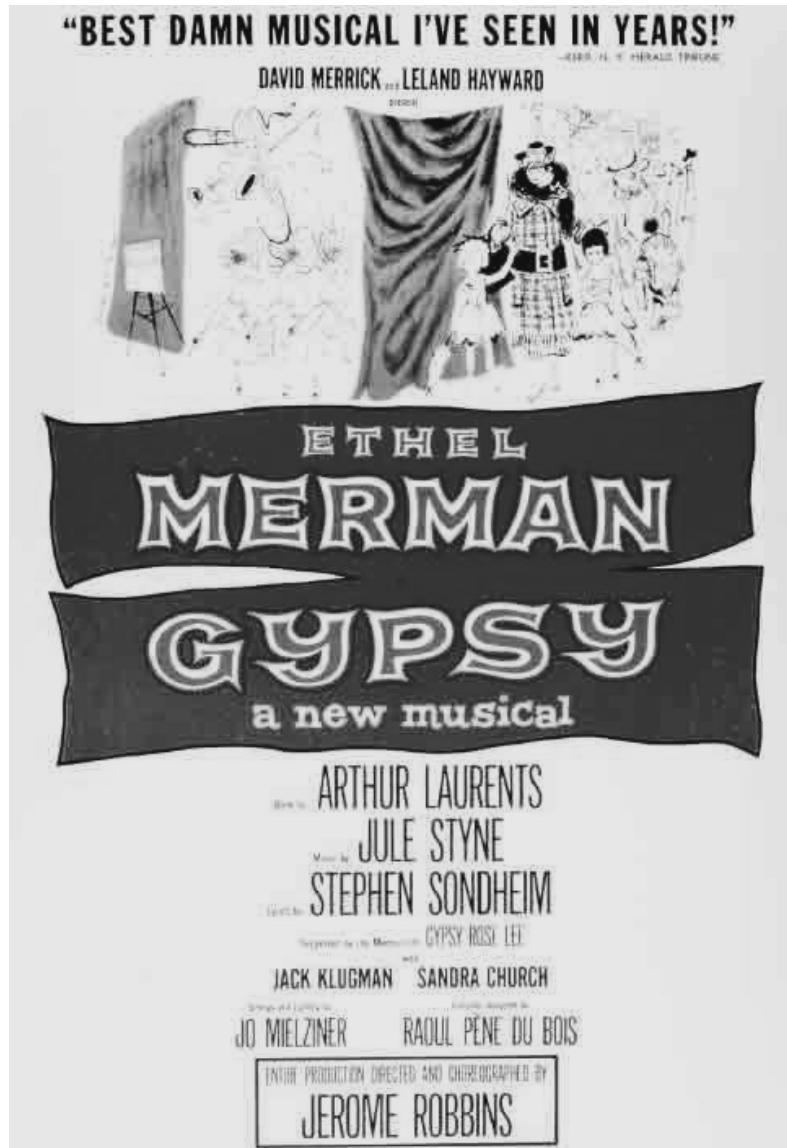


The Birth of Broadway

10. Reinvention



WHEN STRIPPER GYPSY ROSE LEE PUBLISHED HER MEMOIR IN 1957, Broadway producer David Merrick snapped up the rights. He got Jule Styne to compose the music and Stephen Sondheim to write the lyrics. Arthur Laurents initially declined Merrick's offer to write the book, but accepted once he realized the musical could focus on two inherently dramatic themes.

One was the idea of parents attempting to live vicariously through their children. Despite the title, the protagonist of the show would be the indomitable Rose Hovick, the stage mother of all stage mothers. After touring the vaudeville circuit for a decade with a show featuring her younger daughter June, she turned her attention to June's less obviously talented elder sister Louise, and was even responsible for pushing her into burlesque. Rose was a rarity in Broadway at the time: a leading role for a mature performer that offers an emotional range approaching that of King Lear.

The other thing that surely inspired Laurents was the realization that this would be a show about *Reinvention*. Most obviously Louise Hovick's reinvention of herself as Gypsy in her late teens. But also Mama Rose's determination to reinvent herself after each setback, a phoenix rising from the ashes. And, given characters whose spoken and sung lines are only a fraction of what they might be feeling and thinking—the subtext—each production is essentially a reinvention, and for the performers a nightly process of discovery and self-realization. *rb.*

Plot Outline

Rose Hovick enters her precocious daughter **June** into a children's talent show, backed up by her older daughter **Louise**. By blackmailing the producer and flattering everybody else, she

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manages to secure them a spot. Although she fails to get financial support from her father, she builds a professional vaudeville act around June, getting bookings with the aid of **Herbie**, a former agent who has fallen for her charms. We see them performing essentially the same act with only cosmetic changes for the next decade, until the children are well into their teens. But vaudeville is dying, the troupe is tiring of the routine, June elopes, and the act inevitably breaks up.

Rose, however, is not one to stay down for long. Realizing that she had been neglecting Louise, she is determined to build a new act around *her*. But the best Herbie can do is book them into a burlesque house in Wichita. Getting to know the strippers, Louise learns how little there is to it, so when there is suddenly a vacancy and her mother volunteers her, she is willing to give it a try. Her youth and ladylike manner make her unique in the business, and soon she is the highly-paid headliner at Minsky's in New York. Still trying to micromanage her, Rose comes into her dressing room, but Louise will no longer tolerate the interference and some hard truths are exchanged. Rose goes out into the empty theater and, half in reality, half in her distraught mind, imagines her own moment of glory on the stage. Louise overhears her and attempts at least a partial reconciliation before the curtain falls.

A. How it All Began

Starting with the penultimate sequence in the show, in which Louise reinvents herself as Gypsy Rose Lee, we look back at some of the Act I scenes that prepare for this moment. Unless otherwise noted, all excerpts come from the video below.

Laurents/Sondheim/Styne: *Gypsy*. London 2016. Imelda Staunton, *Rose*; Lara Pulver, *Louise*; Peter Davison, *Herbie*; Dan Burton, *Tulsa*. Jonathan Kent, *director*.

- “Let me entertain you” (Louise)
- “May we entertain you?” (montage of June’s shows)
- “Little lamb,” ending (Louise)
- “Some People” (Rose), also Bette Midler excerpt, 1993
- “All I need is the girl” (Tulsa)
- “Everything’s comin’ up roses” (Rose)

B. How it Ends

Three sequences from the second act, showing how Rose responds to the challenge of recovering from failure, pushes Louise into burlesque, and then reassesses herself in the light of her daughter’s success.

- “Everything’s comin’ up roses,” ending (Bette Midler, 1993)
- “Together wherever we go” (Rose, Herbie, Louise)
- Wichita dressing-room scene
- Minsky’s dressing-room scene
- “Rose’s turn” (Rose), also Bette Midler excerpt, 1993
- Final moments: Rosalind Russell (1963), Bette Midler (1993), and Patti LuPone (2008)

Arthur **Laurents** (1917–2011, *American playwright*), David **Merrick** (1911–2000, *American producer*), Jerome **Robbins** (1918–98, *American choreographer*), Stephen **Sondheim** (1930–2021, *American composer and lyricist*), Jule **Styne** (1904–95, *English-American composer*)

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