



Hart, Moss (1904-1961)

by Richard G. Mann

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Moss Hart, a prominent American playwright and director, achieved great commercial success and popular acclaim. Nevertheless, throughout much of his adult life, he suffered from severe depression and other emotional problems that were intensified, and possibly caused, by intense anxiety concerning his sexual orientation.

Hart probably is best known today as the co-author with George S. Kaufman (1889-1961) of such quintessentially American comedies as *You Can't Take It with You* (1936) and *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1938). In collaboration with Irving Berlin, Ira Gershwin, and other composers and lyricists, he provided the books for several successful musicals, including *As Thousands Cheer* (1933) and *Lady in the Dark* (1941). Independently, he also wrote many other dramas and comedies for stage and screen. As director, he is credited with giving definitive form to such hits as Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady* (1956).

Recognition of Hart's place in queer history has been hindered by his widow, Kitty Carlisle Hart, who has tried to prevent access to any sources that might contain evidence of his sexuality. Carlisle has sealed Hart's diaries, his correspondence with other homosexual men, and many other personal papers, and she also has discouraged Hart's associates from speaking frankly with scholarly researchers. In effect, Carlisle is continuing Hart's own attempt to "heterosexualize" his life story by omitting details of his close relationships with Dore Schary and other homosexual men who are mentioned in his memoir, *Act One* (1959).

Nevertheless, in his pioneering biography (2001), Steven Bach presents extensive evidence concerning Hart's romantic and sexual relationships with other men. Although a few of his associates were willing to speak frankly with Bach, he had to depend primarily on information in publicly accessible documents. Fuller information about Hart's homosexual relationships must await the release of his personal papers.

Because he often characterized the theater as a refuge from the harsh realities of life, it is perhaps not surprising that historians generally have not attempted to investigate ways that Hart's plays reflect his sexuality or other aspects of his experiences. However, the assertion of Kurt Weill, one of his collaborators, that "Moss can only write about himself" suggests that his work may have significant autobiographical dimensions.

Background and Early Career

Hart was born on October 24, 1904 in a tenement on East 105th Street in New York City. Although Hart described his background as one of "genteel poverty," his family actually lived at a level of bare subsistence. Dominating the household in Hart's early years was his grandfather, Barnett Solomon, an unsuccessful cigar maker. The black sheep of a distinguished British Jewish family, Barnett Solomon was the uncle of the Symbolist painter Simeon Solomon, who became notorious because of his openly homosexual lifestyle.

Hart's account of his childhood in *Act One* recalls the sissy archetype. He maintained that his strong dislike of physical activities and his gentle personality isolated him from his peers. However, he found that storytelling provided a means for him to gain the attention and respect of other boys. He was introduced to the theater by his Aunt Kate, who took him to matinees at local theaters, beginning in 1911.

In October 1919, just as he was beginning eighth grade, Hart was discharged from school so that he could contribute to the support of his family. In June 1922, as a clerk at National Cloak and Suit Company, Hart scripted and staged his first theatrical production, *The National Review*, performed by other employees for a company event. In 1923, Hart sold a script, entitled *Oscar Wilde*, to silent film producer Louis Burston. Unfortunately, the only copy of the script was destroyed in 1924 in an automobile accident, which also killed Burston.

By 1923, Hart was working for George Pitou, a producer of touring shows, who called himself "King of the Road." Interviewing candidates for jobs, Hart made many lifelong friends, including George Cukor, then seeking work as a stage manager. In 1924, he wrote *The Beloved Bandit* with Eddie Eliscu and persuaded Pitou to stage it in Rochester and Chicago. On the train from Rochester to Chicago, Hart shared a sleeper car with actor Gerald Griffen, who inscribed sheet music for the show, "To Mossy--who knows that the Garden of Eden is not the one night stands or in a sleeper from Erie." In its "out of town" try-outs, *Bandit* incurred significant financial losses, which were among the factors that caused Pitou to close his business in 1925.

