

SHAW FESTIVAL 20

Gypsy

A Musical Fable, Book by Arthur Laurents

Music by Jule Styne

Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Suggested by memoirs of Gypsy Rose Lee

Original production by David Merrick & Leland Hayward

Entire production originally directed and choreographed by Jerome Robbins

Directed and choreographed by Kimberley Rampersad

Music direction by Paul Sportelli

Set designed by Cory Sincennes

Costumes designed by Tamara Marie Kucheran

Lighting designed by Kevin Fraser

Sound designed by John Lott

THE STORY

Gypsy is a musical set in the backstage world of American vaudeville theatre during the early 20th century. There are two story lines: 1) The struggles of life in the theatre as performers chase their dreams of stardom, and 2) the universal story of a mother/daughter relationship.

At the top of the show we meet **Mama Rose**. Rose is a domineering, brash stage-mother who dreams of fame and stardom for her daughters, Louise and June. Rose devotes her entire being to building their stage careers

June, the younger daughter, is an extroverted, talented child star. The older daughter, Louise, is shy. Their kiddie Vaudeville act has one song, "Let Me Entertain You," that they sing over and over and over again, with June always as the center-piece and Louise in the background.

The girls grow up and continue to perform the same act. June becomes tired of her mother's influence and the endless touring. She elopes with one of the backup dancers. Rose is deeply hurt, but determinedly vows that she will now make Louise a star.

Unfortunately, with the rise of radio and movies, the Vaudeville theatre jobs disappear. Louise and her second rate act are accidentally booked to perform at a burlesque house. Rose is anguished, as she sees this as a blow to her dreams of success. When the star Burlesque performer is not available, Rose, driven by her ambition for fame, volunteers Louise to perform in her place.

Over time, Louise transforms into Gypsy Rose Lee, a successful Burlesque star. As Louise gains fame, her mother realizes she is no longer an influence in the lives of her daughters. Rose admits the desire for fame and stardom were HER dreams, which she experienced vicariously through her daughters.

At the end, Rose and Louise gain a deeper understanding of each other. Will they be able to reconcile?

WHAT IS VAUDEVILLE?

Vaudeville is a type of entertainment in which a variety of different acts perform on a stage. A vaudeville show often consisted of ten to fifteen unrelated acts - anyone who could keep an audience's interest for more than three minutes. Beginning in the 1880s and through the 1920s, vaudeville was home to more than 25,000 performers, and was the most popular form of entertainment in the US and Canada.

Vaudeville was an essential part of every community. At the height of its popularity, there were over 400 vaudeville theatres throughout Canada and the US. Successful vaudeville entertainers would travel from town to town, performing their acts. One of the largest chain of theatres was the Orpheum Circuit, which controlled theatres from Chicago to California. In the musical *Gypsy*, Rose and her daughters believe they have hit the big time when their act is booked on the Orpheum Circuit.

Interesting fact: Vaudeville's attraction was more than simply a series of entertaining sketches. It was symbolic of the cultural diversity of early twentieth century America. Vaudeville was a fusion of centuries-old cultural traditions, including the English Music Hall, minstrel shows of eighteenth-century America, and Yiddish theater. Though certainly not free from the prejudice of the times, vaudeville was the earliest entertainment form to cross racial and class boundaries. On the down side, some Vaudeville acts promoted negative caricatures and stereotypes. Further, segregation was a reality during American society at this time, and Vaudeville theatres often reflected that reality.

In the 1930s, vaudeville began to decline, and by the end of the decade it was dead. Why? The Depression, the growth of radio, and the birth and popularity of talking (and singing) movies provided fierce competition

WHAT IS BURLESQUE?

Burlesque is also a form of stage entertainment - similar to a variety show. Derived from elements of Victorian music halls and minstrel shows, burlesque shows in 20th century America were a blend of satire, performance art, music hall and adult entertainment, featuring striptease and broad comedy acts. Performers, usually female, often created elaborate characters with lush, colorful costumes, mood-appropriate music, and dramatic lighting.

By the early 20th century, two national circuits of burlesque theatres were thriving, along with resident companies in New York City, such as Minsky's at the Winter Garden. In *Gypsy* the musical – the character Gypsy Rose Lee is at the height of her success when she performs at Minsky's World Famous Burlesque theatre.

With their show of exposed legs and lewd entertainment, burlesque shows were not considered respectable, and raids by the local police were often prompted by offended citizens. Censorship laws in the 1930s, plus the competition of motion pictures, led to the decline of burlesque.

REAL-LIFE ROSE, LOUISE, AND JUNE– WHO WERE THEY?

The musical *Gypsy* is based on the memoirs of real-life Burlesque performer Gypsy Rose Lee, whose real name was Louise. Louise and her little sister June supported their family by touring as child performers in the vaudeville circuit in 1920's America. They did not attend school.

Their mother was Rose. During the early 1900's a young teenage Rose got married right out of convent school. She became Rose (Thompson) Hovick. The couple had two children – Louise and June. Even though the marriage ended, she kept the name "Hovick" for the rest of her life.

After the marriage breakup, Rose moved with her girls to Seattle, Washington to live with her parents.

Rose's father never allowed her to pursue a life on the stage, and now, she wanted theatre careers for her children. Rose created stage acts for her daughters – with June as the star. Rose's dogged determination and strong will led to great stage successes for her daughters on the Vaudeville circuit.

She was notorious for lying, bullying, cajoling, stealing, sabotaging rival acts and was masterful at conning people with her genteel, brave-but-helpless single mother act.

