



LUCKY GUY

by Laurence Maslon



Among the unresolved phenomena of the human experience, “coincidence” surely has to rank as one of the most confounding. Is it, as some scientists aver, simply a matter of random happenstance, or is coincidence, as the mystically inclined believe, a synchronicity of profound events?

Whatever debates rage between scientists and philosophers regarding the nature of coincidence, among playwrights the conclusion is unavoidable: in a play, too much coincidence is not a good thing. Therefore, it’s remarkable that the impeccably talented playwright Moss Hart would pen a memoir that features so much coincidence—or, as he refers to it, variously and in the course of his own early life, “luck,” “chance,” and “serendipity.” The real coincidence in *Act One*, however, comes not from random events in Hart’s life but from the very fact that he came of age during the most fertile period in the American theater and crossed paths, in one way or another, with most of the era’s major players.

When Moss Hart got his first glimpse of the Theater District in 1916, he was twelve years old—the same age as the Times Square subway stop from whence he emerged. In 1904, the Times Square subway stop formed the epicenter of a new Theater District; by the end of World War I, Times Square had been transformed into the mecca of American entertainment. The upbeat economy of the postwar years fueled the disposable income of the leisure class, and there was much along Broadway on which to dispose of one’s income. The entertainment bandwidth ushered in by the 1920s contained the glory days of vaudeville; the refinement of the silent movie, screened in palatial theaters; and the flowering of the legitimate theater—all while radio was still in its infancy. Eager to get out of their cramped apartments, urban residents flocked to Forty-second Street and its environs, thrilled to share these variegated spectacles cheek by jowl with thousands of their fellow men and women.

Nightclubs, restaurants, lobster palaces, and hot-dog stands catered to these consumers; even drugstores had luncheon counters—where, among the younger, hungrier set, many an argument occurred over the future of the American theater. Prohibition didn’t inhibit the hordes of spectators and thrill-seekers; speakeasies and clubs dotted the Theater District, if one knew how to look for them; and the mayoral administration of James J. Walker was far more interested in revels than in regulations. (Walker himself, a married man, was having an open affair with a Broadway showgirl.) The city’s theatrical life was covered by *fifteen* newspapers published for readers in Manhattan and Brooklyn; the rock star (as it were) among these daily reviewers was indisputably Alexander Woollcott, an owl-like, venomous Pillsbury Doughboy of a figure, who dispensed violets and vitriol in equal doses in the columns that he wrote for various newspapers throughout the 1920s. (His diatribes were avidly devoured by Hart, who would later immortalize Woollcott as the Man Who Came to Dinner in the eponymous 1939 comedy written in collaboration with George S. Kaufman.)

In the 1920s, for the first and last time, vaudeville theaters, legitimate theaters, and movie theaters would exist together along the fifteen-block stretch that spanned Thirty-eighth Street, north to Fifty-third (and beyond); by 1928, there were

seventy theaters in the Times Square area. If the Theater District was America’s most sophisticated playground, the Magic Castle that towered above it was not the Times Tower but, rather, the New Amsterdam Theatre, half a block to the west along Forty-second Street. (Indeed, it is even more of a Magic Castle since its purchase, in 1994, by the Disney Company.) It was here, in 1913, that the great producer Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr., moved his empire, presenting his annual *Follies* on its glorious Beaux Arts stage; two years later, he opened up a roof-garden nightclub on the New Amsterdam’s tenth floor, as a showcase for new talent, such as Eddie Cantor and Will Rogers. Before the war, and into the 1920s, one could easily have seen these performers, along with Bert Williams, Fanny Brice, and W. C. Fields, strolling in and out of the stage door, or taking the gilded elevators to Ziegfeld’s office in order to negotiate a new contract. Imagine the thrill for a stagestruck teenager to get an office job in such hallowed halls, as Moss Hart did (for another producer) at the start of the 1920s. What would the fifteen-year-old Hart have made of the fact that, more than a quarter of a century later, he would be directing one of the twentieth century’s greatest musicals—*My Fair Lady*—on the tenth floor of the same New Amsterdam, Ziegfeld’s former glamorous roof garden turned into a rehearsal hall?

The *Follies* also provided fertile material for Hart when he started a career, in his twenties, as the entertainment director of a Jewish summer resort in the Catskills; Hart staged streamlined versions of every *Ziegfeld Follies* revue comedy sketch he could remember, and whatever he didn’t remember he simply rewrote. The Jewish summer-camp entertainment circle was Hart’s MFA playwriting degree.

Hart’s own embryonic attempts at serious playwriting were influenced by the most important dramatic force of the 1920s: Eugene O’Neill. As one contemporary wag put it, “Before him, the United States had theater; after him, we had drama.” O’Neill’s effect on the younger, post-World War I generation cannot be overestimated; he was at once the most imitated of American playwrights and the most inimitable. Drawing on his burdensome wealth of personal and familial dysfunctionality, he turned his inner turmoil into jagged, emotionally excavated tales that resonated with universality. O’Neill’s plays from the 1920s were electrifying in their experimentation and their eclecticism. Some were long and ambitious, such as *Strange Interlude*, from 1928, which won O’Neill his third Pulitzer Prize in the 1920s; others were short and ambitious, such as the Expressionistic psychodrama *The Emperor Jones*. *The Emperor Jones* made its debut in Greenwich Village in 1920; its leading role of a conscience-stricken, self-ordained black dictator was nearly impossible to cast. Luckily, the Provincetown Players tracked down an exceptional African-American thespian, a Broadway veteran reduced by the paucity of respectable roles for black actors to working as an elevator operator. His name was Charles Gilpin.