Newly unemployed, the handsome and charming Hart quickly made friends in coffee shops in the theatrical district. Among his openly homosexual acquaintances was Lester Sweyd, a former dancer and actor who had become a literary agent. Twelve years older than Hart, Sweyd was deeply attracted to Hart and resolved to promote his career. As a tribute to his protégé, Sweyd made a comprehensive scrapbook of Hart's life. The scrapbook included a studio portrait, inscribed by Hart "Here's that picture--sleep with it next to your heart" and by Sweyd "A Dirty Mind is a Perpetual Solace."

With Sweyd's encouragement, Hart became actively involved in the burgeoning Little Theater movement and directed a variety of plays for Labor Temple Players and other groups. Hart also gained both theatrical experience and income by working as a director at adult summer camps on the "Borscht circuit" and at the Brooklyn YMHA and other Jewish organizations in the New York area.

In 1926, Hart gained favorable reviews for his performance in a revival production of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, featuring Charles Gilpin, who had originated the title role. Hart's early work with Gilpin, the most famous African-American actor of his generation, is of interest because he later became a vocal proponent of equal rights for racial minorities.

Serving as his assistant at the elite Flagler Hotel in Fallsburg, New York in the summer of 1929 and later at several other venues, Dore Schary became one of Hart's closest friends. Letters, written in later years by Hart to Schary, suggest that they developed a passionate romantic relationship. In a letter apparently written in late 1939, Hart revealed his feelings for Schary: "we shall once again lay in each other's arms and taste the sweetness of sin--I love you very much." Hart concluded another letter, dated December 11, 1939, with "a large incestuous kiss to you."

In 1929, Sweyd actively promoted Hart's *Once in a Lifetime* to several prominent theatrical agents and indirectly helped Hart secure the collaboration of George S. Kaufman, one of the most successful comic playwrights of the era. Between February and September 1930, Kaufman and Hart worked intently on refining *Once in a Lifetime*, which became an immediate hit upon its opening. Because it was so widely imitated in later plays and movies, it is now hard to appreciate the originality of the storyline, concerning unsuccessful Broadway actors assigned to help improve the diction of former silent screen stars.

Hart at the Height of His Theatrical Success

The critical and popular success of *Once in a Lifetime* helped Hart gain access to elite New York society, and he quickly distanced himself from many of his early friends, including Sweyd, who, nevertheless, remained devoted to his memory for the next several decades. Concerned with impressing the famous individuals with whom he now associated, Hart spent much of his money on lavish clothing and furnishings, as he would for the rest of his life.

In December 1930, Hart traveled to California to work on the Los Angeles production of *Once in a Lifetime*, sponsored by Sid Grauman. However, he was unable to attend the opening on January 27, 1931, because he suffered the first of the many nervous breakdowns that were to plague him for the rest of his life.

After spending several months recuperating, Hart returned to New York, where he sought to forget his problems by working on several shows, including two popular musical reviews, which he created with Irving Berlin: *Face the Music* (1932) and *As Thousands Cheer* (1933). The latter turned out to be the most successful American musical show of the Depression era, and it certainly seems to have been helped, rather than hindered, by the controversies that swirled about it.

In opposition to those who wanted to preserve racial segregation on the Broadway stage, Hart insisted that the African-American singer Ethel Waters be given a featured role. After the opening, several newspaper critics loudly condemned the loose morality of the production, exemplified by the scanty clothing of the male chorus. The male lead of *As Thousands Cheer* was Clifton Webb, an elegant gay singer, whom Hart nicknamed "my blemish" and who was later to go on to epitomize the "film sissy."

To celebrate the successful opening of *As Thousands Cheer*, Hart undertook a South American cruise with Charles Lederer, a young MGM screenwriter. Hart described this trip as "doing a Noël Coward"--which may have referred to more than the concept of intercontinental travel. Hart and Lederer only got as far as Jamaica when they were removed from the ship, supposedly because of an unspecified illness afflicting them.

