

State TheatreNJ.org
Keynotes



Book by **ARTHUR LAURENTS**
Music by **JULE STYNE** Lyrics by **STEPHEN SONDHEIM**

Triumphant in every way"

- The New York Observer

"Blissfully **Brilliant**"

- NY1 News

"The Greatest of all American Musicals"

- New York Times

The State Theatre in New Brunswick, New Jersey welcomes you to the performance of *Gypsy*. Created by show business legends Arthur Laurents, Jule Styne, Stephen Sondheim, and Jerome Robbins, the show has been hailed as “the greatest of all American musicals.”

These *Keynotes* provide information and ideas that will help you appreciate and enjoy the performance. We hope the guide will also help you find connections between what you see on the stage and your own personal experience.



CONTENTS

Welcome/Acknowledgements	2
About the Show	3
The Story	4-5
The Real Gypsy	6-7
The World of <i>Gypsy</i>	8
Getting Ready	9



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The State Theatre, a premier nonprofit venue for the performing arts and entertainment.

What is *Gypsy*?

It's a *musical*—a type of theater that intersperses songs, dances, and incidental music with spoken dialogue to tell the story. The story of *Gypsy* is loosely based on the 1957 memoirs of Gypsy Rose Lee, the famous striptease artist.

Who created *Gypsy*?

Gypsy has four main creators.

- The **BOOK** (the plot and spoken dialogue in a musical) was written by Arthur Laurents, an award-winning playwright, novelist, screenwriter, and stage director. In addition to *Gypsy*, his Broadway credits include the books for the musicals *West Side Story*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, and *Hallelujah, Baby!*.
- The **SCORE** (music) of *Gypsy* is by Jule Styne, a British-born American songwriter who created the scores for such Broadway musicals as *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*, *Peter Pan*, *Bells Are Ringing*, and *Funny Girl*. He collaborated with a number of famous lyricists, most notably Sammy Cahn, with whom he wrote the Oscar-winning song, "Three Coins in the Fountain."
- The **LYRICS** (the words of the songs) for *Gypsy* were written by Stephen Sondheim, one of only a handful of people to have won an Academy Award, several Tony Awards, multiple Grammy Awards, and the Pulitzer Prize. Only 29 when *Gypsy* was first produced, Sondheim went on to become the composer/lyricist for a number of groundbreaking Broadway musicals, including *Company*, *A Little Night Music*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*, and *Assassins*.
- The show was originally **DIRECTED** and **CHOREOGRAPHED** by Jerome Robbins, a choreographer who enjoyed equal success in both the Broadway and classical ballet worlds. He was closely associated with the New York City Ballet, creating numerous works for the company and eventually becoming their ballet master. His extensive musical theater credits include choreography and/or direction for the original Broadway productions of *On the Town*, *The King and I*, *The Pajama Game*, *Peter Pan*, *West Side Story*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*. In 1989, a retrospective revue of his most famous musical numbers, *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*, earned him his fifth and final Tony Award, for Best Direction of a Musical.

When was *Gypsy* written?

Laurents was approached about writing the book after Gypsy Rose Lee's memoirs were published in 1957. *Gypsy* officially opened on May 21, 1959 at the Broadway Theatre in New York City. It has enjoyed numerous successful revivals since then.



Ethel Merman as Mama Rose

Gypsy on Broadway

(Soundtrack recordings are available for all the productions listed below.)

The 1959 original Broadway production of *Gypsy* starred Broadway legend Ethel Merman and ran for nearly two years. "Mama Rose" was perhaps the most celebrated performance of Merman's illustrious career. She introduced "Everything's Coming Up Roses" and "Some People" and ended the show with the gripping "Rose's Turn."

Angela Lansbury starred in the 1974 Broadway revival, which was based on a successful London production directed by Arthur Laurents.

In 1989, Tyne Daly starred as Mama Rose on Broadway in a production again directed by Arthur Laurents.

The most recent Broadway revival, directed by Sam Mendes, was in 2003. It was acclaimed for Bernadette Peters' "un-Merman" portrayal of Mama Rose.

The story of *Gypsy* begins in 1921, during the Great Depression. It follows the dreams and efforts of Mama Rose to raise two daughters to perform onstage and casts an affectionate eye on the hardships of show-business life. The character of Louise is based on the notorious Gypsy Rose Lee, and the character of June is based on her sister, the actress June Havoc.

Act I

The story opens at a Seattle vaudeville house, where Baby June and Baby Louise audition for a kiddie show by singing and dancing "**May We Entertain You?**" Their mother, Rose, enters, calling, "Sing out, Louise!" She is the quintessential pushy, controlling stage mother.

