The Gershwin Newsletter

No. 2, 2007

Words Without Music

The Gershwins in Europe: Ira’s 1928 Diary

First Gershwin Prize Awarded
Kitty Carlisle Hart died this spring. She was 96. We were long-time friends, but our friendship grew as we joined in efforts to encourage new productions of Lady in the Dark, the 1941 Broadway musical written by Kurt Weill, Ira Gershwin, and her husband, Moss Hart. Our acquaintance began in 1964 when I was an “impostor” on the television program, To Tell the Truth, where Kitty was a regular panel member. Over the years that followed I had great fun teasing Kitty that I had successfully fooled her into believing I was an American who had joined the French Foreign Legion. My favorite adjective to describe Kitty was “wise.” She was a role model in so many ways. At the age of 93 she called asking if I could get her a “cabaret gig” in San Francisco. Her live nights at the Plush Room rocked the City! Kitty never looked back — it was always “tomorrow,” “who’s coming?” “where are we going?” Kitty, we will see Lady in the Dark again — you betcha! — Michael Strunsky
Excerpts from Ira Gershwin’s 1928 Diary

On March 10, 1928, George and Ira Gershwin, their younger sister Fran, (“Frankie”), and Ben’s wife, Laurence (“Lee”), boarded the S.S. Majestic in New York harbor for a three-month trip through Europe. George was an experienced traveller, having made four previous European journeys between 1923 and 1926, while Ira and Lee were beginning to lose their desire for foreign travel.

On March 19, 1928 the Gershwin’s arrived in London. In their 1928 Diary George wrote: “On our arrival in London, George and Ira opened their new hotel room at the Hotel Majestic, 217 Piccadilly.” George and Ira were in London for the premiere of their new musical, “Fever,” which opened at London’s Piccadilly Theatre on April 27, 1928, starring Lee, and was directed and choreographed by Lewis Milestone. In later years, Bette Davis would star in a revival of the musical.

So called him & he rushed backstage – and on his appearance the house gave him another big hand. So the pianist played for an encore “Do! Do! Do!” a verse & 3 choruses they had evidently arranged and practiced, for it went with great eclat and the house wanted more.

It was the 1st time I had heard of an encore by soloists to a symphony program. In the lobby George told us Baton had apologized for the performance saying they had only rehearsed the piece ½ hour, and he had only the piano score etc. At any rate despite the almost laughable performance George was thrilled by the reception. In the lobby met Deems Taylor & Mary Kennedy; then Fekete, Salabet & Yvain, a tall and lanky looking Frenchman, Adolph left us and George, Frankie, Lee, Mabel & myself drove to Mabel’s apartment to get Bob, who had been golfing, and all of us to Lapérouse, a restaurant on the Left Bank where we had a good dinner for about 350 francs. Then we walked a short way to a house in Paris playing “Ghost.” And to bed about 2. Finished “transition” about 4.

Notes

3/22/28

Described by a friend of the Gershwin’s as “the most fashionable night club in London”. The “Embassy Club” was located on the Bond Street. The 1928 house orchestra was Jack Harris and His Band.

Arnold Bennett (1867–1931) was an English novelist whose most famous works include The Old Wives’ Tale (1908) and the Chapman brothers, which was one of the most influential novels of the early 20th century. In the diary, George and Ira mention visiting the club and attending an opera performance. The club was considered one of the most fashionable and exclusive in London during this period.

3/23/28

After winning two scholarships at the Beaux Arts Institute of Design in New York, American sculptor Adolph Block (1906–1978) sailed for France in June 1927 and spent 15 months studying there. The Saturday Concerts Paselepou were a feature of this Parisian concert society created by John Pollack in 1901. The Symphony in D minor by the Belgian-born, French composer César Franck (1822–1890) was premiered in Paris in 1889.

The Menu of Nigemom had its 1st performance in Paris in 1920, by the Opera-Comique Orchestra, which was also known as the Orchestre d’Harmonie Parisienn. The opera was dedicated. Based on an episode from Gustave Aimard’s novel, Le Soupir, the ten-minute symphonic poem quotes three Native American melodies.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 06
The world premiere of *The Gershwin's: An American in Paris*, a new musical with a book by Tony-award winner Ken Ludwig (*Crazy For You*), will cap the 2007-2008 season at Houston's Alley Theatre. Scheduled to open in May 2008, it is a funny, fictionalized account of the making of the classic 1951 MGM film.

A second reading of the script took place at the Alley's rehearsal space this past May, with Harry Groener, who had starred in Crazy for You on Broadway, and singer-dancer Jeffry Denman both resuming their roles from a 2006 New York reading. Chitty Chitty Bang Bang's Erin Dilly played the female lead.

Gregory Boyd, the Alley's long-time artistic director, will direct the Houston production. The creative team includes Rob Berman (the new music director of New York City Center's Encores!) as musical director, choreographer Randy Skinner, scenic designer Douglas Schmidt, and lighting designer Paul Gallo, a veteran of *Crazy for You*. Final casting is in the works.
The neglected 1925 George and Ira Gershwin musical *Tip-Toes* received a warm welcome this past spring from audiences at the small Whitefire Theatre in Sherman Oaks, California. Other than a 1978 production at the Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam, Connecticut—which incorporated songs from other Gershwin shows and was also seen in 1979 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music—*Tip-Toes* has not been fully staged since its original run on Broadway at the Liberty Theatre. In 2001, New World Records released a CD of the show, conducted by Rob Fisher, who had restored the score using material found in 1982 at the Warner Brothers Music warehouse in Secaucus, New Jersey. Whitefire producers William Mead, who directed and choreographed the show, and Brian O’Halloran, the musical director, based their version on Fisher’s restoration. Reviews of the Whitefire staging were uniformly positive. Variety’s critic wrote, “Mead permits no trace of campiness or condescension, and it would take a hard-hearted cynic indeed to resist show’s appeal.” Backstage West called the show “a nostalgic and melodic bonbon recalling the simple charms of old-fashioned tuners.” Cynthia Citron, critic for ReviewPlays.com, noted that “Like Stephen Sondheim’s, Ira’s lyrics are sophisticated, with intelligent and unexpected rhyming patterns.”

