

Kim H. Kowalke

Today's Invention, Tomorrow's Cliché: *Love Life* and the Concept Musical

Famed Broadway and Hollywood choreographer Michael Kidd remembers going backstage after a tryout performance of *Cabaret* in Boston during October 1966 to greet Lotte Lenya, who was creating the role of Fräulein Schneider. "They finally did it!" Kidd exclaimed. "Kurt and Alan tried to pull it off and it didn't quite work. Now after all these years, they've used the same basic idea and it really works." Lenya responded, "You're absolutely right, Michael. It's the idea Kurt tried to do a long time ago."¹ That idea, or, as it would later be called, *Cabaret's* "concept" was to alternate narrative scenes containing traditional, non-diegetic "plot" numbers with diegetic "commentary" numbers. And indeed the non-linear structure of *Cabaret* is almost identical to that of Alan Jay Lerner and Kurt Weill's *Love Life*, the "vaudeville" which Kidd had choreographed on Broadway in 1948. It ran 252 performances, but then virtually disappeared without a trace. *Love Life* was not performed again until 1987.² It remains unpublished, unrecorded, and unavailable for "stock and amateur" licensing.

Ironically, that very obscurity may have allowed Broadway's next generation of creative talents, most of whom were just beginning their careers in 1948, to imitate, emulate, adapt, and extend its "idea" without anxiety that such emulation would be deemed derivative. Fred Ebb, the lyricist of *Cabaret*, for example, recalled *Love Life* as "a marvelous piece and a major influence."³ Stephen Sondheim, who also found *Love Life* "a useful influence" on his own work, explained the delayed, but nevertheless seminal impact of it and Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Allegro* (1947): "They weren't hits, so they didn't have an

¹ Michael Kidd, oral history interview with Peggy Sherry, 1 October 1991, Weill-Lenya Research Center (hereafter WLRC), Ser. 60, p. 10.

² In April 1987, the Musical Theatre Program of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor presented the first stage production of *Love Life* since its close on Broadway in May 1949. The American Music Theater Festival mounted the first professional revival, with book revised by Thomas Babe, at the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia in June 1990. Opera North presented the British stage premiere in Leeds in January 1996, and the Musical/Show division of the Hochschule der Künste Berlin produced an abbreviated version in German translation/adaptation in November 2000. To date, these remain the only fully staged productions of *Love Life*; I was fortunate enough to see all of them.

³ Fred Ebb, quoted by Foster Hirsch, *Kurt Weill on Stage: From Berlin to Broadway*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002, p. 297.

immediate reaction. Most people didn't see them, so they don't think of them as having the kind of impact that *Oklahoma!* had. But I think they did."⁴ *Cabaret's* director, Harold Prince, concurs: "*Love Life* and *Allegro* were the first concept musicals."⁵ And Boris Aronson, who designed the productions of both *Love Life* and *Cabaret* (as well as Sondheim and Prince's *Company*, *Follies*, and *Pacific Overtures*) identified Lerner and Weill's experimental show as the wellspring for many of the conceptual innovations of musicals during the 1960s and 1970s: "There were enough ideas in this show for twenty musicals."⁶

"What made writing *Love Life* such enormous fun," Lerner recalled, "was discarding a lot of old rules and making up our own rules as we went along. Of course, this also made the work doubly difficult."⁷ He had met Weill in April 1947, when Cheryl Crawford, one of the co-founders of the Group Theatre and the producer of *One Touch of Venus*, took Weill and Lenya to see her production of Lerner & Loewe's *Brigadoon* (which had opened on Broadway two months after Weill's *Street Scene*):

"Cheryl thought it would be a wonderful idea if we collaborated. So I met Kurt the night he saw the show. We had a drink together afterwards. A couple of weeks later I went up to have lunch at his house in the country. Afterwards, we took a long walk up the road. We talked of working together. He was going off

⁴ Sondheim, interview with Steven Robert Swayne, in "Hearing Sondheim's Voices," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1999, 348. Sondheim's few public statements about Weill are contradictory and conflicted: "I'm not a Brecht-Weill fan. I'm one of those heretics that likes Weill's Broadway music better. I do like *Threepenny Opera* very much, though." [David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988, p. 228.] "Weill's musical language is anathema to me... I mean, anathema, like those fruity chords with the added sixths. They make me come over all queasy... He was attempting to elevate popular musical theater as opposed to opera. And I think that there is an affinity there, not that I ever read anything he wrote about that sort of stuff... Now, I did see *Love Life*. If it influenced me, it was unconscious. I think all they're talking about is book, not about songs. I think they're talking about using vaudeville techniques to make a point and to relate somehow to human issues. Anybody who thinks that there's any similarity between the songs of *Love Life* and anything I've written is, I think, foolish." [Sondheim, unpublished interview with Steve Swayne, December 2003.] The set-up, imagery, and diction of Sondheim's earliest "faulty memory" song, "I Remember That," composed in 1954 for the unproduced *Saturday Night*, is too similar to that of "I Remember It Well" to be accidental, however.

⁵ Hirsch [fn 3], p. 297.

⁶ Aronson, quoted in Frank Rich with Lisa Aronson, *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987, p. 93.

