BEAUTIFUL MORNIN'

The Broadway Musical in the 1940s

ETHAN MORDDEN

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To my golden-age editor,
one of the last of his kind:
Sheldon Meyer

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Beautiful Mornin'

1

Musical Comedy I

The 1940s is in certain ways the unique decade in the musical's history, quite aside from the fact that almost half of it was played out during a war for the survival of Western Civilization. It was the first to leave substantial documentation in the form of cast recordings, giving us what the mere black-and-white of surviving scripts and music pages cannot: a powerful sense of Broadway performing style. This was also the first decade to produce an impressive amount of undisputed classics regularly performed today. And it was the decade in which the musical's artistry changed most decisively and even most suddenly, in what we might call "the Rodgers and Hammerstein revolution."

As we'll see, these three defining features are interrelated, for it was the impulsive nature of this revolution that inspired so many great shows in so little time; but it was also the invention of the "original-cast recording" that turned successes into classics, made them permanent.

Ironically, as the 1940s began, the musical was deeply vexed. Depression economics had all but banned the daring or even mildly unusual show, and the seasonal tally of new productions

was down from an average of about forty-five in the 1920s to about fifteen. The revue, in its twenties heyday a showcase for special talents, had degenerated into a lumpy vaudeville. Hollywood had lured away many of the musical's most gifted performers, from Eddie Cantor and the Marx Brothers to Fred Astaire and Jeanette MacDonald. Another problem was the loss of writers who were especially influential when the musical's Golden Age started, at around 1920. Among composers, George Gershwin was dead, Vincent Youmans had retired, and Jerome Kern composed his final stage score in 1939. Lorenz Hart, though still active as Richard Rodgers' partner, had tired of his work and life and was soon to depart. Major new talents had arrived in the 1930s in composers Harold Arlen and Kurt Weill, lyricist E. Y. Harburg, and composer–lyricist Harold Rome; but in 1940 their distinguished work was, for the most part, still ahead of them.

Yet another problem was the paucity of good old-fashioned singing voices, a concomitant of the collapse of operetta in 1930 but another effect of Hollywood's buying up Broadway talent for the movie musical. And perhaps the worst problem of all was the Hoagy Carmichael–Johnny Mercer show *Walk With Music* (1940).

All right, not that show alone. But *Walk With Music* represents all that was wrong with the musical in general: lack of content. Musical comedy had been running on a formula most effectively set forth in the Alex Aarons–Vinton Freedley Gershwin piece for Fred and Adele Astaire, *Lady, Be Good* (1924): start with hot performers, add a hot score and hot choreography, and glue it all together with as much humor as possible. What this format didn't have was a story, characters, realism, irony, point. These were constructions without foundation, circles without centers. The genre depended entirely on the available talent. If the songwriters and performers came through, one had success—but even that success was fluff. It was tunes and charm, eccentric comedy, and a New Dance Sensation.

And that was all that the public wanted—in the 1920s. By 1940, this approach was so exhausted that only the most able performers and the most tuneful songs could draw an audience. *Walk With Music* might have done so, perhaps. It was no worse

than many a twenties hit. Out of town, as *Three After Three*, it was bombing. Was it because theatregoers had had enough of the "three fortune hunters" plot popularized by Hollywood, as nightclub artistes Vivi (Simone Simon), Carrie (Mary Brian), and Rhoda (Mitzi Green) pose as, respectively, heiress, chaperone, and maid in Palm Beach to bag a millionaire? Was it because Vivi falls for a poor guy (Jack Whiting) while *Rhoda* loves the rich guy (Art Jarrett), just as we knew they would? (Carrie got her man, too—Lee Sullivan, who would introduce "I'll Go Home With Bonnie Jean" and "Come To Me, Bend To Me" in *Brigadoon* seven years hence.) Did the public regret the cliché figure of the man-hungry la-di-da (Frances Williams) and her wisecracking brother (Marty May)?:

> WILLIAMS: Where's my bag?
> MAY: My dear, you have one under each eye.
> WILLIAMS: Look who's talking—Snow White! If you had a streak of decency in you, you'd go back and marry that five-year-old girl.
> MAY: Why should I? I've had the best years of her life.

