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Reconstructing Lost Musicals

Benjamin Sears
Bradford Conner

ABSTRACT. The American musical, particularly those written in the first half of the twentieth century, is now receiving, on the part of producers and scholars, the attention that European opera of the nineteenth century has long been receiving. Music libraries can be a valuable starting point for research on these works through their own holdings and by

Benjamin Sears, (E-mail: ben@benandbrad.com); and Bradford Conner, (E-mail: brad@benandbrad.com), are Boston-based performers, producers, and historians of American song and musical theatre. They also teach and lecture regularly on the music they perform. They may be reached at *American Classics, Oakton Recordings, 70 Allston Street, Boston, MA 02134*.

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pointing researchers to other sources, be they libraries, museums, estates, or private collections. The authors have had experience in such projects and offer an overview of their work and how it can be generally applied to this area of music research.

KEYWORDS. Archival research, Broadway reference materials, musicals, scripts, vocal scores

The American musical, particularly those written in the first half of the twentieth century, is now receiving the type of attention on the part of producers and scholars that European opera of the nineteenth century has long been receiving. In both cases, the creators of these works did not see their role as writing for posterity, but rather to put on stage a production that would entertain an audience and showcase the stars of the day. As a result, materials were not archived and often haphazardly saved (if at all). Finding them can be a project of lengthy research, a great deal of perseverance, and just plain luck. Knowing the various realms of exploration can be of use to music librarians in assisting to bring Broadway shows back to life.

Libraries are a great source, or at least a very good starting place, for this type of project. Surprises abound, and a chance discovery of a vocal score, script, or even a song can lead to the recreation of a long-lost show.

The first thing to know is that there is no formula for how to find the material. The only rule is: research. Anywhere, everywhere. This paper tells of how we researched and reconstructed four shows, providing a good overview of what is involved, and pointing out the best sources. It can only give general directions; each project is unique (as will be shown, also).

The four shows under discussion are three by Irving Berlin: his first complete Broadway score, *Watch Your Step* from 1914, and its immediate successor, *Stop! Look! Listen!* from 1915, both with books by the prolific but rarely inspired Harry B. Smith. The third Berlin show is a compilation of his four *Music Box Revues* from 1921-1924. The one non-Berlin entry is the classic revue, *The Band Wagon*, a 1931 hit by Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz, with skits by Dietz and George S. Kaufman.

As with so much in show business, our involvement initially came about by the kind of chance discovery mentioned previously. Specifically, it was discovering that the Loeb Music Library at Harvard University had a published vocal score of Berlin's *Watch Your Step*.

In 1914, vocal scores for sale were unheard of, but Berlin wanted his score available. Being a publisher in addition to being a songwriter, he published it himself (as he would with all of his music). A perusal of the score quickly revealed it to be charming, full of unknown gems and one Berlin standard, "Play a Simply Melody." Given our fascination with early Irving Berlin, for us it was a goldmine.

A few years later, the Boston-based group American Classics, of which we are two of the founding producers, contemplated doing a concert performance of a musical, along the lines of *Encores!* in New York, but with piano rather than full orchestra. What proved to be the first of our Musicals in Concert series was slated for performance in November 2000, and the existence of the Berlin score made *Watch Your Step* a distinct possibility for our first show. The problem with this potential production was there was no script. Beyond the vocal score, Harvard had nothing more in its libraries. Additionally, a phone call to the Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization, which manages Berlin's works, turned up nothing. What material was finally located was in the collection at the Museum of the City of New York.

There proved to be two scripts, neither of which was complete. The Museum also had a copy of a very early draft that bore little resemblance to the final product, making three rather incompatible sources. This proved to be a fine example of an aspect of musicals from the beginning of the twentieth century: a "book" musical may have a plot, nonetheless it was a very loose frame on which to hang songs, dances, and specialty acts. (The specialty acts in *Watch Your Step* include a "Specialty dancer," a Burlesque Russian Ballet, and originally W. C. Fields in a billiards scene which was dropped during the first tryout.) In short, scripts were fluid, and this one was no exception.

Our research gave us an Act I which appeared to be the opening night script, or very close to it. Acts II and III were clearly from much later in the run, when the cast had changed significantly. The scripts bore no information about when they were written and/or used, so how to use them to produce a script resembling the one of the opening night in 1914 was impossible. The scripts, however, were sufficient as the basis of a viable performing edition.

