

UPSTAGE

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Nine Lives

UPSTAGE spoke with Maury Yeston, original composer and lyricist for the musical *Nine*, who led us through the initial creative journey of the musical...

UPSTAGE

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UPSTAGE: The most amazing thing about this piece, *Nine*, is that it all came from your head. How did you hold on to the vision for so many years? How did you make *Nine* happen?

YESTON: It's a vast single piece of music and even though it was done in stages, it grew. It's a passion that I lashed onto when I was 17 years old, and I never let it go. It took 19 years, and I would have spent another 19 years. I just saw it. I knew I had the vision and I was not going to stop.

Even before I knew I was going to write a show called *Nine*, I knew I was completely obsessed with artists and in love with the film *8 1/2*, which I first saw when I was 17 when Americans were discovering foreign films. When I first saw that movie, I realized that there was something in that movie that was intrinsically about me dealing with all of the crises that adolescents were dealing with: self-identity, sexuality, what you do with your work, whether you set out to be a businessman or business woman, lawyer or an artist. In his book *200 days of 8 1/2*, Fellini is driving back into his memories of being 8 1/2 years old and portraying the world of the past, the world of the present and the world of fantasy simultaneously. I thought that was extraordinary and radical and I loved it.

I really spent the next ten years going to college and going to England and educating myself by absorbing Europe and foreign languages, living in France and Italy and Greece and going to school in England. When I got back into the states, I started writing musical theatre in earnest. This was the second or third project I really took seriously. By then I thought I had gotten the requisite skills and sort of knew that I wanted to do it. I

burned passionately to write it. Of course I wrote an outline for most of the songs, and then I looked about to find a collaborator. The first collaborator I spoke to was Mario Fratti, who was introduced to me by a good friend of mine. Mario helped to explicate the Italian in the piece. He was basically an Italian critic and an Italian playwright who did not come naturally to the form of musical theatre. Nevertheless, whatever we did resulted in a "mise-en-scene" (world of the play) that functionally added to the adaptation of the film. I had a tape of the music which was accepted and read by the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Company.

The first director there was a young guy who had started his own theatre company in NY named Howard Ashman. Howard of course had a genius relationship to the creation of the libretto. His editing and suggestions before and during the O'Neill production were really enormously contributive to the book and what ultimately became the book. We picked up a lot of wonderful ideas from Howard, who essentially grew up to write everything from *Little Shop of Horrors* to *Aladdin* to *Beauty and the Beast*.

After the O'Neill, the piece was accepted and in fact, it won the first Richard Rodgers Production Award. That was when Tommy Tune heard the score and said "I must absolutely direct this, I love this more than I love anything else." It was Tommy's suggestion to give back the Richard Rodgers award and not do an experimental reading of the show but rather just go to Broadway and have Tommy direct it. It was at that point that Tommy felt that we really did need the ear of a native American speaker for the book, in order for the piece to really come alive and be an American musical. It was his feeling that Arthur Kopit

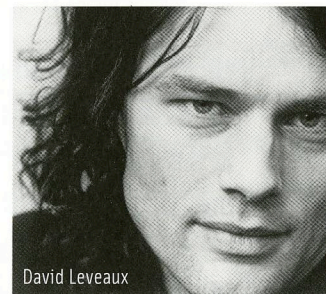
The Look of Leveaux

UPSTAGE SPOKE WITH DIRECTOR DAVID LEVEAUX TO INVESTIGATE HIS TAKE ON THE ASPECTS OF LOVE IN *NINE*.

Nine is different in the way it becomes a paradigm of ways of loving, moment by moment. It's an interior, psychological narrative, where you're slipping back and forth through time and slipping from location to location. In a sense, what we feel is not a musical about the main character Guido Contini and the women in his life, but actually a musical about these women and their Guido Contini, which is very different. It's about their feelings in their entirely individual ways of loving him and therefore, the very individual ways that he loves each of them.

