

# Class 10: Reinvention

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## A. How it all Began

1. Osher information
2. Class title (*Gypsy*)

When celebrity stripper **Gypsy Rose Lee** (1911–70) published her memoir in 1957, Broadway producer **David Merrick** (1911–2000) immediately saw the possibilities and secured the rights. He recruited composer **Jule Styne** (1904–95) to write the music, **Stephen Sondheim** (1930–2021) to write the lyrics, and *West Side Story* author **Arthur Laurents** (1917–2011) to write the book. Sondheim was initially reluctant because he really wanted to compose, but eventually agreed. Laurents also refused, for how could one write a whole show about a stripper? But he too came around.

3. Gypsy Rose Lee, archival photo

One reason for his change of mind was the realization that this would not be about Gypsy's career as a stripper, but of how she emerged from a childhood in vaudeville to *reinvent* herself as a stripper, which has much more inherent drama. He suggested representing this by the second-to-last number in the show, which is a montage in which we see the tentative teenager **Louise Hovick** gradually gain confidence and become Gypsy. The actress in the 2016 British production I'll be using for most of the class is **Lara Pulver**.

4. *Gypsy, Act II: Louise becomes Gypsy*

That is an 8-minute scene, certainly not enough for a full musical. But what made Laurents finally come aboard was the realization that Louise/Gypsy was not the true protagonist of the show at all, but her tornado of a mother, **Rose Hovick**, determined to use charm, finagling, and sheer vitriol to give her daughters the stage career she had never had herself. The role was premiered by the powerhouse **Ethel Merman**. Rose is the *ne plus ultra* of stage mothers. We first see her when she charges down from the back of the auditorium where her daughters are auditioning for a kiddie show. At this moment, and for all the first act, Louise is only the backup for her cold-star younger sister June. You may also recognize her musical number, "May we entertain you," as the piece that Gypsy uses in a very different context to start her strip routine! The Rose is **Dame Imelda Staunton**, whom you remember as the final incarnation of Queen Elizabeth II in *The Crown*.

5. *Gypsy, Act I: Opening scene*
6. Collage of similar scenes

Rose decides to abandon the kid-show world and get June a booking on a professional vaudeville circuit. For the next decade or so, they tour the country performing essentially the same act, as *Baby June and the Newsboys*, and, when they are too old to pass as kids, *Dainty June and her Farmboys*. There is a neat

effect at the end of the Newsboys section, devised by **Jerome Robbins** (1918–98), where the boys do a dance move called **trenches**, and as each goes briefly into the wings, he is replaced by an adult dancer.

7. *Gypsy*, Act I: Baby June and the Newsboys
8. *Gypsy*, Act I: Dainty June and the Farmboys
9. Collage of similar scenes (repeat)

Another writer or composer might have made each episode different, so as to get in more music, but Styne and Sondheim keep them close variations on the same theme. Another team might have been advised not to start a show with so many numbers involving child performers. So why did these ones make the choices they did? Partly because Rose Hovick did put her daughters on the stage as children, and by forcing them to do the same routines even well into their teens essentially deprived them of normal childhoods. The first song that Louise has, well into Act I, is sung to a toy lamb given her on her fifth or sixth consecutive tenth birthday, with the text, “Little lamb, little lamb, I wonder how old I am.”

10. *Gypsy*, Act I: “Little Lamb,” ending
11. *Gypsy*, number list

By the time Louise has this song, Rose will already have has three numbers that she launches as extended solos, although other characters may join in later; she will have four more. This may be a record; none of the other characters comes close. The first we hear is when she approaches her utterly conventional father to ask for seed money for the new venture; he refuses, but she goes on singing anyway. As you listen, consider two questions: how does this song (or at least this performance) differ from other Broadway numbers you have heard? And why is Rose really singing? I’ll play you a bit of the 1993 **Bette Midler** video as a comparison

12. *Gypsy*, Act I: “Some people” (Staunton)
13. *Gypsy*, Act I: “Some people,” beginning (Midler)
14. Stills from both the above