In the next scene, in the song "**Some People,**" Rose explains her determination to develop June's vaudeville career. Skeptical of Rose's motives, her aging father refuses to subsidize the scheme, whereupon Rose rips her father's solid-gold plaque off the wall and hitchhikes to Los Angeles with the girls. There she meets Herbie, whom she convinces to represent the girls' act. At the same time, she dangles the possibility of romance and marriage in their duet, "**Small World.**"

Through Herbie's efforts, "**Baby June and Her Newsboys**" become a top vaudeville act, but, as the years pass, June and Louise mature, vaudeville wanes, and the troupe finds itself in "two plaster-cracked hotel rooms in Akron." Rose begins Louise's birthday celebration with a breakfast of reheated Chinese food. Herbie arrives with Mr. Goldstone of the Orpheum Circuit, who offers a contract to save the day ("**Mr. Goldstone, I Love You**"). A forgotten Louise sits with her present, a baby lamb, and sings "**Little Lamb.**"

The next scene takes place in a Chinese restaurant in New York, where Rose and Herbie discuss the next day's audition at Grantzinger's Palace. Herbie begs Rose to marry him and threatens that, if she does not, he may some day leave. Rose sings "**You'll Never Get Away from Me**" and they end up dancing. Mr. Grantzinger offers June a contract, but on the condition that she go to school for a year and take acting lessons and that Rose keep away. Enraged at the terms of the contract, Rose storms out of his office. The girls, who dream of a normal life, sing "**If Momma Was Married.**" The troupe, infrequently employed and restless, continues to tour.

In a theater alley in Buffalo, one of the boys in the act—Tulsa—shares his dream of forming a dance team with Louise and performs the number "**All I Need Is the Girl.**" Louise dreams of being that girl, but is again disappointed.

Louise brings Rose a farewell note from June, who has run off with Tulsa. Rose is stunned. Herbie begs her to marry him and give up show business, and Louise urges her to accept Herbie's offer. Instead, Rose announces to a horrified Louise that she will make her a star, proclaiming, "**Everything's Coming up Roses.**"



Hollywood June
Courtesy of American Musical Theatre of San Jose



Rose and Louise
Courtesy of American Musical Theatre of San Jose

Act II

The second act opens with a rehearsal of **“Madame Rose’s Toreadorables,”** a transparent reworking of the Baby June show. Louise rips off the blonde wig that Rose has provided and announces, “Momma, I am not June.” Rose tries to reassure her and, with Herbie, they sing **“Together, Wherever We Go.”** After a period of little work, Herbie finally gets the act, now titled Rose Louise and Her Hollywood Blondes, a two-week booking. To everyone’s surprise, the venue turns out to be a burlesque house. When Rose discovers this, she is adamant that the troupe withdraw. But Louise emerges as the voice of practicality. “Momma, we’re flat broke. We’ve got to take this job,” she says. Louise learns that you don’t need talent to be a burlesque star when a trio of broken-down strippers sings **“You Gotta Get a Gimmick.”**

Rose has agreed to marry Herbie at the end of this engagement. She and Louise are packing to leave when the theater manager announces his star attraction has been arrested for soliciting in the drugstore next door. Rose immediately responds, “My daughter can do it.” She begins to plan Louise’s costume and music as Herbie, disgusted, tells Rose he is leaving her forever. Rose pushes her frightened daughter onstage, where Louise shyly sings **“Let Me Entertain You,”** and, before the audience’s eyes, evolves into strip-tease artist Gypsy Rose Lee.

The penultimate scene finds Rose with Gypsy in her star dressing room at Minsky’s Burlesque in New York. Increasingly superfluous to her now-successful daughter, Rose bristles at Gypsy’s independence. She exits the dressing room, slamming the door behind her. Alone on the darkened, empty stage she sings **“Rose’s Turn.”** Gypsy enters from stage right where she has been watching and tells Rose, “You really would have been something, Mother.”



“Let Me Entertain You”

Courtesy of American Musical Theatre of San Jose



Louise, Rose and Tessie Tura

Courtesy of American Musical Theatre of San Jose



Louise and Rose in a dressing room

Courtesy of American Musical Theatre of San Jose


The Real Gypsy

Seattle-born Rose Louise Hovick had her first brush with fame at age one, winning a “healthy baby” contest. As Gypsy Rose Lee, she became famous in burlesque as a classy and witty striptease artist. She, her little sister June, and her monstrous stage mother, Rose Thompson Hovick, passed into show business legend when her bestselling 1957 memoir, *Gypsy*, became a smash-hit Broadway musical.

Born in 1911 and called “Louise” from early childhood, Gypsy Rose Lee was the daughter of a mild-mannered businessman and a restless, strong-willed woman who divorced her husband when he objected to her show-business ambitions. Rose set to work to make a performer out of Louise, but Louise had no talent. Her little sister June, however, could dance on point at age two. Soon “Baby June” was appearing regularly around Seattle—once as part of the bill on ballerina Anna Pavlova’s farewell tour—inspiring Rose to change her billing to “Baby June, the Pocket-Sized Pavlova.”