I joke about it sometimes, but quite seriously, Guido's a serial monogamist. He's a man who when he loves someone, he loves them because they bring to him something that he can't get anywhere else in his world. He is in love with Carla, his mistress, he is in love with Claudia, his muse, and he is in love with a girl who came on her bike with her boyfriend and stayed because Guido was just too electrifying. At the center of all that is this other kind of structural story that holds the entire musical together and that is his marriage to Luisa, his wife.

It is a marvelous story because we are dealing with women of enormous wit and intelligence. They're not simply iconic [representing a conventional style]. When you see sexual wit on stage as opposed to just sexiness, it's a totally different thing and it's sexier.



David Leveaux

I've always been interested in sex in the theatre. It's an important theme because it's radical and political as well. Obviously, the way that I'm talking about sex is actually in terms of all of the dimensions I mean by that word. It's very important to develop an attitude towards sex in some way, its transformative power and its ways of operating philosophically and intellectually.

Theatre is an excellent place for this kind of investigation because, first and foremost, whatever the play, theatre gives us a way to see what is otherwise invisible. What I mean by the invisible is the shifting and elusive contradictions that actually lie in the deep gesture of human beings. If I were to pass onto you one really useful thing I've learned about theatre, it would be this: there's no excuse for an audience to leave the theatre with less energy than they came in with. **UPSTAGE**



1963. Federico Fellini on the set of *8 1/2*.
New York Public Library Picture Collection

would be a good person to take the show to the next step of the way. Arthur had written a wonderful play called *Wings*, which takes place inside of a woman's mind, which attracted us, because *Nine* has a lot to do with what's inside Guido's mind.

We basically went ahead with my *mise-en-scene* from the start, which was passed through this European eye from an Italian playwright whose stock and trade was not intrinsically American musical theatre or English. From there, we went to an American playwright who was very comfortable in English, and who was guided by the sure hand of a director/choreographer [Tommy Tune] who eats, sleeps and breathes musical theatre and the musical theatre form. I think that whole sequence, with the added uncredited contributions of Howard Ashman along the way, made the piece what it is.

UPSTAGE: What are the themes of *Nine* from your point of view?

YESTON: As time goes on I begin to see that obviously *Nine* is about life. Everything is about marriage and about love. It's about your work and it's about passion and it's about reality.

In *Nine*, we get to hear from the women. As I get older and as I see this extraordinary variety of women who have been created in *Nine* -- the wife, the mistress, the mother, the lover -- I begin to understand that there must have been some rudder keeping me straight on course in the show. I think *Nine* answers the simple question, "What are women to men?" And it's so interesting in that they are companions, they are lovers, they are mothers, they are teachers, they're our task masters who make us work hard to achieve, they inspire our greatest artists' hopes, they care for us, they tempt us, they betray us, they save us, they give us life. And amazingly, any one woman can be all that to a man. Ultimately, what's extraordinary about the piece is that we begin to find out that they can be women without us but we somehow can't be men with out them.

UPSTAGE

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THE COLLABORATION PROCESS CONTINUES WITH THE DESIGNERS AS THEY ANSWER THE QUESTION, "HOW ARE THE THEMES YOU IDENTIFY IN *NINE* SUPPORTED BY YOUR DESIGN CHOICES?"

DESIGNING

Scott Pask Set Designer

First and foremost, it's a play about a marriage. We learn about the landscape of this marriage through Guido. The women that he has loved throughout his life exist for us in this space. The play takes place at a critical point in his life as his marriage is falling apart and his creativity is at a stalemate. The present themes for me are in the pressure of work and the pressure of creation as well as in the acknowledgment of the most important person in your life. Guido is such a buoyant character. He is torn between his love of women in general and the love and support of a brilliant and incredibly elegant wife.

"I think the best thing about my job, which is not just a job, it's my life, is that each project brings an opportunity to learn about something that I had never looked at before, and that's incredible."