The Guy Bolton–Parke Levy–Alan Lipscott book, based on Stephen Powys' play *Three Blind Mice*,* was quick and dirty and the Hoagy Carmichael–Johnny Mercer score fast and loud, and *Three After Three* folded in Detroit, promising to hit New York after some revisions. They always say that; this time, they meant it. Three months later, as the title slithered from *Ooh! What You Said!* to *Walk With Music*, as Kitty Carlisle and Betty Lawford replaced Simone Simon and Mary Brian, as the girls became sisters (who left not a nightclub but a farm), and as the out-of-town song hit, "Darn Clever, These Chinee," was dropped because it turned on the "Confucius say" vogue that had suddenly become irritating, the show reached Broadway. To a man, the critics asked *Why?* Why labor to perfect a piece of junk?

Because, by the rules of the Aarons–Freedley formula, a poor show wasn't all that unlike a good show. They were separated by

* Filmed in 1938, *Three Blind Mice* spun off countless remakes and imitations, including the Betty Grable musical *Moon Over Miami, Three Little Girls in Blue*, and *How To Marry a Millionaire*.

differences of emphases, not of kind. For instance, the choreography of Anton Dolin and Herbert Harper was haphazard: someone would sing a number, and anyone else would dance it. Or now Dolin would direct a corps de ballet, and now Harper would set them tapping. Sloppy? Hit shows used dance in the same way.

Or: Mitzi Green, Paramount's former child star, now nineteen, found chances to slip in her impressions of Greta Garbo, Katharine Hepburn, and Fanny Brice's Baby Snooks. She did them well, and it must have been amusing to applaud a performer who had been around forever yet was still a teenager. But did celebrity imitations really help a show? In this age, they never hurt one.

Or: the two main ballads, "I Walk With Music" and "What'll They Think of Next (now that they've thought of you)," are simply less melodious than the popular Broadway ballads of 1940: "I Could Write a Book," "It's a Lovely Day Tomorrow," "Taking a Chance on Love." The score as a whole is not without invention. One number led to a mixed quartet singing bop scat on the names of New Jersey townships, with a lot of "doodle" and "chu de wa" in the delightfully tricky Hugh Martin manner—arranged, in fact, by Martin himself. Another number, "The Rhumba Jumps!," for Frances Williams, honored the craze for South American dances with a sharp lyric about a Harlem band's adventures south of the border (" 'Hep, hep,' they hollered, the moment they landed . . .") and a jagged tune bound to delight.

Or: the gaggy book ran from the pathetic to the workmanlike:

> PAMELA (*formerly* VIVI): You can go to prison for giving a bad check, can't you?
> RHODA: You get your choice—you can either go or they'll take you.

The book even ran—just once in the evening—to the stunning, though this *is* in bad taste:

> WING: (*hearing a crash offstage*) What's that?
> CARRIE: It's the new maid. She handles china like Japan.*

* This refers to Japan's brutal attack on Nanking and Shanghai in 1937, an operation that left some 370,000 Chinese dead.

"A blizzard of quips," Richard Lockridge of the New York *Sun* called *Walk With Music*, adding, "Somebody will have to do something about the musical comedy book someday"—really, I think, meaning Somebody will have to write shows with genuine content and integrity of elements rather than these assemblies of spare parts. This is why the good shows were more entertaining than but not much different from the poor ones. They were *all* concoctions, pranks, swindles.

