



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Welcome to MasterVoices' presentation of *Lady in the Dark*, a piece very dear to my heart, and one that I am excited to share with you. It was a Kurt Weill/Ira Gershwin show, *The Firebrand of Florence*, that brought me to MasterVoices; since then we have performed other pieces by each author, and now we bring to life their collaborative masterpiece, 25 years after it was last presented in New York in the first season of City Center's Encores!

Premiering in 1941, *Lady in the Dark* represented a major milestone for each of its creators. For playwright and director Moss Hart, it was his most personal project to date, and not written in collaboration with his usual partner, George Kaufman. For lyricist Ira Gershwin, it was his return to work after the tragically early death of his brother, George. And for composer Kurt Weill, it was his first commercial Broadway project, and his first smash hit. And a smash it was... it ran for two seasons on Broadway, followed by a national tour and a return to Broadway for a total of 777 performances.

The late 1930s were a time when the Broadway musical was at a crossroads. Weill described the situation of musical theater as he saw it: "worst example of old-fashioned opera (museum) on the one side, musical comedy, which tries to be sophisticated and low brow at the same time, on the other side. Nothing in between. Enormous field for musical theater." Weill was interested in working with the best possible collaborators and he asked Hart to lunch. Hart recalled: "We had arranged to meet to see if we could not do a show together, and had thoroughly succeeded in discovering that we couldn't. That is, we were both completely disinterested in doing a show for the sake of doing a show... and the tight little formula of the musical comedy stage held no interest for either of us." Of course they didn't leave it at that, and instead continued to meet and eventually came up with a daring new concept for their show.

Hart came up with the idea of writing a play with music based on his own experience with psychoanalysis. After each of his big successes, Hart would go into a deep depression, even having suicidal impulses. He went for treatment to the "shrink to the stars", Lawrence Kubie, whose theories heavily influenced the writing of *Lady in the Dark*. The original production starred Gertrude Lawrence as a successful and respected fashion magazine editor, who is experiencing a nervous breakdown and can't understand what is happening to her. She relates her dreams to her new therapist, and these dreams come to vivid, surreal life in three mini-operas. The music of the play is concentrated in these twenty-minute sequences. At a time when musicals were experimenting with integrating songs and scenes more tightly, *Lady in the Dark* does the opposite.... it segregates the music to the fantasy world. This would only work with this specific plot; it is not a roadmap for how to write musical theater works of the future. It does, however, set the stage for future "concept

musicals” like *Allegro*, *Cabaret* and *Follies*... and even Laurie’s “Dream Ballet” in *Oklahoma*, which was on Broadway by the time *Lady in the Dark* played its final performances. The songs and connecting musical passages are entirely specific to the character’s desires and fears; the role of the chorus, which sings almost as much as the principals, is the voice inside Liza’s head.

I have been fascinated with this piece since I first discovered it in my college library. I staged a production in Philadelphia in 2001, and have been eager to do it in New York ever since, especially with Victoria Clark as Liza Elliott. Although there are aspects of the writing that reflect the now-dated view of a woman’s place in the world, I find much to admire in the author’s choice to center their show on a woman in charge, who is trying to find the right balance in her life...isn’t that something that so many of us (men and women) are still struggling with? It’s true that Liza’s therapy is extremely condensed (cured in three sessions!) but the essence of the treatment is accurate to a time when “the talking cure” was the mode and antidepressants had yet to be invented. By casting Dr. Brooks as a woman, I’m hoping that her analysis gives Liza a mirror in which to observe another successful professional, and a safe space in which to examine her own neuroses. Presented with several potential romantic solutions to her situation, Liza picks the least comfortable and expected, a future wide open with possibilities, even the possibility that it won’t last.

We at MasterVoices thank you for coming to *Lady in the Dark*, and hope you will enjoy this rare opportunity to experience this groundbreaking work.

-- By Ted Sperling, MasterVoices Artistic Director