What did you think? Imelda Staunton is an actor who also sings; most of the other performers you see are singers who also act. I think that makes a difference. I thought Midler’s spoken performance was terrific, and she is a far better singer than Staunton. But the moment the music began, you were aware of a change of gear: this is the voice that made her famous, and she is going to show how good she is. As to why Rose sings, one reason is obvious, to persuade her father. But that fails, as she knew it would fail, yet she keeps singing anyway. One reason, I think, is to psych herself up, on the verge of what is bound to be a momentous life-change. You can have different theories; different performers can have different theories; but the point is that the possibilities are open. Other musicals also have sung songs and spoken lines; *Gypsy* is just about the first to focus equally on the thoughts *behind* the lines: the **subtext**. Which brings me to my other meaning of “Reinvention.” If the inner life of the character is as important as what she sings, says, and does, then it is up to each performer to discover it; essentially, she is *reinventing* the character in each production, even in each performance.

15. Louise and Tulsa 1

Apart from one or two of the really early things, *Gypsy* is the only musical in the course that I did not know at all before beginning work on it: not a note, not a line, not even the story. A computer glitch made me have to stop after watching the first act, and I had to wait a day before seeing the second. I found myself on tenterhooks wondering how it would all work out. And this feeling was not confined to the intermission. At many other points in the show, I found myself thinking that it would probably go in one direction, only to find that it went in quite a different one. This is because the major characters have more than one dimension. You don't just take what they are singing or saying, you wonder what is really going on in their minds. Here is the first place where I thought this. The only solo song in the show not given to either Rose or Louise is a song-and-dance number for one of the boys in the troupe, Tulsa. Louise finds him practising behind the theater and asks him about his dreams. Here is his reply. [I have made a cut in the dance itself for reasons of time.] **Dan Burton** play Tulsa.

- 16. *Gypsy*, Act I: “All I need is the girl,” beginning and end
- 17. Louise and Tulsa 2

If you already know the story, indulge me. I was quite convinced that Louise, who is clearly hanging onto Tulsa's every word, would join him in the song as well as the dance, and would become his girl. So the next scene came as a big shock.

- 18. *Gypsy*, Act I: Omaha station scene
- 19. Class title 2 (still from the above)
- 19z Osher information

## B. How it Ends

- 20. Section title B (Midler)

Let's look once more at the ending of that last number, “Everything's Coming Up Roses,” this time with **Bette Midler**. Listen to its musical shape, pay particular attention to Sondheim's words, and answer a question that you might think rather odd: Who chose to put this particular kind of song in this particular place—the writers, or Rose herself?

- 21. *Gypsy*, Act I: “Everything's Coming Up Roses,” ending (Midler)
- 22. Midler and Staunton in the above

What did you think? Midler, of course, is the better singer. It is her better voice that made me realize the extent that this kind of song—the big number that drives to a huge climax—is a familiar Broadway trope. Yes, Jule Styne wrote it, but he wrote it as a handle for Rose to grab onto to keep from sinking in a sea of lost hopes. She sings it because she needs to drive herself towards a new goal, whether it is realistic or not. Like “Some people” at the beginning of the act, **it is her song of reinvention**. She needs that Broadway moment to keep her going. And Sondheim plays right along by writing ever more insane lyrics (lollipops and Santa Claus) the more the music builds.

### 23. Toreadorables

And Rose's goal is indeed unrealistic. When Act Two opens, she is rehearsing the old show with Louise in the lead and a new troupe, now given Spanish costumes and called "The Toreadorables." It sucks, and Louise tries to get her mother to understand that this is going nowhere. Her long-time, long-suffering agent and partner Herbie (Peter Davison, the original Tristan Farnon from *All Creatures Great and Small*) tries to get her to give up show business, marry him, and settle down. But she launches into another number, "Together wherever we go." It is the same as before, an obviously upbeat Broadway number to keep the show on the road. WE know it is hopeless; LOUISE and HERBIE know it is hopeless; probably ROSE knows it is hopeless but is not about to admit it. And because we can look into their minds and see ahead—because we know the subtext—the whole upbeat song nonetheless has the air of a tragedy unfolding, and there is nothing we can do to stop it.