Walk With Music gave up after six weeks, just as the only slightly more successful *Higher and Higher* (1940) folded. Here we find Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart screwing up almost as badly as *Walk With Music*'s authors, in a piece designed for Vera Zorina, the dancer who had proved a delight in the 1937 London production of Rodgers and Hart's *On Your Toes* (1936) and then on Broadway in their *I Married an Angel* (1938). Zorina turned out to be busy getting into Irving Berlin's *Louisiana Purchase*, so Marta Eggerth was substituted: a singer taking over for a dancer in a show that wasn't about anything in the first place. Well, okay: about servants passing off one of their number as a lady, to snag a millionaire. It's *Walk With Music* with Rodgers–Hart songs, mostly dull ones. The show did produce a semi-standard in Shirley Ross' solo "It Never Entered My Mind" and offered one forgotten but lovely ballad, "(You are) From Another World," when Eggerth has just fallen in love at sight of society scion Leif Erickson. This became a musical scene when the refrain leaped from the servants to soda jerkers and cops as news of the arrival of the fake debutante traveled the city, recalling the voyage of "Isn't It Romantic?" in Rodgers and Hart's Maurice Chevalier–Jeanette MacDonald film *Love Me Tonight*. Jack Haley, as another servant, was Eggerth's co-star, but both were upstaged by Sharkey the trained seal, who figured prominently in the show's poster and the largely favorable reviews.

These could not help a show that lacked the topline score, the irresistible performances, the opulent novelty background that filled in for the Broadway musical's typical insubstantiality. True, Rodgers and Hart had enjoyed a boom in the late 1930s with a string of insubstantial shows. But each of them had *something*—a dream ballet by Balanchine or Weidman, a star turn by George

M. Cohan, an endearingly youthful cast, a circus. Even *Too Many Girls* (1939), the Rodgers and Hart show that directly preceded *Higher and Higher*, had a secret ingredient: George Abbott. As producer and director, Abbott kept *Too Many Girls* taut and bouncy. He didn't need strong storylines or character development to make a hit show. On the contrary, he thought of such things as impediments to fun. What Abbott knew was editing wordy scripts, pointing a scene, a joke, an exit, and getting false but pleasantly functional performances from his actors.

A good idea for Abbott was *Beat the Band* (1942), which he not only produced and directed but co-authored, with *Too Many Girls*' librettist, George Marion Jr. *Beat the Band* typifies what could go wrong in an early forties musical comedy: everything. Not because the authors made crucial mistakes in delineating the material, but because there was no material. There was novelty color in a slight focus on the world of the swing musician. This made the leading man (Jack Whiting) a bandleader, brought noted instrumentalists (trumpeter Leonard Sues and drummer Johnny Mack) on stage with lines to read, and provided two big numbers, "The Steam Is on the Beam" (in a boiler room: because swing is *hot*) and the first-act finale, "America Loves a Band," a huge sequence in which the chorus' shouted "Sock!" is rhymed with "Rock!," the first instance I know of in which the latter word was used, on Broadway, in a musical context.

The score, by Johnny Green and Marion, is like that to most of the other forgotten forties musicals: melodic in the ballad "Let's Comb Beaches," with its rippling accompaniment; not funny in "I'm Physical, You're Cultured"; unnecessary in "I Like the Men"; and so on. But then, what do you sing when the plot is not only aimless but so convoluted that the theatre ushers couldn't have explained it by the final night of the show's nine-week run? The book was gags and song cues. A princess turns out to be from Oklahoma. How did she get to be a princess? "The hard way," she snaps back. "I married the prince." There was one bizarre moment, at least, when trumpeter Sues wanted to go bowling with drummer Mack, who said, "I can't—I got a date with your wife." Replied Sues, "Why don't you try and get away later?"

Any decade has its failures, but there is an awful emptiness

about a forties failure. Complaining about *Beat the Band*, George Jean Nathan wrote, "The attitude of a portion of our theatrical producers seems to be that what people want in war time is not serious drama but entertainment, and then providing them with none of it." However, it wasn't wartime alone that produced these copiously vacant shows. Yes, the theatregoing public now included a great many servicemen and their dates who undiscerningly cheered cheap comedy and inadequate stagecraft. Still, the Broadway musical had been running on empty for years.

