

books

His brilliant career

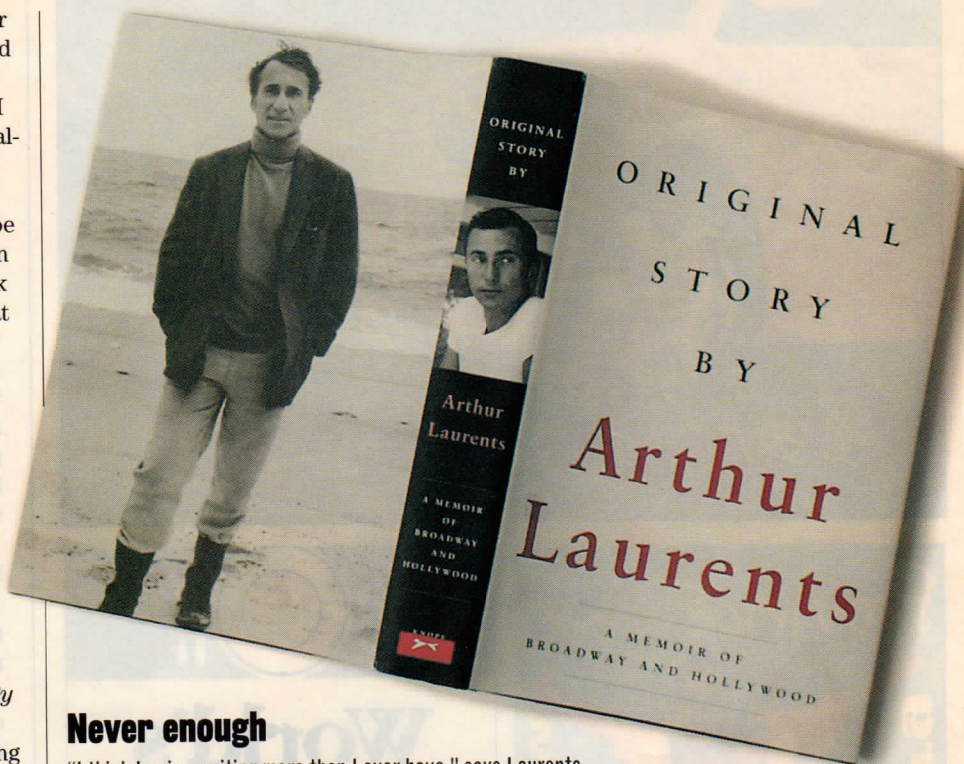
Writer-director **Arthur Laurents** talks to *The Advocate* about his amazing life, from *Gypsy* and *The Way We Were* to his rip-roaring new memoir **By Gerard Raymond**

Asked if he has any advice for younger gay men, celebrated writer-director Arthur Laurents grins. "First of all I want to say I'm active sexually, so there's hope for anyone!" he replies. "Don't look at the numbers. The numbers lie. I'm 82 and should be creeping around with a cane, if not in a wheelchair, but I've just come back from two weeks of skiing. It isn't that I'm defying age—that's how I feel."

Well-known for being feisty and forthright, Laurents pulls no punches in his current *Original Story By: A Memoir of Broadway and Hollywood* (Knopf, \$30). "It's not an autobiography," Laurents asserts as soon as we begin chatting in his well-appointed town house in New York City's Greenwich Village. "I find autobiographies too predictable."

Happily, Laurents's lively memoir is anything but. *Original Story By* dispenses with the conventional chronological format, instead roaming back and forth to span his remarkable 55-year-and-counting career—and to offer a personal glimpse of his enduring 44-year romance with his lover, Tom Hatcher. The book is filled with strong opinions and, of course, choice anecdotes culled from Laurents's justly celebrated list of credits. His work includes the screenplays for *Rope*, *The Way We Were*, and *The Turning Point* as well as the librettos for two of the most famous American musicals of the past half century—*West Side Story* and *Gypsy*; he also directed *La Cage aux Folles* on Broadway.

"I didn't want this to become a book about Ethel Merman anecdotes," Laurents remarks wryly. Still, there's good dish: The great Merm's fans may not be thrilled to read his assessment of the *Gypsy* star's mental agility. And superstar Streisand may not care for the non-



Never enough

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glossy portraits of herself from the early '60s, when her career was launched in a Laurents Broadway production. There's a disturbing confirmation of Katharine Hepburn's homophobia—a belittling remark she made at one of gay director George Cukor's parties. "That's more than just an anecdote," comments Laurents about his entry on Hepburn. "It's about the cruel things people say and are never called to account for."

For all his frankness, though, Laurents didn't out the married or closeted gay men he wrote about; he says he protected them out of consideration for their families. "I think they are shameful, but that's my opinion," he adds characteristically. Two exceptions are Jerome Robbins and

Leonard Bernstein, his collaborators on *West Side Story*, who have been outed in previous books.