A valuable source of information about Broadway musicals is Richard Norton's *A Chronology of American Musical Theater* (Oxford Uni-

versity Press, 2002), which catalogues the opening night casts and credits of every musical that appeared in New York. He also meticulously notes any changes in the song list as the production went on. Berlin biographies, and other writings about Broadway, often are sources for information about the shows, though it can be a hit-or-miss proposition. One thing we knew for certain was that one star of *Watch Your Step* was Frank Tinney, a comedian whose specialties included blackface routines. Research revealed that his character was no longer in the show in the version of Acts II and III which existed, so the Act II and III script had to be from later in the run after he had been replaced. Other stars were Vernon and Irene Castle. Vernon Castle played a lead character; Irene played "Mrs. Vernon Castle," who also was missing from Acts II and III. Sources indicated that she left the show early in the run, though her husband continued in his role.

With this material in hand, serious work of reconstruction could begin. We had a full vocal score; we knew where songs fell in the script (or in some cases, at least approximately), even if the script was not always clear as to which song went where. We knew which songs were dropped and what went into their place, and we had two incompatible versions of the script. From various writings about the show we knew the general outline of the plot, which helped us meld the two versions together; however, another problem quickly arose, one which we have not yet satisfactorily solved in order to create a final performing edition. Given the fluidity of scripts, as the cast changed, the plot was adjusted. In this instance it meant that the plot development at the end of Act I, as we had it, was not properly resolved in the version of Acts II and III. One has to assume that the later version of Act I was changed, too.

We took refuge in that fluidity, pasted together what we had as best we could, wrote a short scene of extra transitional dialogue early in Act II to connect it to the extant Act I (added after the opening night of our production), and let the music take care of the rest. When the music is this good it can obscure book problems, as producers, writers, and songwriters have known since the Broadway musical began. In keeping with the style of the time, we interpolated songs which either were intended for the show but dropped, or which were interpolated during the run.

Sources of materials for *Watch Your Step* were The Museum of the City of New York, Loeb Music Library (Harvard University), and our own files.

Stop! Look! Listen!, given a November 2002 performance by American Classics, required some different research. We had discovered that the script was in the collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts during our research on *Watch Your Step* (making it another chance discovery). Berlin, the publisher, again made sure that Berlin, the songwriter, had many of the songs published. Unlike *Watch Your Step*, no vocal score was published. (Berlin would not publish another vocal score until *Annie Get Your Gun* in 1946.) The library had a lovely copyist's version of the score which appeared to be Berlin's own (not in his hand, since he did not read or write music, although the signature in it appears to be his). In addition to the copy of the script at the Library, another was at the Museum of the City of New York.

For this show, copyright became a problem. The script and score were unpublished thus falling under a form of statutory copyright, despite having been written before 1923. What this meant is we could *perform* the work clear of any royalties, but we could not *copy* it in order to perform it without the permission of the copyright holders, which was granted for the score. In order to get a copy of the score, however, we had to pay for the library to make a microfiche, from which we were able to make our own copy. A complicated process, but the only method to get it.

The script was another matter. If someone is administering the Harry B. Smith Estate, it has proven impossible to determine who that is. Again, because the material is out of copyright, there is no problem with performing it, but there is a problem with copying it. The quirks of copyright law, in this case, did not allow us to photocopy it without permission of the copyright holder (unknown, as noted), *but* we could copy it by hand or by typing it into a laptop computer. Two days were spent putting all the extant material into a laptop computer.

As with *Watch Your Step*, the show underwent revisions as the cast changed, so the materials reflected different versions of the script, fortunately with a complete script amongst those materials. Additionally, this show went to London, where it underwent significant rewrites and changes of songs to suit the British audience.

Again, taking into account the fluidity of shows, and the pragmatism demanded of a show's creators, a performing version was created using the score, songs that were interpolated and later published, and the various versions of the script (including what we knew of the London version). Certainly not what was seen on opening night in 1915, but a

version which, like *Watch Your Step*, allowed the score to be the star of the performance.

Sources for this show came primarily from the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, along with The Museum of the City of New York, and our files.

Irving Berlin will return later. For the moment, let us turn to the American Classics production of November 2001, *The Band Wagon*. This show required the most detective work, but the result of that work was an edition that completely matched opening night in 1931. The score and script remained relatively unchanged throughout the show's run and later tour performances, thus interpolations or new scripts were not an issue. The easy part was that many of the show's songs had been published in sheet music form. A significant portion of the material from the production was in the Library of Congress (though it took some research to learn this), and the Arthur Schwartz Estate gave us permission to copy all materials.

The musical material in the Library of Congress was in various forms—piano/vocal, full score, and orchestra parts. When there was no piano/vocal score for a song, extrapolations had to be done from the full score or orchestra parts. The script was in a private collection in Manhattan, and generously was shared with us.