Even the hits could be . . . well, *Early To Bed* (1943), a one-joke farce in which a bordello in Martinique is mistaken for a finishing school by a surprising number of characters, including the California state track team. This leads to many doubles entendres, such as:

> COACH: I asked [the manager] if they had facilities here for a workout, and he said he guessed it could be arranged.

or, when club singer Lois tells newly arrived sex worker Eileen that Lois wants to rehearse her act:

> EILEEN: You have to rehearse it?
> LOIS: Of course. You can't go out and do your specialty before a lot of people without rehearsing.
> EILEEN: You have an audience? . . . I hope this place doesn't turn out to be too continental for me.

With the omnipresent George Marion and Robert Alton, *Early To Bed* counted one unusual credit: music by Fats Waller, in his second (and last) full-length Broadway score. It's a lively one, in "Hi-De-Ho-High" and "When Nylons Bloom Again," then torchy in "There's a Man in My Life," loving in "This Is So Nice." None of the tunes caught on, though the critics' favorite, "The Ladies Who Sing With a Band," was revived in the Waller anthology revue, *Ain't Misbehavin'*.

The reviews were raves, though, again, this title was hotter than, but not appreciably unlike, its brothers. Its cast—soprano Muriel Angelus as the madam, John Lund as her opposite (who frames the action as a flashback when he tells her story in a bar), Richard Kollmar as a vainglorious bullfighter, Jane Deering, Jane

Kean, and Bob Howard—was comparable to those of *Walk With Music, Higher and Higher*, and *Beat the Band.* So was its physical production, the quality of its choreography, and so on. It was state of the art when art is out of ideas, and this particular show was made notorious only because its no-no subject matter and grinning title suggested a bawdy night out. In fact, it was not unlike a college musical building up to a bullfight instead of a football game. "It's a show your sixteen-year-old daughter can take . . . the pastor and your maiden aunt to," said a doting Burton Rascoe of the *World-Telegram.* It even failed to be banned in Boston, though the script was temporarily tamed there, especially the lines of Yorba, a leftist mural painter (modeled on Diego Rivera) whose masterpiece is a large female nude holding *Das Kapital* over her genitals.

Today, we look back on the musical's history and decree that the key ingredient of a good show is its score: *Show Boat, Anything Goes, Carousel, My Fair Lady.* However, this overlooks the central importance of *Show Boat*'s epic narrative, *Anything Goes*' casting chemistry of Ethel Merman with the team of William Gaxton and Victor Moore, *Carousel*'s perfection of the new genre of American "folk" art, and *My Fair Lady*'s Shavian dialogues.

Furthermore, early forties thinking did not see the score as uniquely essential because scores were so often generic, with their go-everywhere ballads, dance setups, and comic novelties. Still, there were glimmers here and there, something unusual in the songs—even, something unusual to match the unusual nature of the show itself. If George Abbott's worst mistake in this era was *Beat the Band*—and he himself called it "the poorest job of producing and directing that I ever did"—it was very smart of him to hire Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane to write the score for *Best Foot Forward* (1941). The two youngsters, who collaborated simultaneously on both music and lyrics, raised the level of the piece to memorable, inciting a relatively faithful MGM film, a 1963 off-Broadway revival, and enough high-school drama-club stagings to threaten the supremacy of *Good News!* (1927).

Good News! is a college musical, but *Best Foot Forward* is even younger, with a prep school setting and a Big Dance instead of a Big Game. The plot hitch is that some smitten students have in-

vited a Hollywood star whose career is suffering a slowdown. Her agent gets her to accept, for a PR coup, but her arrival on campus arouses the jealousy of the boys' dates. If *Beat the Band* is loaded with aimless action, *Best Foot Forward* is concentrated but short on action. In fact, virtually nothing happens till late in Act Two, when the girls attack the movie star on the dance floor, ripping her dress apart and causing a scandal.