⁷ Alan Jay Lerner, "Lerner's Life and *Love Life*," in *PM*, 14 November 1948.

to [Palestine] to see his family. He said he'd be back in June. Somewhere along the line, while he was gone, I'd gotten the idea of doing a cavalcade of American marriage; of taking one family, beginning with the start of the Industrial Revolution and showing what happened to them in a satirical way. I called up Kurt when he returned and told him about it. He said it sounded interesting, that it needed a vehicle – a way of telling it."⁸

"After two or three meetings," Lerner recalled of his collaboration with Weill, "I discovered a quality that was unique in my experience, a quality that was almost like talking to a wiser version of yourself, of reaching through all one's own flounderings with an idea and articulating it for you, of understanding exactly what you were groping for."⁹ They quickly agreed on the basic story they wanted to tell:

"Susan and Sam Cooper are a good and simple couple. They are living peacefully with their two children, Johnny and Elizabeth, in Mayville, Connecticut. It is 1791. They are in love. They have a home. They are happy. The play then progresses, by slow stages, to today. Through the magic of stage license, the four main characters remain the same throughout. They never get older and they never change, not basically. Nor in appearance. But the world around them changes. The industrial era comes along. The jazz age. Prohibition. Modernity. All their backgrounds and codes and mores change. And what does all that do to them? How does it affect them?"¹⁰

"We knew what we wanted to say," Lerner recalled, "and then we talked – and talked and talked – for about two months before we figured out the form our story ought to take. That, from the writing standpoint, was the most important problem we had with *Love Life* – finding a way to tell our story":

"Finally, after discussing hundreds of notions, the idea of doing the show as a vaudeville found its way to our misty heads. We decided on it for a host of reasons. To begin with, we were telling a basically American story and we feel that vaudeville is a basically American form. Secondly, the form was loose enough to allow for any kind of invention. Taking advantage of this, we

⁸ Lerner, liner notes for the recording *Lyrics by Lerner* (Heritage 0600, 1955, "Show Music at Its Best," vol. 3; re-released on DRG, 1983).

⁹ Lerner in an interview with George Davis (1955), unpublished typescript in WLRC Ser. 37, box 1, folder 17, p. 1.

¹⁰ Wolfe Kaufman, "The Story of *Love Life*," souvenir program of *Love Life*.

incorporated a magician, a quartet, madrigal singers, a trapeze act, a minstrel show and a tightrope walk into the proceedings."¹¹

Once Lerner and Weill agreed that a vaudeville bill, comprising unrelated variety acts that could be used to comment on the "book" scenes, would provide a workable metaphorical frame for their story, it took them four months to complete the first draft of the libretto, then unfortunately entitled "A Dish for the Gods." The authors realized, however, that this first version was much too bitter, with the Cooper's marriage already shattered in the first scene. Subsequently the libretto would evolve through five more drafts and then undergo more revisions in production than any of Weill's other theatrical works.¹² Crawford's plans for a spring 1948 production had to be postponed, and the show was still incomplete when rehearsals finally began in August.

Weill hadn't begun to orchestrate his score, his most ambitious for the American theater, until June. Not including numbers dropped during the rehearsal and tryout process, Weill's orchestral score comprises 737 pages, a full two hours of music. The culmination of his decade-long research into American popular music, it's a compendium of styles and idioms, including the polka, schottische, waltz and waltz clog, ragtime, jump, madrigal, soft shoe, fox-trot, as well as ballads, torch songs, full-blown arias, concerted operetta numbers, and even a hillbilly banjo tune. The exotic accent which marks even Weill's most determinedly American efforts is still perceptible, however. Lerner recalls that he had to caution Weill "to use a major key and bright orchestration for 'Green-Up Time,' as he didn't want to hear two thousand years of Jewish misery creeping into the song."¹³ Yet the unexpected feint toward minor mode already in the third bar of the song alerts the listener that this isn't "June is bustin' out all over," no matter how earnestly it strives to be. (In fact, Weill planted a wicked intertextual instrumental reference to Rodgers's tune to introduce the refrain of "Green-Up Time.")

¹¹ "Lerner's Life and *Love Life*." [fn 7] As a byproduct of the Industrial Revolution that had helped to Americanize thousands of arriving immigrants, vaudeville's double entendres, satirical sketches, feats of skill, and wide range of music had provided American audiences of all classes a chance to see their reflections in a theatrical mirror.

¹² Shortly after the Broadway opening of *Love Life*, Lerner recalled: "We wrote about 15 songs which we did not use. We wrote one complete 20 minute opera bouffe which was later thrown away. At the present moment, as a matter of fact, there are about 200 pages of sketches and scenes cluttering up the drawers of my desk – material we did not use." ["Lerner's Life and *Love Life*" (fn 7)].

¹³ Lerner interview with George Davis [fn 9], p. 5.

Promising Lerner and Weill a "landmark production" (capitalized at \$200,000), Crawford had recruited an all-star creative team. After considering Jerome Robbins, Robert Lewis, and Rouben Mamoulian, she engaged as director Elia Kazan, who already had *A Streetcar Named Desire* to his credit and would postpone directing *Death of a Salesman* so that he could stage *Love Life*. Although choreographer Michael Kidd's only Broadway credit was the previous year's *Finian's Rainbow*, Russian-born conceptualist set designer Boris Aronson had been a Broadway fixture for twenty-five years, and costume designer Lucinda Ballard's resumé included *The Glass Menagerie*, the 1946 revival of *Show Boat*, and *Annie Get Your Gun*. After Gertrude Lawrence, Mary Martin, and Ginger Rogers had all (fortunately) dropped out of contention, soubrette Nanette Fabray left *High Button Shoes* to star as Susan. The Juilliard-trained "heroic" baritone Ray Middleton stepped out of Ethel Merman's shadow in *Annie Get Your Gun* to play Sam. Seven hundred singers auditioned for the seventeen-member vocal ensemble. Even the trapeze artist claimed to be a former student of Nijinska's and a veteran of Ringling Brothers' Circus.