After his triumph in the original production, Gilpin found it difficult to sustain an acting career—indeed, he went back to running an elevator for a while—but throughout the 1920s he frequently revived the part of Brutus Jones in increasingly threadbare productions across the country. In the fall of 1926, Gilpin dragged his emperor’s jacket and riding boots out of the

trunk one more time for a two-month engagement at the tiny Mayfair Theatre, on West Forty-fourth Street. He shared the stage—insofar as the egocentric and often inebriated Gilpin shared anything—with a terrified actor in his early twenties named Moss Hart.

Within a few months of his brief encounter acting the words of O'Neill, Hart decided that he was neither an actor nor an O'Neill. Increasingly, his tastes veered toward comedy, or, rather, toward the insights and perceptions that a good comedy can reveal. Here, too, Hart was extraordinarily lucky, in that his own artistic growth coincided with a major development in American stage comedy.

If Eugene O'Neill could be considered to represent the tragic mask of American theater, then George S. Kaufman could surely

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lay claim to its comic counterpart. The lanky, laconic Kaufman was a Pittsburgh native who, by the time the 1920s began, was heading the Drama Desk at the *New York Times* as well as beginning his own career as a Broadway playwright. American comedy before Kaufman was rather like low-grade plywood; it was a poor substitute for the real thing, had a thin veneer, and was best deployed for construction. The big comedy smash of the 1916–17 season was typical of the lot: *Nothing But the Truth*, in which a stockbroker named Bob Bennett takes up a bet that he can tell the truth for twenty-four hours, while his friends try to trip him up. That was as deep as it got, folks.

Kaufman wrote virtually all of his comedies in collaboration; in the 1920s, his main partner was Marc Connelly, another Pennsylvanian who plied the journalism trade in New York. Their collaborations were those rare comedies with a point of view, usually featuring an innocent and honest Joe (or Joan) who triumphed over the forces of avarice or hypocrisy, embodied by some sort of societal or economic authoritarian structure. *Beggar on Horseback* (1924), for example, tackled the soul-killing snobbery of the urban cultural scene. When Moss Hart caught the Chicago road company of *Beggar on Horseback* in 1926, he knew instinctively that this was exactly the kind of purposeful, satirical comedy he was destined to write.

By then, Kaufman had diversified his comic portfolio in even more extraordinary ways; he had written the Marx Brothers' first real musical comedy for Broadway, *The Cocoanuts*, and had emerged as the premier comedy sketch writer for musical revues. As the decade panted to an exhausted close, Kaufman would write another show for the Marx Brothers (*Animal Crackers*); a theatrical comedy of manners with a new collaborator,

Edna Ferber (*The Royal Family*); and a brilliant satire of meretricious Tin Pan Alley tunesmithery, *June Moon*, a 1929 collaboration with the acerbic Ring Lardner. Hart was enthralled with *June Moon* as well; indeed, the comedy's portrait of corporate fatuousness would provide a virtual blueprint for *Once in a Lifetime*, Hart's own attempt at skewering the frenetic Hollywood of the early sound era.

Hart caught a performance of *June Moon* from the balcony of the Broadhurst Theatre only two weeks before the stock-market crash. The crash provided the final curtain for the most extraordinary decade Broadway—and perhaps any entertainment industry—would ever have. During the 1927–28 season, a remarkable 267 shows opened on Broadway. (By way of contrast, the number of shows that have opened on Broadway each season in the past decade has hovered below forty.) Mind you, a fair amount of that was dreck, but during Christmas week of 1927 eighteen shows opened, including new plays by Philip Barry, Rachel Crothers, and George Kelly, as well as Kaufman and Ferber's *The Royal Family*, plus a little thing called *Show Boat* (based on Ferber's novel—some week for her!).

Two seismic events of the late 1920s would carry Moss Hart's burgeoning career along like a tidal wave: the release, in October 1927, of *The Jazz Singer*, the first talking-picture narrative, and, almost exactly two years later, the stock-market crash. The former would essentially put an end to vaudeville and create a brand-new, highly anxious and highly profitable era of sound film, while the latter would put a huge dent in Broadway's fortunes and drive countless creative talents to the West Coast and Hollywood's seductive charms. Those two events would also create the context for *Once in a Lifetime*; when that comic masterpiece opened in the fall of 1930, it would, ironically, lift Moss Hart out of the dull, incessant burden of poverty that oppressed him during the first quarter century of his life, while, at the same time, millions of Americans would slide down the Roaring Twenties' gilded ladder of success and descend into a decade-long sentence of deprivation.

"I was fortunate to have been a new playwright in a time when the theatre contained a reasonable continuity and did not resemble a wild game of roulette...today, it would have been impossible to do what needed to be done within the limits of the lunatic immediate-hit or immediate-flop procedure that now prevails," Hart wrote in *Act One*, back in 1959. Goodness knows what he would have made of the "wild game[s] of roulette" played on Broadway in the twenty-first century, but what he wrote was incontrovertibly true—he was indeed fortunate to have learned his craft during a magical and unprecedented time. And the serendipity of Moss Hart's talent for the stage extends across the decades, forward to us, nearly a century later.

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