

Review of *A Ship Without a Sail: The Life of Lorenz Hart* by Gary Marmorstein

The hits of the songwriting team of Richard Rodgers (1902-1979) and Lorenz Hart (1895-1943) are numerous. People familiar with what has been called "American Popular Song" since publication of the seminal work by Alec Wilder entitled: *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators – 1900-1950* in 1972, are fondly aware of the charms of "Manhattan," "With a Song in My Heart," "The Blue Room," "Dancing on the Ceiling," "Isn't It Romantic," "Blue Moon," "It's Easy to Remember," "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World," "My Romance," "Lover," "There's a Small Hotel," "The Lady is a Tramp," "Bewitched," "My Funny Valentine," "Where of When," "Falling in Love with Love," "This Can't be Love," and "I Didn't Know What Time it Was." These Rodgers and Hart songs were ubiquitous in the golden age of American Popular Song, when they were sung from the Broadway stage, in Hollywood films, on network radio, and by singers with the great dance bands that endlessly toured the nation. Consequently, they became embedded in the musical consciousness (and subconscious) of a significant part of the American populace in the years 1925-1950, and beyond.

In addition to these hits, all of which have considerable musical merit (thank you Mr. Rodgers) and lyrical merit (thank you Mr. Hart), are many other Rodgers and Hart songs of great worth. These include: "Mountain Greenery," "This Funny World," "Thou Swell," "My Heart Stood Still," "You Took Advantage of Me," "A Ship Without a Sail," "He Was Too Good to Me," "Ten Cents a Dance," "Spring is Here," "You Are Too Beautiful," "Little Girl Blue," "Glad to be Unhappy," "Quiet Night," "Have You Met Miss Jones?" "My Own," "It Never Entered My Mind," "I Could Write a Book," and "Wait 'Till You See Her." The songs of Rodgers and Hart have transcended the purposes for which they were created and are now a part of the fabric of American culture.

I have always been struck by the poetic sensibility of many of the lyrics of Lorenz Hart. From what human experiences, I have often wondered, did this lyric come?

"I'm wild again, beguiled again,
A simpering, whimpering child again,
Bewitched, bothered and bewildered am I."

Or this one:

"Fools rush in, so here I am,
very glad to be unhappy.

Unrequited love's a bore,
and I've got it pretty bad.
But for someone you adore,
it's a pleasure to be sad."

The new biography of Lorenz Hart, *A Ship without a Sail: the Life of Lorenz Hart*, by Gary Marmorstein, (Simon and Schuster), answers that question. It also traces, in considerable detail, the life of the man known to all of his friends and professional associates as "Larry," from its beginning in 1895 in an immigrant family in Manhattan, to its sad end forty-eight years later, in a Manhattan hospital.

The soil from which Lorenz Hart sprung was very different from the norm in the U.S.A. in 1895. But it was not so different from the norm in New York City then. His family was led by his father, Max Meyer Hertz, and mother, Frieda Isenberg Hertz, both Jewish immigrants from Germany. The Hertz family moved from Manhattan's lower east side to Harlem, where a Jewish community was blossoming, a few years before Larry was born. Max Hertz

could aptly be described as a combination hustler, con-man, and broker of any and all deals that might bring him financial profit. He was a practical man who didn't worry too much about ethics, or the law. He was often the defendant in both civil and criminal lawsuits. Nevertheless, he provided well for his family. He decided that he should change the name Hertz, which is German for "heart," to Hart, so that he could fit in better in America. He also became an American citizen so he could have more business opportunities.

The Hart family which also included a second son, Theodore, known as Teddy, lived in a commodious house which was warm and embracing, with an abundance of food, affection, and material goods. These were provided by Frieda, who spent Max's money carefully, but wisely. Larry became fluent in German as a child, learning to read and write the language, as well as being able to speak it. He also became enamored of the English language at an early age. He was endlessly fascinated by words, their meanings, and their sounds. His mother noticed this and began to acquire works of literature in the English language for him to read and study. Larry devoured them. At about the same time, he discovered the lyrics of W.S. Gilbert. Soon libretti from Gilbert and Sullivan operettas began to appear at the Hart house, with Larry poring over them by the hour.

Max and Frieda enjoyed theatrical entertainment, but for them that was to be found in The People's Music Hall in the Bowery, or in many other theaters below Fourteenth Street that catered immigrant Jewish audiences. Max, who when he was flush with cash could be rather extravagant, would often invite performers from these entertainments to the Hart home. Both Larry and Teddy were thus exposed to theater people from an early age. They soon were bitten by the theater bug. (Teddy would become an actor.)