The installation that serves as a crucible for this moment in Guido's life is a marriage of the old and the new. The space, a ruin in various states of decay, has now been completed by a modern architecture. This reimagining of the space follows the original layout and has completed the missing ancient aspects in a modern, streamlined aesthetic. Within this room is a fantastical spiral staircase that reaches to the heavens and serves as the entrance for the women, a vertical gateway into this room. We begin within this intimate space where the women of Guido's life are sharing

a table in a sort of very Italian fashion. Then as the evening moves on key moments in Guido's memory are revealed within the space.

What is so rewarding in this work is that this space serves as a singular piece that changes its character. The way in which light acts upon and exists within the space is a huge aspect of this production: ways in which it enters the space, ideas of translucence and reflection, and how it behaves with various watery aspects bouncing it around the glass room. There are also elements that are revealed which simultaneously deepen our understanding of the history of the space while reflecting the spirit of Fellini.

Set design rendering
for *Nine* by Scott Pask.



nine




Vicki Mortimer Costume Designer

Costume design renderings
for *Nine* by Vicki Mortimer.

The nature of Fellini's films was the starting point for me. His freedom from literalism, his surrealism, his recognition that people are not necessarily consistent or predictable, all had to do with it. For reference, we gathered a lot of pictorial material from libraries and collections in Milan, as well as the UK. Also, we wanted to make it clear to the audience that they were not watching a conventional play in terms of the way time and characterization work alongside Guido's memory. Black and white seemed the right color choice for the costumes in this production. For the same reason there are very few costume changes as such - each woman appears as Guido's memory needs her to - primarily we took the view that they would appear as they looked when Guido first met them.

The play takes place in the sixties, and that style is present in the spirit of *joie de vivre* [joy of life] that fills *Nine*, and in the search to find a way to resolve the combination of creativity, love and maturity. In the early sixties, there was an amazing diversity of fashion for women - the fifties influence was still very strong, whilst the drive towards youthfulness and experimentation which would come to fruition in the later sixties was already seeded. Women were completely comfortable with achieving their fashion identity using a huge range of artificial means, which, whilst they have their equivalents today, seem contrived and restrictive to the modern woman. To the sixties woman, they were simply a requirement of presenting themselves to the world - both for the male gaze and for their own self-image.

"I approached design for the stage via a broader context, with the text as the starting point, and with detailed research as a natural reflex, drawing together the physical world to serve not only the immediate staging requirements (nor indeed the needs of pure design) but the performance as a live event with all it's fragile suggestiveness."

Continued on page 6.



A STITCH IN TIME...

1730. Canaletto's "Views of Venice".
New York Public Library Picture Collection

Arthur Kopit, who wrote the book to Nine, shared with UPSTAGE more elements to the creative process.

UPSTAGE: Can you tell me, from your point of view, what you think the themes of *Nine* are?

KOPIT: It's about growing up. It's about imagination and creativity. But for me, mostly, it's about the healing power of love. I should add, it is not a story about a philanderer. Guido is not interested in sexual conquest. If he had been, the women in his life would never have all loved him the way they do.

In what ways is Guido's struggle common to other artists?

KOPIT: In every artist's life there comes a time when he suddenly feels as if the well-springs of his imagination have run dry. Work seems meaningless. He doubts the value of what he has created. This often occurs when the artist is at some major turning point; a sort of "mid creative-life" crisis you might say, though it can really come at any time. Clearly, it's as much a spiritual crisis as an artistic one. The genius of Fellini's *8 1/2* is that Fellini takes a crisis such as this and makes that the basis of his film. His hero/director/surrogate thinks, "I'm done for, creatively" and then, all at once: "Oh my God! Why not do a film about a man who thinks he's done for, creatively!"

Was there a struggle in the writing of the story, or the dramatization of this theme?