To that point, *Best Foot Forward* is no more than who's dating whom, who's breaking up, and who's probably going to reconcile. But then, that's this show's peculiar charm: a long, loving look at what matters to carefree kids. Legend tells that producer–director Abbott was attracted to the script, by John Cecil Holm, because a cast of teenagers meant that the boys wouldn't be drafted; the United States was to enter World War II only nine weeks after the play opened. But in fact only the characters are teens: the players were more like twenty or so.

Abbott chose a jolly crew: Gil Stratton Jr. as the lead student and Maureen Cannon as his girl, Jack Jordan Jr. and big, dumb, and grinning Kenny Bowers as his buddies, June Allyson and Nancy Walker (the latter billed only as "Blind Date") as prominent girls at the prom, Rosemary Lane as the movie star, and, in the chorus, future Hollywood director Stanley Donen and Broadway choreographer Danny Daniels. Richard Rodgers, frustrated by Lorenz Hart's increasing torpor, signed on as Abbott's co-producer, though, ironically, he took no poster credit, to avoid antagonizing Hart. As their dance director, Abbott and Rodgers hired their pal Joey, Gene Kelly, in his sole Broadway production credit till he directed Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song* seventeen years later.

As historian Stanley Green informs us, it was Rodgers who gave *Best Foot Forward*'s prep school its famous name, for the show had gone into rehearsal without anyone's being able to come up with a suitable sound for this place of youth in merry riot. The school's fight song had been written around a "working title," Wisconsin. This became "Tioga," but that felt like . . . well, the musical comedy version of a prep school. "What we need," said Abbott, "is a name that has has something to do with winning with a lot of sock in it." "That's it!" said Rodgers. " 'Winsocki.' "

Has any other musical boasted a major hit tune that serves the story as a football fight song? "Buckle Down, Winsocki" became so popular over the years that it made a merely pleasing show seem a giant by implication. But *Best Foot Forward*'s score is strong overall, its special quality being a youthful energy to match the youthful characters. It even has a couple of plot songs. "Three Men on a Date," for the central trio of students, affirms their unrepentant dumping of their girls for their Hollywood guest, Gale Joy. "Hollywood Story," a duet for Gale and her agent, gives us an intriguing portrait of a truly unhappy woman.

The other numbers are the usual ballads and up-tunes, turned out, however, with unusual skill. Hugh Martin had got his start charting vocal arrangements for Abbott–Rodgers–Hart and Cole Porter shows in the late 1930s; he was jazzy yet neat, lovingly aggressive, and one hears it in these songs. "That's How I Love the Blues," "The Guy Who Brought Me (can't send me)"—the lament of a girl stuck with the direst of dates, a non-dancer—"Just a Little Joint With a Juke Box," and a rousing tribute to the barrelhouse, boogie-woogie, and blues, "The Three 'B's'," are about music. "I Know You By Heart" and "My First Promise" are about dating. "Ev'ry Time," the daintiest of torch songs, is about getting stood up. It's all *youth*. "Shady Lady Bird" tells us "I've got an awful lot to learn" and "What Do You Think I Am?" goes on "Just a baby?" For once in this time, the score matched the subject: cute kids got cute kid songs.

The *Best Foot Forward* score continued to grow for MGM's 1943 Technicolor version, which, in wartime perforce, turned Winsocki into a military school. Lucille Ball played herself as the movie star, and on hand from Broadway were Walker, Allyson, Jordan, Bowers (the last two, for inexplicable reasons, exchanged roles), and Tommy Dix, graduated from a cameo, singing "Buckle Down, Winsocki," to playing lead. Ball (dubbed by Gloria Grafton) got "You're Lucky," Walker got "Alive and Kicking," and the kids in general got possibly the best song of all, the ultimate Hugh Martin choral spree, "Wish I May (Wish I Might)," ingenious in pinning down kids' interests—riding in a Cadillac with the top down, making out at the drive-in. All three numbers were retained in the 1963 revival, along with two unused titles that Martin and

Blane had written for MGM's *Meet Me in St. Louis*, "Raving Beauty" and, for Liza Minnelli's eleven o'clock spot, "You Are For Loving." It would be interesting to see, in these days when Broadway is stuffed with revivals, and with so many first- and second-rank titles already exploited, how a third-rank classic* would fare on The Street commercially.