When Hart and Lederer returned to Hollywood, most of their acquaintances assumed that they were "an item." Hart seems to have been disconcerted by the comparatively relaxed attitudes to homosexuality that he encountered in the film community. In a letter of 1938 to Schary, Hart explained the discomfort and ambivalence he often felt in Hollywood: "I am fond of Hollywood--but I don't like the life out there. It's wrong--so wrong."

Despite severe insomnia and debilitating depression, Hart remained notably productive throughout the late 1930s. Between 1934 and 1940, he wrote eight plays with Kaufman and provided the scripts for three other successful shows (including the Cole Porter musical, *Jubilee*, 1935).

One of the most successful plays by Hart and Kaufman, *You Can't Take It With You*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1936. In defiance of Hart's apparent concern with conforming to mainstream society, *You Can't Take It With You* concerns a household of happy eccentrics who refuse to pay attention to the outside world as they do just what they want.

The initial Broadway production of Hart and Kaufman's *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1939) ran for 739 performances, a record for the era. The central character, Sheridan Whiteside, is obviously based on Alexander Woollcott, to whom Hart and Kaufman dedicated the play. An author, critic, and actor, Woollcott was a great celebrity in the later 1930s, although he generally is overlooked today.

A lifelong bachelor, who described himself as a "Fabbulous [*sic*] Monster," Woollcott managed to create an aura of sexual ambiguity. In his perceptive study of Woollcott's long and complex friendship with Harpo Marx, Ned Stuckey-French describes his carefully cultivated public persona as "the quintessential version of a certain modern gay style, a style that fends off sadness with wit and uses double entendres to hint at the

double life."

Hart and Kaufman vividly captured this personality type in their characterization of Whiteside--a role played by gay actor Monty Woolley in the initial Broadway production and in the 1942 film. Whiteside addresses Banjo, a character based on Harpo Marx, as "you fawn's behind"--an endearment that Woolcott frequently applied to Marx in real life. Another character in the play, Beverly Carlton, is an affectionate satire of Noël Coward. Further enhancing the "queer feel" of *The Man Who Came to Dinner* are references to such iconic figures as Oscar Wilde and Gertrude Stein. Although *The Man Who Came to Dinner* clearly has distinctly queer features, they would have been recognized as such only by those "in the know."

Despite their success, Hart and Kaufman ended their collaboration in 1940. The reasons for the dissolution of their partnership remain unclear, but Hart's ambition to write socially significant dramatic works in the spirit of Eugene O'Neill, one of his personal idols, may have been a contributing factor.

Hart on the Therapist's Couch

While in California in 1933, Hart began psychoanalysis with Dr. Gregory Zilboorg, a psychiatrist who had many celebrity clients; and he would remain in therapy for the rest of his life. By 1937, Hart was a patient of Dr. Lawrence S. Kubie, whose avowed specialty was the "conversion" of homosexuals to normative heterosexuality. Dubbed a "star fucker" by a disgruntled former client, Kubie's other long-term clients included Vladimir Horowitz and Tennessee Williams. Kubie tried to persuade both these men to give up their creative activities, because he believed that such pursuits enabled his clients to conceal from themselves the harmful consequences of their "perversions."

Until Kubie's retirement from practice in 1959, Hart met with him on a regular basis, usually having two sessions a day. As part of his therapy, Hart also underwent frequent shock treatments, often more than once a week. Many of Hart's friends recognized that his psychological state was not improved by this therapy. Lotte Lenya, for instance, wrote about Moss in 1944: "He is in an awful state. I am more than ever convinced that this Dr. of his is a great faker."

