ASCAP? To enjoy an education that's free but worth thou-

sands of dollars—not to mention the support and encouragement of hundreds of colleagues—and then decamp! Maury Yeston has often said this does not trouble him, but it certainly troubles me. Am I missing something? What ever happened to gratitude, loyalty, taste, good manners or a simple sense of justice? (I'm not referring to those who are ASCAP members before they join the Workshop. That's another matter.)

Well, that's enough ranting and venting. On a positive note, I'm still very happy to be associated with a gang of such talented, brilliant, stimulating and for the most part likeable people. It's been a unique adventure, and I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

—December 2007

29.
Look to the Rainbow

Because I am pessimistic and cynical, I sometimes forget that some very good changes have taken place in our society over the past half-century. The Civil Rights movement, for example. No one says racism has disappeared, but the progress made since the demise of Jim Crow cannot be denied.

Late in 1979, auditions were going on for *Elizabeth and Essex,* the story of a great queen's passion for a young man and the tragic results. Michael Stewart and Mark Bramble wrote the book, Doug Katsaros the music and I the lyrics. For Doug and me it was an introduction to the professional world, albeit a small off-Broadway production.

Lynne Thigpen

We were having trouble finding an actress who would dominate the stage as Elizabeth I, who was supposed to be in her sixties during the course of the action. Lots of talented women showed up to sing and read for the part, but lightning was not striking for the writers.

Then in walked Lynne Thigpen and gave a powerful audition. After she left, Mike Stewart said, "She's the strongest we've seen so far." I was thunderstruck at the suggestion we might cast a young black woman as the aging, very English monarch. We continued to search, though I think Doug, youthful and adventurous, would have gone along with this colorblind casting. (Luckily Estelle Parsons—as strong an actress as one can imagine—decided to take the role and solve the problem.)

Today I'd be more than happy to have Lynne Thigpen playing Elizabeth Tudor (Sadly, she died young.) And needless to say, if Audra McDonald took a notion to tackle Good Queen Bess, I'd probably have a heart attack from sheer joy.

Recently in drawing up a casting list for the concert version of *Lorenzo, the Libertine Librettist,* I found myself writing down the names of wonderful singer-actors regardless of race, though none of the characters in *Lorenzo* is a person of color. But a few years ago in casting *Little Ham,* it was essential to have white actors in the three "white" roles, or the story wouldn't have made sense.

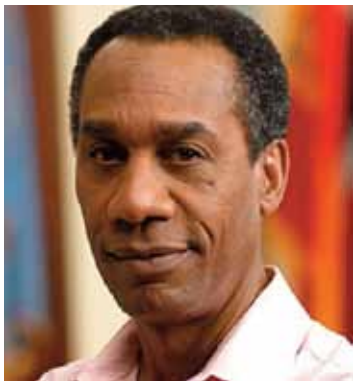
Audiences, at least in New York, are used to colorblind casting. Yet not too long ago, during BAM's attempt to form a repertory company, there was a lot

Ken Page as Nicely-Nicely Johnson

of complaining about black actors in "white" parts—Joe Morton as Oedipus, for example. And some of the critics, John Simon in particular, were very nasty. At that time we were still having gimmicky productions like the all-black *Guys and Dolls,* which seem to be a thing of the past.

So don't tell me nothing changes for the better. We are freer now—at least in some ways—than we were thirty years ago. And freedom is good!

Early in my BMI days it struck me that a musical version of *The Lady Eve* would be fun, with Diana Ross in the Barbara Stanwyck role. But at that time I altered



Joe Morton

the character to account for Ross's skin pigmentation. Today I wouldn't bother unless there were other good reasons to make the change—to make Eve more exotic, for instance. I wonder what Vanessa Williams would think about *The Lady Eve,* but alas, I don't have rights to the property.

Imagine if these newfound casting freedoms had happened long ago. We might have had Sammy davis, Jr. as Mack the Knife or *The Music Man.* Ethel Waters as Mama Rose. Lena Horne in whatever role struck her fancy. And wouldn't that have been thrilling?

—Summer 2007

30.
Summing Up

"Nostalgia isn't what it used to be"—a celebrated witticism—perfectly reflects my mood as I reach the end of a long (26 years), happy turn as one of the Workshop's moderators. I'll be available as a fill-in; I'll have the fun of attending the sessions and listening to bright people; other than that, I'm hanging it up without a twinge. Maybe I'm simply too old and cynical for nostalgia.

