



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Playbill for Duke Ellington's Sophisticated Ladies

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[[advertisement]]
[[image - front right side of a red Datsun 200-SX]]

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[[/boxed]]

[[image - illustration of the NAPS-Z engine]]
[[caption under image:]] The NAPS-Z engine with 2 spark plugs per cylinder burns fuel more efficiently.

[[image - photograph of a red Datsun 200-SX]]

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[[image - The name of quality NISSAN Nissan motors logo]]

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Cheryl Crawford rejected Death of a Salesman because the main character seemed pathetic rather than tragic.

ā whim or flash of insight, decided not to listen, and, finally, the play was produced at that playhouse in Skowhegan.



BY then, Walter Huston had twice turned down the role of father and Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne had also refused to join the company, with Fontanne telling Lunt she couldn't see "spending every night on the stage getting you baptized." Finally, Howard Lindsay, who had co-authored the play with Russel Crouse, and who had once acted but who hadn't been on the stage for five years, was persuaded to take the title role with his wife, Dorothy Stickney, playing opposite him.

Life With Father did not make it to New York until November, 1939. But then it stayed for seven-and-a-half years, becoming the longest running play of its time with a whopping 3,224 performances.

Lighthearted works are not the only plays that have had their troubles. Cheryl Crawford, in her autobiography, *One Naked Individual*, recalls how she rejected *Death of a Salesman* because the main character seemed to be "pathetic rather than tragic" and, besides, "who would want to see a play about an unhappy travelling salesman?" Similarly, *That Championship Season* bounced from out-basket to out-basket - and Burt Lancaster turned down the role of coach - because it was, as someone put it derogatorily, "a play with no women in which some guys just talk about old basketball days." Then Joseph Papp presented it at the Public Theater, giving it the opportunity to go on to win the theatre's triple crown - the Tony, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. Alexander H. Cohen, one of those producers whose office rejected it, says ruefully, "I never read it. It was turned down by the person who was then in charge of development for me. And I didn't learn about this until I read about it in *The New York Times* after the play had become a success."

Sometimes, chance and circumstance play their mysterious roles in dictating which shows producers will champion and which they will not. Lester Osterman, for example, had an opportunity last season to produce the revival of *Morning's At Seven*. He wanted to but at the moment of decision he was struggling to keep alive another revival, *Watch on the Rhine*. And, he reasoned, "If *Watch on the Rhine*, which was originally a success, is having trouble, what possibly could be the fate of a show that wasn't a hit to begin with?" Of course, *Morning's At Seven* went on to garner three Tony Awards.

On occasion, bright lights have flashed in producers' minds, illuminating concepts they think have potential. Then, for some reason or another, they have not been able to breathe life into the projects, only to suffer the chagrin of watching others find the right chemistry.

Once upon a time, for instance, Robert Whitehead, who has produced successes as *A Man for All Seasons* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, held the rights to turn *Pygmalion* into a musical. But, he says, after studying the original Shaw work again and again, he decided it was "indestructible and wouldn't be made any richer with music." Cheryl Crawford had her turn with the work and she approached Alan J. Lerner and Frederick Loewe. But, they, at the time, refused her. Later, of course, they went on to create one of the all-time great American musical scores for the classic called *My Fair Lady*.

On a like note is Alexander H. Cohen's bout with the character, Phineas Taylor Barnum. Cohen, whose 60-odd presentations have included Richard Burton's *Hamlet*, *Black Comedy* and the current hit *A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine*, had the idea back in 1959 of creating

a mammoth musical based on the life of the showman he considers his patron saint. Indeed, in 1960 a press release went out announcing that he would shortly name the librettist and composer who would "validate his vision" of Barnum, as not only a master of flimflam and humbug, but also as one of the nation's cultural pioneers who championed the theatre at a time when it was a suspect activity.

But, he says, though he discussed the project with almost every writer of stature in the theatre - including Michael Stewart.

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