Larry was obviously a bright boy, with an outgoing personality. He did well in school, writing bits of fiction, poems, and essays for school literary magazines by his teen years. In the summers, Frieda felt he should be sent out of the sweltering streets of Manhattan to a summer camp, where he would be able to be stimulated by camp activities, including theatricals. Due to the rather blatant anti-Semitism that was the norm then, Jews were largely ghettoized and not welcome in "American" summer camps. As a result, Jewish entrepreneurs began to develop their own summer camps for youth and resorts for adults, mainly in the Catskill Mountains about a hundred miles northwest of New York City. Larry thrived in various Jewish summer camps over a period of almost ten years, and met many of the people there who would shape and energize the entertainment business in the middle of the Twentieth Century. He also began writing skits for musical shows.

By the time Lorenz Hart had finished growing, he stood barely five feet tall, and had a large head, the size of which was exaggerated by his balding pate. Although he had a handsome face, he had a heavy, dark beard, which required at least two shaves a day. Nevertheless, he always seemed, like Richard Nixon, to have a five o'clock shadow. He was rejected for military service in World War I because of his height.

By the time Larry entered Columbia University to study journalism, the Hart home nearby had become a sort of unofficial fraternity house. Larry's classmates and friends were always welcome there, and at all hours of the day and night, they were there. Frieda's food and Max's liquor were made available to all comers. Young men's thoughts are frequently fixated on young women, and there was much hilarious story-telling in the Hart house by Larry's guests centering around women, ribaldry, and sex. Larry participated, but in a rather abstract way. He was at that time grappling with his own sexual identity, and soon concluded that he was homosexual. This, in addition to his physical stature and appearance, alienated him from a large part of the world he knew and lived in. His antidote to all of this was to drink more, be more convivial, and pick up more checks, which he could afford do with the generous allowance Max always provided him.

Larry was not very interested in taking classes at Columbia University, or in journalism. He was interested in the theater. Gradually, his activities in the classroom at Columbia receded in direct proportion to their increase in the

theater, both at Columbia and elsewhere in Manhattan. He slowly began to gain a reputation as someone who knew about the theater in general, and musical comedy in particular.

He met Richard Rodgers, who was seven years younger than him, in the spring of 1919, being introduced to the seventeen year-old pianist and melodist by a mutual friend. From the moment they met, it was obvious to both of them that their association would be creatively successful. The relationship Lorenz Hart would have over the next twenty-five years with Richard Rodgers would be the most fulfilling one in his life, on a number of levels. Unfortunately, despite the great success of the team of Rodgers and Hart, the same would not be true for Rodgers. The demons within Larry Hart would increasingly emerge to make him, very often, a less than ideal collaborator. But no matter how difficult Hart's personality problems made it for him and Dick to work, when they did work together, the experience for both men was often exhilarating. Their relationship would evolve from one of deep personal friendship to love-hate.

Lorenz Hart was liked, indeed beloved, by many of the people he worked with in his professional career. He was witty, articulate, generous, and compassionate. By the early 1920s, he was a first-rate professional lyricist, on his way to becoming a nonpareil wordsmith with a restless and well-stocked mind. He would have been the first to scoff at any assertion that he was a poet. Nevertheless, his lyrics very often were poetic.

Rodgers's personality was almost completely different from Hart's. Both of them were extremely talented. But Rodgers's great musical talent was coupled with limitless ambition, ego, and chutzpah. Rodgers wanted to get somewhere in this world, and would run over people to get there. When the young arranger David Raksin (later composer of the haunting melody "Laura"), changed a chord in a Rodgers melody, Dick had him fired from the show they were working on. When a singer added or subtracted something from a Hart lyric, Larry would simply tell them not to do that. Rodgers aspired to be accepted and embraced by the upper levels of society. Wealth impressed him. Hart was repulsed by buccaneer capitalism. (A Marmorstein usage. Bravo!) His idea of a good time was to gather with friends in a bistro, engage in witty, stimulating conversation, and pick up the tab.

This difference in personality was only exacerbated by Larry's homosexuality. In a time long before gay pride and compassionate acceptance of gays, Larry would often retreat into the shadows of a homosexual nether world. In the world he worked in with Richard Rodgers, being outed was tantamount to professional ruin. Rodgers grudgingly accepted Hart's gayness because he really had no choice. The fates had brought him together with a perfect collaborator. Larry dealt with these issues by this by drinking more and more alcohol. Still, Dick was patient and encouraging to Larry. He constantly attempted to deal with his increasingly errant partner's peditilloes. He more than anyone else understood how Larry's talent added not only to the commercial appeal of Rodgers's songs, but also to the musical comedy plays they began to work on starting in the mid-1920s.