But despite such an all-star roster, rehearsals didn't go smoothly. Although he was one of the co-founders of the Actors Studio (the new home of the "Method" school of acting) and the pre-eminent director of postwar American drama, Kazan was ill-equipped to stage a musical subtitled "a vaudeville" that required a light touch, humor, and self-conscious theatricality. "Kazan really messed it up," Weill's musical assistant recalled. "He didn't have any idea how to stage the musical numbers... and Michael Kidd was too young and didn't have the guts to stand up to him."¹⁴ Consequently, *Love Life* limped into its four performances in New Haven in early September with much work yet to be done. *Variety* was not optimistic about its chances: "it stumbles over its own originality."¹⁵ Weill reported to his parents: "When we opened in New Haven, we found that some parts, of which we had promised each other a great deal, were not as effective and vice versa – which meant that already before the opening in Boston we had to make changes within a few days' time."¹⁶

At the outset of its three-week stay in Boston, critics were deeply divided, but generally more enthusiastic than anyone had expected. Writing for the *Boston*

¹⁴ Lys Symonette, quoted by Hirsch [fn 3], p. 293. Kazan himself would later admit, "I was no good with music or with spectacles."

¹⁵ Harold Bone, "Love Life, New Haven, Sept. 9," in *Variety*, 15 September 1948.

¹⁶ Letter from Weill to his parents, Albert and Emma Weill, 17 October 1948; original German reprinted in Lys Symonette/Elmar Juchem (Hrsg.) unter Mitarbeit von Jürgen Schebera, *Kurt Weill: Briefe an die Familie (1914-1950)*, Stuttgart; Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2000 [Veröffentlichungen der Kurt-Weill-Gesellschaft Dessau 3], Letter no. 247, pp. 413-414.

Post, Elliot Norton praised *Love Life* as “the most mature musical play the American stage has yet produced... a dream of a show about the American dream.”¹⁷ Regretting its sardonic tone that “harked back to Weill’s early *Threepenny Opera*,” Elinor Hughes in the *Boston Herald* wasn’t so sure: “The arguments that raged last season over *Allegro* are likely to be as nothing compared to the discussions that are going to take place over this highly experimental affair... The overall effect is one of too much attempted, a broken narrative line, and more symbolism and commentary than people, story, and music.”¹⁸ Crawford summoned Moss Hart to “doctor” the show. Having missed the whole point of the intentional disjuncture between the narrative sketches about the Coopers and the intervening vaudeville turns, Hart mis-diagnosed its malady according to the anatomy of a conventional *post-Oklahoma!* musical play: “The show needs integration.” Boris Aronson suggested that this “would take twenty years” – a prediction that turned out to be fairly accurate, given *Cabaret*’s success in consolidating its commentary numbers in the solitary voice of the Emcee.¹⁹

Lerner recalled that “in the three and one half weeks between New Haven and opening night on Broadway, virtually every scene was rewritten and three completely new ones added,” including the show’s “theme” number at its center, “Love Song.” He joked that “Weill had done so much orchestrating and re-orchestrating while we were out of town that when I asked him what he was going to do on opening night he said, ‘go back to my hotel room and do some orchestration.’”²⁰

On 7 October, *Love Life* opened on Broadway, following *Finian’s Rainbow* into the Forty-Sixth Street Theatre, with a whopping advance sale of \$310,000.²¹ The musical began abruptly without the customary potpourri overture, as if the audience were witnessing the opening of a vaudeville show: a magician does several stock tricks before selecting two volunteers from the audience, an “everyman” and “everywoman.” They turn out to be the evening’s stars, Susan and Sam Cooper. The magician saws Susan in half and suspends Sam in midair. The magician then disappears, leaving the couple to figure out how the woman had been split in two, half homemaker and half breadwinner, and the man left

¹⁷ Elliot Norton, “Wit and Wisdom Mingle Merrily in *Love Life*,” in *Boston Post*, 19 September 1948.

¹⁸ Elinor Hughes, “The Theater,” in *Boston Herald*, 19 September 1948.

¹⁹ Lerner interview with George Davis [fn 9], p. 3.

²⁰ “Lerner’s Life and *Love Life*” [fn 7].

²¹ The opening night of *Love Life* coincided with the 1,000th performance on Broadway of *Annie Get Your Gun*.

hanging. The rest of the evening, then, is a search for an answer to their predicament. The Cooper family's fate is depicted as a consequence or reflection of social and economic developments throughout 157 years of American history. Increasingly caustic scenes from Sam and Susan's deteriorating marriage from 1791 to 1948 alternate with "in 1" vaudeville numbers or "oleos," the ever-evolving voice of popular culture, a collection of pastiche numbers intended to be both entertaining and critical. Until the finale, the Coopers themselves sing only in the book scenes.

When Sam, Susan, and their two children first set up home in the New England of 1791, their values are those of the close-knit and hard-working community to which they belong, and their musical idioms are those of stalwart American operetta: "My Name is Samuel Cooper" and "Here I'll Stay." The first vaudeville number, "Progress," sung by a male octet called the Go-Getters, signals the disruption of matrimonial harmony caused by the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. Seeking more money through gainful employment outside his home in 1821, Sam reassures Susan "I Remember It Well," as the community celebrates spring's arrival in "Green-Up Time." The second vaudeville number, "Economics," originally performed by an all-Black quartet, anticipates the next narrative sketch, set in 1857, when Sam's new traveling job with the railroad prevents the couple from scheduling a convenient time for "A New Baby." By the 1890s, as three "terrifying" tots articulate it in a trapeze number, "Momma's Getting Nervous," Susan has joined the women's suffrage movement. She and her comrades parade in the bawdy "Women's Club Blues," lamenting the misery of lying in bed alone at night longing for the right to vote and yearning to be county judges so that they can punish men. The number climaxes in a burlesque of burlesque, as they rip off their corsets. Meanwhile, Sam sits contentedly on the front porch, oblivious to what's going on inside his own house, and croons the self-satisfied "My Kind of Night." In act 9 (the fifth vaudeville slot), a hobo laments that he's traveled far and wide, but no one listens to his "Love Song." Part I culminates in a rousing shipboard Prohibition finale set in the 1920s, with the now wheeler-dealer Sam ignoring Susan, as he sells out what's left of his values in "I'm Your Man."