What a privilege it's been to be part of this group! I joined up in the fall of '72 and had ten years with Lehman Engel himself in the chair. I wish you all could have known that brilliant, nurturing, exasperating, dandyish gent—with his enormous cigars and three-martini lunches—who could be loving one minute and mean as hell the next. Never boring. Utterly loyal to talent and high standards.

He had favorites: in those years Judd Woldin and Robert Brittan, Ed Kleban, Alan Menken, Maury Yeston, Kelly Hamilton, Skip Kennon, Bob Joseph and Donnie Siegal, to name a few. He liked men a lot more than women, but brilliant lyricists—Ellen Fitzhugh, Annette Leisten, Susan Birkenhead—earned his respect.

Everyone knows the now-famous writers who got their start in the Workshop, but there are plenty of others, not household names, who have had substantial careers. In my "year," for example, were Jack Feldman and Bruce Sussman, and my dear friend and collaborator Doug Katsaros—still in his teens when he joined the Workshop and steadily employed

ever since. Not to mention the countless others who became musical directors, arrangers, academics, historians, orchestrators, coaches, novelists, editors, jingle writers, television and movie writers and composers and who knows what else. It's almost impossible to leaf through a *Playbill* and not find familiar names: present and former Workshop members.

Love affairs began in the workshop—some brief, some long-running—and even a few marriages. Babies were conceived and born between writing assignments. And, inevitably, there were deaths—far too many of them prematurre because of the plague of AIDS. Wonderful writers (and dear people) such as Bruce Peyton, Jeffrey Roy, and the hilarious Michael Devon should have been around for decades to cheer us up. But, then, whoever said life was fair?

There were always big talents in the room, but it's my sense that the overall quality of the writing has risen steadily over the past dozen years. Certainly the number of women has increased dramatically, and not only words-women. Back in the day when naming gifted female composers, after Nancy Ford, Carol Hall and Mary Rodgers, where was the rest of the list? Now I look about the room and see composers like Beth Falcone, Linda Dowdell and Joy Son who would have knocked Lehman Engel off his chair! As would terrific lyricists beginning with Lynn Ahrens, Alison Hubbard, Amanda Green and some favorites of mine I wish were still around: Lenore Skenazy, Amy Powers, Joanne Bogart, Ellen Schwartz and the late Georgia Holof. But I'd better stop dropping names or I'll get in trouble for the dozens of names I don't drop.

So you see I don't wax poetic about the good old days. But there is one aspect of the Workshop that could stand serious improvement. Many younger writers in recent years come in woefully ignorant of the literature. In too many cases there are dreams of theatre writing without knowledge of theatre writing. Falling in love with *Rent* or *Les Miz* won't get you very far. Would you expect to become a painter without ever going to an art museum? Or an architect without learning mechanical drawing?

A classical education in music is a distinct advantage; also expertise in standard English and a rich liberal arts experience. But what is absolutely essential is a familiarity with the great theatre writers of the past. Here is the A list (in alphabetical order and not including librettists). All of their work is easily available. Study them!

Composer-lyricists:
Irving Berlin
Noel Coward
Jerry Herman
Frank Loesser
Cole Porter
Stephen Sondheim

Composers:
Harold Arlen
Leonard Bernstein
Jerry Bock
Cy Coleman
George Gershwin
John Kander
Jerome Kern
Richard Rodgers
Arthur Schwartz
Jule Styne
Haarry Warren
Kurt Weill

Lyricists:
Betty Comden and Adolph Green
Howard Dietz
Fred Ebb
Dorothy Fields
Ira Gershwin
Oscar Hammerstein II
E. Y. Harburg
Sheldon Harnick
Lorenz Hart
Alan Jay Lerner
Johnny Mercer

Note: these are all from the past, though five of these writers are blessedly still among the living. They are the creme de la creme, and you will neglect them at your peril if you want to know about classy theatre writing. (The contemporary A list you already know.)

It amazes me how many people still aspire to be theatre writers, given the odds against success and the miserable remuneration. But it was ever thus, so what can one say but Dream! Hope! Learn! Try!

I'll be following your progress with great love, interest and optimism.

—June 2008

31.
Things To Do During a Depression
(based on recollections of the big one)

1. Visit the public library a lot. There are many books! Also, now, CDs, DVDs, computers, recorded books, classes, and various free programs—at least in Brooklyn.

2. Listen to the radio. Not only music, news, and talk shows, but watch for a return of such good stuff as *Amos 'n' Andy, The Lux Radio Theatre, Inner Sanctum, The Lone Ranger* and *Major Bowes's Original Amateur Hour.*

3. Go to the movies (adults a quarter, kids a dime) on Wednesday when they give away dishes. By the time the next economic upturn comes, those dishes will be collectibles—perhaps antiques!—worth a lot of moola on eBay.

