

# Herbert Keyser

## an autobiography

From the preface to  
*Geniuses of the American Musical Theatre*  
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IT WAS 1950. I WAS A SENIOR IN HIGH school. I don't remember feeling any threat of being drafted, although the Korean problem had already started. I had been quite a good student in the year leading up to that time. Although my family was extremely poor, I fully expected I would be going to college on a scholarship. A lot was expected of me. My older brother had been the only other person in my family to move on to higher education. My parents and grandparents, with whom I lived, all agreed that I was the one to become a physician. In the future my parents wanted to be saying "my son the doctor."

I was the only one not relishing the idea.

It wasn't that I was so certain of some other occupation that would make me gloriously happy. In fact, in the stupidity of my youth, I didn't have the faintest idea of where I was headed.

What I can recall most clearly was a simple idea that came into my head. When I would turn on the television set and watch what were mostly local television shows, I was certain I could do as well as the performers I saw.

I found the address for a company credited at the end of a number of shows—Donn Bennett Productions—and went to the television studio and offices. When asked by the receptionist what I was there for, I told her that I was looking for employment, performing on their shows.

"What can you do?" she asked.

"I sing. I dance. I act."

The total extent of my singing, dancing, and acting was accomplished in the privacy of my room. I was completely untrained. In other words, I lied. However, it got me in for an audition, where I was asked to read. When I was done I heard the following response:

"Thank you. We'll call you if we can use you."

Though I previously stated that I was completely untrained, there was a caveat to that. The explanation for that lies in knowing the history of my parents. These two absolutely spectacular individuals were both born deaf. I developed a speech pattern of slow, careful enunciation, so that they could read my lips. As a result, I became a Philadelphian without a Philadelphia accent. That was something the production company was interested in.

Shortly after my audition I received a call back from Donn Bennett Productions.

"Would you be interested in doing commercials?"

Thus began my life in show business. At the production studio over time I was added to a group of singers, and then a group of dancers, and eventually given speaking roles in local sitcoms.

Over that year and the next four in college, I organized a theatrical group that put on productions in the Philadelphia area during the school year. I was committed to somehow making myself into a performer. I filled my troupe with proven talent. The performers were young, up and coming, and getting started in their careers. I found a teenage dancer who was marvelous. His name was Mickey Calin and ultimately he became the second male lead in the original cast of *WEST SIDE STORY*. From there he went on to a very successful film career under the name Michael Callan.

I was able to connect with a female vocalist who was only about fifteen years old. Her name was Sandy Galitz, but she was using the name Sandy Gale. However, since Sunny Gale was famous at the time, she eventually changed her name to Sandy Stewart. She had a wonderful career including *The Perry Como Show*. She ultimately married composer Moose Charlap and still performs today, sometimes with her son, Bill.

One of the dancers in the troupe was a teenager who competed as Miss Pennsylvania in the Miss Ameri-

ca pageant. I believe that she finished third, but it is difficult to be certain after more than fifty years.

I was not in a class with these wonderful young performers, but the association with them kept my dream going.

I spent my summers working in the mountains at a resort. I apprenticed backstage with lighting and scenery, and got small singing and dancing roles, even getting my own gig once a week, heading up the guest talent show. But I made certain that I got a chance to sing.

My family was in despair. Their great hope was going down the drain in a profession they perceived as worthless.

It is difficult to fully understand how much pain they were going through. My mother never heard a single sound in her entire life. She loved me dearly and came to see every performance of mine that she could. Afterward she would tell me, "You have to get out of show business, because you are a terrible singer." Now that is true love!

And then a terrible thing happened to me.

I was accepted to medical school. My life in show business came to a close. I believe that neither my family nor any of the people who saw me perform were particularly concerned about the end of that career.

I have spent the past fifty years very happily ensconced in the world of medicine. During all that time I never lost my profound love of music and the theatre. Even while studying medicine I was part of the school choir.

Those five years in show business did give me enough of a taste to encourage me to write and utilize what I had learned to become a speaker. I used whatever talent I had within my profession and lectured on America's health care system.

My wife and I, during all those years, were constant theatergoers. As my children grew up, they knew they would hear their father singing at the kitchen sink, or elsewhere in the house, all the songs he had learned from show after show.

After fifty years away from actually performing an idea occurred to me. I decided to investigate the lives of all the great composers and lyricists who had given me so much pleasure. I wanted to tell the stories of their lives, while singing their music to audiences who would find these lives to be as intriguing to them as they were to me. I began the research four years ago, and started doing performances one year later.

The stories were so enthralling, so poignant, at times tragic and at other times so inspirational, that I decided to combine them in a book. Searching through literature I found that although there was a great mass of full-length books about these geniuses, no single volume told all their stories in a shortened version. And so this anthology found its origin in a dream I had more than fifty years ago, and finally became a reality.

I omitted some truly great composers and lyricists, not because I thought less of their talent; there was just insufficient biographical data to allow me to fully tell their life stories. Included in that group would certainly be Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick (*FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, FIORELLO, SHE LOVES ME*), Richard Adler and Jerry Ross (*THE PAJAMA GAME, DAMN YANKEES*), Cy Coleman (*LITTLE ME, BARNUM, SWEET CHARITY, CITY OF ANGELS, THE WILL RODGERS FOLLIES*), Stephen Schwartz (*GODSPELL, PIPPIN, WICKED*), Claude-Michel Schonberg and Alain Boubil (*LES MISERABLES, MISS SAIGON*), Vernon Duke, Marvin Hamlisch, Mel Brooks, Maury Yeston, Carolyn Leigh, Bob Merrill, Richard Whiting and a host of others, including the new young composers and lyricists just in the early stages of their careers. I apologize to all of them for leaving them out.

Though I sincerely hope that all who read this book will find these stories enchanting, no one can possibly derive more pleasure than I did, during the past four years of delving into the lives of these icons, these Geniuses of the American Musical Theatre.—Herbert H. Keyser

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