

ACT ONE

BY JAMES LAPINE

FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY
BY MOSS HART



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

ACT ONE
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for Stephen Sondheim

The original Broadway production of ACT ONE was presented by Lincoln Center Theater (André Bishop, Producing Artistic Director; Adam Siegel, Managing Director; Hattie K. Jutagir, Executive Director of Development and Planning) at the Vivian Beaumont Theater in New York City, opening on April 17, 2014. It was directed by James Lapine; the set design was by Beowulf Boritt; the costume design was by Jane Greenwood; the lighting design was by Ken Billington; the sound design was by Dan Moses Schreier; the original music was by Louis Rosen; and the production stage manager was Rick Steiger. The cast was as follows:

MOSS Santino Fontana
HART/FATHER/GEORGE S. KAUFMAN Tony Shalhoub
MOSSY/BERNIE HART Matthew Schechter
LILLIE HART/HELEN Mimi Lieber
WALLY/CHARLES GILPIN/MAX SIEGEL Chuck Cooper
AUGUSTUS PITOU/JED HARRIS Will LeBow
JOSEPH REGAN/JERRY Matthew Saldivar
PRIESTLY MORRISON/SAM HARRIS/PIANIST Bob Stillman
EDDIE CHODOROV Bill Army
DAVID ALLEN/DORE SCHARY/GEORGE Will Brill
IRVING GORDON/PIANIST Steven Kaplan
PHYLLIS/MAY Charlotte Maier
AUNT KATE/FRIEDA FISHBEIN/
BEATRICE KAUFMAN Andrea Martin
BELLE/MRS. ROSENBLOOM Deborah Offner
MRS. HENRY B. HARRIS Amy Warren
ROZ/MARY Laurel Casillo

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Lincoln Center Theater commissioned ACT ONE for the Vivian Beaumont Theater, one of the largest stage spaces on Broadway. Though our production utilized a 60-foot turntable, prior workshop productions were done with small casts and minimal set and costume elements. The storytelling was never compromised, and given that this is a play that relies a great deal on narration, the audience had no problem understanding where they were in the action.

There are 51 speaking roles in the play, 30 men and 21 women. Our Broadway cast numbered 16. I have broken down a casting scenario that suggests how the play can be done with a cast of either 16 or 12, which you can find at the back of this Acting Edition.

ACT ONE is a play about putting on a play. Feel free to find *your* production and shape it according to your resources and artistic vision.

—*JL*

CHARACTERS

(Note: There will be three actors playing Moss Hart: MOSSY, aged 10–13; MOSS, aged 16–24; and HART, aged 55. HART should be onstage observing the action as much as possible.)

MOSS

HART

MOSSY

FATHER

LILLIE

KAUFMAN

WALLY

GILPIN

MAX SIEGEL

LANGSTON HUGHES

PORTER

AUGUSTUS PITOU

JED HARRIS

SLIMOWITZ

FUR WORKERS #1 and #2

REGAN

JERRY

HARPO

MR. BOROFSKY

MRS. BOROFSKY

PRIESTLY MORRISON

GILPIN'S MANAGER

SAM HARRIS

EDDIE

ACTOR (COWBOY)
DAVID ALLEN
DORE SCHARY
GEORGE
IRVING
BERNIE
AUNT KATE
FRIEDA FISHBEIN
BEATRICE KAUFMAN
HELEN
LADY CAROLINE PONTEFRACT
SIR JOHN PONTEFRACT
MISS HESTER WORSLEY
BELLE
MRS. ROSENBLOOM
IDA
EDNA FERBER
PHYLLIS
SHIRLEY
MAY
MRS. HARRIS
DOROTHY PARKER
ROZ
MAID
LATECOMERS #1 and #2

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Scene 1: The Stage Time: 1920–1930

The set consists of a series of levels and stairways that will be inhabited by set pieces that come and go to suggest our locations.

When we enter, we are faced with a row of theatre seats that occupy the highest level, suggesting the second balcony of an old Broadway house. Slowly, these seats are occupied by our cast. Perhaps they have their own usher who hands them Playbills, which they peruse as they wait for the show to begin. The last to arrive and take her seat is Aunt Kate, a portly middle-aged woman.

As the house lights and stage lights fade, the actors settle, put their Playbills on their laps, and stare at us excitedly, as if they're about to watch the curtain go up.

The stage lights immediately come back up on three actors dressed in 19th-century costume: Sir John Pontefract, Lady Caroline Pontefract, and Miss Hester Worsley. Off to either side of them stand two servants — their backs mostly to us as they go about serving tea and cookies.

CAROLINE. I believe this is the first English country house you have stayed at, Miss Worsley?

HESTER. Yes, Lady Caroline.

CAROLINE. You have no country houses, I am told, in America?

HESTER. We have not many.

