

“Gypsy” (Original Cast Recording) (1959)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original album artwork



Original label



Ethel Merman

The life of 1930's burlesque star Gypsy Rose Lee and her domineering stage mother formed the story for the great (some say greatest) Broadway musical “Gypsy” first performed in 1959.

Hailing from Seattle, Lee, born Rose Louise Hovick, and her sister June (later the actress June Havoc) were the daughters of Rose Thompson Hovick. The elder Hovick married her first husband (and the girls's father) at the age of 19. The marriage didn't last, and soon after her divorce, Mama Rose decided to get her daughters into vaudeville as a way of making ends meet. Sister June was the breakout star among the two girls and she was soon being billed as “Dainty June.” Little Rose mostly performed in support of her younger sister.

June fled the act in 1928 to get married—at the tender age of 15! Big Rose then concentrated her energies on making her other daughter a star. Whether mother or daughter knew it, their big chance presented itself in 1929 when, one day at a theater in Toledo, the lead of a touring show called “Girls from the Follies” was unable to go on. Rose immediately volunteered her daughter, even though the role required a provocative on-stage strip tease.

Little Rose's first strip of many to come didn't show much skin and, hence, left her audience wanting more. But she was a hit and she quickly found her calling and a new stage name to go with it.

Even if, at the time, vaudeville was dying out, burlesque was still drawing them in. The newly-christened Gypsy Rose Lee soon became the biggest name on the burlesque circuit. She elevated the art of the strip tease by emphasizing the “tease” elements and incorporating both humor and even intellectual elements into her routines. A short and not particularly notable film career followed. Thankfully, Gypsy could continue to work on the road, in both stage shows and burlesque reviews. A vivacious personality, she was also popular with the press who seemed oddly preoccupied with her life, loves and unique career choice. In 1941, Lee turned author and her novel “The G-String Murders” was a critical and commercial hit. It would later be turned into the movie “Lady of Burlesque” (1943) starring Barbara Stanwyck.

After her mother died in 1954, Lee found it possible to pen her memoir, “Gypsy.” It appeared in 1957 and was soon a bestseller.

Two years later Broadway impresario David Merrick, who had previously produced “Fanny” and “The Matchmaker,” among other shows, thought the book—though obviously embellished—would make good source material for a new musical. After securing the rights from Lee, Merrick began amassing his creative team. Arthur Laurents, who had just hit a career highpoint two years before with “West Side Story,” was secured to write the book. Jule Styne was already a stage legend thanks to his previously composing “Bells Are Ringing” and “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes”; he was

asked to create the score with the lyrical assistance of Stephen Sondheim who had just broken through with “West Side Story” as well. The show would be directed by Jerome Robbins, another “West Side” veteran. All in all, it was an extraordinary team of Broadway talents.

Though Gypsy’s story was compelling, it was the character of her indomitable, overbearing mother which most resonated from the book. And for Merrick, only one performer could ever bring her to life on stage: Ethel Merman.

By the time of “Gypsy,” the powerfully-voiced Merman was already cultivating her role as the first lady of Broadway thanks to such previous stage successes as “Call Me Madam” and “Annie Get Your Gun.” But she had been off the boards since her last show, “Happy Hunting,” closed after a disappointing 412 performances.

Though “Gypsy,” the show, would have its light-hearted, risqué and irreverent moments, both Laurents and Sondheim knew that this was a story capable of incredible pathos. Mama Rose’s ambition may have helped her survive and helped elevate her daughters to fame, but everyone still seemed to have paid a price for it. From the beginning, a final mother-daughter confrontation played out in Gypsy’s dressing room, culminating with powerful solo for the Mama Rose character, was always in the theatrical works.

Astonishingly, it took only four months for the show to be written. Legend has it that the first time she heard the songs, Merman wept. Certainly some of the numbers were uniquely suited for Merman’s style including the show-stopping number “Everything’s Coming Up Roses.” Other songs, like the soon-to-be-a-standard “Small World,” was a bit out of Merman’s norm but she quickly became acclimated. Her big finale, meanwhile, the boisterous yet emotionally naked “Rose’s Turn,” was the Merman showcase.

Subtitled “A Musical Fable,” “Gypsy,” after a series of out-of-town tryouts, opened in New York on May 21, 1959.

Thinking the musical theatre had reached its apex three years prior with the debut of “My Fair Lady,” critics were not prepared for the power, showmanship and sheer entertainment value of this home-grown, distinctly American musical. Walter Kerr of the “New York Herald Tribune” called it “the best damn musical I’ve seen in years.” Frank Rich of the “New York Times” called it America’s answer to “King Lear.”

On the strength of the show, Merman (again) became the toast of Broadway. “Gypsy,” the last original musical she’d ever appear in, capped off her already impressive career. Meanwhile, the show’s marvelous songs entered the modern lexicon. These included “Let Me Entertain You,” “Together, Wherever We Go,” and “Some People,” among others. The show would run until March of 1961. Its Broadway tenure would be followed by a national tour and then a run in London’s West End.

As was the custom, not long after the show opened, the cast was dispatched to Columbia’s now-legendary 30th Street Studio in New York (nicknamed “The Church”) for the recording of the show’s original cast show album. The recording showcased all the musical’s elements from its rousing overture (considered by some the best in Broadway history) to Merman’s spectacular finale with “Rose’s Turn.” After its release in 1959, the album would go on to win the Grammy that year for Best Cast Show Album.

While “Gypsy” fever was at its peak, Hollywood (Warner Bros. specifically) announced it would make a movie of this musical fable. Despite wide assumptions (including those of the performer herself) that Merman would recreate her stage triumph, a bigger “movie name,” Rosiland Russell, was cast in the dynamic role of Mother Rose even though almost all of Russell’s vocals ended up

being dubbed by singer Lisa Kirk. (Before both proving unavailable, Judy Garland and Judy Holiday were also considered for the role.) Natalie Wood, her singing not dubbed, was cast as Gypsy. The film was directed by Mevlyn LeRoy. It was released in 1962 to generally good reviews and a busy box office.

Since its first bow on the boards, “Gypsy” has been revived a number of times and, along with “Hello, Dolly” and “Mame,” has emerged as one of the great showcase roles for musical theatre actresses. Angela Lansbury did the first New York revival of the show in 1974. She was followed in 1989 by Tyne Daly and, in 2003, by Bernadette Peters. Patti LuPone triumphed in a 2008 production. Earlier, in 1993, Bette Midler won critical raves in a TV version of the show.

Considering the strength of its timeless score and the powerhouse role it provides to various female performers, future “Gypsies” are all but assured. But, even then, no matter how well produced the show is, or how dynamic its leading lady, they will almost all invariably be compared to the original, “Gypsy’s” and its enduring gold standard.

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