KOPIT: Writing is always a struggle. That being said, in this particular instance it was as close to sheer joy as writing can get. There were two major reasons. The first was Fellini. I had seen *8 1/2* when it came out and not only did I love the film, it seemed perfect source material for a musical. Well, anyway, perfect as soon as I heard Maury Yeston's amazing score. His music was the second reason. When Tommy Tune brought me into the project, Maury had been working with the playwright and critic Mario Fratti on a version that had been done up at the O'Neil the previous summer. For various reasons the musical wasn't working. Tommy and Maury felt a whole new tack was needed. All agreed I should start over. I worked directly from the film and Maury's score, three-quarters of which remains in the show. The rest he composed during our collaboration. Maury's music and Fellini's film were my guide lines. For a playwright, working conditions rarely get better than that.

This was your first time writing the book for a musical. How did this experience make the process of creating new to you?

KOPIT: Writing the book for a musical is all about defining and creating structure. In short, it's about Story. As often as not, dialogue is the least of it. Knowing how visual elements can help the story-telling, or what the underscoring can do, or a major musical motif, are just as much a part of your palette as dialogue. The challenge comes from the fact that you're not working in isolation. What you believe is the best structure may not be the best for your director, or your composer. Everyone's sensibility has to be taken into account. You can't just say, "Well this is the structure, and if you guys don't like it, the hell with you." You're not at the center. It's not like a play. It has to be something all the collaborators create, and you job is to make it feel as seamless as if one perfect person did it all.

Do you have a specific moment in mind that sprung from this collaboration?

KOPIT: For me, the part in the book I'm most proud of is something one would probably not notice. It's a place where Guido tries to convince his wife, Luisa, that he is no longer having an affair with Carla; meanwhile Carla is nearby threatening to kill herself because Guido hasn't been to see her since she arrived. I asked Maury if, while Guido was talking to Luisa, we could underscore with music associated with Carla and he said, "Yes. Great idea." So, the moment we hear that music, we realize that he may be talking to Luisa, but he actually thinking about Carla. Then Guido visits Carla, and while he's with her, we see Saraghina in the distance, dimly lit. Instantly, we realize something about Carla reminds him of Saraghina. We will soon find out what. At the same time, contrapuntally, Guido's Dead Mother - whom Guido "conjures up" because of a childhood memory linking her to Saraghina - has a talk with Luisa about Guido's chronic woman-problems. All these realities just blend together. It sounds complicated, but actually it's totally clear to an audience. It's because of the music. A scene like this could not possibly happen in a straight play. That to me was the essence of writing the book for *Nine*: seeing the various ways to dramatize a complicated, multi-stranded story utilizing dialogue, songs, underscoring, the collaboration of a gifted director, the purely visual effects of a set, the lights, and meld it all together so it seems as close to effortless as possible. Which is to say, the craft should not be visible. It was a rare and exhilarating experience. **UPSTAGE**

Brian MacDevitt

Lighting Designer

"The same way an actor might not be helped with line readings, designers want guidance and collaboration. I firmly believe the strengths of our collective ideas far outweigh a singular vision."