In all, *Best Foot Forward* was an anomaly—a conventional piece particularized by an unambitious yet all the same *pointed* score. Broadway didn't have many pointed scores in the early 1940s; Broadway had "The Steam Is on the Beam" and "The Rhumba Jumps!."

Or: Broadway had Cole Porter, and that's where this imprisoning format for musical comedy had its release: in a brace of hot numbers. Add Porter's songs to a trashy Herbert and Dorothy Fields book about rich wives "entertaining" soldiers to avenge themselves on unfaithful husbands, create roles to make the most of an extremely fetching cast, and one has the smash-hit book show of 1941—in fact, at 547 performances, the longest-running pure-fun musical comedy since *Good News!*—*Let's Face It*.

Drawn from the 1925 play *The Cradle Snatchers*, by Russell Medcraft and Norma Mitchell, *Let's Face It* not only honored the Aarons–Freedley style but was a Vinton Freedley production. However, there was one major innovation in the style, a technical one that had a powerful effect on artistic matters. In the 1920s, when Aarons and Freedley formed their partnership, musicals were staged in one set per act, or in two sets per act separated by a minor scene played before the traveler curtain—what is called "in one." By the end of the 1920s, advances in the way shows were designed, in the way sets were hung, even in backstage discipline all enabled the creative team to count on four, five, or six sets per act.

This was invaluable, as writers no longer had to twist their sto-

* The first-rank shows are incontestable: *Show Boat, Carousel, West Side Story*. The second rank brings in popular yet not historically overwhelming titles: *Once Upon a Mattress, A Funny Thing Happened On the Way To the Forum*. In the third rank lie the once popular but now more or less neglected charm shows, like this one.

rytelling around the technical possibilities—such as where, physically, they were allowed to be at a given time, or how many characters they could bring onstage, or where people had to be while they were doing what. Narrative grew more fluid—really, more realistic. Finally, the story could dictate to the staging, rather than letting the staging limit the story.

One reason why was a new director's touch that found characters confidently moving downstage during a musical number to let the traveler close behind them (to give the stagehands the necessary privacy) even as the number continued. Once, this was thought threatening to the theatre's always perilous credibility. Changing the visuals *in front of the public* without a blackout? Worse, actors openly parading from one fake place to another, instead of making an official entrance from the wings? Wouldn't this only emphasize the very falseness of theatrical illusion? But, from the start in the late 1930s, when these changes were introduced, the public accommodated itself to the usage effortlessly.

So the traditional musical comedy could now toy with its own sense of artifice, move its folk around more easily, connect disparate places with a point of view. And, of course, as the storytelling improved, the songs had to keep up with the plot, work a little harder. Cole Porter's *Let's Face It* songs did include go-everywhere Cole Porter numbers: the ironic love songs ("You Irritate Me So" and the luxuriously coddling "I Hate You, Darling"), the Latin rhythm novelty ("A Little Rumba Numba," mainly an excuse for an appearance by ballroom dancers Mary Parker and Billy Daniel),* the list song ("Farming," on the bucolic amusements of the usual Porter celebrities, from "Kit Cornell" to the Duke of Verdura; and the wicked "Pets," dropped during rehearsals).

Yet "Jerry, My Soldier Boy" and "I've Got Some Unfinished Business With You" were locked into the storyline; and the

* The ballroom (i.e., "in evening dress") couple's adagio, tango, or choreographic medley, plopped into a book show with little or no motivation, dates back to the 1910s and was still a favorite makeweight in the early 1940s. As we'll see, by 1945 it was virtually extinct, though *Follies* (1971) looks back on it lovingly in the "Bolero d'Amour."

bouncy, brilliant "A Lady Needs a Rest," a cross section of the daily routine of the worldly socialite (who's "keeping her children in nights, and keeping her husband out") could only have been inspired by the show's central players: three bored, lonely, trendy, vital, satirically minded New York ladies:

