

Kurt Weill

Volume 19

Number 2

Fall 2001

N e w s l e t t e r

*Lady
in the
Dark*

Revivals in Philadelphia and
Palermo

Feature article: "*Lady in the Dark*,
Gertrude Lawrence, and *Star!*"

Moss Hart biography reviewed



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Kurt Weill

Newsletter

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The cover photo of Gertrude Lawrence is drawn from the souvenir program for *Lady in the Dark*, 1941.

Lady in the Dark

The glamorous 1941 musical
by Moss Hart, Ira Gershwin
and Kurt Weill


Starring
Andrea Marcovicci
"The Callas of
Cabaret"
-The Philadelphia Inquirer

HELD OVER THROUGH OCTOBER 21

September 29–October 14 2001
at the Prince Music Theater

This glamorous and triumphant musical will kick off our new season and will feature Prince favorite Andrea Marcovicci in the lead role of Liza Elliot, the editor of a fashion magazine who finds herself struggling with indecision about her work and the three men in her life. In three extravagant dream sequences, Liza relives and reinvents her past, emerging from the process with a new sense of balance and discovering her true inner self.

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TEATRO MASSIMO STAGIONE 2001
OPERE E BALLETTI

LADY IN THE DARK

Libretto di Moss Hart
Liriche di Ira Gershwin
Musica di Kurt Weill



Personaggi
Liza Elliot
Randy Curtis
Sammy Pastore
Charley Johnson
Miss Frazier
Maggie Grant
Erendell Nesbit
Alison De Basi
Dr. Bravdo
Miss Stevens

Interpreti
Raina Kabaivanika (19, 21, 24, 26, 28, 29 aprile) Susan Daniel (19, 21, 27 aprile)
Gino Quilico (19, 21, 24, 26, 28, 29 aprile) Christopher Schuman (19, 21, 27 aprile)
Ulrich Schnel (19, 21, 24, 26, 28, 29 aprile) Markon Braun (19, 21, 27 aprile)
Victoria Leubsdorfer
Julia Winkle
Clara Zaslavskoff
Federico Pacifici
Mirella Lo Sardo
Emilio Dato Conti
Piera Formisani

Director
Regia
Collaboratore alle scene
Direttore Ensemble male
"I Sarti di Operadivano" Fabio Ciulla
Coreografi
Sena
Cantanti
Laut

Steven Mercatoro
Giorgio Marini
Suzuki Hagan
Micha van Hoelke
Matti Pavia
Lena Cossani
Elena Ciccarella
Renata Ciulla

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E PICCOLI DANZATORI DEL TEATRO MASSIMO
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FONDAZIONE

Note from the Editor

"It seems so silly to write music at a time like this," Kurt Weill wrote during a dark hour of world history in 1941. As I assume the new editorship of the *Kurt Weill Newsletter*, it seems similarly difficult to find a perspective for this publication in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and their still unforeseeable ramifications. Weill was a composer—the kind of composer who reacted seismographically to his time and tackled such unlikely issues as the holocaust, war, and racism. It is tempting to speculate how he might have responded to the events of September 11. Would he have set another Whitman poem to music, or commissioned a suitable text? Would he have made an even stronger plea for religious and ethnic tolerance? Would he have created or reworked some patriotic music suitable for concerts that currently program either Beethoven or Copland/Gershwin/Bernstein?

Music has played more than just a decorative role in these past days and weeks. Many concerts were scheduled and programs changed in order to offer people consolation, stimulation, distraction, or simply time for reflection. Therefore, it does not seem only fair that we continue to engage with music, it seems essential. That we do so with the works of Kurt Weill is because they continue to have a bearing on our time—not simply because they are still performed regularly.

Whereas some composers' centennials produce a tidal wave of performances and publications that rapidly recedes when the celebration ends, the interest in Weill has kept its momentum. Recent productions of *Street Scene* by the English National Opera and Houston Grand Opera have been recreated in Chicago and Minneapolis this year. More importantly, *Lady in the Dark*, a unique show that many directors and conductors have tiptoed around for some time, has received two important productions, among the most significant since the original production closed in 1943. Two reviews will provide a picture for those who couldn't attend and may bring new insights for those who did. A new biography of Moss Hart is reviewed, and last but by no means least, our feature article sheds more light on the genesis of *Lady in the Dark*, in addition to revealing a most peculiar piece of reception history.

Elmar Juchem

Art Imitating Life Imitating Art: *Lady in the Dark*, Gertrude Lawrence, and *Star!*

by
bruce d. mcclung

Overture

The art of Moss Hart often imitated life. Frequently it was the lives of others that provided the idea for a new play. The havoc that the talkies were causing among film actors became the basis for *Once in a Lifetime* (1930), Hart's first play with George S. Kaufman. Featuring a trio of vaudevillians who travel to Hollywood and pass themselves off as elocution experts, *Once in a Lifetime* was a world far removed from Hart's orbit, but the story successfully skewered Hollywood's studio system and made Kaufman-and-Hart a household name. Alexander Woollcott's demanding visit to Hart's country retreat produced headaches for the host but subsequently inspired *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1939). Kaufman and Hart built their play around an egomaniac radio personality who becomes indisposed and is made a semi-permanent houseguest of an unsuspecting Midwest couple. Lest anyone miss the caricature, the playwrights dedicated their comedy to Woollcott, who even played himself for the production's West Coast tour.