4. Arrange with some neighbors to share the Sunday newspaper. If it's not your turn to get it until Thursday, good. It will be less upsetting.

5. Join a club such as 4-H and develop a "project" like gardening, raising a calf, or sewing. Recycle worn-out clothing as hooked or braided area rugs.

6. Enlist in a choir or neighborhood theatre company. Better yet, organize one of each and write new material in the vein of *Waiting for Lefty, The Grapes of Wrath,* and *The Cradle Will Rock.*

Major Bowes

7. Learn how to bake bread. Not only does it taste and smell good, but you might win a red ribbon and a dollar at the County Fair.

8. Create artistic things out of found objects such as leaves, pebbles, seashells and milkweed pods; give

them away as birthday presents. A visit to the dump or scrap heap is recommended for more exotic treasures.

9. If you're not a handyman (plumber, electrician, etc.), make friends with someone who is and do a swap. Maybe you can mow lawns, baby-sit or chop firewood.

10. Volunteer at your local soup kitchen. You'll get fed, too!

11. Walk or ride a bike for all errands within two miles. Losing some weight is a plus, and you may postpone the onset of arthritis.

12. Instead of dining at a restaurant, get together with pals for a pot-luck picnic or weenie roast, and top off the evening with a singalong. Be sure to include "We're in the Money" and "Happy Days Are Here Again."

13. Finally, don't hold your breath expecting things to get better soon. It took a lot of years of horrible government and outrageous business to bring us to this pass. Happy New Year!

—December 2008

32.
Little Hamline

The term *liberal education* has a particular resonance for me because my college years (1950-54) were spent at a midwestrn oasis of open-mindedness in a vast desert of reaction, conformity and fear. The dignified general in the White House was no idelogue, but it was a time of cold war, blacklists, and deep anxiety about anything alien—and he did not inspire daring or adventure, as Jack Kennedy did a few years later.

I came to Hamline University, then quite a small school, as a freshman in the fall of 1950, having already spent two years there, one day a week, studying violin and chamber music and playing in the school orchestra. Our young conductor, Tom Nee, favored contemporary music—as he continued to do in a sixty-year career in various venues—and I was often confounded by atonal stuff I'd no idea how to hear. My musical background was conventional, 18th and 19th century, tonal, melodic. Not till Bartók became popular in the 1940's did I hear anything that would not have sounded okay in a Victorian salon. Bartók was indeed a breath of fresh air, and accessible; many people referred to him as the fourth B, along with Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. But Tom Nee took us students way beyond Bartók.

The marvelous college choir was heard mostly in a medieval and 20th century repertoire; a pure, ethereal, genderless sound. The head of the music department composed weird little miniature exercises for spinet and the like, that bore no relation to tunes. But, hey, it was different!

In the art department you'd be hard pressed to find anything remotely representational. The reigning idol of the literary set was Dylan Thomas—but he was at least, thank goodness, comprehensible. There was modern dance, and that was it for anything Terpsichorean.

Jim Carlson

Hamline University

Hamline was a church school, preparing young men for the Methodist seminaries, but the professors and staff leaned heavily toward that branch of the denomination sometimes called pink Methodism—socially conscious, often pacifistic, international in outlook and humane in temperament. The Bible was taken seriously but not literally. Among our political heroes: William O. Douglas and Hubert Humphrey, and the occasional moderate Republican like Earl Warren.

Nowhere was the liberal in liberal arts more obvious than in the theatre. Our theatre director Jim Carlson introduced us to a mindbending menu or dramatic works: Shakespeare, Shaw, Ibsen and Wilder, to be sure, then off the beaten path to Garcia Lorca, Tagore, Gorki, Yeats; and strange works from Russia, Japan, Sweden and France by writers we'd never heard of—even a Soviet propaganda piece (ludicrous), and lots and lots of Brecht. Jim produced and directed the American premiere of *The Good Woman of Setzuan,* as well as *The Caucasian Chalk Circle, He Who Says Yes/No, The Private Life of the Master Race,* and on and on—yes, in the heyday of Senator Joe McCarthy!

US playwrights? Of course; not only the expected, but wild cards like Barrie Stavis (world premiere of *The*

Carlson & Engquist

Man Who Never Died, labor martyr Joe Hill), Eric Bentley and Francis Fergusson. Quite a theatrical feast. If Jim produced a film festival, it was sure to include the *avant garde* (Cocteau, Maya Deren) and a splendid piece of propaganda—*The Oxbow Incident*, *The Grapes of Wrath*. When Helen Gahagen Douglas (Nixon's victim) made a swing through the midwest to warn of the right wing, it was our little theatre she spoke in.