Part II occurs entirely in Manhattan in the present, 1948. Susan and Sam, alienated and seemingly blind to the realities of their own situation and that of the society to whose opportunism and materialism both have capitulated, now pursue separate careers and sleep in separate bedrooms. Progress has emerged as the villain of the show, the cause of the decline of the Cooper's love and family life. The vaudevillians sing a risqué madrigal, "Ho, Billy O" adumbrating Sam and Susan's decision to split after admitting "we don't have enough faith in

being married to give up anything for it." An ironic reprise of "I Remember It Well" links this farewell to the couple's first in 1821, and Susan's "blues" number inquires "Is It Him or Is It Me?" A ballet entitled "Punch and Judy get a Divorce" precedes Sam's attempt to convince himself that "This Is the Life," living alone and lonely in a hotel room. In the 25-minute finale, Sam and Susan join the vaudevillians for the first time since the opening moments. Led by an "Interlocutor" and featuring numbers sung by Mr. Cynic, Miss Horoscope, Miss Mysticism, and Miss Ideal Man, "The Illusion Minstrel Show" offers only the "rainbow medicine" of pastiche songs to the terminally miserable Susan and Sam. Clinging to her last romanticized illusion, Susan stops the show in the 11 o'clock slot with a knockout sendup of Broadway torch songs, "Mr. Right." Finally, Sam and Susan reject the minstrels' easy answers and the con-man's illusions; they agree to try to find their way back to one another. They advance tentatively from opposite ends of a tightrope, still loving but deprived of both outside support and distractions. The curtain descends with their children watching anxiously, the family's fate still uncertain, the anticipated happy end still hanging in suspense, with even the final *fff* chord complicated by dissonance and preceded by a disruptive augmented sixth-chord.

The next morning's reviews were deeply divided. Some were veritable love songs for the originality of technique, high production values, and outstanding performances by Middleton and Fabray (who would win the Tony Award for best actress in a musical). "*Love Life* is the most intelligent and adult musical yet offered on the American stage," raved George Freedley in the *New York Telegraph*, though "its sophistication may keep it from the wide popularity of simpler musicals."²² Walter Winchell reported simply, "It is Show Business at its Big-time Best."²³ But Brooks Atkinson in the *Times* found *Love Life* "a cerebral labyrinth... complex and joyless – a general gripe masquerading as entertainment."²⁴ The *World Telegram* suggested that "*Love Life* tries too hard for comfort to be different."²⁵ Other critics lamented its intellectual coolness, heavy-handed and superficial social commentary, problematic second act, inferior quality of some of the vaudeville numbers, and Kazan's directorial missteps. Although Weill's kaleidoscopic score garnered nearly universal praise, one critic

²² George Freedley, "*Love Life* Sheer Delight; Intelligent, Adult Musical," in *New York Telegraph*, 9 October 1948.

²³ "Walter Winchell in New York," in *New York Mirror*, 10 October 1948.

²⁴ Brooks Atkinson, "At the Theatre," in *New York Times*, 8 October 1948.

²⁵ William Hawkins, "*Love Life* a Basic Marriage Allegory," in *New York World-Telegram*, 8 October 1948.

lamented, "Its score, utterly modernistic, lacks a single melody you would like to hear twice or hum as you leave the playhouse."²⁶

When virtually the same barbs would be aimed repeatedly at Sondheim's shows three decades later, he noted that the fragmented, reflexive forms of concept musicals had never been, in fact, the real problem for audiences. Rather, *Love Life* had failed to find a wide audience, Sondheim said, "because it started out with an idea rather than a character."²⁷ Paraphrasing William Goldman, he also observed that almost all long running musicals tell the audience a falsehood it wants to hear or a truth it knows already.²⁸ *Love Life* didn't. It challenged rather than affirmed traditional American values. Its premise that free enterprise and personal ambition had caused the American dream to self-destruct would not appeal widely to a postwar audience snatching up Dr. Spock's first book and magazines featuring Norman Rockwell covers. Divorce, disillusion, disenchantment, and the show's acidic argument lost it public favor in the rosy glow of post-World War II America. With *Oklahoma!* still running – the very model of the modern integrated musical play and a veritable manifesto of American optimism and innocence – the creators of *Love Life* decided to reinstate and expand, several months into the Broadway run, a program note that had appeared in Boston playbills. The guide to *Love Life*'s concept alerted its audience that the "vaudeville" they were about to see would be an ordinary musical in neither format nor content: "Love Life is presented in two parts, each consisting of a series of acts. The sketches, which start in 1791 and come up to the present day, are presented in the physical style of the various periods. The four main characters, Susan and Sam Cooper, and their children, Johnny and Elizabeth, who present the story, do not change in appearance as time moves on. The vaudeville acts which come between each sketch are presented before a vaudeville drop and are styled and costumed in a set vaudeville pattern."²⁹

By then both Weill and Lerner realized that "the show had not quite come off" the way they had hoped, and attendance had begun to dwindle.³⁰ A good vaudeville act can take years to develop, and a full evening of such specialty

²⁶ Unidentified clipping in production file in WLRC (Ser. 50A/L8/1948).

²⁷ Stephen Sondheim quoted by Foster Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre*, expanded edition, New York: Applause Books, 2005, p. 18.

²⁸ Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001, pp. 215-16.

²⁹ The note in the Boston program did not include "The four main characters, Susan and Sam Cooper, and their children, Johnny and Elizabeth, who present the story, do not change in appearance as time moves on."