Other times it was Kaufman's and Hart's personal lives that provided theatrical fodder. For *Once in a Lifetime*, Kaufman played the role of Lawrence Vail, a famed Broadway playwright bankrolled by Hollywood who finds himself grossly underutilized. After Kaufman tired of playing himself eight times a week, Hart, flush with newfound fame, stepped into the role. The playwrights were not above inserting their own thoughts into the mouths of their characters. For *The Great Waltz* (1934), an adaptation of a Viennese operetta, Hart (whose spending was legendary) had the young Johann Strauss declare:

I want to spend. . . I want to know how it feels to go to Doumayers for tea and buy an enormous overcoat, maybe fur-lined and with an astrakhan collar, and pay for my tickets to concerts, and have a carriage perhaps. With three horses . . . just to *have it*.¹

For their last collaboration, *George Washington Slept Here* (1940), Kaufman and Hart drew on their experiences of remodeling country homes in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

When Hart struck out on his own, his experience on the psychoanalyst's couch provided the inspiration for what began as "I Am Listening," but ended up as *Lady in the Dark* (1941). The working title paid tribute to Dr. Lawrence S. Kubie, Hart's psychiatrist, who also received the work's dedication. The inspiration for the title character likely came from a paper that Kubie had presented in 1932 for the American Psychoanalytic Association. "Transvestitism in a Teen-Age Girl" recounted Kubie's analysis of a fifteen-year-old girl who wore riding breeches and boots during the day and formal ball gowns at night. The alternating rhythm of masculine and feminine states matches the heroine of Hart's play: Liza Elliott sports business suits at the office but finds herself donning elegant gowns for her dreams. Because the girl's family ended the analysis prematurely, Kubie never published the paper and may have offered up the case study for Hart's new play.

That said, Liza Elliott is no teenager. Instead she resembles Hart: both are in their late thirties and at the height of their careers. Each success, however, plunges them into depression instead of expected fulfillment. Playwright and character both suffer from insomnia and turn to psychiatry for treatment. The dramatization of the psychoanalytic process metaphorically took Hart off the couch and put him into the psychiatrist's chair for the character in his play. For this he turned to the doctor's 1936 primer, *Practical Aspects of Psychoanalysis: A Handbook for Prospective Patients and Their Advisors*.² Everything from the placement of the analyst's chair, cost and frequency of the sessions, and a trial analysis to the Freudian terminology of free association, biographical analysis, and transference leapt off the pages of Kubie's handbook and into Hart's play. Once *Lady in the Dark* was on the boards, its autobiographical aspects were underscored by Hart's collaborator Kurt Weill: "Moss can only write about himself."³

It would now appear that most of the antecedents for *Lady in the Dark* have been brought to light: a musical play inspired by Hart's own experience with psychoanalysis in general and the process of free association in particular.⁴ In *Lady in the Dark* when Liza lies on the couch to speak whatever comes to mind, the exercise launches a dream sequence. The drama drew on the classic Freudian dilemma of a woman choosing between three men, representing the roles of father, lover, and husband. The manifestation of the woman's psychosis is a mild form of gender dysphoria, perhaps inspired by Kubie's teenage patient. The basis of such cross-gendering was fully explored in the doctor's last published article in which *Lady in the Dark* became a case study for "The Drive to Become Both Sexes."⁵ What will be explored here is the extent to which Gertrude Lawrence influenced the musical play and, in turn, the various ways in which *Lady in the Dark* affected its star.

Act I: Art Imitating Life

Although Hart was well into the first act when she entered the picture, protracted negotiations with Lawrence had a significant bearing on *Lady in the Dark*. They created a drama all their own because Hart had promised the starring role to Katharine Cornell. What ultimately prevented Cornell from playing the lady in the dark was the addition of music. As Hart prepared to begin writing, there was some confusion over just how much music the new play might contain. The *New York Times* announced, "Moss Hart Play Will Have Songs." The story mentioned that Kurt Weill and Ira Gershwin would contribute incidental music, but cautioned that, in Hart's own words, it was "definitely not a musical comedy."⁶ Weill evidently intervened, because two days later the *Times* retracted: "Moss Hart, author of 'I Am Listening,' explained yesterday that Kurt Weill's score for his new play could not be classified as 'incidental music.' His contribution and Mr. Weill's are of equal importance to the production."⁷ With the play properly announced, Hart retired to Fairview Farm to begin "a romantic story of a woman's failure," then still envisioned for Katharine Cornell.

Hart was able to sustain the drama for the sessions in the doctor's office, but the brittle repartee of the Kaufman-and-Hart canon crept into the scenes at the fashion magazine, *Allure*. As was his fashion, Hart based his characters on members of New York's café society. For Alison Du Bois, *Allure's* daffy columnist, Hart lampooned the fashion editor for *Harper's Bazaar*. Diana Vreeland's column "Why Don't You . . ." ("Why don't you . . . rinse your blond child's hair in dead champagne?") became Alison's "Why Not" brainstorm ("Why not save your champagne corks and use them to tie back the curtains on your sun porch?").⁸ To make sure the audience got the parody *before* the line was delivered, Hattie Carnegie dressed the character in Vreeland's signature red with a rash of necklaces. The actress who played the part, Natalie Schafer, had some difficulty with her character, so Carnegie invited her to meet the editor personally. Schafer recalled that Vreeland

wore at least a dozen necklaces and clips and brooches, most of them junk jewelry. She walked through Miss Carnegie's home with her lower body slung forward, saying as she entered each room, "It's divine! SIMP-ly divine!" in a half British, half dead-end accent.⁹

Hart traveled to Philadelphia at the end of March to share with Cornell the progress of his play. On the way home, he admitted to feeling "torn between an honest desire to tell her exactly what she was letting herself in for . . . and a grave doubt as to whether she could do it."¹⁰ The following Sunday he and Kaufman attended a rehearsal for a British War Relief Party to which they were to contribute an act.

