



## Laurents, Arthur (1917-2011)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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Playwright, librettist, screenwriter, and director, Arthur Laurents brought an independent sensibility to some of the most important works of stage and screen in the post-World War II era.

He dared to live openly with a male lover in Hollywood when the studios insisted upon the appearance of sexual conformity. And, in a prime example of what theorist Wayne Koestenbaum has termed "male double writing," Laurents collaborated with such major gay talents as Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, Jerry Herman, Harvey Fierstein, and Jerome Robbins on musicals that challenged audiences to accept an unorthodoxy that goes against the grain of the American success myth.

Asked by a judgmental American spinster to justify the dishonesty required for his extramarital affairs, the courtly Renato Di Rossi in Laurents' *The Time of the Cuckoo* (1952) replies simply, "I am in approval of living." So was Laurents.

Laurents was born July 14, 1917 in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn to middle-class Jewish parents from whom he inherited socialist leanings.

Following graduation from Cornell University, Laurents served during World War II in an army film production unit in Astoria where he wrote scripts designed to educate servicemen going overseas, as well as radio plays intended to foster civilian support for the war.

The success of Laurents' first commercially produced play, *Home of the Brave* (1945)--written in nine days and critically applauded for addressing the issue of anti-Semitism in the armed forces--encouraged him to move to Hollywood, then in its heyday.

In the film industry, Laurents quickly became known for his deftness with psychological themes. He wrote the scripts for *The Snake Pit* (1948), the story of a woman's emotional collapse and recovery, set in a mental asylum with scenes considered shockingly realistic at the time; and for Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), a psychological thriller with a powerful homosexual subtext, which starred Laurents' then-lover, Farley Granger.

Although Laurents was never blacklisted himself, his opposition to the studio heads' support of the communist witch-hunts weakened his status in Hollywood.

He returned to New York where he enjoyed success as a playwright (*Time of the Cuckoo*, 1952; *A Clearing in the Woods*, 1957; *Jolson Sings Again*, 1999), librettist (*West Side Story*, 1957; *Gypsy*, 1959; *Anyone Can Whistle*, 1964; *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, 1965; *Hallelujah, Baby!*, 1967; *Nick and Nora*, 1992), and director (*I Can Get It for You Wholesale*, 1962; the 1973 London premiere and 1989 Broadway revival of *Gypsy*; *La Cage aux Folles*, 1983; *West Side Story*, 2009).

Although he returned to Hollywood to work on such films as *The Way We Were* (1973) and *The Turning*

*Point* (1977), he lived contentedly with his lover, Tom Hatcher, on a beachfront property in Quogue, Long Island, from 1955 until Hatcher's death in 2006.

Laurents' experience of discrimination as both a Jew and a gay man--intensified by his experience during the Hollywood blacklist period--infuses his work with a strong social conscience.

In *The Way We Were*, Katie Morosky is marginalized both by her Jewish ethnicity and by her unflagging pursuit of social justice; her tragedy is to fall in love with Hubbell Gardner, a WASP who assimilates social norms so effortlessly that, finally, he has no principles.

Laurents also treated the subject of blacklisting in *Jolson Sings Again*, which dramatizes the sacrifices of life and integrity made to the McCarthyite drive to root out possible subversives.

Laurents' musical *Hallelujah, Baby!*, written for his good friend Lena Horne, looks at sixty years of race relations in America and was advertised as a "civil rights musical."

While Laurents followed the basic plot of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in his book for *West Side Story*, he made two significant changes in the story. Rather than chance, it is the racial prejudice of the Jets/Montagues that prevents Anita/the messenger from delivering to Tony/Romeo the assurance that Maria/Juliet is still alive; and Maria/Juliet lives to confront the survivors with the evidence of what their hatred has cost the community.

Laurents suggested the "Officer Krupke" scene in *West Side Story*, which comically analyzes society's inability to deal with the juvenile delinquents who have been created by the mainstream's own misguided values.