After our work at the Library of Congress, we had music for the entire show with the exception of one song—a comic song (“New York is a Nice Place to Visit”, listed as “sung by a woman”), which we did not want to leave out. Phone calls to various people revealed that the only known copy of this song was in the same private collection as the script. Again, the owner was willing to share the song with us.

With all the materials in hand the only work here was creating piano/vocal versions of the songs where appropriate. A full score was not needed as these performances would be with piano only. For future performances with orchestra, the orchestral parts and full score still are awaiting reconstruction.

For *The Band Wagon*, sources were the Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz estates, which were more useful in directing us to other sources as their holdings were not extensive; the Library of Congress; a private collection; and our files.

Our last project under consideration here was Irving Berlin again, but it presented a different challenge. In 1920, Berlin made the decision to build and operate his own theatre, an unprecedented and still unique venture for a songwriter. The theatre was the *Music Box*, which is still in operation. From 1921 to 1924, he wrote a yearly revue called, appropri-

ately enough, *The Music Box Revue*. Again, as his own publisher, Berlin published most of the songs performed in the revues. We have been doing a series of Berlin recordings that are roughly chronological and in 2004, we were up to the early '20s and the *Music Box Revues*. The initial project was looking for songs to record. Being impressed with what we found, we looked to create a program drawn from the *Revue*s for our concerts with American Classics.

In this instance, as far as music went, things were easy—everything extant is at the Library of Congress, in specific boxes, so it was really a matter of sorting through the material and finding what was needed. By the end of our research, we had a nearly complete catalogue of the four shows. The *Music Box Revue of 1921* exists complete at the Library of Congress; the Library has most of the materials for the 1922 edition; the 1923 and 1924 shows are sparsely represented. There are some private Berlin collections which are quite extensive, and through a contact we were able to obtain additional materials from these collections.

Given the quantity of material, work at the Library of Congress took about two-and-a-half eight-hour days. As we were packing up to leave on the third day, one of our contacts at the museum introduced us to a librarian who is interested in shows from that era, particularly in the skits which were used in revues. It turned out the Library has an extensive collection of scripts, though only those which were filed for copyright. We had the only two published scripts—Robert Benchley's *The Treasurer's Report*, which had been published in *Greatest Revue Sketches* (compiled and edited by Donald Oliver, Bard/Avon, 1982), and George S. Kaufman's *If Men Played Cards as Women Do*, available from Baker's Plays.

The process of locating the scripts in the Library proved to be somewhat complicated, though. First, it is necessary to know when they were filed (as opposed to when they were written and/or performed); for example, a script from a 1921 show could be listed for copyright under 1922, or 1923, or any other year. The scripts are listed in books which are on an upper floor of the Library; the listing provides a catalogue number for the script or a microfilm of it. These are back on the ground floor. We identified eight scripts, found them, and were able to copy them, all before the library closed that day. This part of the project remains the least complete, as we did not find all the scripts. Throughout the four *Music Box Revues* the skits were all individual works, by various authors, and no compilation of the complete scripts has been made;

or is likely to be made since not all were filed for copyright and some are currently lost.

Two other scripts were written by the team of Bert Kalmar & Harry Ruby, who wrote skits in addition to their song catalogue. The Kalmar estate had some scripts, which they shared with us; the Ruby estate did not have any.

One bit of sleuthing was particularly interesting. A woman named Frances Nordstrom had contributed skits to the *Music Box Revues*, but one of the skits which appeared to be hers was credited to Franken Woods. She had a manager named A. H. Woods, and apparently married him, then adapted a more masculine-sounding first name to go with her married name: Frank from Frances and N from her middle initial, thus becoming Franken. From all appearances, the mystery writer was Frances Nordstrom.

The purpose of collecting the *Music Box* materials was not to recreate any one show, but to make an amalgamation of songs and skits from each of the four editions. In a way, this was the most enjoyable project of recreation as it allowed us to go through the material and choose the songs and skits that appealed to us. It was, however, difficult to narrow down so much quality material, particularly from the 1921 show, since it was by far the best of the four. The final result was a revue that played very well, gave each performer a star turn, and proved thoroughly entertaining to audiences.

Three specific songs that we put into the show deserve a brief mention. In the first revue (1921), the featured chorus girls were billed as The Eight Little Notes (as in notes of the scale—Berlin probably wrote more songs about music than anyone else, and the four revues strongly reflect that). The Eight Little Notes introduced themselves in the opening of the 1921 show, and it was a pared-down version of that scene that we used. There was a practical reason for using this number, as it led to a second, also from that edition, called "An Interview." In it, Berlin made a personal appearance in the eleven o'clock number (traditionally a show's penultimate song, and usually a star turn), being interviewed by The Eight Little Notes posing as girl reporters who question him, desiring to know "how you say it with music." Berlin created a medley by quoting from a number of his well-known songs, culminating in a complete performance of *All By Myself*. This was a number too good to pass up!