³⁰ Lerner interview with George Davis [fn 9], p. 5.

acts, with a requisite ascending trajectory, could not be mass-produced, certainly not without enlisting veteran vaudevillians. The structure of the evening also did not allow the audience to identify sufficiently with Sam and Susan, and the exclusion of the principals from the vaudeville acts resulted in a splintered narrative, with fitful stops and starts resulting in an overall loss of momentum. As Michael Kidd articulated the issue, "Almost revue-like in its format, there was no carry over of emotion from one scene to another. People had to start over again with each scene... Do audiences identify with the characters on stage or with the authors' comment on what is happening on the stage?"³¹ Because of the state of theater technology, all of the vaudeville numbers had to be performed "in 1" in front of a drop, so that the set could be changed behind it for the next "book" sketch. Lasting nearly three and one half hours, *Love Life*, according to Hal Prince's recollection, though "wildly talented," just "had too much of everything," and Kazan didn't know "how to organize that."³² Thus, contrary to customary Broadway practice, Weill and Lerner continued to work on the show after it had opened; five months into the run, for example, they removed from Act II both the reprise of "I Remember It Well" and "Is It Him or Is It Me?" which, in retrospect, they deemed too "tragic."³³ *Love Life* managed to survive the season and closed after a respectable 252 performances on 14 May 1949. On that very day, Berlin critic Friedrich Luft wrote Weill a letter in praise of *Love Life*: "Wir vier Berliner Theaterleute, denen Sie so freundlich die Moeglichkeit gegeben haben, 'Love Life' zu sehen, moechten Ihnen sehr danken. Diesen Theaterabend zaehlen wir zu dem Schoensten und Staerksten, was wir neben der Irren von Chailiot und Streetcare Named Desire gesehen haben. Solche Mischung von Musik, Licht, Tanz und Witz duerfte bei uns zuhaus heute und in absehbarer Zeit in solcher laessigen Praezision kaum herzustellen sein."³⁴

Weill died less than a year later. It would take another four decades for *Love Life* to be exhumed.

³¹ Michael Kidd, oral history interview with Peggy Sherry [fn 1], p. 13.

³² Harold Prince, interview with Elmar Juchem, "Weill and Lenya Come to Broadway," in *Kurt Weill Newsletter* 24 (Fall 2006), p. 11.

³³ "Is It Him or Is It Me" and the reprise of "I Remember It Well" are both still listed among the musical numbers in the *Playbill* of 14 February 1949. Neither appears in the next playbill preserved in WLRC, dated 11 April 1949.

³⁴ Letter to Weill from Friedrich Luft (Hotel Taft), 14 May 1949; original at Yale Music Library, Ser. IV.B, box 48, folder 44; photocopy in WLRC.

Why? The publications, recordings, tours, and secondary productions that imprint most musicals on the public consciousness outside of New York simply never happened for *Love Life*. Though Chappell published eight songs separately as sheet music (including "Susan's Dream," which had been cut in Boston, and even thearia-like "This Is The Life") and fulfilled its contractual obligation to plug them six weeks prior to opening and for sixteen weeks after, an ASCAP embargo against broadcast of its repertory on the national radio networks halted the ascent up the pop charts of "Green-Up Time" and "Here I'll Stay" (which, by 26 November 1948 had made the top 32 for radio play nationwide, according to *Variety*) and prevented *de facto* radio promotion of the show via individual songs.³⁵ Even more damaging in the long run, an American Federation of Musicians' action known as the "Petrillo Ban" prevented pit musicians from recording the show, so no original cast album could be released – an artifact crucial to the afterlife of a Broadway production. (The ban also limited recordings of individual songs from the show to those already made before the union action took effect.) Plans for a London production were abandoned, there was no post-Broadway national tour, and film rights went unsold. A piano-vocal score was never published, nor was the script, not even in the annual issue of *Theater Arts*. Although Lerner refused to make the show available for secondary licensing for stock and amateur production (he said his own love life had made it an embarrassment – eventually he would marry seven times), in 1955 he told Lenya and her second husband, George Davis, that "he would always draw on *Love Life*." Indeed, without informing Lenya, in 1958 he did precisely that, recycling the lyric of "I Remember It Well" in the film *Gigi*, with Frederick Loewe providing a new musical setting. Not until two decades later did Lenya contact Lerner in attempt to persuade him that this "missing link" in the development of the postwar American musical finally had to be unearthed: "The inquiries re *Love Life* are coming so frequently now that it becomes more and more difficult for me to give vague answers or say 'no' altogether... Both book and music were ahead of their time in '49 and now seem all the more enjoyable and relevant... The question of *Love Life* has become very important for me."³⁶

Lerner replied promptly but unenthusiastically: "I wish I loved the book and lyrics as much as I love the music... I am available to be consulted or ignored

³⁵ In his only known appearance on television, Weill accompanied "Here I'll Stay" on "The Swift Show," NBC network, 31 March 1949. [Video of the copy kinescope in WLRC, Ser. 140/238].

³⁶ Letter from Lenya to Alan Jay Lerner, 11 October 1977. Copy in WLRC, Ser. 43.

with equal affection."³⁷ But *Love Life* was still buried when Lenya died in 1981. Five years later, shortly before his own death, however, Lerner agreed to meet with me, as Lenya's successor as president of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, to discuss the show. He reluctantly committed to attempt a rewrite of the book for an anticipated production by the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia. Terminal lung cancer prevented him from doing so. Subsequently John McGlinn's plans to record the entire score aborted with the abrupt cancellation of his contract with EMI.³⁸ The possibility of an afterlife for *Love Life* still seemed remote.