Once her daughters were grown up and on their own, Rose's life continued to be remarkable. Stories include love affairs with both men and women, the operation of a "lesbian pick-up joint" where she sold homemade bathtub gin, wild attempts to extort money from both Louise and June, two stints as a chicken farmer, and three allegations of cold-blooded murder. No wonder Stephen Sondheim, who wrote the lyrics for *Gypsy*, said ... "The fact that she's monstrous to her daughters and the world is secondary... She's a very American character, a gallant figure and a life force."

June, the younger daughter, was born in Vancouver, British Columbia, sometime in the 1910s (her mother changed her birth certificate to evade child labour laws). June appeared on the Vaudeville stage as "Baby June" at the age of 2 and was called "the Tiniest Toe-dancer in the World", then "the Pocket-sized Pavlova", then Dainty June, "the Darling of Vaudeville." After leaving her mother and 'the act', June continued to work in show business, both on stage and screen. She died in 2010 at the age of 97.

As a child performer, Louise was not as talented as her sister June, but became a bigger star through her burlesque persona as Gypsy Rose Lee. Gypsy Rose Lee was famous for her sophisticated onstage wit and casual banter. She was one of the first burlesque artists to imbue her act with grace and style.

Louise became a very wealthy woman performing as Gypsy Rose Lee. She also became an author, penning her own biography, two murder mystery novels, and a play. She appeared on television, in films, hosted her own radio show, and entertained troops in Vietnam during USO tours. Fun fact: She loved to go fishing.

LET'S MEET THE ORIGINAL CREATORS OF GYPSY

Jule Styne, Composer – wrote the music. A child prodigy, accompanist, renowned composer for Broadway, films, television, and radio, Jule Styne was one of the most prolific songwriter-composers in American theatre.

Arthur Laurents, Librettist – wrote the script words. Arthur Laurents is best known as the playwright who penned such plays as *West Side Story* (1957) and *Gypsy* (1959). He was also highly successful in Hollywood as a screenwriter, often adapting his own plays and musicals for the big screen. His body of work is incredible. Look him up and find out why Broadway dimmed their theatre lights when he died.

Stephen Sondheim, Lyricist – wrote the words for the songs. Born in 1930 New York City, he began piano lessons at age seven, and wrote original musicals in high school and college. After a couple of attempts at Broadway musicals, Sondheim was chosen to write lyrics for Leonard Bernstein's music in *West Side Story* (1957), one of the great landmarks of the American musical theatre. This led him to compose lyrics and music for other hit Broadway shows, establishing him as a new leader on the Broadway scene. Today, Stephen Sondheim, composer and lyricist, is synonymous with experimentation and excellence in the field of musical theatre. AND he is turning 90 this year!

GYPSY AT THE SHAW FESTIVAL – SET AND COSTUME DESIGN

The musical *Gypsy* celebrates theatre, and is about the dreams of those who pursue a career on the stage. Since the story is based on real people and set in a specific time in history, the set design draws on both the grandeur and the decay of the 1920-30's Vaudeville theatre by focusing the story within two arches – in theatre they are called prosceniums. The largest proscenium will surround the entire stage. The smaller proscenium sits on a revolve located on the stage, allowing it to move and spin to create different settings. Watch how aspects of Vaudeville theatre, such as stage curtains, an old fashioned placard, and traditional lighting, are used to help distinguish different locations.

The costumes are designed to provide a clear differentiation between the real world lives of the characters and the on-stage acts. Pulling from the styles of the late 1920-1930's, the costumes reflect the personalities of each character. The story begins with child performers, including June and Louise. June's costumes are always bright and sparkly. Louise, dressed

like a boy, is in matte colours and dull. As the girls mature, the costumes for the show are re-used and re-purposed, indicating economy and ingenuity, and highlight the desire of Mama Rose to ensure the girls look younger than their ages.

In the world of Burlesque, the performers have each created a gimmick, which is reflected in their costumes. As Louise transforms into Gypsy Rose Lee, the costumes become more tailored and elaborate, indicating her success and wealth. Note how her final robe and coat are reminiscent of June's sparkly costumes from their earlier Vaudeville performances.

DREAMS AND THEMES

The importance of dreams is a thread that runs through *Gypsy*. Guided by visions of success for her children, Rose calls her dreams "real dreams" and devotes her life to making them come true. Other characters also have their own dreams, some more secret than others. Pay attention when characters mention dreams, and the importance of those dreams to motivate their actions, to influence their personal life decisions, and the subsequent effect on the lives of others.

In the musical *Gypsy*, women are the central characters in the story. Yet in this world of Vaudeville and Burlesque, it is the men that have the control. Women's performances are shaped by, directed by, paid for by, and performed for men. The world of the play clearly demonstrates it is men who have the financial and artistic power that matters. Is Rose then a typical Stage Mother? OR does she attempt to subvert the power structure of her day? Does her energy, drive, and ambition make her inadequately feminine and a bad mother? Or is she simply trying to shape her own life, and the lives of her daughters? Perhaps she is pursuing the American Dream, striving to succeed, to stand out. Some might consider Rose as the embodiment of the indomitable, irrepressible American spirit.

At the heart of the story lies the basic human yearning for acceptance. To be noticed. To count. To be loved. This deep need to be accepted is embodied differently within each of the characters, making them achingly recognizable and human. Perhaps this is the reason why *Gypsy* is so compelling, and acknowledged as one of the best musicals of all time.

"Curtain up. Light the lights. You got nothing to hit but the heights". See you at the show!