### 24. *Gypsy*, Act II: Toreadorables, dialogue, and "Together wherever we go"

#### 25. — still from the above

Normally, in choosing which scenes from a musical to show, I play musical numbers and skip the dialogue. Last week, though, I played some scenes in **Tony Kushner's** movie version of *West Side Story* just because his dialogue was so good. And Arthur Laurents' dialogue for *Gypsy* are as good as they get. The normal Broadway syndrome whereby Act One is a *musical* play and Act Two is a musical *play* is absolutely the case here, but it is not a weakness. You want the dialogue, and now that the chips are down you want a great actress to deliver it. Which I think you get in Imelda Staunton.

### 26. Title slide (repeat)

Whether aware of it or not (he says not), Herbie has booked the troupe into a burlesque house in Wichita, as the one clean act that will keep the cops away. Rose is shocked at first but, trouper that she is, she agrees to go through with it for the money. Louise shares a dressing-room with one of the strippers and learns that there is nothing much to it, just a gimmick that will give your turn a memorable flavor. As they are packing up to leave, Rose overhears that their headline stripper has been arrested, and volunteers Louise to take her place. Louise agrees. Her gimmick will be that she looks so young, ladylike, and virginal that she is the last person you would ever expect to strip. It is a ten-minute scene, beginning just as Herbie is about to take Rose off to get married and ending just before the striptease montage with which I started. But it is too long to play complete, so I will cut the section in the middle, where Herbie comes back in to say that he is leaving. The main focus, though, is on Rose. **Frank Rich** of the New York Times called *Gypsy* "Broadway's own brassy, unlikely answer to *King Lear*." Staunton's performance here makes me realize the truth of this.

### 27. Rose Hovick and King Lear

### 28. *Gypsy*, Act II: Wichita dressing room scene

### 29. *Gypsy's* dressing room at Minsky's, with Rich and LuPone quotations

By the end of her montage, *Gypsy* Rose Lee has become the headline attraction at Minsky's in New York. Despite notices aimed at keeping her out, Rose visits her daughter, still trying to micromanage. It was **Robert W. Schneider**, in his book *Fifty Key Stage Musicals* (Routledge 2022, co-authored with Shannon

Agnew) who first alerted me to the idea of the subtext in *Gypsy*. But he says one thing I don't quite agree with. He notes that while Frank Rich calls Rose a monster, Patti LuPone, who played the role in 2008, says "I do not see her as a monster at all." But this is not surprising; it is simply the difference between a critic and a performer. There are a lot of interviews out there on YouTube, and all the actresses without exception deny that Rose is a monster. You have to; you can't play a negative. Even an actor cast as Hitler has to find some positive motivation to hang onto. So as you watch this dialogue, try to think of what motivations Rose *can* play. The scene leads into her final number, "Rose's Turn." She gives the old Broadway reinvention song another go, this time performing herself before an audience in her imagination. The number ends, but there is no triumphant curtain. Instead, she is alone on an empty stage, with only Louise appaluding silently in the background. And so the show ends, not with a bang, not with a whimper, but with something like an ellipsis...

30. *Gypsy*, Act II: Minsky's dressing room scene, "Roses' Turn," and ending

31. Ellipsis...

The subtext in *Gypsy* means that every production can be a reinvention, and this is especially true of this final moment, what I call the ellipsis. Here, very quickly, is how it ends in the 1962 movie with **Rosalind Russell**, the 1993 television production with **Bette Midler**, the 2008 revival with **Patti LuPone**, and the 2016 performance we have just watched. Are all four equally valid?

32. *Gypsy*, Act II: montage of endings

33. Class title 3