EAST COAST IS EAST COAST, WEST COAST IS WEST COAST…

By Laurence Maslon

It must have been swell to be a playwright on Broadway in the fall of 1929. The previous season had seen 222 premieres (to put that into context: in the 2004-2005 season, 39 shows opened on Broadway.) Audiences were still enthralled by Eugene O'Neill's nine-act psychosexual epic *Strange Interlude* and, with that play, among other new plays by Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, Sophie Treadwell, Mae West, Hecht and MacArthur, and Philip Barry, American playwriting had grown up. It was a golden age for musical theater, as well; entranced theatergoers could tap their toes to new scores by the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hart, Oscar Hammerstein and Sigmund Romberg, and a jaunty comet who had recently blazed back to the American scene named Cole Porter. There were nearly 75 active theaters on Broadway, the stage enjoyed a cultural pre-eminence in American arts, and talking pictures, only two years old, were more of a novelty than a threat.

When it came to writing comedies, one figure bestrode Broadway and 44th Street like a Colossus: George S.Kaufman. If O'Neill can be called the tragic mask of American drama, George Kaufman could easily lay claim to its comic counterpart. Throughout the 1920s, Kaufman, usually working with a collaborator, wrote hit after hit on Broadway, each with a satirical edge and wisecracking brashness that defined this era's "can-do" ebullience. He wrote several comic fables with Marc Connelly about good-natured naifs who triumph over the forces of avarice and hypocrisy; a comedy of manners about the Broadway stage with Edna Ferber; a political satire with a musical score by the Gershiwns (this was a rare flop); and two exhausting musical comedy librettos for those zany darlings of vaudeville, the Marx Brothers. At the beginning of the 1929-30 season, Kaufman scored again, this time collaborating with humorist Ring Lardner on a trenchant spoof of Tin Pan Alley, with all its corny songs and fatuous optimism. Broadway could use a good laugh; by the time *June Moon* had been on the boards for two weeks, the stock market had crashed. Broadway—and America—would never achieve such giddy heights again.

At some point during the run of *June Moon*, an aspiring playwright and director named Moss Hart sat in the balcony and said to himself, "This is the kind of thing I want to write." Apparently the 24–year–old had already been toying with a project in the Kaufman vein, a fantastical satire about Hollywood and the frenzied revolution of sound pictures. In late 1929, Hart barely had two five-cent subway tokens to rub together, so a research trip to Los Angeles was out of the question; he concocted his farce purely from accounts in *Variety* magazine and his own vivid comic imagination. Through a series of humbling peregrinations, detailed at length in his memoir, *Act One*, Hart brought the play (now called *Once in a Lifetime*) to the great man, Kaufman. Kaufman recognized a kindred spirit (in talent if not in manner; Hart was as ebullient as Kaufman was reserved, sentimental and enthusiastic, while his older partner was cynical and detached). Kaufman not only took Hart on as a collaborator, but he also took on the direction of the play and the role of – what do you know? – a reserved and cynical East Coast playwright named Lawrence Vail.

Kaufman and Hart worked through most of 1930 on the show, structuring and restructuring *Once in a Lifetime* during its tryouts in Brooklyn and Atlantic City. Scenes were thrown out with ruthless rapidity and Kaufman, at one point, professed himself out of inspiration, and suggested throwing in the towel. Hart endured, however, emboldened by bright, new ideas

and the duo took their timely spoof into the Music Box Theater on September 24, 1930. It was a smash. Even Kaufman's star turn on-stage drew big laughs, despite his sardonic account of his travails in an article called "How I Became a Great Actor":

'Many a night I sat alone in my room until the wee hours, gulping down cup after cup of strong black coffee, pounding the words into a brain already wearied by the long grind. But I kept on, and when the opening night arrived, I walked onto the stage of the Music Box and spoke every "if," "and," and "but." And if had not been for a certain pardonable nervousness, I would have spoken some of the other words, too.'

