

TheaterWeek

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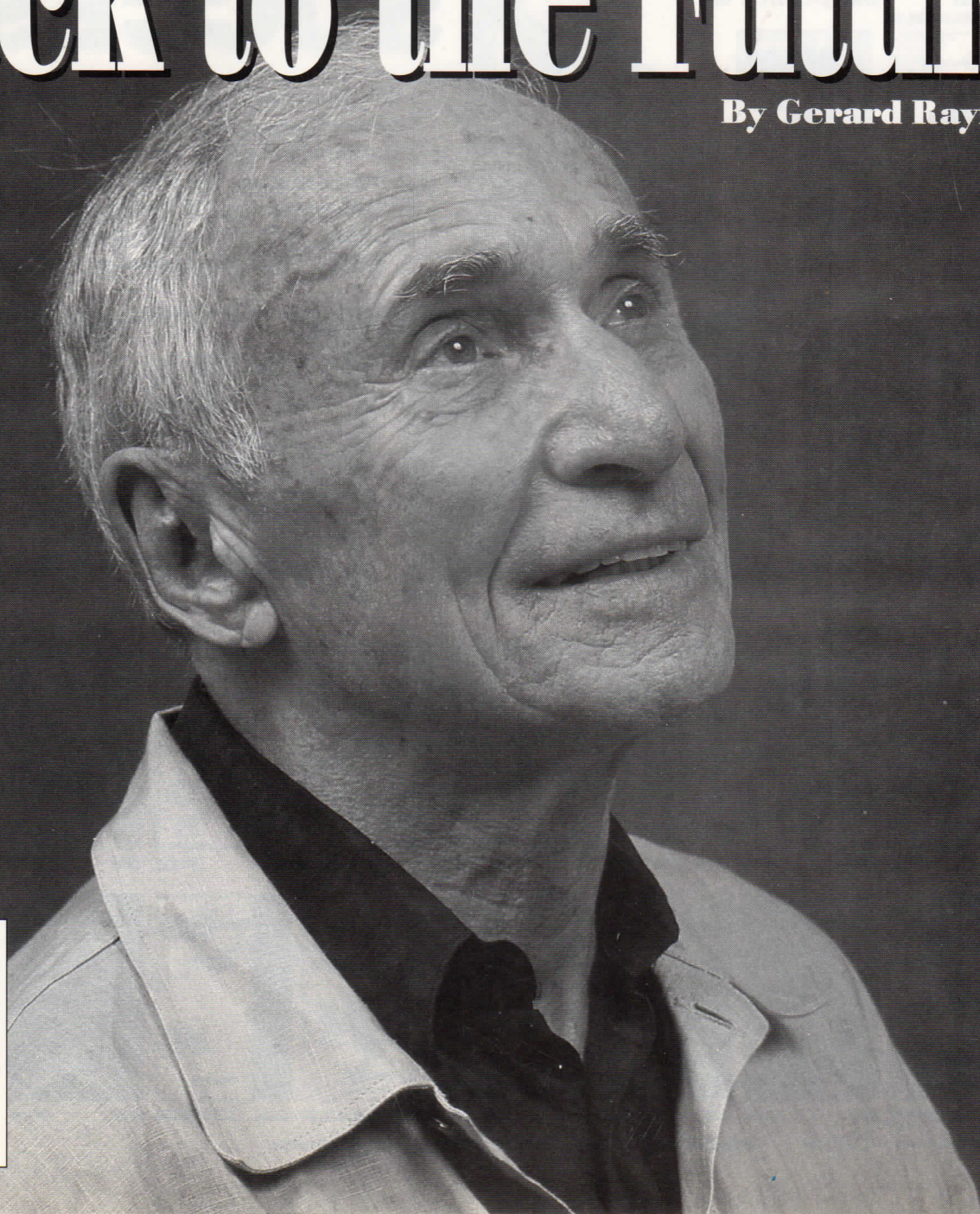
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Arthur Laurents:

Back to the Future

By Gerard Raymond





Arthur Laurents and the cast of *The Radical Mystique*. Joan Marcus

Arthur Laurents Back to the Future

By Gerard Raymond

Passion! Sophistication! Social Conscience! Playwright and screenwriter Arthur Laurents has built up a remarkable career over the past 50 years. But the author of *West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, and *The Way We Were* is not one to rest on his laurels (see box below). Bouncing back after the colossal flop of *Nick & Nora* on Broadway (he was the director and bookwriter on that show), Laurents has completed two new plays and has two more in the pipeline. His current work, *The Radical Mystique*, is a comedy of manners which exposes the tensions between two long-time women friends (one black and one white) as they plan to throw a fundraising party for Black Panther movement in 1969. *TheaterWeek* talked to Laurents recently at the Manhattan Theater Club, where *The Radical Mystique* is playing. Never one to pull his punches, the trim and sprightly, soon-to-be-77 year-old playwright is as feisty as ever.

