



Ashman, Howard (1950-1991)

by Linda Rapp

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Award-winning lyricist and playwright Howard Ashman collaborated with Alan Menken on projects as diverse as the stage musical *Little Shop of Horrors* and the animated Disney film *Beauty and the Beast*.

A native of Baltimore, born May 17, 1950, Howard Elliott Ashman studied at Goddard College and Boston University and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from Indiana University. The aspiring playwright moved to New York in 1974, taking an editing job at Grossett & Dunlap to earn a living while working at his craft.

Ashman's early plays include *'Cause Maggie's Afraid of the Dark*, *The Confirmation*, and *Dreamstuff*. The last, a musical version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, was presented at the WPA Theater in 1976.

Shortly thereafter the theater closed, but it reopened the following year with Ashman as its artistic director, a post he held until 1982.

During this time Ashman began his musical collaboration with Alan Menken. Their first work, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, based on the Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. novel of the same name, was produced in 1979, with Ashman directing. The play had moderate success, but greater things lay ahead.

Ashman wrote the book, and he and Menken the score for *Little Shop of Horrors*, a musical based on Roger Corman's 1960 film. The play, which opened in 1982, was a spectacular success, becoming the highest-grossing off-Broadway musical. The show earned the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Musical.

The quirky story of flower-shop worker Seymour, his love-interest Audrey, and a monstrous man-eating plant became a movie musical in 1986. Frank Oz directed, and Ashman wrote the screenplay. Ashman and Menken received an Academy Award nomination for their music.

Ashman teamed with Marvin Hamlisch for *Smile* (1986), a musical stage version of Michael Ritchie's 1975 film spoofing beauty pageants. The show closed after a short run, but Ashman garnered a Tony nomination for Best Book.

Ashman reunited with Menken to write the music for John Musker and Ron Clements' Disney animated feature film *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Their work earned them a Golden Globe Award, two Grammy Awards, and an Academy Award for the song "Under the Sea," a catchy calypso number.

Ashman and Menken had another triumph with Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise's 1991 *Beauty and the Beast*, another Disney production. The film, not originally conceived as a musical, gained direction when Ashman was brought on board.

Ashman, who became executive producer of the movie, encouraged the writers and producers to put the focus on the Beast's becoming a person and also to turn props--a candelabrum, a clock, and a teapot--into characters.

Ashman's contributions added considerably to the artistic richness of the film, elevating it from a mere cartoon to "what we used to see on Broadway," in the words of Angela Lansbury, who voiced Mrs. Potts, the teapot. *Beauty and the Beast* became the first fully-animated film to receive an Academy Award nomination as Best Picture.

Ashman's work on *Beauty and the Beast* came when he was terminally ill with AIDS, a condition that he concealed even from Menken until after they had won the Oscar for *The Little Mermaid*. Tragically, Ashman was terrified of losing the opportunity to work and feared that "friends would be afraid to have their children sit on his lap, or to go out to dinner with him," according to Menken.

Ashman died on March 14, 1991. The following year when the title song from *Beauty and the Beast* won an Oscar as Best Original Song it was Ashman's life partner, architect William P. Lauch, who joined Menken in accepting the award. In a moving speech Lauch proudly declared, "Howard and I shared a home and a life together." He went on to note that this was "the first Academy Award given to someone we've lost to AIDS." Later he praised the Disney Company and the Motion Picture Academy for treating him as Ashman's survivor.

Beauty and the Beast bears a dedication to Ashman: "To our friend, Howard, who gave a mermaid her voice and a beast his soul, we will be forever grateful."

Until shortly before his death Ashman had been collaborating with Menken on the score for another animated Disney feature, Musker and Clements' *Aladdin* (1992). One of their works, "Friend Like Me," was nominated for an Oscar.

When Ashman could no longer work, Tim Rice was brought in as lyricist to complete the score.

Menken stated that Ashman "was the best librettist of our generation" and also praised his generous friendship, saying, "He was a tremendous support for a lot of people, including me."

Critics were impressed by the collaborative work of Ashman and Menken, and saw in them the potential to take a place among the great teams of musical theater. The music ended too soon.

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