Although therapy seems to have done little to relieve his depression and constant insomnia, Hart became devoted to Kubie, and he conceived *Lady in the Dark* (1941) as a tribute to him. The "action" of *Lady in the Dark* revolves around the psychotherapy of Liza Elliott, a successful career woman who manages a leading fashion magazine. Intended as a musical with great dramatic significance, *Lady in the Dark* features a score by Kurt Weill, then in exile in New York, and lyrics by Ira Gershwin. Hart not only wrote the script, but he also directed the initial Broadway production, which starred Gertrude Lawrence and Danny Kaye.

As Bruce McClung has explained, Elliott's psychotherapy is conducted according to the guidelines followed by Kubie in his own practice. Furthermore, Hart embodied Kubie's theories about the supposed causes of homosexuality in the two principal characters: Liza Elliott and Russell Paxton, a staff photographer. Kubie held that both sexual "perversions" and deep unhappiness resulted from the "the drive to become both sexes."

Throughout *Lady in the Dark*, Elliott is identified as masculine. She wears severely tailored suits and sits at a "man's desk" in a "large and heavy" chair. Furthermore, she conducts her business affairs with rigorous authority and emphatically rejects any amorous advances from men. Yet Elliott envisions herself in her dreams as dressed in a conventionally feminine way and as involved in impassioned romances. In accord with Kubie's theories, Elliott resolves the conflict between her inner and outer selves by rejecting the "drive to become both sexes"; at the end of the end of play, she is more feminine in appearance and has opened herself to romance.

The conflict of gender identities is even more pronounced in the figure of Russell Paxton, who has flamboyant mannerisms and occasionally wears women's clothes. Paxton's homosexual orientation is

emphasized by his gushing descriptions of more masculine characters. Paxton corresponds with Kubie's emphasis upon the "feminine personality of inverts." Tellingly, while Elliott is able to find happiness through transformation, Paxton remains unchanged and unfulfilled.

Hart's therapy did not diminish his sexual attraction to other men. In the late 1930s, he had a prolonged affair and lived briefly with Glen Boles, a handsome young actor who gained a role in a touring production of *You Can't Take it With You* as Tony (the idealized romantic interest). Boles later wrote that his relationship with the sexually confused Hart ultimately inspired him to undertake a career as a psychiatrist, offering affirmative treatment to gay men in a homophobic era.

Also in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Hart became acquainted with Gordon Merrick, then an actor and later a literary agent and writer. According to his life partner, Charles Hulse, Merrick utilized Hart as the model for playwright Meyer Rapper, the central character of *The Lord Won't Mind* (1970), publicized as the first openly gay novel on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Otis Bigelow, who performed in *Dear Ruth* (1944), and several other men who acted under Hart's direction, have confirmed that Rapper is an accurate characterization of Hart.

As Hart did during the period of his association with Merrick, Rapper lives opulently at the Waldorf-Astoria, and he has many of Hart's distinctive physical attributes and mannerisms. Bluntly asking sexual favors of actors auditioning for parts in his plays, Rapper explains, "my analyst would never speak to me if I went into rehearsal with this situation unresolved. I might easily have a breakdown."

Marriage to Kitty Carlisle

On August 10, 1946, when he was almost forty-two years old, Hart married Kitty Carlisle (born Catherine Conn, September 3, 1910, in New Orleans). Despite her mother's insistence that she marry a wealthy man, Carlisle had remained single as she pursued her singing career. After appearing as a soprano in the Marx Brother's *A Night in the Opera* (1935), she realized that she was unlikely to be successful in the film industry. However, by the time of her marriage to Hart, she had gained national recognition as a nightclub singer and radio entertainer.

Hart's marriage greatly surprised most of his associates and friends, who assumed he was a lifelong bachelor or gay (or both), and some of them speculated that Hart was intending to fulfill Kubie's theories by adopting a "normative" lifestyle. In interviews, Carlisle has maintained that she received assurances from Hart that he never had any homosexual experiences before accepting his proposal. At the wedding reception at his house in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, Hart embarrassed Arthur Laurents and other gay male guests by suggesting that they all take off their clothes while there were "no girls around."