Watching Gertrude Lawrence run a number, Hart realized that her talents were better suited for the role than Cornell's. After the rehearsal Hart invited Lawrence to the Plaza Hotel's Oak Room where, over beer and a snack, he outlined his new play for her. The two agreed to meet the next afternoon so she could hear some of the dialogue. Having now essentially offered the title role to two actresses, Hart reported that falling asleep that night was even more difficult than usual!

The following afternoon Hart called on Lawrence at her West 54th St. penthouse, recently done over in an "Arabian Nights" decor. The star recalled:

I invited him to my apartment to read the play and, as I had just done the thing over, I knew I could set the stage. I love to act offstage even better than on, so when Mr. Hart arrived I was at the end of a long living room gracefully posed with a throw over my knees, knitting. Despite the Cecil Beaton atmosphere, Moss Hart drew up a chair and proceeded to read, but I knew he was distracted so I just kept knitting. Finally I was so intrigued I had to put the sweater away.¹¹

After completing the reading, Hart and Lawrence chatted leisurely over tea. He remembered her reaction: "she literally *was* the part as she walked about the room talking about it."¹² Hart was poised to clinch a deal and inform Cornell of the turn of events, but

Lawrence deferred making a commitment because her astrologer had advised her not to make any important decisions until after April 7th. Frustrated, Hart returned to the farm ("cursing Gertie's astrologer all the way down to Pennsylvania") and resumed writing.¹³

Lawrence's belief in astrology gave Hart an idea. Although he had already parodied her seductiveness and egocentricity in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, he would weave astrology into *Lady in the Dark*. It could serve as a foil for the rational science of modern psychiatry and, on a purely personal level, even the score with Lawrence for putting him off. Astrology would be introduced into the plot by the wacky columnist. In Hart's original draft Alison had made references to having seen an analyst herself and taking a physic (the 1940's version of colonic irrigation); now she would extol the virtues of astrology. Once Weill and Ira Gershwin began working on the musical sequences, astrology served as the climax for the third dream sequence. Set in its first incarnation as a trial and minstrel show, the sequence climaxed with Liza's defense speech, "No Matter Under What Star You're Born." Then she and her defense attorney launched into an exhibit of the zodiac signs in order to convince the jury that her fate is in the stars ("Song of the Zodiac").¹⁴

As it turned out, Lawrence's fate wasn't in the stars. She telephoned Hart on April 6th and postponed making a decision until Noël Coward could hear the play:

But don't you see, darling. It all works out! My astrologer said to do nothing until April 7th, and I never do anything without Noël's advice. . . . You must read the play to Noël

and if he says "yes" I'll do it. It's all worked out beautifully. Bless you, darling!¹⁵

Hart "groaned as the receiver clicked." Lawrence's inability to make up her mind influenced *Lady in the Dark* even more than astrology had. This manifestation of the title character's psychosis became one of the dominant themes of Hart's play. Not only would Liza not be able to make up her mind about the men in her life, she would now show indecision at every turn, not the least of which would be choosing an upcoming cover for *Allure*. Once the whole astrology finale was scrapped, Weill and Gershwin drafted "The Saga of Jenny," a number in which Liza—and by extension, Gertie—could extol the virtues of *not* making up one's mind.

Hart's meeting with Coward had to be postponed, causing further delay. It was not until early May that he was able to entertain Coward at Fairview Farm. After Hart read his play, Coward pronounced, "Gertie ought to pay you to play it."¹⁶ A few days later Coward took Lawrence to lunch: "I wagged an authoritative finger in her face as I had so often done in the past. She shilly-shallied a bit, took refuge in irrelevancies, giggled, and finally gave in."¹⁷ Hart's problems with Lawrence were far from over: the contract was not signed until just before she went on tour with *Skylark*, her current project, in mid-July. But in the interim she had provided a host of ideas that had helped Hart through his writer's block. Not only had Lawrence informed the play as a whole, the title role now



The cover of the *Lady in the Dark* souvenir program.

fit her like a glove. Like Woolcott in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, she would be able to take center stage playing a part based on the very personality characteristics she herself possessed. The art of Moss Hart had, again, imitated life.

Act II: Life Imitating Art

What neither Hart nor Lawrence could have predicted was that the relationship between art and life would attain a reflexive quality during *Lady in the Dark's* extended run. That is, although Lawrence had first influenced the character and plot of the musical play, now *Lady in the Dark* would cast its shadow on the actress. The issue of gender dysphoria, perhaps first suggested by Kubie's teenage patient, had been integral to Hart's play from the start. Liza Elliott wears tailored business suits with no jewelry or makeup. Hart describes her office at *Allure* as "not a feminine room" with "a man's desk," large and heavy chairs, and severe curtains. From the scientific point of view, Kubie described the character as living in a "no-man's land between the sexes."¹⁸ Such a diagnosis could hardly apply to Lawrence! An active sex life propelled her through two marriages and countless affairs (the most publicized were with Captain Philip Astley and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.).