Laurents' willingness to challenge social conventions made him particularly interested in the relative values of madness and sanity. The relativity of normalcy is clear in *Time of the Cuckoo*, where Laurents satirizes American tourists in Venice who are unimaginative, insensitive, and self-centered, yet certain of their own superiority to the supposedly childlike, sexually undisciplined, immoral--yet clearly happier--Italians.

More provocatively, one of the settings for *Anyone Can Whistle* is a sanitarium called The Cookie Jar, described as catering to "the socially pressured"; the brilliant "Cookie Chase" scene underscores the contradictions in the American pursuit of success and happiness, which drives social authorities to attempt to destroy any instance of potentially subversive originality. Rose's breakdown in the climactic scene of *Gypsy* dramatizes the consequence of striving for success at any cost.

Laurents was at his best when depicting a female character's search for liberation from the social strictures that demand conformity. In *Gypsy*, Rose angrily protests to her father that her own two daughters will "have a marvelous time! I'll be damned if I'm gonna let them sit away their lives like I did. And like you do--with only the calendar to tell you one day is different from the next!"

Laurents' most daring decision was to focus *Gypsy* not on the title character on whose memoirs the play was based, but on Gypsy Rose Lee's mother, making the play the portrait of a woman so determined to break free of the humdrum that she is unaware of the moral monster that she becomes in the process.

In *The Turning Point*, middle-aged friends Deedee Rogers and Emma Jacklin are forced to confront the choices made earlier in life that led one to leave the ballet stage to marry and raise a family in obscurity, and the other to become an internationally famous ballerina with an unsatisfying private life.

In *A Clearing in the Woods*, Virginia learns that "an end to dreams isn't an end to hope." And in *Time of the Cuckoo*, Leona Samish must let go of her unrealistic romantic expectations and accept the moment as life offers it. As Di Rossi advises Leona, "You are a hungry child to whom someone brings--ravioli. 'But I don't

want ravioli, I want beefsteak!' You are hungry, Miss Samish! Eat the ravioli!"

Daring to aspire to a life beyond the humdrum, yet courageous enough to resist the corresponding temptation to be blinded by romantic illusion, Laurents' female characters are portraits of human resilience.

They spoke strongly to the pre-Stonewall generation of gay men, themselves experimenting with constructing an alternative, more satisfying existence.

[In his later years, Laurents kept busy looking both backwards and forwards. He has wrote memoirs and revived his landmark works, *Gypsy* and *West Side Story*, but he has also wrote new works and planned new projects.

In 2000, Laurents published *Original Story by Arthur Laurents: A Memoir of Broadway and Hollywood*, in which he discussed not only his stage and film work, but also his romantic relationships, including those with Farley Granger and, especially, with Tom Hatcher.

Hatcher's death on October 2006 marked the end of the couple's 52-year relationship.

Following his recovery from the depression that attended Hatcher's death, Laurents returned to his work with a vigor that is astonishing for a man of his age.

His revival of *Gypsy*, starring Patti LuPone, was widely acclaimed. It earned him a Tony Award for Best Director of a Musical in 2008 (an honor he had also earned earlier for his direction of *La Cage aux Folles* in 1984).

Laurents followed that success with a controversial revival of *West Side Story*, distinguished by its emphasis on acting rather than singing and dancing and its bilingualism.

In 2009, Laurents published another memoir, *Mainly on Directing: "Gypsy," "West Side Story" and Other Musicals*, in which he examined the musicals he directed as well as the work of other directors. He also discussed his long love affair with Hatcher, and his platonic relationships with the actors he has directed.

In 2009, Laurents also premiered his play, *New Year's Eve*. Starring Keith Carradine and Marlo Thomas, the work examines the ambiguous sexuality of a somewhat jaded New York theatrical family.

On May 5, 2011, Laurents died peacefully at his Manhattan home.]

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### **About the Author**

**Raymond-Jean Frontain** is Professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas. He has published widely on seventeenth-century English literature and on English adaptations of Biblical literature. He is editor of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*. He is engaged in a study of the David figure in homoerotic art and literature.