After getting married, Hart ended his friendships with many "out" gay men. It was widely rumored in the theatrical community that Carlisle forced Hart to do this, but she has publicly stated that she had no role in this development.

Following a performance by Carlisle in Terence Rattigan's *O Mistress Mine* at Bucks County Playhouse in July 1948, Hart proudly presented son Christopher (born January 14, 1948 in New York City) to the audience--announcing "Now they won't be able to say I'm gay anymore." Hart and Carlisle also had a daughter, Catherine Carlisle Hart (born June 17, 1950 in New York City), who has gained recognition for her strong support of AIDS charities.

According to their friends, Hart and Carlisle developed a close and mutually supportive relationship, and she offered him great emotional support during bouts of depression. They collaborated together on a number of theatrical projects. Hart's direction of Carlisle in the starring role in *Anniversary Waltz* (1954) helped to establish her on Broadway as a significant comedic actress.

Later Career

Following the dissolution of his partnership with Kaufman, Hart sought to realize his ambition to write significant dramas for the stage. However, with the notable exception of the musical *Lady in the Dark*, his "serious" plays received poor reviews and incurred significant financial losses. Hart was particularly disappointed by the failure of *The Climate of Eden*, which closed after only twenty performances in 1952. Hart based his script on Edgar Mittelholzer's novel *Shadows Move Among Them* about an emotionally tormented bisexual playwright, who finds refuge in an unorthodox mission and orphanage in an African jungle. Apparently reluctant to tackle a controversial theme, Hart simplified the central character by removing all indications of his bisexuality.

Although they generally received only lukewarm reviews, many of his later musicals and comedies were popular and financially successful. The exuberant musical review *Winged Victory* (1944) appealed to patriotic sentiment during the final stages of World War II. Although Hart maintained that the comedy *Light Up the Sky* (1948), concerning the difficulties of staging a play, contained some of his finest writing, critics complained that he had recycled material from earlier plays.

During the later phases of his career, Hart gained the greatest critical recognition for his film scripts, even though he preferred to write for the stage. His screenplays included *Gentleman's Agreement* (directed by Elia Kazan; recipient of the Academy Award for Best Picture, 1947), *Hans Christian Andersen* (directed by Charles Vidor, 1952), and *A Star is Born* (directed by George Cukor, 1954).

Historically, *Gentleman's Agreement* was important for its frank revelation of anti-Semitism in America. Hart succeeded in giving narrative coherence to a storyline that, with less skilled treatment, could easily have become pedantic. Judy Garland insisted that Hart was the only writer capable of devising an effective treatment for the musical remake of *A Star is Born*, and she agreed that he would receive a higher salary than she did for the undertaking.

Hart also gained great acclaim for his skillful and sensitive direction of many different types of theatrical presentations, and he is credited with developing the final form of such hits as the Lerner and Loewe musicals *My Fair Lady* (1956) and *Camelot* (1960). Both these shows went through long, complex, and stressful processes of development. Actor Robert Goulet and many others involved in *Camelot* have maintained that Hart behaved in a notably flirtatious manner toward him.

In 1961, Hart and Carlisle moved to Palm Springs, California, in the hope of finding an environment that would be less stressful for him. However, on December 21, he suffered a fatal heart attack.

Conclusion

From 1930 until his death in 1961, Hart was a significant presence in the American theater. On the basis of currently available evidence, it is clear that he had significant emotional and sexual relationships with other men, but that his attraction toward men was also disturbing to him.

In the musical *Lady in the Dark*, Hart articulated the ideas about homosexuality held by his therapist Kubie. However, *The Man Who Came to Dinner* may involve a more affirmative presentation of queer perspectives. When more of Hart's personal papers become publicly accessible, it may be possible to develop a more complete understanding of the interactions of his sexuality with his many professional achievements.

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