During *Lady's* second season, America's entry into World War II profoundly affected the lives of its citizens, including the cast of *Lady in the Dark*. Weill and Hart organized, produced, and wrote sketches for revues presented during lunch breaks at defense plants. In addition, both men volunteered their time as "spotters" (watching for enemy aircraft), with Weill going so far as to register for the draft and Hart drafting a musical for the Air Force. Lawrence's husband was sworn in as a lieutenant in the Naval Reserve and went on duty the day of *Lady's* first anniversary. The cast of *Lady in the Dark* inaugurated the Stage Door Canteen, and Lawrence brought the house down with her ribald "Saga of Jenny." The star herself enrolled in the first Red Cross class of the American Theatre Wing War Service and gave blood on her day off. Soon after passing the Red Cross exam, Lawrence found herself manifesting attributes of her character's gender dysphoria: sporting a masculine Red Cross uniform by day and Hattie Carnegie's feminine gowns by night.

The contrast was not lost on Lawrence's fans. One example will suffice: during *Lady's* Broadway reengagement in 1943, Lawrence participated in a benefit where actors and actresses posed for sculptors and painters. In a scene right out of the *Glamour Dream*, Lawrence's portrait did not depict her in a glamorous evening gown, but instead in her drab khaki uniform. According to a newspaper reporter:

While Gertrude Lawrence posed for Dana Gibson, one old lady turned to another and said: "A most unattractive costume for poor Gertrude, isn't it?" Evidently Miss Lawrence heard the remark because she gazed in their direction . . . then brushed a speck from her left shoulder of her Volunteer Red Cross Uniform insignia. She resumed her original pose as she raised her chin—a little higher than before.¹⁹

Lawrence was not alone in her new attire: American women working for the war effort in ordnance plants, shipyards, and airplane factories were all wearing new work clothes and challenging gender roles. The war also afforded women their first opportunity to serve as regular members of the armed forces. A 1943 *Woman's Home Companion* feature debated whether a "Rosie the Riveter" could still be glamorous.²⁰ Like her character in *Lady in the Dark*,



Gertrude Lawrence as portrayed on the cover of the playbill for *Lady in the Dark*, 1941.

Lawrence advocated for servicewomen a different form of dress in the evening:

"Do you think a man likes to dance with someone who looks like his major?" questioned Miss Lawrence; she hastened to add, "I don't! It just doesn't look right to see women in uniform at night . . . in the daytime, fine! I'm all for it, but at night men still want to see women looking sweet and feminine."²¹

The character of Liza Elliott finishes the musical play by rejecting the advances of both Kendall Nesbitt (the father figure) and Randy Curtis (the lover) and instead ends up with advertising manager Charley Johnson (the husband). Presumably content to assume the traditional role of wife, she agrees in the final minutes of the play to step aside eventually and allow Charley to run the magazine. As problematic as the ending is today (the line is often omitted), Lawrence's own departure from *Lady in the Dark* parallels the final scene. That is, Liza Elliott, a powerful magazine editor, steps down from her position to attend to her personal life. Lawrence, who, in a case of life imitating art, had spent most of *Lady's* tour having an affair with the actor playing Charley Johnson, went home to her husband. A journalist at Penn Station reported,

Getting off the next train from the west was Gertrude Lawrence, bound for Cape Cod and a six weeks' rest. . . . With *Lady in the Dark* now a happy memory, she was just a navy wife, hurrying to the Grand Central station in New York to meet her husband, Lieut. Comdr. Richard Aldrich.²²

Exit Music

The convoluted relationship between *Lady in the Dark* and its leading lady came full circle, albeit posthumously, when *Lady in the Dark* provided the central plot device for *Star!*—the 1968 biographical film about Lawrence directed by Robert Wise and starring Julie Andrews. Through a series of eerie coincidences, Andrews appears to have been destined to play Lawrence. Both Brits had a mother in show business and had gotten their start as



Julie Andrews as Gertrude Lawrence in the publicity for the Robert Wise film *Star!*, 1968.

child actors in vaudeville and pantomime. In addition, both had married in England, had one daughter, and later divorced their husbands. They were both feted as the toast of Broadway in their first American visits, Lawrence in *André Charlot's London Revue of 1924*, Andrews in *The Boy Friend* (1954). After settling in the U.S., both married American producers and played the role of Eliza Doolittle on the Great White Way: Lawrence in Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1945) and Andrews in Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady* (1956). Hart, having directed the leading ladies in *Lady in the Dark* and *My Fair Lady*, even told Julie that she reminded him of Gertie.²³

Star!'s screenplay was the brainchild of William Fairchild, who produced an original script based on various sources. He chose to follow Lawrence's rags-to-riches story from her childhood days in Clapham, England through the opening of *Lady in the Dark* (her subsequent career, which culminated with *The King and I*, was omitted). Not only did "The Saga of Jenny" serve as the dramatic climax of *Star!*, but Fairchild went so far as to graft the central plot of *Lady in the Dark* back onto Lawrence's life. That is, she became the character of Liza Elliott, unable to make up her mind about which of three men she wanted to marry after her brief first marriage. The role of Sir Anthony Spencer (modeled on Captain Astley) maps onto the Kendall Nesbitt figure. Wealthy and from a different class, he proposes marriage, but Lawrence is unable to accept (in real life Astley never proposed). The role of actor Charles Frazier (modeled on Bert Taylor, the scion of a wealthy American family) assumes the young, dashing Randy Curtis character. Finally, Richard Aldrich (Lawrence's real-life second husband) steps into the Charley Johnson part. Refusing to accept her indecisiveness, he calls her bluff and wins her heart.