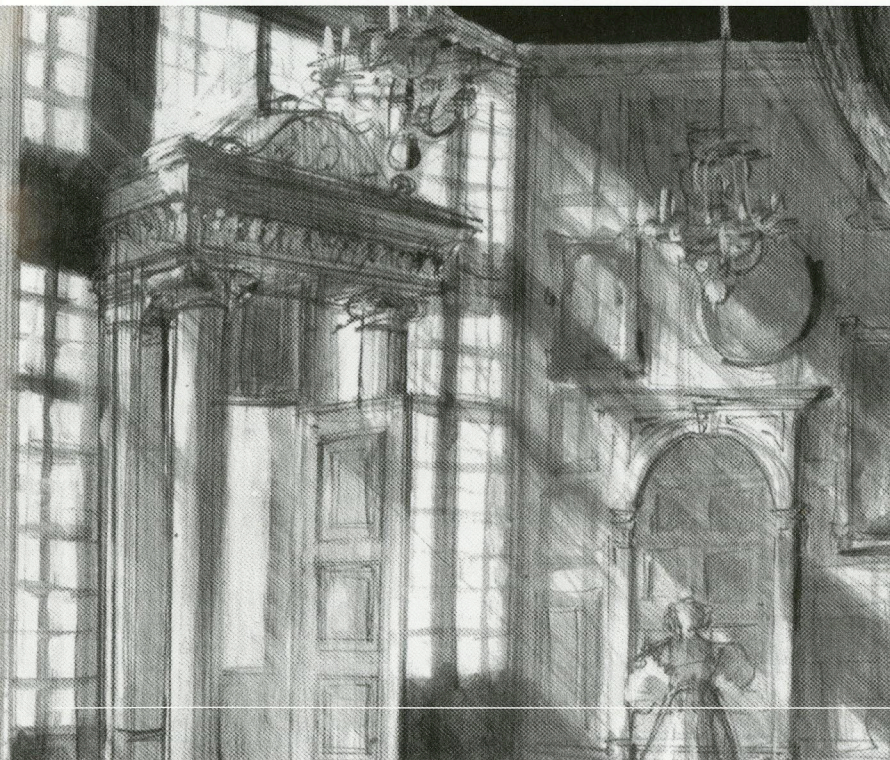
The main character is an artist in crisis. He has a deadline and no sense that he can meet this deadline. His head is swimming with guilt, love and panic. It is a funny situation but underlying it is intense pain and insecurity. We should identify with his journey and enter his world and sympathize with his pain. I still get a sick feeling on Sunday nights that some homework is due and I haven't started a long paper and have no ideas for it. It is

this same sense of panic and doom that pervades this character's world. We hope to let the audience know right away that this is what is going on in Guido's head.

I collaborated with the set and costume designers on exploring the theme as well. The set designer and I discussed color, contrast, how he imagined the space. Do we reveal the whole space or parts of it? It is a modern space integrated with an antique space. We discussed the ancient as earthy and natural and the modern parts, the glass and steel, as more ethereal and dream-like. We both agree that the piece contains both elements. It is sexy and earthy and also airy and dreamlike. The lighting can favor one or the other depending on what we are trying to convey during the show at a particular moment.

With costumes, we discussed color and flow of fabrics and what would be the best way to enhance a character at a specific moment. The clothes are very black and white, high contrast, and vary greatly from character to character. They are definitely individuals and Guido loves different qualities of each person. There are certain ways to portray each, like the set, some may be more earthy and some more airy. We also decided to separate the characters with tight spotlights simultaneously to create separate "realities" so Guido sees different people and they are unaware of each other. **UPSTAGE**

John Lee Beatty's set design for *Tartuffe* illustrates the dramatic effect of Brian MacDevitt's lighting design.



Activities

DISCOVERING YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE

Before you go

Identify and explore the areas in your life in which you feel creative. Have you ever written poetry, drawn a picture, doodled, or even written a paper for school? Have you ever performed through acting, singing, dancing, or playing music? As you think about those times, keep the following questions in mind:

1. What inspires you to create?
2. In what ways have others inspired or helped you realize your creations?

At the Theatre

Watch and Listen for Guido's struggle with creating:

1. How does Guido's creative struggle relate to your own experiences?
2. How do the elements of fantasy and reality play against each other during the course of the musical? How do the designers help to portray Guido's state of mind?

After the Show

Write an outline of a play, musical, or movie you would write about the creative struggles of your life:

1. Would this piece be a musical? Would it be a comedy or a drama?
2. What will the conflict be?
3. Who would you need to collaborate with on this? What would they add to the final product?
4. Who would be in the movie?

Send your work to Roundabout, and we'll share it with the artists who created *Nine*.

Mail it to: Education Department
Roundabout Theatre Co.
231 W. 39th St., Suite 1200
New York, NY 10018

Or email to: lindsaye@roundabouttheatre.org

When you get to the theatre...

BELOW ARE SOME HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR THEATRE-GOING EXPERIENCE MORE ENJOYABLE.