**LADY, BE GOOD! @ REGENT’S PARK**

As part of its 75th anniversary season this past summer, London’s Regent’s Park Open Air Theatre presented a revival of George and Ira Gershwin’s 1926 musical *Lady, Be Good!* During the production’s six-week, sold-out run, audiences were treated to such Gershwin classics as “Fascinating Rhythm” and “Oh, Lady, Be Good!” as well as the charming “Little Jazz Bird” and “The Half of It, Dearie, Blues.” A typical 1920s musical romp with a book by Guy Bolton and Fred Thompson about suddenly homeless and penniless socialites, *Lady, Be Good!* was staged by Ian Talbot in his final season as the Open Air’s artistic director. Most reviewers responded positively to what Clive Davis of The Times called “this exuberant Gershwin revival.” “I can’t think of a more infallible cheer-me-upper,” wrote Charles Spencer in the Telegraph. The Financial Times’ Sarah Hemming commented, “This jazz-age musical comedy, driven by George Gershwin’s restless rhythms and Ira Gershwin’s nimble lyrics, has an irresistible energy, and Ian Talbot’s production delivers it with style.” Paul Gruner’s comic portrayal of the lawyer Watty Watkins and Bill Deamer’s adept choreography came in for particular praise from the critics. The original production of *Lady, Be Good!* — the first complete Broadway collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin — starred Fred and Adele Astaire as the siblings Dick and Susie Trevor and ran for 330 performances at the Liberty Theatre in New York. After its U.S. tour, the show began an equally successful stay at London’s Empire Theatre in 1926.

Four lesser-known Ira Gershwin lyrics were heard on Broadway this past spring in *LoveMusik,* the Harold Prince-directed musical about Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya. Starring Michael Cerveris as the composer and Donna Murphy as the singer-actress, the show explored the couple’s fraught, complex relationship, from their courtship and marriage in Germany to their “second act” in the United States. The score, drawn from songs composed by Weill, used Ira’s “Song of the Rhineland” from the 1945 movie *When Do We Go From Here?* (sung by Lenya’s family during the Kidshe, “Come to Paris” from the 1945 musical *The Firebrand of Florence,* and two Ira lyrics from the 1941 show *Lady in the Dark,* “Girl of the Moment” and, as Weill and Lenya marry one another for the second time after their arrival in the U.S., “It’s Never Too Late to Mendelssohn.” *When Do We Go From Here?* was a World War II musical fantasy with Fred MacMurray, Joan Leslie and June Havoc. *Lady in the Dark,* Ira and Weill’s hit musical about psychoanalysis, with a book by Moss Hart and starring Gertrude Lawrence, ran for 467 performances; interestingly, it was Ira’s most successful Broadway show. *The Firebrand of Florence,* Ira and Weill’s second Broadway undertaking, closed after 43 performances.

Other lyricists whose work was represented in *LoveMusik* included Ogden Nash, Maxwell Anderson and Bertolt Brecht. The score featured such well-known Weill songs as “Speak Low” (lyrics by Nash), “September Song” (lyrics by Anderson), and his famous Brecht collaboration, “Mack the Knife.” Jonathan Tunick received a Tony nomination for his period-perfect, often haunting orchestrations. The book for *LoveMusik,* by Alfred Uhry, was “suggested by the letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya,” published by the University of California Press in 1996 as *Speak Low (When You Speak Low).* Despite Tony-nominated performances by Cerveris, Murphy, and David Pittu as Brecht, *LoveMusik* closed after 24 previews and 60 performances.

**DEDICATION OF MARK TRENT GOLDBERG COLLECTION**

The large performing arts collection of Mark Trent Goldberg, the Gershwin Trusts’ late Executive Director, was donated this past April by his parents, Gene and Mary Goldberg, to the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library in downtown San Jose, California. The library, which serves both San Jose State University and the general public, acknowledged the gift of more than 2,000 books and audio recordings at a moving dedication ceremony attended by Mark’s family, friends and colleagues. Mr. and Mrs. Goldberg decided to place the collection at SJSU because of their personal connection to the university — they were married in the school chapel in 1955 — and the warm relationship they developed with the library’s staff. For further information on the named endowment created to allow for additions to the collection, visit the SJSU library web site at www.sjlibrary.org/support.
AROUND THE WORLD WITH PORGY AND BESS
A calendar of upcoming presentations

New York Harlem Productions, Inc.,
based in Munich, Germany
On Tour 2007-2008:
France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Spain,
Switzerland, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Zachary Scott Theatre Center, Austin, Texas
1/25/08-2/03/08

The Dallas Opera, Dallas, Texas
2/22-24-26-28/08 & 3/1/08

National Philharmonic, North Bethesda, Maryland
2/23/08

Townsend Opera Players, Modesto, California
2/24/08, 2/29/08 & 3/2/08

Fresno Grand Opera, Fresno, California
5/2/08 & 5/4/08

Opéra de Lyon, Lyon, France
5/17/08-6/1/08

Théâtre National de l’Opéra Comique, Paris, France
10 performances starting 6/08

Deutsche Oper Berlin, Berlin, Germany
7/4/08-8/10/08

Norwegian National Opera, Oslo, Norway
Approximately 20 performances starting 8/08