The transference of *Lady in the Dark*'s plot onto Lawrence's life story became doubly reflexive with Julie Andrews playing the role of Gertie. During the filming of *The Sound of Music*, Andrews herself had undergone psychoanalysis. As she admits, "I have enormous phobias about singing, stemming from the Broadway days when I was trotted out every night and was pretty much mixed up" (shades of Liza Elliott singing her bedtime song, "My Ship"?). Andrews continues, "I suppose another of my failings is that I am a

totally ambivalent person. Ambivalence can either be a vice or a virtue. But I am able to see both sides of anything to such an extent that it is terribly hard for me to make a decision or do anything involving a drastic change."²⁴ And so, the actress who had difficulty making up her mind (and consulted a psychiatrist), played the role of another actress—who herself had had trouble committing to playing a woman who had difficulty making up her mind (and consulted a psychiatrist)—in a film about that actress not being able to make up her mind.

Star! owes even more to *Lady in the Dark* than its plot (a woman choosing between three men), climactic number ("The Saga of Jenny"), and denouement (the heroine is made to understand her problem). From the outset the specter of psychoanalysis hovers over the proceedings. The film begins not in a psychiatrist's office, but with an overture of songs to follow, as if we are in a Broadway theater. The curtain opens to reveal the titles of Lawrence's shows painted upon a scrim. Then the film proper begins, but with a black-and-white credit sequence and a copyright date of 1940! The sixteen-millimeter documentary about Lawrence called *Star!* contains scratchy newsreel footage. Suddenly, the film switches to seventy-millimeter color as the middle-aged Gertie yells to stop the projector. It turns out we have been in a screening room previewing a documentary about her life and career:

DIRECTOR: Miss Lawrence, I need your o.k. to show this picture.

GERTIE: Mm. You need it to use that title song, too, darling.

DIRECTOR: Now, don't be awkward . . .

GERTIE: I am never awkward. I just hate being rushed into decisions.

DIRECTOR: Well, are we right? That you want to be *lots* of different people?

GERTIE: Well, as an actress I did, yes.

DIRECTOR: As a person?

GERTIE: Now look here, Jerry Paul. I get analyzed on stage every night in *Lady in the Dark*. Don't you go probing my psyche . . .

It soon becomes obvious that the purpose of both directors (the fictitious one of the black-and-white documentary and Robert Wise) is exactly that: to probe Lawrence's psyche. With the directors impersonating Dr. Brooks, Gertie assumes the role of Liza Elliott. We are meeting her at middle age and the movies—the Twentieth Century Fox film and the film-within-the-film—trace the root of her problem back to childhood and portray the ways it has played out across her adult life. Through the interchange between the fictitious director and Gertie, we learn that the problem itself is a difficulty with making decisions, which is exactly how Lawrence's relationship began with the play that is now serving to tell her life story. Art and life had intertwined to such an extent that they had become inseparable. Put another way, the real life Gertrude Lawrence had originally been the star of *Lady in the Dark*, but now *Lady in the Dark* had become the Gertrude Lawrence of *Star!*

(endnotes on p. 12)

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Feature Reviews

Lady in the Dark

Philadelphia

Prince Music Theater

Premiere: 6 October 2001

Despite routine inclusion in lists of great musicals, *Lady in the Dark* leads an oddly invisible life: much discussed, seldom performed. After its first decade or two (a film version that made a point of eviscerating its source, an early television adaptation, some summer-stock productions), chances to see it became rare: very occasional regional stagings, a couple of prestigious concert presentations, a Royal National Theatre production in London that led to the only truly complete recording to date. It's not much, when compared to the ubiquitous classic musicals of the 1940s and '50s.

Some of the reasons advanced for this rarity are easily dealt with. For instance, the legendary size of the original production (cast and crew more than 50 each, four turntables, and so on) need not be a binding precedent for an imaginative director, any more than the naïve presentation of psychoanalysis-as-instant-breakthrough is a serious problem for audiences used to stage simplifications. More fundamental are two issues that deal directly with protagonist Liza Elliott (beyond the little matter of finding a stellar, charismatic actress). One is her vocal writing. Having been tailored for Gertrude Lawrence, it demands a type of leading lady no longer extant: a light soprano with a comfort zone placed higher than that of almost any popular singer or singing actress of today. Even if her music is transposed (a non-trivial matter with Weill's orchestrations and musically continuous dream sequences), the line sits relatively high in her overall range.

And then there's Liza's dramatic arc: After the pleasure of experiencing a 1941 drama about a successful businesswoman, the ostensible happy ending goes rather

sour with an implication that when she achieves true mental health, she'll want to stop working and hand her job over to its rightful owner—a man. A new production needs to make us experience Liza's dilemma as a personal (not men *vs.* women) one, one with which we can all empathize.