The Broadway theater of the 1920s was evolving from a place where very often either European-styled operettas or old-fashioned vaudeville reviews with songs were staged, to more narrative driven plays. Rodgers and Hart were in the vanguard of the movement to alter the old conventions further by writing songs that would advance the story of the play. Although the basic *modus operandi* for Rodgers and Hart had Dick writing the music first, and then Larry writing the lyric, what stimulated Hart's creativity every bit as much as Rodgers's melodies, was a specific character or occasion within the show they were working on. It would not be an overstatement to say that Hart was obsessed with the integration of story and songs in a show. This was revolutionary in the 1920s Broadway theater where Rodgers and Hart first found success.

The breakthrough success they had with *The Garrick Gaieties* (1925) provided them a springboard to numerous other Broadway triumphs in the Twenties including *A Connecticut Yankee* (1927) and *Present Arms* (1928). The coming of sound to motion pictures in the late 1920s opened lucrative but not creatively fulfilling opportunities for

Rodgers and Hart. They often went to Hollywood in the early 1930s, wrote quality songs (many of which were never used, at least initially, in the films they were written for), took large sums of money with them back to New York, and continued working in the theater. More Broadway successes followed: *On Your Toes* (1936); *Babes in Arms* (1937); *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938); *Too Many Girls* (1939); *Pal Joey* (1940); and *By Jupiter* (1942).

By the early 1940s, the differences between Rodgers and Hart, and Larry's increasingly undependable behavior, were driving them apart both personally and professionally. Rodgers craved more mainstream acceptance and success; Hart wanted to create more provocative and challenging theater. Rodgers had the stronger personality. His will to compete and triumph over rivals in the theater like Irving Berlin, Cole Porter and Jerome Kern, among others, drove him to undertake a bucolic farce entitled *Green Grow the Lilacs* in 1942. Larry disliked it and told Dick he didn't want to work on it. Indeed, Larry was having difficulty working at all then. Rodgers, who for some time had been planning how to deal with the inevitable dissolution of Rodgers and Hart approached lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, who had worked with a number of collaborators previously, about the project. Hammerstein, reliable and professional to the core, was very happy to be working with Richard Rodgers on *Green Grow the Lilacs*. As the production evolved, the title changed, to *Oklahoma!* The play debuted in early 1943, and was an immediate runaway success.

Larry, who had been hospitalized in early 1942 for various ailments related to his alcoholism, was no longer the partner of Richard Rodgers—Oscar Hammerstein was, and they were enjoying a colossal Broadway triumph together. Larry was not jealous of their success with *Oklahoma!* He was very gracious to both Dick and Oscar in expressing his good wishes. But without Rodgers, who very often acted as Larry's surrogate parent, begging, imploring, wheedling to get him to work, Hart was lost. This situation was compounded by the death, in early 1943, of Larry's mother, who was probably the only person in his life who had given him unconditional love. She too had been a stabilizing influence on her wayward son. In the wake of Freida's death, Larry's drinking accelerated from episodic binges to continuous.

The end came for Lorenz Hart in November of 1943. After wandering about the cold, rainy streets of Manhattan for several days, he was hospitalized with bilateral bronchial pneumonia. His exhausted body did not respond to treatment. He was forty-eight years old.

Gary Marmorstein's biography of Lorenz Hart is very good. It is well written, though its prose, unlike the lyrics of Larry Hart, seldom sparkles. It is a treasure trove of esoterica about Broadway and Hollywood in the years 1925-1940, and the details included serve to place the story of Hart's life in context. It is a welcome addition to the information available about the life and career of Lorenz Hart that scholars will find useful in future years.

Although there are a few amusing anecdotes sprinkled throughout the pages of Mr. Marmorstein's book, I would think, given Hart's colorful personality and fabulous theatrical career, that many more could have been recounted. That would have leavened the sometimes name and fact dense narrative, and livened the prose.

Over the 500+ pages of the book, Mr. Marmorstein seldom expressed his opinions about the inner workings of Lorenz Hart's mind, something he undoubtedly was well-qualified to do after having amassed, analyzed, and written about all of the information he included in the book. Such opinions, judiciously expressed, would also have added some balance to the voluminous facts.

One of the highlights of "A Ship without a Sail" is its prologue. It contains some of the most concise, insightful writing in the book. I read it with great interest as I began reading the book, and it thoroughly engaged me. I then read the rest of the book. I am sure that was exactly what Mr. Marmorstein intended for readers to do. But as

effective as the prologue is as an introduction to the story of Lorenz Hart's life, it would have been more effective, given its content, if it had been placed at the end of the book as an epilogue.

I would recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in the history of show business in America in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

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"Mr. Trumpet...the Trials, Tribulations

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