The third number of interest was what proved to be the last in a series of operatic parodies which Berlin wrote, *A Bit o' Grand Opera: (Yes,*

We Have No Bananas Opera Burlesque Sextette) from the 1923 *Revue*. The song "Yes, We Have No Bananas" had been an enormous hit that year, reaching almost plague proportions in its ubiquity. Berlin found ways to weave it into both popular song *and* opera, using Verdi's *Aida*, *Rigoletto*, and *Il Trovatore*, Puccini's *La Bohème*, Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffman*, Wagner's *Lohengrin*, Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, the popular *La Paloma*, and even Handel's *Messiah*. This number existed in two incomplete versions, one from the original *Revue* and another from a reworking that Berlin did for the 1930 Al Jolson film, *Mammy*. It proved to be the one thing that truly needed reconstruction, with Bradford Conner creating a performing edition from the material in the Library.

For *The Music Box Revues* our sources were primarily the Library of Congress, followed by, again, our own archives, and the generosity of private collectors.

From these four examples, it is clear that there is no single formula for approaching a project of finding and reconstructing a Broadway musical. For a music librarian, good starting places are the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Many songwriters, playwrights, producers, and performers have donated their papers and other effects to university and college libraries; it can take some research to pinpoint them, but once identified they can be treasure troves. Yale, for example, is the recipient of quite a few such collections.

Non-library sources include the estates and/or families of the writers (script, lyrics, music), assuming they can be identified and located (as seen, not always the case). Some writers set up Foundations to preserve their work; Yip Harburg is one example (The Yip Harburg Foundation, New York City). Arthur Schwartz's son Paul is in the process of organizing his father's material for the Arthur Schwartz Foundation. The lawyer for the Jerome Kern Estate is the contact for his material. After the obvious sources it is often just a case of finding out who knows whom and then contacting children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Descendants of show writers do not necessarily share our enthusiasm for their ancestors' creations. Some really do not know what they have or why it is important; others do not want to be bothered (there are tales of telephones being slammed on researchers). It can only be hoped that these materials will find their way to libraries.

If the estates or families do not have the material, many are likely to know where it is—in the hands of a licensing agency like Tams-Witmark, or in libraries and other places previously mentioned. Irving Berlin and Rodgers & Hart/Hammerstein are probably the easiest to research as the Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization is so well organized and interested in such projects. For Gershwin material, the Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trust in San Francisco is the best starting place. Finally, the Shubert Archive in New York City has a wealth of material, mostly of shows produced by the Shuberts, but occasionally something from a non-Shubert show.

A music library is a prime source for bibliographical aids, and most libraries should have some of the following books. As mentioned, Norton's *A Chronology of American Musical Theatre* is a prime source of information. Robert Kimball has edited a series of Complete Lyrics (all published by Alfred A. Knopf) for Irving Berlin, Ira Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, Frank Loesser, and Cole Porter, all of which are packed with information. Biographies of writers often have information on shows. Reviews in theatre collections and archives are often very useful; the Harvard Theatre Collection being a good source. General overviews such as *Revue: The Great Broadway Period* by Robert Baral (Fleet Press, 1962, 1970), *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musicals from Show Boat to Sondheim* by Geoffrey Block (Oxford University Press, 1997), *Broadway: An Encyclopedic Guide* by Ken Bloom (Routledge, 2004), and *Broadway Musicals of the '30s* by Stanley Green (Da Capo Press, 1971), for instance, can have useful information (though it may take some work to find it in the text). Biographies of Broadway performers can turn up nuggets not found elsewhere, particularly if they worked with the major writers. Ethel Merman, Fred Astaire, Mary Martin, Eddie Cantor, along with producers Florenz Ziegfeld and the Shuberts, have all either written autobiographies and/or are the subject of biographies.

In the past twenty-five years, interest in the Broadway musical, especially the era before 1950, has grown amongst both performers and scholars. Forgotten works are getting concert, if not semi- or fully-staged productions, which often reveal them to be worth the effort. Much is still out there waiting for attention. It can be time-consuming to bring them to performing quality, but the results justify the work.

For the music librarian this is an area still in development, and one that provides endless fascination. The best things to remember are:

(1) never be afraid to explore the smallest lead—it can lead to many things that were once thought lost; and, (2) be tenacious! This is an American legacy; one that producers, performers, and librarians should and can preserve with pride.

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