The first of these challenges was handled intelligently, the second brilliantly, in the *Lady in the Dark* production undertaken by the Prince Music Theater in Philadelphia from October 6 to October 21, 2001. (I saw the press opening on October 5, following five previews which had begun on September 29.)

Much of the credit belongs to Ted Sperling, a longtime top-rank music director who has recently turned to stage direction and herewith proves the validity of that shift. With his impressive design team (scenery, costumes, and lighting by James Schuette, David Belugou, and James F. Ingalls respectively), he worked out a production concept that served the material well in both emotional and practical terms, allowing for vivid storytelling and swift pacing. Robert La Fosse's choreography was a helpful part of the achievement, less in dance routines *per se* than in small bits of movement within the dreams.

Perhaps it's facile to say so, but Sperling seemed especially masterful as a kind of "conductor" of the action, with an overall plan for variety of tempo and inflection; some of the dialogue was spoken at top speed in the manner of film comedies of the period, thus earning time for more hesitant pacing at moments of introspection. Let this not be taken to mean that the visual and emotional aspects of the production were anything less than satisfying. As promised in his program note, Liza's central issue was clarified as the kind of lifelong self-censorship ("I won't try to do anything I can't do well" as a justification for giving up) that most of us engage in to some extent.

Liza herself, Andrea Marcovicci, was in many respects a most fortunate choice. She portrays with ease both the glam-



Liza Elliott (center, played by Andrea Marcovicci) receives welcome support from two of her colleagues from *Allure* magazine, Alison Du Bois (Alison Fraser, left) and Maggie Grant (Maureen Mueller, right). Photo: Mark Garvin

orous siren and the hard-edged executive, and is an inventive, appealing actress with wonderful vocal variety when speaking. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to control her singing with equal finesse. She is, of course, at least as well known for singing as for acting, but primarily as a cabaret performer, where she can adjust the material to make the most of her considerable interpretive and expressive gifts. Similar strategies were employed here—keys lowered, “The Saga of Jenny” thoroughly rearranged—but ultimately Liza must command her numbers with confident bravura, and Marcovicci's uneven vocal production prevented this. Excursions into the upper register always felt a bit perilous—one wished her well each time, but the suspense made it hard to stay immersed in the drama. She remains in many ways a smart choice for the part, and without her eagerness to undertake the role we probably wouldn't have had this production at all.

The supporting cast of 21 included some fine characterizations (not forgetting the versatile choristers). The novel casting of Dr. Brooks as a woman proved revelatory: the sight of the two women, analyst and patient, figuring things out together added new poignancy to their scenes, as well as the dramaturgical value of seeing a capable professional woman as part of the solution, and although we meet the doctor only at work, Nancy Hume did more to round out the character than I have previously seen.

Brian O'Brien looked and sounded good as movie star Randy Curtis without quite living up to the worshipful buildup that precedes his entrance; then again, that may be an impossible task—has anyone ever managed it? (The original Randy, Victor Mature, had the look but couldn't sing.) But Maureen Mueller was slouchy-elegant perfection as Liza's confidante Maggie Foster, and Alison Fraser's mannered



The New York skyline looms in the background as Sutton (Nina Hennessey) brings Liza up to date during the *Glamour Dream*. Photo: Mark Garvin

brightness proved just the thing for her caricature cameo, madcap columnist Alison Du Bois.

Beau Gravitte's laid-back self-assurance and insolent charm hit the right notes for Charley Johnson, a character who can become unpleasant if exaggerated. Mark Victor showed similar restraint to even more welcome effect as photographer Russell Paxton; while the requisite fey manner was there, entertainingly so, it was just one part of an endearing character's reality. And his “Tschaikowsky” was the one genuine showstopper of the evening; it's always effective if decently done, but this was polished to a dazzling degree.

The overall visual scheme is always an important part of *Lady in the Dark*, what with two locations that define the real

world, contrasted with a cinematic flow for the dreams that contain all the music. The plan here was simple and worked beautifully: The two offices occupied different depths of stage so that the dropping of a wall could take us from one to the other instantly. Or everything could slide away and the size of the stage expand for the dreams, with the analyst's couch remaining onstage almost throughout, an unforced symbol that could transform itself as needed (into a limousine, for example). Of a long string of memorable images, I'll name three, one from each dream: a gorgeously evocative Manhattan skyline behind the *Glamour Dream*; Liza's former classmates eulogizing her at her funeral (an invention that fit the ominous music and made a neat equation between death and her impending marriage); and the transformation of a lattice of windowpanes into a giant jungle gym.

Textual matters: Weill's full orchestration was used (splendidly conducted by Rob Berman), with the adaptations for Marcovicci noted above. The only noteworthy musical excisions were the “Is it Impressionistic?” guessing passage in the first dream and Liza's “Tra la” refrain in the

third. (But what happened to some of the spoken tags in “The Princess of Pure Delight”?) The full Entr'acte was played, and cut songs were used instrumentally to accompany the childhood flashbacks.

Some tucks were taken in the dialogue, probably coinciding for the most part with those made in the original production (which the published script does not reflect). These mostly worked well, especially in not dwelling overlong on now-familiar psychological issues (Kendall Nesbitt might have benefited from a few more lines; that excellent actor Sam Freed couldn't make much effect with what he had to say), and contributed to the tight two-and-a-half-hour running time. One altered word is worth mentioning: Liza's

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final hint that as co-editor with Johnson she may step down “after a while” was spoken as “for a while”; I hope (despite my purist principles) that it wasn’t a one-night mistake, for the implication (that her time off wouldn’t be permanent) does wonders for the denouement.