Though Jim Carlson never did anything conventional or boring, he nevertheless unstintingly supported those students whose writing was strictly traditional—like me with my musical comedies! And some of the songs I wrote during those years I later recycled, with new lyrics, in such productions as—but you don't want to know!

So when you see me now, square and stodgy, relentlessly (and tediously) playing the elder statesman, know that I in fact had a heady, eclectic, adventurous and often off-the-wall education. If I happen to be sitting in the moderator's chair and you're in the mood to present something absolutely new, fresh, wacky and bizarre, do it. Please. Take me back to the glory days of Hamline U. and my introduction to the wide, wide world.

—June 2009

33.
Build Your House with Care

When Barbara Cook presented her 80th birthday recital, a review in the *Times* suggested that her choice of material seemed to chart a life-long emotional journey, "from faith and innocence through a dark night of the soul that is ultimately rejected with a vigorous assertion of optimism."

An interesting take. Was that what Ms. Cook had in mind, or was she simply putting together a satisfying program of very good songs? And does it matter?

It got me thinking, since I'm not much younger than Barbara Cook: how would I chart my own emotional life in song? How would you? This is better than a parlor game; it's almost therapy.

With thousands of songs stored away in my brain, I decided at once that a list of a few titles—even a few dozen—was impossible. But I was able to come up with categories of songs that seemed to characterize my life's journey.

1935-40 (I was born in 1933): songs my parents sang when they were happy—"Only Make Believe", "Shuffle Off to Buffalo", "Just a Baby's Prayer at Twilight", "Dear Little Boy of Mine", "The Umbrella Man." Plus Sunday School hymns that, try as I might, I've never been able to erase from my consciousness.

1940-45: Big Band stuff; *Your Hit Parade;* Gene Autry; World War II songs—"Der Füehrer's Face"! How I loved Spike Jones!

1945-50: campfire songs, choir music, and tunes I associated with favorite performers, such as Betty Hutton and Marlene Dietrich. For a high school variety show I got myself up in Mae West drag and sang "Frankie and Johnny"!

1950-55: *The Great American Song Book*—especially theatre songs of the period and earlier: Rodgers and Hart/Hammerstein; Irving Berlin; the Gershwins. This was still the golden age of radio for pop music—not to mention classical, operatic, "country" and every other genre.

1955-60: More show music, and the great albums by Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole and others. Radio fades. Gone are the days when one learned every song from *South Pacific, Guys and Dolls* and *Call Me Madam* before seeing the shows.

Well, I won't bore you with the rest of my catalog. But I suggest that you review your own musical experience—what spoke to you powerfully and shaped your taste? How did it lead to your ambition to be a musical theatre writer? What should you be revisiting, or visiting for the first time?

On an entirely different subject…

Over the Thanksgiving holiday I spent time in a wonderful new/old house that struck me as a metaphor for writing a musical. It's an old farmhouse with the charm of those which were well-designed: sturdy, of pleasing proportions, sunny, cozy and inviting. The rooms are on the small side, and the ceilings aren't high, but there's a comfortable, welcoming feeling that says *home and family.*

The house has recently been renovated without altering the structure. The windows, bathrooms and kitchen fixtures are all new and state of the art without appearing anachronistic. The interior and exterior paint job is meticulous and elegant. In other words, one has the charm of an old farmhouse with all the hardware and decor up to date. Perfect!

Why a metaphor for musical theatre?

Because the structure itself is the book—what makes everything else work: sturdy, well-planned, functional, familiar. All else is brand new and exciting—the sound, the look, the surprise and innovation.

Build your house with care. As has often been observed, people don't leave the theatre singing the book or the scenery, but if that book (structure) isn't sound, the whole thing teeters. Which is why the book writer is always the key element but often unappreciated. If you've ever tried to put together a musical starting with a bunch of good songs and no story, you'll know exactly what I mean.