June was now the star of the vaudeville act, “Madam Rose Presents Dainty June and her Newsboy Songsters.” The songsters consisted of a revolving cast of male street urchins whose parents were glad to turn them over to someone who would feed them. Louise played one of the newsboy songsters. Even offstage she was sometimes forced to dress as a boy, so as not to eclipse June, who sported tiny fur coats, hats and muffs, garish makeup and bleached-blond curls. At its height, the act was pulling in \$1,500 a week, and Dainty June was a powerhouse with top billing who often stopped the show.

There were rumors about Rose during this time, about how she had to dodge the police, who enforced strict child labor laws, and even about how she may have murdered a man she thought was pestering her children. Despite these rumors, June and Louise’s act continued to be successful throughout the 1920s.

By the late 1920s, vaudeville was dying and Dainty June was getting too big for a kid act. Just 15 years old, she eloped with Bobby Reed, one of the newsboy songsters. June eventually changed her name to June Havoc and had a long stage, film, and television career.  (more)



Gypsy Rose Lee (publicity photo)



Dainty June Hovick c. 1920
Courtesy *Early Havoc* by June Havoc



Vaudeville act with Rose Louise (Gypsy Rose Lee)
and June Hovick (June Havoc), ca. 1925

Courtesy *Early Havoc* by June Havoc

With June gone, Rose and Louise hit the road as "Rose Louise and Her Hollywood Blondes," with Louise standing out as the only brunette. They played their first burlesque house in Kansas City, Missouri because they needed the money. Sometime during their burlesque run, the star stripper was unable to go on. Never one to pass up an opportunity, Rose volunteered Louise, who was just 15 at the time. She stepped onstage wearing little more than a grass skirt, and slowly and teasingly didn't take much off. Audiences responded favorably to this new kind of striptease act, which was more "tease" than "strip." Louise had finally found her calling.

"If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing slowly... very slowly."

—Gypsy Rose Lee

For her stage name she took Gypsy, a nickname she derived from her hobby of reading tea leaves, and combined it with her real first name, Rose, and Lee, which she added on a whim. By 1931, Gypsy Rose Lee was in New York, playing Minsky's Burlesque. She soon moved up into higher social circles and became the toast of café society. Her act was a send-up of a strip act. She recited a witty monologue in a low, singsong voice and an upper-class accent as she stripped, and got big laughs, dropping the pins that held her costumes together into the tuba. She revealed little actual flesh, ending the act draped coyly in the curtain. The act was more about comedy than sex, and men and their wives were now in the audience.

A run at Hollywood failed, as did a play she wrote, but Lee made money producing and appearing in *Star and Garter*, a 1942 musical revue with her lover, producer Mike Todd. Her mystery novel *The G-String Murders* (later filmed as *Lady of Burlesque* with Barbara Stanwyck) was a critical and commercial success. A follow-up mystery novel, *Mother Finds A Body*, with a grotesque character not unlike Madam Rose, was not.

By the 1950s, she had found a comfortable niche as a sort of queen mother of burlesque. She had gone through three unhappy marriages, as well as affairs with Todd and director Otto Preminger; the latter was the father of her only child, Erik Lee Preminger. She was not close to her sister June. She still had to contend with Mama Rose, who constantly tried to extort money from her with vicious threats.

After Rose's death, Lee was free to exploit the sensational story of her childhood without fear of a libel suit by her mother. Her 1957 memoir, *Gypsy*, was an instant bestseller. Lee continued her strip act until the 1950s. She died of cancer in 1970, with the musical bearing her name guaranteeing her lasting show-business fame.



Gypsy Rose Lee (publicity photo)

See Gypsy's G-String... Here in New Jersey!

The original typescript of Lee's murder-mystery thriller, *The G-String Murders*, and 12 letters she wrote to her

publishers about it, are in a collection at the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections at the Princeton University Library. The collection is open for research.



VAUDEVILLE was a form of live variety entertainment that was developed in the 1880s by entrepreneurs seeking to appeal to a broad, middle-class, family audience. A typical vaudeville program comprised a mixed bill of unconnected acts that might include musicians (both classical and popular), dancers, comedians, trained animals, magicians, female impersonators, acrobats, strong men, short plays or scenes, lectures, and short films. While singers and dancers were part of every bill, the specialty acts set vaudeville apart. Nothing was too eccentric if it gave an audience ten minutes of diversion.

Vaudeville died out after a relatively short period of popularity. What forms of entertainment that we currently enjoy do you think are most likely to disappear in the coming years?