The memoir is also candid about Laurents's early attempts to "cure" his own homosexuality—efforts made more stressful by the attractive-man quotient in '40s Hollywood. High on the list was Farley Granger, the hunky star of *Rope*, with whom Laurents had a four-year affair. ("Oh, yes, he's still alive," Laurents says, laughing, when asked about his former love—but that's all he'll add to what's already in the book.)

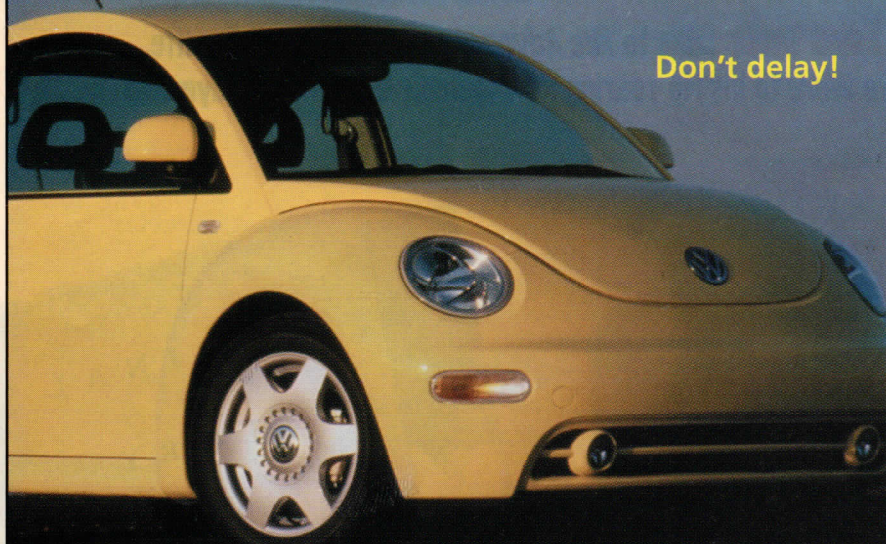
Although others have described a thriving Hollywood gay demimonde in that era, Laurents says he never enjoyed a gay support system in Los Angeles. "I knew no gay society in Hol- ▶

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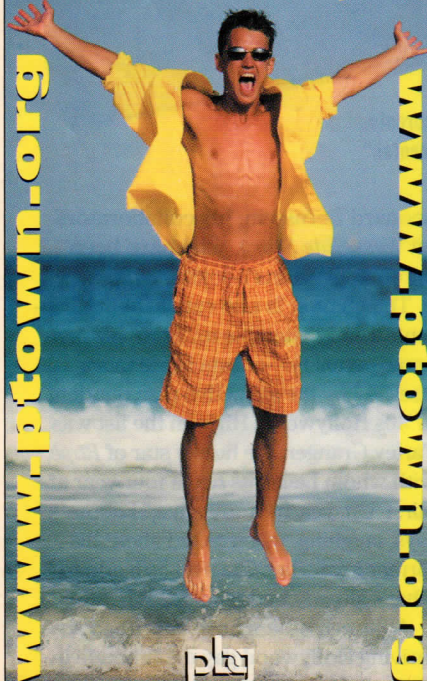
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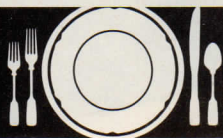
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lywood, probably because most of my friends were left-wing and the left wing was never helpful to gays," he comments. He didn't get invited to Cukor's notorious all-boy porn parties, but on a few occasions he was invited to the famed director's "casual dress" dinners. Those occasions comprised a cast of four, Laurents writes: "me to converse with George, an old queen to reminisce with George, and a hustler to fuck with George. The old queen and I would be kicked out at 10 sharp. Those evenings were insulting, much as I tried not to admit it."

Like his book, Laurents's conversation ranges over a variety of topics and, of course, opinions. ("Log Cabin Republicans are an oxymoron," he says. "I just don't see how any gay person can belong to a party that won't let them come to a convention.") But his tough, even intimidating, demeanor disappears when he talks about his love for Hatcher. "We are closer now than ever before," he muses. "It's amazing how it has deepened. Part of it is we know each other so well, but he's always interesting, and he's always surprising."

Since *The Turning Point*, for which he received an Oscar nomination in 1978, Laurents has preferred to work in the theater. "I think I enjoy writing more now than I ever have," he says. Along with his memoir, Laurents has also been writing several new plays. *Jolson Sings Again*—about the McCarthy witch-hunts (the political backdrop for *The Way We Were*)—will be produced off-Broadway in the fall and is scheduled to star Patti LuPone. *Two Lives*, which explores Laurents's relationship with Hatcher, is set to debut at Lincoln Center in the 2001–2002 season. And even as his 1952 play *Time of the Cuckoo* concludes a successful revival in New York, Laurents is finishing a third new play and starting on a new musical. "The key is energy," Laurents explains, smiling. "One needs all kinds of energy—physical, emotional, sexual, and mental. I think life is exciting." ■

Raymond is a freelance theater writer based in New York City.

Read Larry Kramer's 1995 interview with Arthur Laurents in *The Advocate* at www.advocate.com