—February 2010

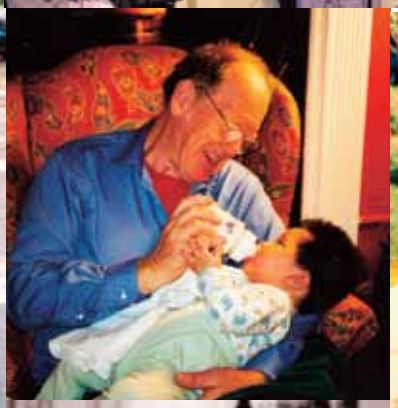
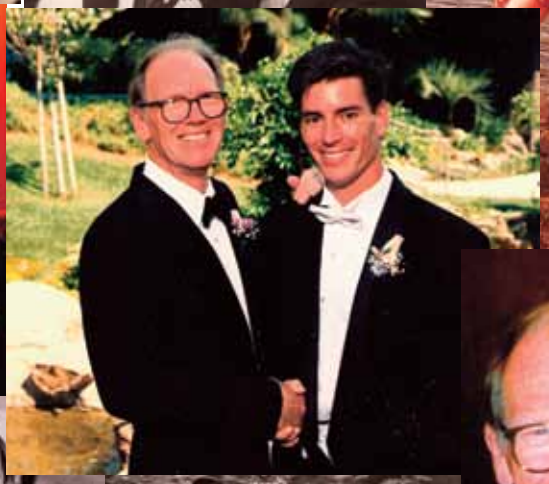
RICHARD ENGQUIST was a teacher of musical theatre at the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop and a musical dramatist. Among the earliest generations of Lehman's students, Richard participated as a lyricist in the Workshop until Lehman's passing in 1982—whereupon he became one of the original members of the Steering Committee formed to carry on the Workshop tradition, and shortly thereafter a key member of the faculty. He moderated the Second Year songwriters' class for many years; and upon Maury Yeston's retirement, moved on to moderate the Advanced class for another six until his own retirement in 2008, though he continued to serve on the Committee and guest-moderate on occasion.

As a theatre lyricist, he wrote the following musicals: With composer Douglas Katsaros, *Elizabeth and Essex, Dennis the Menace, Merry Go-Roundelay* and *Abie's Island Rose* (co-lyricist Frank Evans); with composer Raphael Crystal, *Kuni-Leml* (Outer Critics Circle Award, Best Musical), *My Heart is in the East, Half a World Away, The Cincinnati Saint, Encore*—all at the Jewish Repertory Theatre—plus *Lysistrata* and selections for the revue *Pets;* with composer Judd Woldin, *Lorenzo* and *Little Ham.* His catalog includes a prodigious amount of revue material as well.

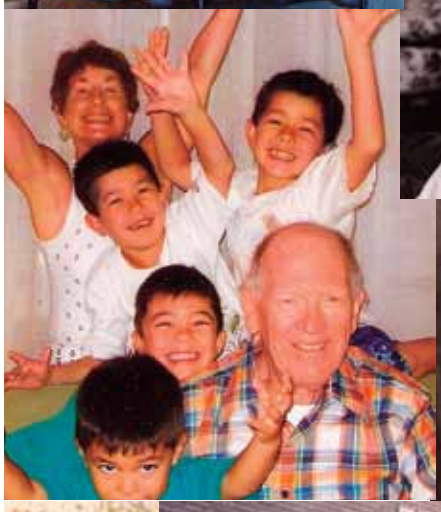
A father and grandfather, he was married to bestselling author and *New York Times* personal health columnist Jane Brody.



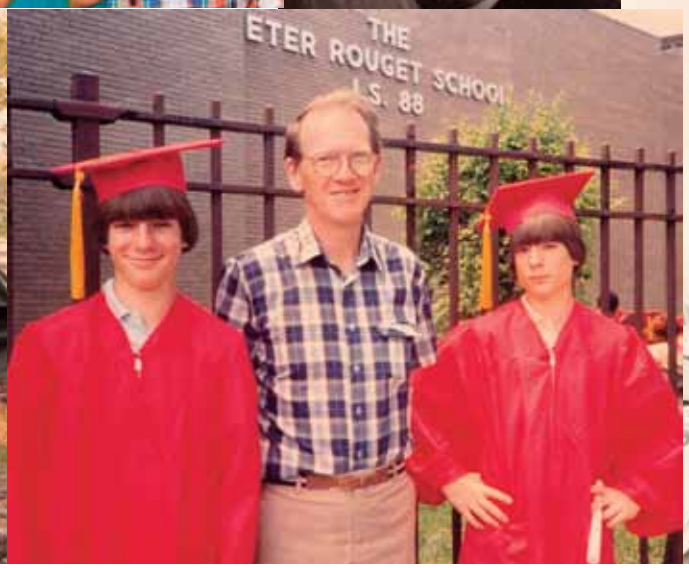









THE
ETER ROUGET SCHOOL
I.S. 88

Richard Engquist
1933-2010