TheaterWeek: Is it true your current spurt of writing came about because of the failure of *Nick & Nora*?

Arthur Laurents: Yes, that was a great relief. I don't mean the failure, but to be done with it. It freed me. No more musicals, no more collaboration, no more trying to please anyone but me. That's what these plays have been. The pleasure is in the doing, in the writing of them.

Didn't you have another new play, *Jolson Sings Again*, about the McCarthy era, done in Seattle recently?

Yes. *The Radical Mystique* is the second in a series of plays I have been writing. *Jolson Sings Again* is the first. The third is called *My Good Name*, and that is about the end of the '80s, about how greed can destroy your identity. It's going to be workshopped in Seattle and then done at Manhattan Theater Club next year. And there is a fourth called *Two Lives*. I am not going to tell anyone what it is about, but it takes place today, and I am very eager to start writing it.

I recently read your 1973 play *The Enclave*, about a set of friends dealing with the homosexuality of one of the group, and I liked it very much; I was surprised that it didn't make greater waves at the time.

What was most peculiar about that was the attitude of the press. It was, "Oh

yes, well there is no problem with gays or homosexuals any more." This was in the '70s. It is interesting how people like to say things like that—not only critics—to dismiss a problem. If you say it doesn't exist, then not only do you not have to face it, you don't have to accept it or try to do anything about it.

It seems to me that *The Enclave* shares similar themes with *The Radical Mystique*—hypocrisy, for example....

Oh yes, there is hypocrisy in *The Enclave* as well....

...and you also seem to be examining the nature of liberalness. I mean, aren't your villains the supposed liberals who pride themselves on being tolerant?

Is that true? Good Heavens, I didn't think of it that way, but...(pause) My Lord! Well yes, I suppose they are people who talk a good game. I really don't want to attack liberals, particularly in this day and age.

Your work often deals with loaded issues—anti-Semitism in *Home and the Brave*, homosexuality in *The Enclave*, McCarthyism in *The Way We Were* and *Jolson*. Do you set out to be topical?

No. I start from people—characters—they are the most important thing in the world. And if you are going to really deal with people, you have to deal with political, social, and economic themes.

***Jolson* deals with the '50s and *Radical Mystique* with the '60s. Were you specifically interested in writing about these different periods?**

Jolson is absolutely period, except I think [the same thing] is going on today—if you dissent, you are a pariah. I don't think *The Radical Mystique* is period. I mean, it is about that period because of the plot, but here is a play about three liberations [black, gay, feminist]. To me the most ironic moment in the whole play is at the end when the characters make a toast and say "To now, there couldn't be a better time." But look at it today: untrue with a vengeance. Oddly enough, there is a building blown up in the course of the action of the play—the house the Weathermen blew up on 11th Street—and here we have Oklahoma City, which is a ghastly coincidence. Then it was the radical left, and now we have the radical right.

Somebody mentions in the play that

once we have civil rights, we start behaving in an uncivil manner. Maybe this is a cynical viewpoint but, however much lip-service we pay to being liberal or tolerant, aren't there insurmountable barriers between different groups of people? Isn't that the hypocrisy of liberalism?

You can call it hypocrisy or you can call it wishful thinking. I don't think that's cynical. I believe a vast majority of the people in the United States—in the play the black woman says everybody—are prejudiced against...well, you can go down the list. To deny it is idiocy.

You were prevented from using your first title, *Radical Chic*, because Tom Wolfe coined it to describe the infamous party that Leonard Bernstein gave for the Black Panthers at his Park Avenue apartment in 1970.