TICKET POLICY

As a student participant in *Page To Stage* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

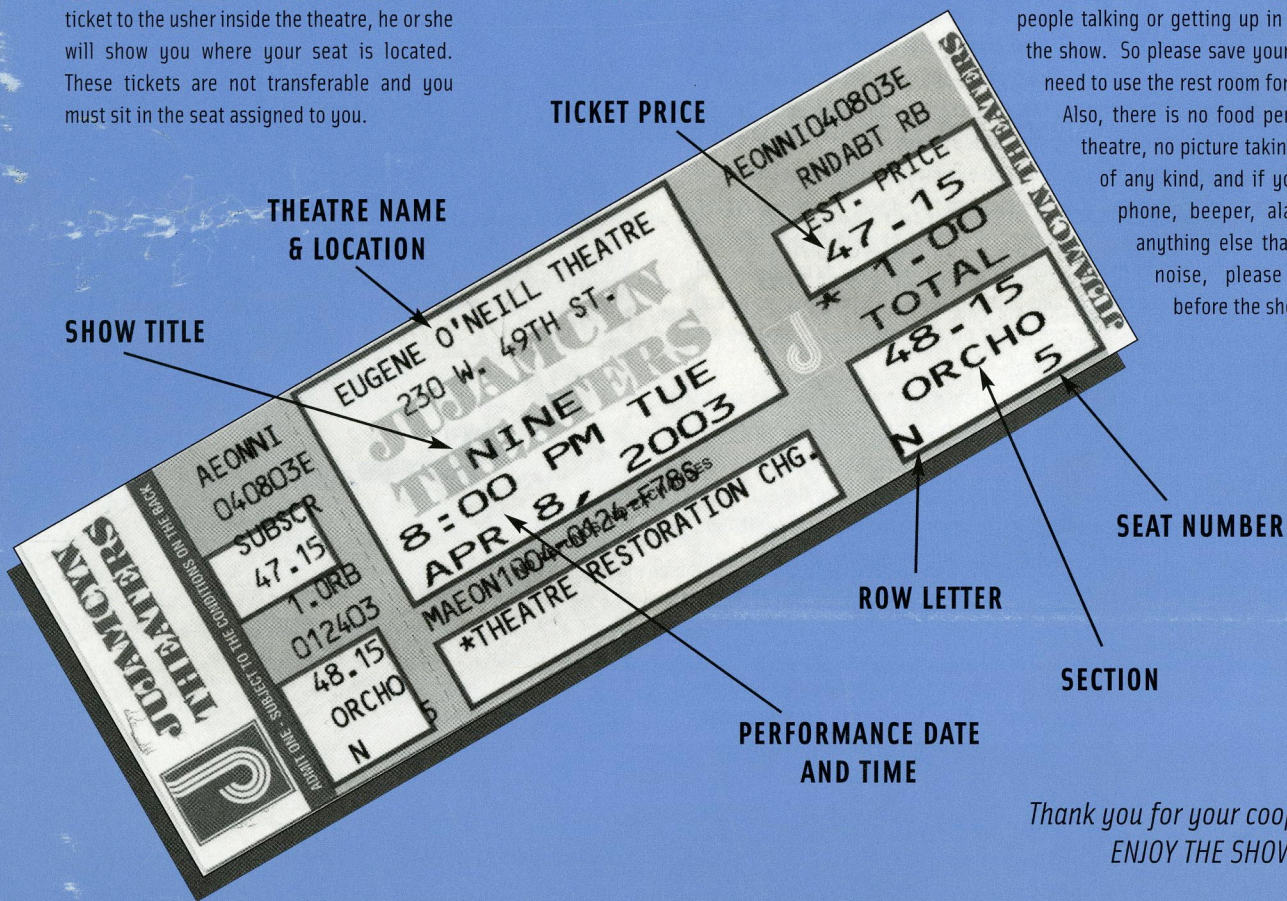
PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission.

Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



Thank you for your cooperation.
ENJOY THE SHOW!

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