Eve Arden, Vivian Vance, and Edith Meiser. Opposite them, as the soldiers they vainly attempt to seduce, were, respectively, Danny Kaye, Jack Williams, and Benny Baker;* and opposite *them*, as their ingenue sweethearts, were Mary Jane Walsh, Nanette Fabray, and Sunnie O'Dea. These were specialists, not just actors, and *Let's Face It* was organized around their gifts. Mary Jane Walsh, a suave singer in the belt range, was on hand to maintain a vocal standard. As Kaye's girl friend, she was strongly involved in the plot. But the Fieldses and Porter had above all to keep her positioned to put over the show's best melodies, perhaps especially "(Always have an) Ace in the Hole," with its ultra-Porter couplet in which "Bad times may bar you from Saks [Fifth Avenue]" abuts a warning about "a Satan in slacks." (Dancers Parker and Daniel made another appearance here, covering a set change and reminding us how easily the Aarons–Freedley format included miscellaneous talents without making the slightest excuse for their presence.)

Danny Kaye, fresh from his star's acclamation as an effeminate photographer in *Lady in the Dark*, was noted for retailing gibberish at a furious rate, and Porter gave him and Arden a dense patter number, "Let's Not Talk About Love," and also came up with "Baby Games," for the three ladies and their soldiers, similarly rooted in the frantically infantile mannerisms that Kaye specialized in. Then, too, Kaye's wife, Sylvia Fine, fashioned novelties for Kaye, "Melody in 4-F" and "Shootin' the Works." These interpolations into a Cole Porter score may strike us moderns as blasphemy. Yet this had long been common practice (though far more so in the early 1900s and less so now). Besides, why employ a zany such as Kaye and deny him material specifically provision-

* *The Cradle Snatchers'* founding sextet was even more impressive: Mary Boland, Edna May Oliver, and Margaret Dale facing off with Humphrey Bogart, Gene Raymond, and Raymond Hackett.

ing that zaniness? Fine could create it, and Porter probably didn't want to. The bulk of Kaye's script, too, gave the public full measures of his manic-depressive hysteria, not least in a scene aboard a canoe perched on a cardboard lake in which Arden tries to wring a little romance out of the soggy Kaye.

It was Arden, really, who got the most surely crafted tour de force, in a self-contained comic scene. Keep in mind that Arden, a sometime Hollywood player who by 1941 had appeared on Broadway in four revues and a book musical, commanded an established persona as elegant and ironic, with a clipped, deadpan* delivery and the ability to remain eternally bemused—or, rather, calmly staggered—by eccentrics. A decade after *Let's Face It*, Arden was to achieve ultimate completion with this identity in television's *Our Miss Brooks* as the schoolteacher surrounded by a daffy landlady, a befuddled though ceaselessly scheming principal, a libido-less boy friend, and so on. But here, in *Let's Face It*, is Arden at her peak, as she waits by a telephone on an army base. A soldier enters to place a call. As soon as he speaks, we hear a bizarre vocal impediment: he can't pronounce an "L." Worse, his girl friend, "Rirrian," apparently can't understand why he won't be able to see her that night. It seems that his leave has been canceled:

> SOLDIER: My reave! My reave! Can't you understand English?

As he goes on, Arden gives the audience her patented "how absurd does this world have to get?" look:

> SOLDIER: My reave got cancowed! My reave! (*He's frantic.*) My *reave*!

Arden can't take any more. As masterfully as a colonel, she holds out her hand, the soldier obediently gives her the phone, and in her very, very precise English, Arden speaks to the soldier's girl friend:

> ARDEN: Lillian—he says his leave got canceled.

* Literally "blank face": a now nearly lost art in which a comic performs his or her punch lines in a sardonic tone with expressionless features. Arden also specialized in "takes": reaction shots.