So, does *Lady in the Dark* still work for present-day audiences? Certainly for this audience member it does, in such a persuasive production: a “good show” that’s also an unexpectedly moving look at the process of self-discovery. The aspects that might seem dated prove not to be, when the point

of the writing is respected and conveyed as it was here. We also now have proof that it’s all doable, with style, on a less lavish scale than the original, as long as those in charge have their priorities right. Casting Liza remains a challenge, although who knows?—if all our Broadway divas started demanding the chance to play her, we might get some pleasant surprises there, too.

Jon Alan Conrad
University of Delaware



Movie star Randy Curtis (Brian O’Brien) tries to convince Liza that he is the one for her, ultimately without success. Photo: Mark Garvin

Lady in the Dark

Palermo
Teatro Massimo

19–29 April 2001

American musicals have only recently begun to enjoy real popularity in Italy, partly because of an increasingly widespread knowledge of English among audiences, partly perhaps due to a decline in affection for traditional Italian opera, compared to which even a work sixty years old—like *Lady in the Dark*, which was recently given its Italian premiere in Palermo—can appear refreshingly modern in its musical idiom and subject matter. At the performance seen on April 24 at the Teatro Massimo, one of Italy’s largest and most imposing opera houses, Weill’s bewitching score came across strongly, if not subtly (amplification was used, in spite of the theater’s excellent acoustics and the use of opera singers), to the evident delight of a sizable audience. What did not really come across convincingly were the story line and character interplay devised by Moss Hart. About three-quarters of the often witty lines in his book were cut, and much of the skeletal dialogue that remained was distorted beyond recognition, making it hard to judge the work’s theatrical viability. Although something of a period piece—in Italy too the craze for psychoanalysis, widespread in the 1970s, now seems passé—it surely contains enough home truths about the sometimes uneasy and alienating role of an emancipated woman in modern society to seem relevant today.

Some of the most successful musicals in Italy in recent years, such as the production of *West Side Story* mounted at La Scala last season, have been largely imported packages. In Palermo they chose, courageously, to use an Italian director, designer, orchestra, chorus, and ballet company, an almost entirely Italian cast of actors and the Bulgarian soprano Raina Kabaivanska (who has lived in Italy for decades) as the protagonist Liza Elliott. The other singing roles were taken by Americans, and the Italian-American Steven Mercurio conducted.



Liza Elliott (Raina Kabaivanska) reclines on the psychiatrist's couch. Photo: Studio Camera Palermo

Apart from helping to save money and avoid union protests, this method of casting was logical enough in theory, since it allowed Italian artists to gain much-needed experience in an increasingly popular genre alongside expert foreign performers. And Kabaivanska, though something of a veteran (she made her Met debut in 1962), still possesses considerable charisma and has proven her versatility in recent years by stretching her repertory to include works by Janáček, Poulenc, Britten, and even Weill's songs in recital. Moreover, her presence undoubtedly had a healthy effect on the box office.

The soprano's delivery of the spoken dialogue, however, though initially even charming in a vaguely Garboesque manner, was marked by such frequent misplacing of stresses within sentences, often to bizarre effect, that it was difficult to take the character of Liza Elliott seriously. And if the dialogue scenes lack credibility, it is harder for the audience to suspend disbelief in the dream sequences. Kabaivanska's singing, though boldly projected and occasionally virtuosic in breath control, missed the irony in Ira Gershwin's lyrics, and the amplification could hardly hide the lack of bloom in the sound. Yet her performance of the songs was never dull and always made one aware of the magical potential of the music.

The Italian actors proved on the whole to be something of a liability. Their pronunciation was generally poor and their diction in many cases no less stilted than the soprano's. Federico Pacifici was unable to make anything of Kendall Nesbitt and Emilio Dino Conti turned Dr. Brooks into a grotesque parody, quite the opposite of what Hart intended. In this, as in other cases, director Giorgio Marini was surely to blame. His overall aim—having perceived the relative sophistication of this musical—seemed to be to demonstrate his own sophistication rather than trying to make the piece work on its own terms. The set designed by Lauro Crisman, with its surrealistic decor and *tapis roulant*, and the Schiaparelli-inspired costumes designed by Elena Cicorella, were certainly nice to look at, but failed to provide an ade-

quate contrast between Liza's office and her dream world. The dreams themselves were elegantly choreographed, with some telling quotations from films of the same epoch, by Micha van Hoecke. The circus dream came off best, although even here the execution of the dancers was not always sufficiently on the beat, and the singing and dancing of the chorus (the "Solisti dell'Operalaboratorio") were well below Broadway standards.

There was much to enjoy, however, in the performances of the other lead singers. Julia Wade as Miss Foster/Miss Sutton looked and sounded distinctly classy and Gino Quilico and Victor Ledbetter were ideally cast as Randy Curtis and Charley Johnson. Shon Sims made a positive impression too, although as the Ringmaster his rendition of the famous "Tschai-kowsky" number proved less than irresistible.

All the singers were given strong support by Mercurio, thanks also to the surprisingly idiomatic, if not entirely uninhibited, playing of the Teatro Massimo's orchestra.

