



Wright, Robert (1914-2005), and George "Chet" Forrest (1915-1999)

by Linda Rapp

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For over seventy years Robert Wright and George Forrest were partners in life and art. Together they wrote music and lyrics for film, stage, and club acts. They specialized in adapting themes from classical music into engaging tunes for movie scores and stage musicals.

George Forrest Chichester, Jr., later to be known professionally as Chet Forrest, was born in Brooklyn, New York on July 31, 1915. A musical prodigy, despite scant formal training he was playing the piano masterfully before he even started school.

In the early 1920s the Chichester family moved to Florida. By the age of thirteen Forrest had launched his musical career, playing in clubs in Miami.

He was also a member of the Miami High School glee club, through which he met his future life partner, Robert Wright, who was the club's pianist.

Wright, born on September 25, 1914 in Daytona Beach, Florida, had also taken early to music. By the time he met Forrest he was the conductor of a radio show.

Brought together by their shared love of music, Wright and Forrest soon began collaborating.

In 1934 Forrest, who was working at a Miami nightclub, played for an audition by drag entertainer Ray Bourbon. Forrest and Wright soon began writing material for Bourbon, who the following year took them on a nation-wide tour ending in California, where he helped them pursue their career in music.

At their audition for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Forrest and Wright played a dozen of the approximately eighty songs that they had written during the tour. Impressed with their work, studio executives signed them to a seven-year contract.

Wright and Forrest had already written songs or lyrics for several films when they were called upon to provide music for Robert Z. Leonard's *Maytime* (1937), which starred Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy. When producer Hunt Stromberg suggested that Wright and Forrest rework material in the public domain, they used musical themes from operas and from Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony to create new songs.

Throughout their career they were known for their refashioning of classical works as well as for their original compositions. They used themes from Rudolf Friml in Leonard's *The Firefly* (1937) and songs by Victor Herbert in the scores of W.S. Van Dyke's *Sweethearts* (1938) and Reinhold Schunzel's *Balalaika* (1939).

During their years at MGM Wright and Forrest were thrice nominated for Academy Awards in 1938 for "Always and Always" (for which they wrote the lyrics and Edward Ward the music) from Frank Borzage's *Mannequin*, in 1940 for "It's a Blue World" from Joseph Santley's *Music in My Heart*, and in 1942 for "Pennies for Peppino" from George Archinbaud's *Flying with Music*.

Cole Porter, who was working for MGM at the same time as Wright and Forrest, became a great admirer of the pair. When the studio wanted additional lyrics for Van Dyke's *Rosalie* (1937), he suggested that they "get the boys" to write them. Wright and Forrest willingly provided uncredited lyrics to the film.

The two wrote music and lyrics for dozens of films and shorts at MGM, the last being Van Dyke's *I Married an Angel* (1942), the movie version of the Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart musical, for which the studio wanted new lyrics to replace some by Hart that they deemed too risqué.

When their MGM contract ended, Wright and Forrest, who had already done some theater work, gave up writing for movies to devote themselves to the musical stage.

They soon had a hit on their hands with *Song of Norway* (1944, book by Milton Lazarus), a fictionalized biography of Edvard Grieg, whose music they adapted for the score. *Song of Norway*, which featured dance performances by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and choreography of George Balanchine, had a run of 860 performances on Broadway, the longest ever for an operetta in New York. The show also had a very successful two-year run in London beginning in 1946.

Wright and Forrest are probably best-known for the score of *Kismet* (book by Charles Lederer and Luther Davis), which was based on the music of Alexander Borodin and won a Tony Award in 1953. Immensely popular on Broadway, the show also had great success in London. A film version, directed by Vincente Minnelli, came out in 1955. The most popular song from the show, "Stranger in Paradise," has been recorded by many artists, perhaps most notably Johnny Mathis.

Not all of Wright and Forrest's works were box-office hits. *Magdalena* (1948, book by Frederick Hazlitt Brennan and Homer Curran), based on music by Heitor Villa-Lobos, was, in Wright's opinion, one of their finest efforts, and the music and lyrics garnered favorable reviews, but the show closed after only eleven weeks on Broadway. *Anya* (1965, book by George Abbott and Guy Bolton), a retelling of the story of the czarina Anastasia set to music based on the work of Sergei Rachmaninoff, also closed quickly.

Timbuktu (1978, book by Luther Davis), a reworking of *Kismet* with an all-black cast, including Eartha Kitt, enjoyed a modest run in New York.

Wright and Forrest's adaptation of Vicki Baum's novel *Grand Hotel*, called *At the Grand* (book by Luther Davis), closed out of town in 1957, but a revised version, *Grand Hotel* (1989, book again by Davis), directed on Broadway by Tommy Tune, was a great success, winning five Tony Awards. Wright and Forrest's "Let's Take a Glass Together" is a show-stopper and was a highlight of the year's Tony Awards show. Critic Ed Real called *Grand Hotel* "one of the great musicals of the past decadea complex and compelling work of theater."

In the 1990s Wright and Forrest returned to a work that they had begun three decades earlier with P.G. Wodehouse, *Betting on Bertie*, a musical about the Bertie Wooster character from Wodehouse's "Jeeves" stories. The project ended when Forrest died in Miami on October 10, 1999.

Forrest's passing brought to an end a loving and creative partnership of over seven decades. Wright followed his partner in death on July 27, 2005.

Wright and Forrest's professional career included work in film, television, radio, the cabaret circuit, and most notably the stage. The later was rightfully acknowledged when they were given the 1995 ASCAP/Richard Rodgers Award for their contributions to American musical theater.

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