Though four fully staged productions have since reified both its strengths and shortcomings, *Love Life* still remains, sixty years after its Broadway premiere, unpublished, unrecorded, and largely unavailable to the theatrical and scholarly communities. Nevertheless, it has acquired a considerable underground reputation, and many theater historians now consider it the prototype for the "concept musicals" of the 1960s and 70s, a succession of shows, beginning on most lists with *Cabaret*, which tend to be non-linear in structure and unconventional in their use of diegetic musical numbers, rely on the cumulative effect of vignettes rather than plot, concern themselves with social or political issues, and revolve around a central concept or metaphor that informs virtually every aspect of content and presentation. But *Love Life* would merit only a footnote of distant genealogy had it not been seen and much admired by the major figures who two decades later transformed musical comedy into the deconstructive modernist musical theater. Through their work, its novel devices and materials seeped through into other, ultimately more successful, musicals, many of which also utilize a musical theater genre as a metaphorical frame, whether vaudeville, cabaret, follies, or dance audition. It is

³⁷ Letter from Lerner to Lenya, 27 October 1977. Copy in WLRC, Ser. 43. Miles Kreuger recalls a conversation with Lerner about *Love Life* in 1964: "I can never allow that show to be revived! When I asked why not, he said quite solemnly, 'I've turned into everything I satirized in that show.'" ["Some Words about Kurt Weill on Broadway," notes to *Kurt Weill on Broadway*, p. 38.] In 1976, Lerner and Leonard Bernstein attempted a variant of *Love Life*'s concept in *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, a series of episodes about the White House in which all the presidents and first ladies are played by the same two actors, observed over the centuries by the same two servants who do not age. It lasted only seven performances, despite the tie-in to the American bicentenary celebration. Earlier Oscar Hammerstein II, when told that he was terminally ill, had hoped to rewrite *Allegro*, which had run 315 performances on Broadway, in order to correct its flaws.

³⁸ In 1994, however, five numbers from *Love Life*, 21'32" of the score in Weill's original orchestrations, were included in *Kurt Weill on Broadway* (EMI Classics 7243 5 55563 2 5), with Thomas Hampson and Elizabeth Futral, conducted by McGlinn.

probably not surprising that after the upheavals of the 1960s called into question many aspects of the American dream, Harold Prince, Stephen Sondheim, Kander & Ebb, and Bob Fosse, to name just a few major figures, capitalized on and extended the techniques pioneered in *Love Life* while addressing some of the same themes.

Although some critics detect echoes of *Love Life* already in Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti* (1952), *Cabaret* self-consciously built on the ground broken by Weill and Lerner. Boris Aronson, whose conceptualizing designs were crucial to both, directly linked *Love Life* with *Cabaret*. But there are other obvious connections to Weill: *Cabaret* was set in Berlin in the Twenties, Kander & Ebb conceived the role of Fräulein Schneider with Lenya in mind, and some of their score can be heard as intentionally derivative of Weill's Berlin manner. Like *Love Life*, *Cabaret* still had one foot planted in the traditional book musical; its structure is virtually identical with *Love Life*'s, as book scenes alternate with numbers performed in the Kit Kat Club. (Compare the structural layouts of the two musicals in Figures 1 and 2.) In *Love Life* the principal characters enter the world of vaudeville only in the long Act II finale, whereas in *Cabaret* the two performative domains come together at the end of each act: first, when the cabaret performers attend the party in the fruit shop and Jewish and Nazi anthems collide, and then again at the end of the show when the narrative and its cabaret frame merge as the meagerly talented Sally Bowles invites us to join her in capitulating to the coming darkness: "Life is a cabaret.... Your table's waiting." But gathering the commentary cabaret numbers around the central figure of the Emcee is a masterful improvement on the Weill-Lerner scheme, and in the 1972 film version, Bob Fosse went a step further. He omitted all songs that had occurred in book scenes in the stage version, because realistic characters breaking into non-diegetic song would confuse the conceptual framework of the film.

Following on *Cabaret*'s heels in April 1967 and winning the following year's Tony Award for best musical, *Hallelujah, Baby!* (book by Arthur Laurents) attempted to trace the experience of African Americans over the course of the twentieth century, as personified in the character of Georgina, a role intended initially for Lena Horne but played by Leslie Uggams. As in *Love Life*, the characters do not age, and the score (music by Jule Styne, lyrics by Comden & Green) surveys a historical panorama of African American musical idioms. Three years later, Prince and Aronson, now teamed with Sondheim, took a leap forward conceptually with *Company*, whose modular, cube-motif design for modern Manhattan apartments had been adumbrated by Aronson's conception

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CHERYL CRAWFORD
presents
LOVE LIFE
A Vaudeville

Book and Lyrics by ALAN JAY LERNER Music by KURT WEILL

Directed by ELIA KAZAN
Choreography by MICHAEL KIDD

NANETTE FABRAY with **RAY MIDDLETON**

Settings designed by BORIS ARONSON Costumes designed by LUCINDA BALLARD
Musical Director: Joseph Littau Lighting by Peggy Clark
Musical Arrangements and Orchestrations by MR. WEILL

"Love Life" is presented in two parts, each consisting of a series of acts. The sketches, which start in 1791 and come up to the present day, are presented in the physical style of the various periods. The four main characters, Susan and Sam Cooper, and their children, Johnny and Elizabeth, who present the story, do not change in appearance as time moves on. The vaudeville acts which come between each sketch are presented in a set vaudeville pattern.

LAYOUT OF SCENES AND MUSICAL NUMBERS

PART I

Act 1: The Magician

Act 2: Sketch: "The Cooper Family" Mayville, 1791

"Who is Samuel Cooper?" (Sam & Ensemble)
"Here I'll Stay" (Susan & Sam)

Act 3: "Progress" The Go-Getters

Act 4: Sketch: "The Farewell" Mayville, 1821

"I Remember It Well" (Susan & Sam)
"Green-Up Time" (Susan & Ensemble)

Act 5: "Economics" The Quartette

Act 6: Sketch: "The New Baby" The Cooper home, 1857

Act 7: "Mother's Getting Nervous" 3 Tots & Trapeze Artist

Act 8: Sketch: "My Kind of Night" The Cooper home, 1890s

"My Kind of Night" (Sam)
"Women's Club Blues" (Susan & Suffragettes)

Act 9: "Love Song" Hobo

Act 10: Sketch: "The Cruise" An ocean liner, 1920s

"I'm Your Man" (Sam & Ensemble)

PART II

Act 1 Sketch: "Radio Night" The Coopers' New York apt., the present

Act 2 "Ho, Billy O!" (Madrigal Singers)