CAROLINE. Have you any country? What we should call country?

HESTER. (*Smiling.*) We have the largest country in the world, Lady Caroline.

CAROLINE. Ah, you must find it draughty, I should imagine. (*Laughter from the balcony; no one louder than Kate.*) Tea, Miss Worsley?

HESTER. Thank you.

JOHN. Well, you couldn't come to a more charming place than this, Miss Worsley.

CAROLINE. I must warn you. Dear Lady Hunstanton is sometimes a little lax about the people she asks down here. Lord Illingworth, of course, is a man of high distinction. But Mrs. Allonby is hardly a very suitable person.

HESTER. I dislike Mrs. Allonby.

CAROLINE. It is said of course, that she ran away twice before she was married.

JOHN. But you know how unfair people often are, darling.

CAROLINE. Well, I myself don't believe she ran away more than once. (*Loud laughter from Aunt Kate, much to the dismay of those seated near her. The servants walk downstage towards us. They are Moss Hart in both younger [Moss] and older [Hart] configurations. Hart should be onstage observing the action as much as possible. The lights slowly glow on Aunt Kate as they pull down on them.*)

HART. The theatre is not so much a profession as a disease, and after attending my first play at the age of eleven, it was the beginning of a lifelong infection. You see, the stage is the inevitable refuge of an unhappy child:

MOSS. The first retreat an unhappy child makes is to contrive a play-world of his own, and it's not a huge leap from there into the fantasy world of the theatre. (*Mossy enters, reading a book. He always wears a cap.*) I learned early on that theatre made possible the art of being someone else, and so I dreamed of being an actor —

HART. (*Looks to Mossy.*) — Not just a scrawny poor kid with bad teeth, a funny name, and a mother who was a drudge. (*Mossy looks to his older selves, then exits.*)

MOSS. My parents were English and met in London before coming to America with my mother's parents and her sister Kate. (*Moss looks to Aunt Kate, who rises from her seat and exits.*)

HART. Shortly after they arrived in New York, my grandmother died — probably uttering a great sigh of relief — and my grandfather appeared at my parents' doorstep with my Aunt Kate in tow.

MOSS. The five of us lived in a small two-bedroom tenement apartment. When I was seven, my grandfather also died and we were forced to take in boarders to help make ends meet. (*The set changes to the Harts' tenement apartment.*)

Scene 2: Hart Tenement

Lillie, Moss's mother, stands in their tiny kitchen, cooking as she holds a baby, Mossy's younger brother Bernie. Aunt Kate approaches the tenement entrance and is surprised by Mossy, who is sitting on the steps outside waiting. Note: The rooms in the Hart tenement are divided by walls of sack cloth. Father and Lillie speak with Cockney accents. Kate's is a more faux-upper-class English.

MOSSY. Aunt Kate!

AUNT KATE. Mossy, you startled me! What are you doing out here?

MOSSY. We thought you'd be home by now.

AUNT KATE. It was such an exciting night at the theatre. Guess who was in attendance?

MOSSY. Who?

AUNT KATE. John Hylan, the mayor of New York City. There was quite a crowd.

MOSSY. Did you see him?

AUNT KATE. I had a very good view of him from the second balcony.

MOSSY. Tell me about the play. Was it a comedy or a drama?

AUNT KATE. It was a comedy, I think. Now come inside and let me tell you about it properly. (*They enter. Mossy helps her off with her coat and then sits at the small table.*)

LILLIE. There you are. It must have been a very long play.

AUNT KATE. I mingled with the crowd after the show. The mayor was in attendance.

LILLIE. My, my, my.

MOSSY. Where's the Playbill, Aunt Kate?

AUNT KATE. Hold on, Mossy. Hold on.

LILLIE. Let your aunt get settled.

MOSSY. Can I take it out of your purse?

AUNT KATE. All right. Careful.

MOSSY. Tell me about the play.

AUNT KATE. It was called *A Woman of No Importance*, by a man named Oscar Wilde. He is Irish but his play is about the English upper class. Like us, Lillie.

LILLIE. Just like us. *(She moves into the other room to put the baby down.)*

AUNT KATE. *(Opens the Playbill.)* The story centers on Lord Illingworth —

MOSSY. Illingworth?

AUNT KATE. Wonderful name, isn't it? He is a bachelor and quite a flirt. The secret of the play surrounds an affair he had years ago with a pious society lady —

MOSSY. What do you mean, "affair"? *(Beat.)*

AUNT KATE. They were *very* close friends — one night.

MOSSY. You mean they *shtupped*?

AUNT KATE. *(Aghast.)* That's not quite how Oscar Wilde would have put it, Mossy. *(She has a good laugh.)* But yes! Now, Lord Illingworth visits the home of the rich Lady Hunstanton — *(The lights suddenly go out.)* Oh no. Will this ever end?