Arden hands the receiver back to the soldier, who now has another problem: Lillian accuses him of cheating on her with this other woman:

> SOLDIER: I am at camp! I ain't at Erinor's house! That wasn't Erinor!
> ARDEN: (*dryly flabbergasted*) *Who?*
> SOLDIER: (*To* ARDEN, *suddenly cowed*) Erinor.

And so on. In all, *Let's Face It* won its popularity on a plan that was by now nearly a generation old: start with a novel premise, develop farcically rather than realistically, and fill out with The Three Essentials: good score, good jokes, good players. (Sets and costumes were not regarded as crucial, and individualistic choreography was still being acculturated.)

The weakness in this format lay in the difficulty in rounding up all three Essentials at once. If even one of the three faltered, a show could dissolve, because it lacked foundation. *Let's Face It* could not have captivated Broadway without that Porter score, smart, loving, and constantly surprising with the customary Porter rhythmic sidesteps, pushbeats, and syncopations. Yet what would the songs have been worth without the pointed fun in the book and the expert comics socking that fun forth? The Essentials interlocked, cooperated, sustained each other.

A similar case can be made for *Louisiana Purchase* (1940), in which the Three Essentials were: one, Irving Berlin; two, a racy Morrie Ryskind–B. G. De Sylva book; and, three, the team of William Gaxton and Victor Moore with Vera Zorina, Irene Bordoni, and Carol Bruce. As well, this show boasted something special in its subject—political burlesque on Governor Huey Long's quasi-fascist rule in Louisiana.

Long was dangerous on the national level. At the time of his assassination, in 1935, he was poised to threaten Franklin Roosevelt's regime with a third-party candidacy that would have split the Democratic vote. However, producer and co-writer De Sylva was a retailer of the Aarons–Freedley shop, and he had no intention of tackling anything as serious as an Issue, even with the prickly former liberal Ryskind eager to observe ironies in Rooseveltian America. It was De Sylva who devised *Louisiana*

Purchase's storyline: straight-arrow but fuddled Republican senator (Moore) comes south to investigate shady yet likable politician (Gaxton). Politician falls for Hitler refugee (Zorina), who agrees to help compromise senator in an erotic scandal but then falls for *him* when he agrees to help her mother get out of Nazified Austria. That—along with the worldly commentary of restaurateuse Bordoni, the amiable company of songstress Bruce, the threats and sorties of Gaxton's corrupt cronies, and the "vocal stylings" (as they used to say) of the quartet billed as the [Hugh] Martins—is Act One.

The plot thins somewhat in Act Two. But by now we know that plot is not one of the Essentials. Expert makers of musicals were instead used to building their structures out of such other material as, say, the sheer discovery of the twenty-year-old Bruce, a real find for her strangely mature elegance, her plummy light mezzo. Or there was the reteaming of Zorina and choreographer George Balanchine, though this most snazzy and contemporary of musical comedies may seem an unlikely host for ballet. In fact, the ballet world had been moving from operetta into musical comedy for years. The brassiest, sauciest shows were on their toes nowadays. *Beat the Band* would be choreographed by ballet's David Lichine—yes, even "The Steam Is on the Beam."

Or take *Louisiana Purchase*'s curious opening number, no scene-setter but an "in real time" presentation of producer De Sylva's attorney, dictating a letter in which he frets over possible lawsuits unless the show pretends to take place in not the actual but a "mythical" Louisiana. The lawyer mentions Ryskind and Berlin by name, really worried at first and then avuncular, even gubernatorial, when he reveals the solution—and, of course, in a joke dating back to the early 1900s, he's one Sam Liebowitz, of the firm of O'Rafferty, Driscoll, and O'Brien.*

* The chuckling remark that all the lawyers of most common occurrence are Irish or Jewish presumably reflects the racial consciousness of early-twentieth-century show biz, heavily populated by minority groups who exploited stereotypical humor even as they tried to discredit it. I raise this point here because, under the influence of the racially sensitive Rodgers and Hammerstein and the culminating anti-stereotype sarcasm of *Finian's Rainbow*, the 1940s is