In fact, Kaufman was so sure of himself that, in a gesture uncharacteristic of the self-aggrandizing world of the theater, he stepped out during the opening night curtain call and announced, "I would like the audience to know that 80 percent of this show is Moss Hart." The show made Hart's fortune and bolstered Kaufman's; Kaufman shrugged and went right back to work collaborating with, respectively, the Gershwins and Edna Ferber, but Hart was embraced by the heady world of Broadway and found himself gloriously ensconced in rehearsal for new projects with show-biz royalty like Irving Berlin and Cole Porter.

Given how deadly accurate *Once in a Lifetime* seems three-quarters of a century later, it's quite astounding to remember that neither Hart nor Kaufman had ever been to Hollywood when they wrote it. Hart and Kaufman saw Hollywood as exactly what it always has been and always will be: an absurd wonderland where anything can happen, a kingdom of the aesthetically blind where the one-eyed man is studio chief. In this, they were simply following the cues of the comic craftsmanship of Shakespeare, who was so expert at creating topsy-turvy worlds that affect all who venture within their magical groves. What is Hart and Kaufman's Hollywood, really, but Illyria with swimming pools instead of a seacoast, the Forest of Arden dotted with palm trees?

Once in a Lifetime also has the happy distinction of being a seminal example of that ever-delightful sub-genre: the Hollywood satire. There had been a few plays about filmmaking before 1930: a minor one-act by O'Neill and Kaufman and Connelly's own spoof about silent pictures, *Merton of the Movies*, which pokes more fun at a gawking fan's obsession with the movies than with the movies themselves. But, throughout the thirties and forties, it was rare to find a Broadway comedy that didn't take some kind of potshot at Hollywood, and Kaufman and Hart's plays (separately and together) were no exception. (In fact, some of *Once in a Lifetime*'s pointed charm is unfairly blunted by the fact that so many other plays and films—*Singin' in the Rain* is the most conspicuous example—have borrowed so heavily from it.)

When it came to dealing with the real-life Hollywood (such as it is), Kaufman preferred to take the money and stay in New York. Although the 1930s produced some highly entertaining film versions of Kaufman's plays—*Dinner at Eight, Stage Door, You Can't Take It With You* to name only the most highly regarded—he had nothing to do with their screenplays or adaptations. (In fact, he bemoaned the changes wrought on *Stage Door* to his collaborator, Edna Ferber—'They should have renamed it *Screen Door*.') Kaufman's only real interest in Hollywood came in the person of Irving Thalberg, MGM's producer, who had the kind of refinement and taste that Kaufman admired and found so rarely in the film capital. Thalberg nearly wooed Kaufman to a studio contract, but failed. Instead, he—and

the moviegoing public—had to content themselves with only two original Kaufman screenplays: the quaint but jolly *Roman Scandals*, for Sam Goldwyn and Eddie Cantor, and the classic *A Night at the Opera*, written for the Marx Brothers at Thalberg's request. One anecdote—out of many—displays Kaufman's feelings about Hollywood. At one point, Paramount's studio chief, Adolph Zukor, offered Kaufman the paltry sum of $30,000 for the rights to some smash Broadway comedy of his; Kaufman cabled Zukor back, offering him $40,000 for Paramount.

Moss Hart, thankfully, had fewer reservations; having been born into near-abject poverty, glamour and money were always very attractive to him. His first trip there was in 1932 to portray Lawrence Vail in the Los Angeles production of *Once in a Lifetime.* In a missive back to New York, he wrote, "The entire place is pervaded by a sneering provincialism that is alarming and a little more than bewildering to the uninitiated; and of glamour, there is none." But soon, he was under a screenwriting contract for MGM, and, throughout his all-too-brief career, he wrote several important screenplays, including *Gentleman's Agreement* and *A Star is Born* for Judy Garland, squeezed in between opening nights on Broadway. When it came to working in Hollywood, Kaufman could either take it or leave it; Hart was able to take it *and* leave it. However, when Kaufman and Hart worked together *on* Hollywood, they came up with a theatrical happy ending and a professional happy beginning that would be greenlit by even the most myopic studio chief.

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