LILLIE. *(Entering the kitchen.)* I'll get the matches. *(Moss's father comes charging into the kitchen.)*

FATHER. Why are the lights out? Didn't you put another coin in the meter?

LILLIE. No. I thought you had. *(Two boarders, a husband and wife, enter the kitchen. They speak in heavy accents.)*

FATHER. Well, give me a quarter.

MRS. BOROFSKY. No light.

LILLIE. We know, Mrs. Borofsky.

MR. BOROFSKY. We pay for light. To eleven.

FATHER. We know. We know.

AUNT KATE. *(Ignoring what's going on.)* Move the candle over here, Mossy. *(Mossy moves over to get a candle and brings it to the table and lights it as the following transpires.)*

FATHER. Give me a dime. *(Lillie goes into a cabinet, hiding what she's doing from the boarders. She looks inside a jar.)*

LILLIE. We only have pennies.

FATHER. Give them to me.

AUNT KATE. (*To Mossy.*) So where were we? Mr. Illingworth makes the acquaintance of a young American woman —

FATHER. (*Approaches Kate with the pennies.*) Kate, do you have nickels or a dime?

AUNT KATE. Certainly not. (*Father takes the change and holds out the pennies to the boarders.*)

MR. BOROFSKY. (*Reaches into his pocket.*) I got dime —

FATHER. Thank you, Mr. Borofsky. (*He dashes out to the hallway to put the coin in the meter.*)

LILLIE. Thank you, Mr. Borofsky.

MRS. BOROFSKY. Coffee. Six-thirty.

LILLIE. Yes, Mrs. Borofsky.

AUNT KATE. Of course the playwright sets up these characters — (*Kate is annoyed by the interruption.*)

MR. BOROFSKY. With milk.

LILLIE. With milk.

MRS. BOROFSKY. Hot.

AUNT KATE. (*To the Borofskys.*) Are you quite done? (*Raising her voice.*) — to meet at a party given by Lady Hunstanton — (*Lights pop back on.*) It's about time ... (*The boarders begin to retreat into their room. Father enters, fuming.*) So, where was I? Lady Hunstanton —

FATHER. Kate, you didn't have a dime?

AUNT KATE. I beg your pardon?

FATHER. You heard me. You couldn't even bother to look in your purse —

AUNT KATE. I don't think I care for your tone. (*Anyone else would be petrified of him now, but not Kate.*)

LILLIE. Let's not raise our voices. The Borofskys are already put out.

AUNT KATE. The Borofskys are peasants.

FATHER. The Borofskys pay us rent. The Borofskys allow us to eat. The Borofskys allow you to go off to the theatre while we —

AUNT KATE. That's untrue and you know it. My father gave me that money —

FATHER. (*Overlapping and louder.*) It's not like I asked you to give me a quarter.

AUNT KATE. Here you go again —

FATHER. I know you would never offer to pay —

LILLIE. Shush! Both of you!

ACT ONE

by James Lapine

30M, 21W (doubling, flexible casting)

Growing up in an impoverished family in the Bronx, Moss Hart dreamed of being part of the glamorous world of the theatre. Forced to drop out of school at age thirteen, Hart's famous memoir *Act One* is a classic Hortatio Alger story that plots Hart's unlikely collaboration with the legendary playwright George S. Kaufman. Tony Award-winning writer and director James Lapine has adapted *Act One* for the stage, creating a funny, heartbreaking, and suspenseful play that celebrates the making of a playwright and his play *Once in a Lifetime*. ACT ONE offers great fun to a director to utilize over fifty roles, which can be played by a cast as few as twelve, and in a production that can be done as simply or elaborately as desired.

"... brims contagiously with the ineffable, irrational and irrefutable passion for that endangered religion called the Theater ... ACT ONE critically reminds us, at a moment when it's easy to forget, of why so many of us fell head over heels for this cockamamie faith to begin with ... Hart captured the desperation, egotism, self-consciousness, illusionism and perverse certainty that made his escape possible. It's a self-portrait in which affected and determined young misfits continue to find consoling reflections of themselves ... Mr. Lapine has telescoped the book's events with honorable efficiency."

—The New York Times

"A rollicking valentine to the theater."

—Associated Press

"... quite faithful and wrought with abundant skill and empathy ... And although Lapine is evoking a Broadway scene nearly a century old, not so much has changed: Writers are still neurotic, actors are still vain, and producers are still snakes or saints — or both ... credit is due to Lapine for effectively distilling a fast-moving memory play ... ACT ONE is tremendous fun, sweet and wise-wistful, [full of] insight into the joys and terrors of show business."

—Time Out (New York)

Also by James Lapine

FRAN'S BED

THE MOMENT WHEN

TWELVE DREAMS

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