

City of Angels

Program Notes

By Joshua S. Ritter, Education & Library Director

Los Angeles, the late 1940s: shadows bathe the streets as a sultry socialite struts into the office of a cheap private eye. The cynical sleuth returns a bottle of whiskey to his desk as his secretary announces the arrival of a client. For a private investigator in the City of Angels, it isn't easy to make a buck without being bumped off or given a beating. Private detectives can only trust their instincts and put the screws on potential clients. You can't be too careful; Hollywood is crawling with well-heeled villains, thugs, tyrannical film producers, and duplicitous dames.

The scene described above is reminiscent of many of the hard-boiled crime fiction films and novels of the postwar era and gives a picture of the second scene of the innovative, hilarious, and uniquely American musical, *City of Angels*. More precisely, it depicts a scene from the on-stage film within the musical, but more about that later.

In 1981, Cy Coleman, a jazzman and musical theatre composer, was watching late-night TV when the 1941 classic Bogart film noir *The Maltese Falcon* appeared on the screen. French film critics coined the term “film noir” or “black film” after noticing the trend of using dark imagery and themes in American detective cinema after the war. Throughout his career Coleman’s musical theatre scores ranged from comic opera style (*On the 20th Century*) to circus style numbers (*Barnum*), and he suddenly realized that no one had written a ‘40s bebop and big band-infused crime fiction musical. Coleman sought to write a true jazz score that would draw on his early career as a jazz pianist. But he didn’t intend to write the kind of jazz music you might hear in nightclubs—rather, he intended to incorporate a quartet to sing intricate harmonies. Coleman stated, “I wanted to do something that I think I’m uniquely qualified to do in the theater, which is to present real jazz as opposed to pastiche or the kind of choreographed jazz I’ve written for other shows. By real jazz I mean music whose rhythmic phrases you can’t describe but that when you’re snapping fingers to it, you say, ‘This swings.’”

With *City of Angels*, Coleman succeeded in writing the first hit Broadway musical to feature a full-blown jazz score. In fact, the show contains two scores: one that seems to communicate the emotional arch of the production and enhance particular moments throughout the show, and one that adds underscoring to the dialogue thereby developing the vintage film noir ambiance of the piece and bolstering its authenticity. Coleman’s deeply personal work on the score began to fuse the theatrical, musical, and cinematic elements of the production. His innovative efforts to blend those essential aspects of the show were complemented and enhanced by Larry Gelbart’s magnificent work on the script.

Gelbart, renowned for his ability to write laugh-out-loud gags and situations, penned the brilliant and hilarious script for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and developed the award winning television series “M*A*S*H. In the same fashion, Gelbart’s work on *City of Angels* was wickedly clever, eliciting uproarious laughter while challenging audiences on an intellectual level.

Gelbart achieved this by writing a movie and placing it in the show. He explains: “*City of Angels*, in telling the story of the novelist Stine, offers the audience not only scenes from his life, but from his work,

as well. His work being the adaptation of one of his books into a screenplay built around a fictional hero and ex-cop named Stone. Those scenes add up to an onstage mini private eye movie—a shred of Chandler, a dash of Hammett, so to speak.”

City of Angels is essentially two shows in one with two interweaving plots. One deals with the writing of a screenplay, while the other depicts the enactment of said screenplay. Gelbart explains, “The result is a show that works on the twin levels of those hardy perennials, reality and fantasy. The *final* result, however, is a show that works on *four* levels. The third is achieved when Stine’s character, Stone, steps out of the pages of the screenplay to confront Stine in the real world, to insist that his creator maintain the same moral values he ascribes to his fictional alter ego. The fourth level, or the play-within-the-play-within-the-play-within-the-play, is created by having our actors play more than one role.” Directors traditionally communicate this double feature quality of the production by "color coding" aspects of the show. The movie scenes traditionally appear in shades of black and white while the real life scenes are in brilliant Technicolor.



City of Angels opened "cold" on Broadway on December 11, 1989. The show did not have the advantage of an out-of-town tryout, but that saved the producers about a million dollars in production expenses. The show featured David Zippel’s wisecracking lyrics, a first rate production team, and a remarkable cast. In the pit, the show included one of the "swingiest" bands in Broadway history. Not surprisingly, the show received rave reviews and enjoyed solid success. In 1990, *City of Angels* received eight Drama Desk Awards and six Tony Awards including Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical, and Best Musical Score.

The director of Goodspeed’s *City of Angels*, Darko Tresnjak, is delighted to share this sophisticated, sexy, and rarely-produced musical with audiences. He is thrilled to be able to draw on his personal experience to nurture and inform the creative process. Tresnjak grew up enjoying classic film noir and he remains a fan to this day. Living in Southern California for the past seven years has left him with an intimate connection to the region. Surely, Tresnjak’s personal relationship to *City of Angels* will add even more depth and authenticity to this treasure of the contemporary musical theatre.

Photo: Humphrey Bogart, Peter Lorre, Mary Astor, and Sydney Greenstreet in the 1941 film noir classic *The Maltese Falcon*.