

GENIUSES OF THE AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE

By Herbert Keyser

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large

Normally I only review theatre productions. On rare occasions when a book about the theatre comes along that I feel has something extra special to say about musicals or straight plays and their creation do I offer critical commentary. Author Herbert Keyser discovered his passion for musical theatre as a youngster. Then a terrible thing happened (his words). He was accepted to medical school after college where he had performed in various productions. Now after fifty years in the medical profession, he has elected to write about some of the geniuses of America's song book.

While there is no exact time frame that defines the golden age of American theatre, the period of the mid 1930's into the 1960's encompasses an incredible body of masterpieces in both musical and non-musical theatre. There were scores of extremely talented, diverse writers working simultaneously. Surely they challenged and stimulated each other. Keyser has collected, for the first time, biographies of twenty-eight of the composers of musicals who were at their peaks during these years. Some of the songwriters and lyricists included are Irving Berlin, Leonard Bernstein, George Gershwin, Jerry Herman, Johnny Mercer, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Stephen Sondheim and many more. One might quarrel about some of the great talents that are not included. Keyser says they were eliminated because he found it difficult to get sufficient information about their lives. I should think space was a factor as well. There are no rock composers.

As you read about these men and women, you realize how their music and words are indelibly etched into our brains. I found that I would stop reading to sing a tune mentally and be amazed at how I knew every word of each lyric. Looking at the lives of these folks side by side, one senses similarities and great disparity as well. Many of them, such as Irving Berlin and "Yip" Harburg came from poor, lower east side immigrant families, predominately Jewish. Alan Jay Lerner and Cole Porter came from wealthy parents. Most of the others came from comfortable if not lavish upbringings, Some could not read music while others were accomplished musicians. Vincent Youmans was a neurotic, difficult alcoholic who hated writing down his music. He hired Harold Arlen as his musical secretary. Arlen, a republican, was blacklisted, by the way because of his friendship with Harburg. There are several alcoholics, diverse sexual orientations, and numerous contentious show business issues.

There is a lot of gossip and inside information about putting on a show to be relished. Hoagy Carmichael became a lawyer. Ernie Pyle of World War II fame said Hoagy wrote "Stardust" on the Pyle family piano. In 1973, Dorothy Fields put some of her own money in SEESAW to keep it going for nine months because the budget had grown to over one million dollars. Irving Berlin, Noel Coward and Jerry Herman are among those who cannot read music could not read music. Kander and Ebb of CHICAGO found Sinatra mean and self-centered and disliked him intensely though they made a great deal of money off his singing "New York, New York." Bob Fosse was cruel and mean to everyone in rehearsals for CHICAGO including Gwen Verdon, his wife. There are lots of marriages, divorces, affairs, family discord and addiction problems. I'll let you discover those when you read this handsome, eloquent book which I strongly urge you to do.

Keyser notes that, "Carl Jung wrote that people of great genius must pay dearly for that privilege, as each of us is born with a limited store of energy. The creative process steals most of the energy, leaving a deficit in some other aspect of life." In spite of fame and great wealth, many of these makers of music often lived lives of misery and loneliness. Their legacies, though, are eternal gifts to us lesser folk who will sing their songs forever.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.