As vaudeville spread through the U.S., major theater chains or "circuits" were established. A successful act toured for 40 or more weeks a year, doing one-nighters, split-weeks, or weekly stands. The number of shows per day varied from circuit to circuit, but was never less than three for all but the biggest acts. Performers put up with these demanding schedules because even those who did not reach the level of headliner could make good money. In 1919, when the average factory worker earned less than \$1,300, a small-time circuit performer playing a 42-week season at \$75 per week earned \$3,150 a year. As performers rose in prominence, they were able to work their way into the better-paying, less strenuous working conditions of the big-time theaters. The pinnacle of vaudeville success was "The Palace," New York City's Palace Theater.



The State Theatre in New Brunswick, NJ, pictured here in 1923, was once a part of the extensive B.F. Keith vaudeville chain.

BURLESQUE, vaudeville's older, rowdier cousin, featured comic skits, songs and dances, and—most famously—numbers that paraded nude or barely-dressed women. The tone of the acts was bawdy, satirical, and decidedly lowbrow. Burlesque had its own vaudeville-style circuits of small, medium, and big-time theaters, the most famous of which was Minsky's in New York City.

A number of legendary performers who went on to achieve success on Broadway and film—among them Fanny Brice, W.C. Fields, Jackie Gleason, and Bob Hope—learned their craft on the burlesque circuit. The ambition of many burlesque stars was to move up to vaudeville; however, for a vaudeville performer to appear in burlesque generally meant that they were "washed up."

In the 1920s, both vaudeville and burlesque faced increasing competition for the public's attention from movies and radio. The Great Depression further eroded their audience. Vaudeville was all but dead by the mid-30s. Burlesque houses began to rely on striptease acts to draw an audience. Strippers had to walk a fine line—going too far (let alone "all the way") could land them in jail for corrupting public morals. New York's reform-minded mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, closed the city's last burlesque houses in 1937.

The past several decades have seen a revival of burlesque. *Sugar Babies*, a burlesque-style revue, was a hit on Broadway in 1979. Today's "neo-burlesque" includes performers, shows, and festivals and academies around the world.



Mazeppa, Tessie Tura, and Electra, the burlesque trio from *Gypsy*.

Watching a live performance is a skill, just like a lot of other things we do; the more shows we attend, the better we become at understanding and appreciating what we see. We learn to look with a critical eye at the individual components that make up a production, and we can compare them to other performances we have seen. As you watch the performance, try to notice each of these elements:

- **SETS** - How does the set designer let you know where and when the story is taking place? How are the visual transformations between scenes achieved?
- **COSTUMES** - Are the costumes appropriate to the characters who wear them? Do they help you identify the main characters? Do they complement the other visual elements?
- **LIGHTING** - Does the lighting help set the mood, time, and place of the story? Can you see the people on stage? Are there special lighting effects that add to the production?
- **PERFORMANCES** - Did the actors create believable characters? How did they relate to the other people onstage? Did they speak clearly? How was their singing? Did the dancers execute their steps with style and skill?
- **DIRECTING** - Could you follow the story? Did the action make sense? Did all the elements of the production fit together?

Nobody can enjoy a performance when people in the audience fail to observe the basic rules of etiquette. Please be sure to remember that, unlike a movie or television show, a live performance brings the audience and performers together in the same room. Any kind of distraction will break the spell that the performers are working so hard to create. To ensure the best possible experience, make sure to:

- **ARRIVE ON TIME** and remain in your seat during the performance.
- **TURN OFF** cell phones, beepers, watch alarms, and any other noise-making electronic devices before the show starts. Remember to turn them off again after the intermission.
- **OBEY THE NO-RECORDING RULES:** no photography (including camera phones), video recording, or audio recording of the show.
- **LAUGH AND APPLAUD** in response to anything on stage that moves you. But please refrain from talking or whispering during the show—or singing along with the music!



Resources

BOOKS

Early Havoc, by June Havoc. Simon and Schuster, 1959

Gypsy, a Memoir, by Gypsy Rose Lee. Harper, 1957

Minsky's Burlesque: A Fast and Funny Look at America's Bawdiest Era, by Morton Minsky and Milt Machlin. Arbor House, 1986

No Applause—Just Throw Money: The Book That Made Vaudeville Famous, by Trav S.D. Faber & Faber, 2006

DVD/VIDEO

Gypsy (1962). Directed by Mervyn LeRoy, starring Rosalind Russell and Natalie Wood

Gypsy (1993). TV movie directed by Emil Ardolino, starring Bette Midler and Cynthia Gibb

Vaudeville. Directed by Ben Vereen. PBS documentary featuring archival footage and interviews

WEBSITES

www.musicals101.com

histories and examples of vaudeville and burlesque routines, commentary on *Gypsy*, and more

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA02/easton/vaudeville/vaudeville.html>

sound and video samples, a detailed history of vaudeville and musicals, including *Gypsy*