Tom Wolfe threatened to sue, but you can't copyright a title. The only people who win lawsuits are the lawyers, so why do it? Actually, I changed the title largely for another reason: Calling it *Radical Chic* would confine it too specifically to that party. These are not those people. But I have my own private jokes about some of the names.

I wasn't sure I got the joke about the Bernsteins, when one character wants to make sure they invite Felicia without Lenny.

(Laughs) Well, he would take over the party, any party.

The boy in the play discovers his own gay identity after witnessing the Stonewall uprising. Did you have an awareness of the impact of Stonewall at the time?

I didn't certainly and they don't in the play either. But this is a kid who has been brought up in a liberal family and the point is that finally he finds a cause that relates personally to him. I think that is the importance of any cause. It's why people drop in and out of causes so quickly: They want to do good, but they don't make a personal connection.

You know, there were all those damn cocktail parties for this and that—I think it was because people just want to have an excuse for a party.

In the play, you seem to imply that the characters become connected to their individual revolutionary causes through discovering their sexual identity.

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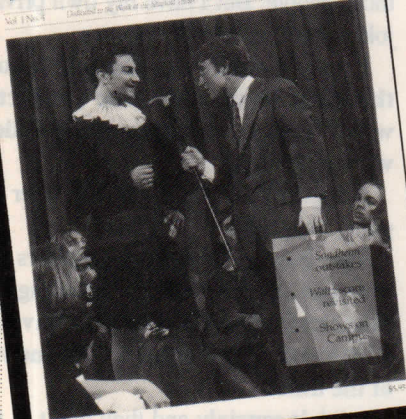
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I am very glad you picked up on that. This is something that I believe very strongly. The play says, I think very clearly, that you have to begin with your sexual identity, whatever it is. In my experience, a lot of people are confused about their sexuality—and I don't mean only gay or straight, there are countless variations. In this country particularly, people are childlike about sex. They are terribly puritanical, yes, but they don't even know what good sex is. And it embarrasses them to talk about it. I've said this before: They'll accept one "homosexual" (I'll avoid the political term "gay"); but show them two and they get images, and images are very upsetting. That's why to see an older man with a bimbo is very upsetting. People think they are really doing it, and they don't want to look. I think it's because they are afraid they may be missing something, and they probably are!

You know, although you have never been closeted, it is only very recently that publications like *The New York Times* have referred to you as being gay.

I think it's my age. I have always lived the way I have wanted to, not defiantly, but because that is my philosophy in life. You should live the way you want, if you can. That proviso is economic, not moral. I can remember at one point in the '50s, I walked into Sardi's and there was this director and his wife and she said, "Oh, I admire you so much." I asked why and she said, "For the way you live." I said, "Don't patronize me." I don't think one deserves credit for living the way one wants. The problem is when you don't.

When you directed your play *Invitation to a March* in 1960, the press made quite a big deal about a playwright directing his own work.

That is because they had a very short historical memory. You don't have to go back to Moliere, there are plenty of playwrights who have directed their own plays.

I directed because there was a great paucity of directors in the American theater. Today it is worse. There are almost none—none that I consider first class. I figure I certainly couldn't do worse myself. But obviously there is Dan Sullivan [artistic director of Seattle Rep, director of *Jolson Sings Again*]. He is not only a

wonderful director but he's a wonderful human being as well, which is very important to me.

What about *The Radical Mystique*? You took over as director from David Petrarca at the last minute.

It was an unfortunate problem and I wish it hadn't happened. Dan was supposed to direct it originally, but he had to stay in Seattle for personal reasons. You know, when you go into the details about this nobody comes out well, so the best thing to say is that it simply didn't work out.

Another unpleasant experience with collaborators, like on *Nick and Nora*?

No, there is a difference. There was no acrimony. I liked [Petrarca] personally. I think he is a good director. We simply had a different vision for this play—it was a generational thing. [With] *Nick and Nora*, they were dreadful people, I really disliked them. Why are you laughing?

Why do you think you are perceived as a difficult person to work with?

Let me tell you something. I have been perceived as a difficult person my whole life. This was news to me—a shock, and at first, an unpleasant one. Then I figured out what it was: I say what I think. I just think that it's a way of life—one should be up front, forthright, and honest. If I say to somebody I liked your play, they know I mean it. It doesn't mean that I have all the answers, but at least you know where you stand with me.

And the funny thing is, as the years go by, more and more people respect me for that and don't think I am so bloody difficult.