**Stephen Hastings
Milan**



With the jury behind her, Liza belts out "The Saga of Jenny" during the Circus Dream. Photo: Studio Camera Palermo

Remembering Scott Merrill (1918–2001)



Photo: Louise Dahl-Wolfe

The actor and dancer Scott Merrill, perhaps best known for his portrayal of Macheath—Mack the Knife—in *The Threepenny Opera*, died on 28 June 2001 in Branford, Connecticut. He was 82 years old.

A native of Baltimore, where his parents ran a cocktail bar, Merrill took up dancing lessons after a doctor's diagnosis of diabetes. While performing in various local clubs, he landed his first role in a Broadway show when Weill's *Lady in the Dark* was on tour in Baltimore. The tour company needed to replace a dancer, and Merrill was asked to join them in Pittsburgh as a member of the Albertina Rasch Dancers (his job during the "Circus Dream" was to lift Gertrude Lawrence into the air). Merrill stayed on for the remainder of the tour and returned with the ensemble to the east coast for the reopening on Broadway in late February 1943.

In New York, Merrill launched a successful dancing career, often as leading dancer. Among the many shows he appeared in were *Oklahoma!*, *Bloomer Girl*, *Small Wonder*, *Paint Your Wagon*, and the crucial 1952 revival of *Pal Joey*. In April 1949 Merrill replaced one of the dancers in the Weill/Lerner concept musical *Love Life*.

Weary of dancing, Merrill started to search for acting roles. His first opportunity came when he successfully auditioned for the off-Broadway production of *The Threepenny Opera* in 1954. Merrill joined the cast as Macheath alongside Lotte Lenya, who was recreating her famous portrayal of Jenny in the 1928 Berlin premiere. He received excellent notices; Daniel Blum, editor of *Theater World*, called him one of the "most promising personalities of the Broadway stage." Others named in that category were Orson Bean, Harry Belafonte, James Dean, Ben Gazzara, and Eva Marie Saint.

A series of acting engagements followed the success of *Threepenny*, including appearances on television and as Tallulah Bankhead's co-star in the 1957 play *Eugenia*, an adaptation of Henry James's novel *The Europeans*. In the 1970s, Merrill retired from the stage and became the director of a center for the elderly in Bristol, Connecticut, where he worked for about a dozen years before he retired.

(continued from p. 7)

Notes

I wish to thank Kim H. Kowalke, Mary Sue Morrow, and Mary Watkins for reading drafts of this essay and making helpful suggestions.

1. As quoted in Steven Bach, *Dazzler: The Life and Times of Moss Hart* (New York: Knopf, 2001), 119.
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3. Manuscript letter dated 25 September 1941 from Kurt Weill to Lotte Lenya, as quoted in *Speak Low (When You Speak Love): The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya*, ed. and trans. Lys Symonette and Kim H. Kowalke (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996), 276.
4. The idea for a play based on free association had been percolating since 1937 when Kaufman and Hart had briefly entertained it as a vehicle for Marlene Dietrich.
5. Lawrence S. Kubie, "The Drive to Become Both Sexes," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 43 (1974): 349–426.
6. "Moss Hart Play Will Have Songs: But 'I Am Listening' Is Not a Musical Comedy—Story of 'A Woman's Failure,'" *New York Times*, 24 February 1940.
7. "News of the Stage," *New York Times*, 26 February 1940.
8. As quoted in Bernadine Morris, "Museum Celebrates the Flair That Was Vreeland," *New York Times*, 2 December 1993; Moss Hart, *Lady in the Dark* (New York: Random House, 1941), 45–46.
9. Alice Hughes, "Today's Woman: Star of *Lady in the Dark* Steals Play from Celanese Creative Fabrics Showing," *New York Post*, 19 February 1941.
10. Moss Hart, "Life with Gertie: In Which Some Light Is Thrown on *Lady in the Dark*," Box 13 U.S./Mss/13AN of the Moss Hart-Kitty Carlisle Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison, 2. When the article was subsequently published as "The Saga of Gertie: The Author of *Lady in the Dark* Tells How He Found a Star," *New York Times*, 2 March 1941, dates and details were changed perhaps in order for Hart to avoid offending Cornell.
11. Charles Gentry, "Lawrence, Lady of Energy," *Detroit Times*, 1 December 1942.
12. Hart, "Life with Gertie," 4.
13. *Ibid.*, 5.
14. See this author's "Ira at 100, Life after George: The Genesis of *Lady in the Dark*'s Circus Dream" *Kurt Weill Newsletter* 14.2 (Fall 1996): 4–8.
15. Hart, "Life with Gertie," 5.
16. *Ibid.*, 6.
17. Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Heinemann, 1954), 126–27.
18. "Dr. Brooks" [Lawrence S. Kubie], preface to *Lady in the Dark*, x.
19. *Waterbury* (Connecticut) *Democrat*, 2 March 1943.
20. Virginia Bennett Moore, "Begrimed—Bewitching or Both," *Woman's Home Companion*, October 1943, 80.
21. "Simple Lines, Solid Colors Star's Choice: Gertrude Lawrence Likes 'Comfortable' Clothes Above All," *Camden* (New Jersey) *Courier-Post*, 3 May 1943.
22. Adeline Fitzgerald, "These Charming People," *New York Sun*, 31 July 1943.
23. Robert Windeler, *Julie Andrews* (New York: Putnam, 1970), 49.
24. *Ibid.*, 208, 209.