Act 3 Sketch: "Farewell Again" The present

"I Remember It Well" reprise (Susan & Sam)
"Is It Him or Is It Me?" (Susan)

Act 4 "Punch and Judy Get a Divorce" (Ensemble)

Act 5 Sketch: "A Hotel Room"

"This is the Life" (Sam)

Act 6 "The Minstrel Show"

"Here I'll Stay" reprise (Interlocutor)
"Minstrel Parade" (ensemble)
"Madame Zuzu" (Miss Horoscope & Miss Mysticism)
"Taking No Chances" (Mr. Cynic)
"Mr. Right" (Susan and Miss Ideal Man)

Fig. 1

CABARET

Book by
JOE MASTEROFF

Lyrics by
FRED EBB

Music by
JOHN KANDER

Produced and directed by HAL PRINCE
Choreographed by RON FIELD
Designed by BORIS ARONSON

Based on John van Druten's *I Am a Camera* and Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*

ACT I

Kit Kat Klub

"Outside"

Scene 1:
"Wilkommen" (Conférencier)
Crossover: "Wilkommen" reprise

Scene 2: N.Y.'s eve; Railroad compartment

Scene 3: Fräulein Schneider's Boarding House
"So What?"

Scene 4:
"Don't Tell Mama"
"Telephone Number"

Scene 5: Cliff's Room
"Perfectly Marvelous"

Scene 6:
"Two Ladies"

Scene 7: Schneider's Living Room
"It Couldn't Please Me More"

Scene 8
"Tomorrow Belongs To Me"

Scene 9: Cliff's Room
"Why Should I Wake Up"

Scene 10
Pimp's Song: "Sitting Pretty"

Scene 11: Schneider's empty living room
"Married"

Scene 12:
Fruit Shop; Party; Cabaret Performers There
"Jewish anthem": "Meeskite"
"Nazi anthem": "Tomorrow Belongs To Me"

ACT II

Kit Kat Klub

"Outside"

Scene 1: Dance turns into Military Drill

Scene 2: Fruit Shop
Reprise: "Married"

Scene 3:
"If You Could See Her
Through My Eyes"

Scene 4: Cliff's Room
"What Would You Do?"
(Fräulein Schneider/Cliff/Sally)

Scene 5:
"Cabaret"

Scene 6: Cliff's Room

Scene 7:
Railroad Station
Cabaret
Reprise: "Wilkommen"
"Cabaret"

Fig. 2

of the Cooper's apartment in *Love Life*.³⁹ Though owing nothing to *Love Life* musically, *Company* might be considered something of a "new and improved" variation on its theme (marriage) and its form (self-contained vignettes punctuated by commentary musical numbers). Although Prince and Sondheim both claim to "hate Brecht," Sondheim admitted that in *Company* "all the songs had to be used, I'm sorry to say, in a Brechtian way as comment and counterpoint." But critics leveled virtually the same charges against *Company* that Sondheim would against *Love Life*: the central character had too little of it, and ultimately the show's cool, cynical detachment alienated the audience. It too was a show more about ideas than character.⁴⁰

Follies, again designed by Aronson, with music and lyrics by Sondheim, co-directed by Prince and Michael Bennett, may be the most flamboyant and imaginative of *Love Life*'s descendants, though Prince credits *Lady in the Dark* as having been equally inspirational. Its central metaphor of a "Weissman Follies" reunion is more flexible and powerful than Weill's and Lerner's arbitrary vaudeville frame, as it more convincingly accommodates narrative, characterization, and song. Whereas the principal characters in *Love Life* never age, in *Follies* "growing older without growing wiser" accounts for the tragedy of both principal couples, who are shadowed by actors playing their younger selves. And, as present and past intersect and interact in cinematic fashion, Sondheim's score modulates back and forth between the diegetic and non-diegetic, frequently ambivalently suspended dreamlike somewhere between the two, as music externalizes memories and ghosts of characters' younger selves sing along in the present. *Follies*'s debt to *Love Life* is most apparent in its thirty-minute finale – not a minstrel show, but a fantasy Follies finale entitled "Loveland," which begins as the opulent and innocent dream we expected to see when we entered the Follies/*Follies* and ends with a nightmare we had hoped to forget. In between, the four principals confront their younger selves and their present illusions in a series of four solo songs, in which Sondheim turns pastiche inside out, as each character borrows a historical "follies" idiom that evinces his/her own private folly, functioning not unlike Susan's

³⁹ See Rich [fn 6], p. 91.

⁴⁰ Quoted by Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Company*, 2nd ed., New York: Da Capo Press, 1994, p. 131. Despite their denials, Foster Hirsch, who has written monographs on both Prince's and Weill's stage works, asserts correctly that "the Brecht-Weill idea of musical theater has filtered into the American mainstream primarily through the collaboration between Prince and Sondheim, even though neither the director nor his composer will admit any specific impact." [Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre* (fn 27), p. 15.] See also Savran [fn 4], pp. 228-9.

"Mr. Right" in *Love Life*.⁴¹ After the illusion of "Loveland" evaporates before our eyes, the two couples resume tenuous relationships no less perilous than Susan and Sam's precarious walk toward one another on a high wire – though advances in stage technology allowed Aronson and Prince to achieve cinematic magic that the creators of *Love Life* could only have imagined.

A scrapbook in revue form, *Pacific Overtures* (1976), Aronson's final collaboration with Sondheim and Prince, chronicled 150 years of history, not of the American family, but cultural imperialism in Japan, a different take on the American dream. With its multiple frames and ambiguity of viewpoint, even more than *Love Life* it is a musical about ideas rather than characters, particularly the necessity for and the costs of progress.

