



**Smithsonian Institution**

*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

## **Playbill for Ma Rainey's Black Bottom on Broadway**

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[[image - faint rectangle and top hat]]  
passing stages  
by Louis Botto

**FACT OF FICTION** Imaginary Friends, the new play by Nora Ephron at the Barrymore Theatre, dramatizes the great enmity between the Broadway playwright Lillian Hellman and the celebrated essayist and novelist Mary McCarthy. Ms. Hellman filed a lawsuit when Ms. McCarthy declared on the "Dick Cavett Show" that "Every word [Ms. Hellman] writes is a lie, including 'and' and 'the.'"

This brings to mind an incident that occurred when Hellman's first play, *The Children's Hour*, opened at Maxine Elliott's Theatre on Broadway in 1934. The famous drama, which scored a huge success because it dealt with the then-taboo subject of lesbianism, thrilled its opening night audience with its boldness. As the audience was leaving the theatre, a member of the Pulitzer Prize committee overheard two men discussing the play. One of them said, "This is a very original play." The other disagreed. "Not so original—the plot comes from a book by William Roughead on famous trials. The real trial took place in Scotland." The following day, the writer from the Pulitzer committee interviewed Ms. Hellman and asked her if she had gotten her plot from William Roughead. "No," she replied tartly, "IT came out of my own head." In an article in the paper the next day, the writer reported, "Yes—it came out of her own Roughead."

**OUT TOWN TALES** The recent revival of Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Our Town*, at the Booth Theatre, recalls the chaotic birth it had in 1938. The play opened in Boston, produced and directed by that stage genius, Jed Harris. Since it was performed without scenery, the Boston critics panned it, and audiences walked out in droves. Harris was about to close the play, but two distinguished critics saved it. Alexander Woollcott and Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* saw the play, were enchanted by it and urged Harris to bring it to Broadway immediately. It opened at Henry Miller's Theatre on February 4, 1938, was hailed by the critics, moved immediately to the Morosco Theatre and won the Pulitzer Prize.

The late Helene Pons, who designed the play's costumes, once told me of a violent even that took place in front of Henry Miller's Theatre before it opened. She had a heated argument with Jed Harris about one of the costumes. He threw her onto a parked car and started to choke her. "He would have killed me," she said, "but a stranger attacked him and saved me."

**More violence:** The stagehands' union objected to the fact that the actors in the play were moving props around. This being a union violation, they posted a stagehand backstage on opening night to police this. Harris promptly threw the stagehand down a flight of stairs, locked the door and the actors were free to move the props.

**Final tragedy:** Jed Harris has an affair with the social actress Rosamond Pinchot. The affair cooled, but Harris hired the actress as a prop girl for *Our Town*. He treated her so miserably that she committed suicide and was buried in the wedding gown that Emily wears in the play, both at her wedding and her funeral. Ms. Pinchot designed the gown.

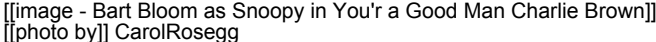
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BART IN BLOOM continued from page 15

  
[[photo by]] CarolRosegg  
[[caption]]Bart's inspired performance as snoopy in You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown garnered a 1999 Tony Award as Best Featured Actor in a Musical[[/caption]


"As Carmen Ghia I was a Sprinter," says Bart. "[Bloom] is a long-distance runner."

Something wasn't going right in a scene before me." So he cupped his hands and popped away. "Suddenly, all the tension went out of the room, because it was so bizarre. Matthew and Nathan couldn't continue. Mel said, "Keep it in!"

During his entire run as Carmen, Bart had plenty of time to study the part of Leo as he listened to "the radio play" as he called it-the version of the show that was piped into his dressing room as he awaited his next entrance. "I heard it so many times, it is embedded in me." Nonetheless, the leap from supporting player to lead has left its mark. "As Carmel Ghia I was a sprinter. This guy is like a long-distance runner. I sometimes think to myself, 'Should I have stayed Carmen?' So exhausted was he after his first couple of performances as Leo that he phoned to do the interview for this article a half hour earlier than scheduled. "I just really want to lie down and take a nap," he explained.

Still, he'll hold on to the job with both hands. "I'd been playing peculiar parts" until now, he said. Among them were a dog and a harlequin, characters which jibed with his comic face, a series of acute angles ascending from jawline to hairline. "I didn't think I would ever be standing on a Broadway stage singing love songs and dancing with a six-foot blonde"-Cady Huffman as Ulla, without a doubt the first Swedish stereotype to hit Broadway in half a century. "They're going to hire Brian Stokes Mitchell for that."

Playing Leo also affords him the opportunity to observe the production's current Carmen up close. The Producers is a show famous for slyly referencing other musicals as well as itself. Is Bart slipping in a little of his old Ghis gate when the mincing Musgrove enticingly invites him to "Walk this way"? "Well, you see, he's doing me." So when Bart imitates Musgrove's walk, "I'm doing him doing me. So it may look like it' me doing me." Let's hope so.

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