Considering that you've been working recently at a regional theater (Seattle Rep) and a resident company (Manhattan Theater Club), do you think that's where the future of American theater lies?

Well, yes and no. I love working in Seattle, where I have finally found a director who I think is terrific. But I am also engaged in trying to do something to save Broadway for the new American play. Steve Sondheim and I have been trying to get all the entities in the theater together and we are succeeding slowly to get everybody to realize that unless everybody gives up something, we will have nothing. And, of course, in princi-



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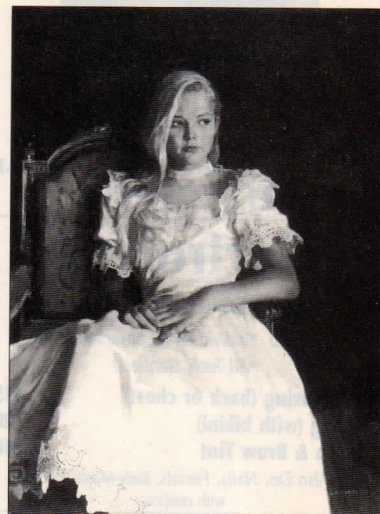
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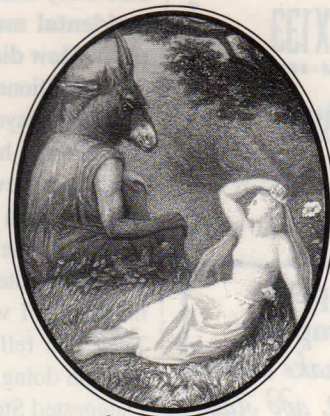
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Sharon Washington (left) and Mary Beth Fisher in *The Radical Mystique*, written and directed by Arthur Laurents. *Joan Marcus*

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ple everybody agrees, but it's always the other fellow who is recalcitrant. However, we have made progress. I have hopes and I am going to keep at it.

What about the plays themselves, are they out there?

There I have learned to keep my mouth shut! I won't answer that.

You and Sondheim collaborated on a number of projects including *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*, and he wrote the incidental music for several of your plays. How did you two meet?

He auditioned for me. That sounds terrible! He played for me the score of the first musical he wrote—*Saturday Night*, which has never been produced. I was going to do a musical called *Serenade*, based on the James M. Cain novel; Lenny Bernstein was going to write the music and I was looking for a lyricist. Then that fell through because we got back on doing *West Side Story*, and then I suggested Steve to do the lyrics. That's the way it began. We are extremely close friends and have a very good time together, and we have been talking about doing another musical together.

But you said no more musicals!

Well, one of the reasons for no more musicals is because of Steve. I wrote the first musicals with him, and I don't think there has ever been a lyricist who can come near him.

You cover four decades in your current series of plays. Are you planning on writing your memoirs?

Yes. The plays are a form of autobiography, but I have a way of doing my

memoirs that nobody has ever done. And don't ask me what—I am not going to tell you. I'm not going to do one of those autobiographies where they tell their humble beginnings, then they have their first success and then you are ready to close the book. The relationships that I have had, and have, are the most important things in my life, more than any work. I never want to sit on a rocker and look at press clippings. I mean, I am one of those people who thinks I am never going to die. And I may not.

Is that a threat?

Well, it probably is!

Arthur Laurents, Selected credits

Plays/Musicals: *Home of the Brave*, 1945; *Time of the Cuckoo*, 1952; *A Clearing in the Woods*, 1957; *West Side Story*, 1957 (bookwriter); *Gypsy*, 1959 (bookwriter, also directed subsequent revivals); *Invitation to a March*, 1960 (also directed); *I Can Get It For You Wholesale*, 1962 (director); *Anyone Can Whistle*, 1964 (bookwriter, also directed); *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, 1965 (bookwriter; based on *Time of the Cuckoo*); *Hallelujah, Baby!*, 1967 (bookwriter); *The Enclave*, 1973 (also directed); *La Cage aux Folles*, 1983 (director).

Screenplays: *The Snake Pit*, 1948; *Rope*, 1948; *Anastasia*, 1956; *Bonjour Tristesse*, 1958; *Summertime*, 1965 (based on *Time of the Cuckoo*); *The Way We Were*, 1973; *The Turning Point*, 1977.