That season's other contenders for "best musical," Kander & Ebb's *Chicago*, staged by Bob Fosse, and Michael Bennett's *A Chorus Line*, could also claim to be descendants of *Love Life*. Subtitled a "musical vaudeville," *Chicago* bears a striking resemblance to *Love Life*, which Fosse had seen and admired. The sensational trials and imprisonment of a pair of murderesses play as a succession of vaudeville acts, with a jazz-band perched above the action and its conductor announcing each of the vaudeville numbers, which, unlike those in *Love Life*, are performed by the principal characters. The sizzling opening sequence, "All That Jazz," furnished the title for Fosse's 1979 autobiographical film, which itself concludes with a half-hour "Hospital Hallucination," perhaps even more manifestly inspired by *Love Life*'s minstrel show than was the "Loveland" sequence in *Follies*. When Lenya saw the film, she immediately contacted Fosse and asked him to consider directing a new stage or television version of *Love Life*. He replied that he had seen the show repeatedly in 1948, remembered it very well, but had already exploited its innovations in *Pippin*, *Chicago*, and *All That Jazz* and moved beyond them.⁴²

But of all the shows descended from *Love Life*, none seems closer in tone and technique than Sondheim and John Weidman's *Assassins* (1990), produced off-Broadway with the collaboration of neither Prince nor Aronson, who had died in 1979. A dark documentary "vaudeville" about nine assassins and would-be assassins of American presidents, it too surveys more than a century of American history and American popular music. It too examines an aspect of the

⁴¹ Although Sondheim says that he was imitating and commenting on a Cole Porter song in Phyllis's folly, "The Story of Lucy and Jessie," a more plausible model is "The Saga of Jenny" from *Lady in the Dark*, for which Sondheim would write a parody lyric, "The Saga of Lenny," for Bernstein's seventieth birthday. Ben's folly, "Live, Laugh, Love," echoes Ira Gershwin's lyric for *The Firebrand of Florence*, "Life, Love, and Laughter."

⁴² Lenya recounted Fosse's response to me during a visit in August 1980.

American dream, as Elliot Norton articulated it in his review of *Love Life*: "the conviction that here in this nation there should be opportunity for everyone to make his way happily, according to his own abilities." Just as the romantic corollary of that dream was corrupted in the course of *Love Life*, Sondheim and Weidman's assassins pervert "the right to the pursuit of happiness" into "Everybody's got the right to be happy, Everybody's got the right to their dreams," as the malcontents sing in the opening frame song set in a shooting gallery. Martin Gottfried considers *Assassins* Sondheim's "most youthful and audacious show," in fact, the "defining show" of his career.⁴³ If Sondheim considers *Sunday in the Park with George* his "Britten score," then *Assassins* surely is his "Weill score," dramaturgically and in its pointed use of pastiche of popular idioms to make dramatic and often ironic points. To be sure, as Gottfried asserts, only Stephen Sondheim could have written the music of *Assassins*. But its revue-like, non-linear structure, its slapstick vaudeville-like sketches, its stylistic coherence within a virtuoso pastiche score, its use of popular music as a mirror of society, its courage in confronting the audience with a critique of its cherished illusions, its critical detachment, and even its own minstrel-cakewalk number, "The Ballad of Guiteau," remind us why Sondheim found *Love Life* "useful for his own work."⁴⁴

Sondheim has discouraged a major revival of his and Arthur Laurents's experimental *Anyone Can Whistle*, which closed after just nine performances in 1964, because, he says, "so much has happened in the last twenty years that *Whistle* would seem hilariously old-fashioned."⁴⁵ The same may now be true,

⁴³ Martin Gottfried, *Sondheim*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993, p. 183.

⁴⁴ *Assassins*'s connection to *Love Life* is circuitous. In 1977, Charles Gilbert, a young writer/director/composer very much in the thrall of *Pacific Overtures*, had written a musical entitled *Assassins*, which was produced in 1979 at Theater Express in Pittsburgh. In the early 1980s Gilbert submitted the script to a competition sponsored by the Musical Theater Lab in New York designed to pair novice musical theater writers with mentors. Sondheim served as one of the judges. Although Gilbert did not win, in 1988, he received a letter from Sondheim seeking permission to write a musical with John Weidman with the same subject matter and title. Gilbert agreed, and the credits for the show include "based on an idea by Charles Gilbert." In an e-mail correspondence of 28 September 1998 with this author, Gilbert said that he had "studied *Love Life* rather thoroughly" and certainly recognizes "plenty of connections" between his own and Sondheim's *Assassins* and *Love Life*.

⁴⁵ Sondheim, quoted by Zadan [fn 40], p. 89. In the early 1960s, Carmen Capalbo, the coproducer of the famous Theater de Lys *Threepenny Opera*, approached Sondheim to translate and adapt *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* for off-Broadway production: "We met, he was flabbergasted, at that time he had never heard of the piece. He wrestled with it for a long time, but I knew what his answer was going to be. He didn't forget it though, because a few years later he wrote *Anyone Can Whistle* [1964]. If you study that libretto, it's *Mahagonny*."

after sixty years, for the far more successful and daring *Love Life*, at least without the revision of libretto that Lerner himself deemed necessary for any future productions. Virtually all its innovations were repeated, extended, and refined in later, better-known shows. Commentary song has become a convention of musical dramaturgy, and the musicals which drew inspiration from *Love Life* are themselves now approaching "middle age"; some of them are even looking a little yellow at their edges and have required "revisal" for recent commercial productions. Yet their greater metadramatic sophistication and more fluid execution do not detract from *Love Life*'s own achievement in having opened up such startling possibilities by exploring complex issues and painful truths in untried structures. The souvenir program of *Love Life* quoted Weill and Lerner, still breathless from the exhilaration of working at the cutting edge in 1948, as saying in unison: "We must continue to invent and improvise. That is the only way the theater can remain healthy. Today's invention is tomorrow's cliché."

[Carmen Capalbo, interview with Donald Spoto, 7 March 1986, WLRC, Ser. 60.] For Sondheim's recollection of Capalbo's invitation, see Savran [fn 4], p. 228.