

Incidental Music for Three Plays: LAURETTE - RASHOMON - DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Incidental music in straight plays has been a regular occurrence on Broadway, with many top composers creating the scores. From the Golden Age, that would include Alex North for *Death of a Salesman*, *The Innocents*, and a production of *Richard III*, Vernon Duke for *Time Remembered*, Laurence Rosenthal for *Rashomon*, Stephen Sondheim for *Invitation to a March* and *The Enclave*, Paul Bowles for *The Glass Menagerie*, to name only a handful. And that tradition carries right through to today. On this CD, we gather together three examples of terrific incidental music for the theater, by three great composers known mostly for their film work: Elmer Bernstein, Laurence Rosenthal, and Alex North.

Laurette, a play about the legendary actress Laurette Taylor, closed out of town before it ever reached Broadway. Judy Holliday starred, and it was meant that this show would show people she could play more than just the ditzy-smart-lovable blonde of *Born Yesterday*. Unfortunately, the play by Stanley Young was, by all accounts, not very good. Mr. Young was an academic, a critic, editor, and novelist, and had written four Broadway plays, none of them successful. Other than the playwright, the pedigree of the creative team was amazing. The director was Jose Quintero, the producer was Alan Pakula (at one point his soon-to-be partner in filmmaking, Robert Mulligan, was meant to direct *Laurette*), the sets, costumes, and lights were by, respectively, Peter Larkin, Patricia Zipprodt, and Tharon Musser. Besides the brilliant Miss Holliday, the cast included Joan Hackett, Patrick O'Neal, Bibi Osterwald, and Nancy Marchand.

From the beginning of rehearsals, everyone knew the play was in trouble. Mr. Young was apparently unyielding and unbendable about changing one single word of his play, much to the chagrin of Quintero, Pakula, the company, and most especially Miss Holliday. As Miss Holliday wrote in her journal:

"The writing, on reading aloud, turns out to be shoddy. It defies the actors to do anything but a stock performance. Pseudo-poetic *Ladies Home Journal* circa '40 – \$10.00 and a little box in the middle of the page. Stanley alternates between writing vitally and pretentiously. Just when it starts going someplace, it sloshes over into conventional banal sentimentalism."

Towards the end of rehearsals, Mr. Quintero threatened to quit unless he would be allowed to make alterations in the script. Young finally backed off, and Pakula hired writer Gavin Lambert behind the playwright's back. But Mr. Lambert's contributions apparently weren't any better than Mr. Young's. (Lambert would go on to write the novel *Inside Daisy Clover*, which would later be produced as a film by Mr. Pakula.)

Laurette opened at the Shubert in New Haven on September 26, 1960. While the reviews were unfavorable, the consensus was that somewhere in the mess was a play and that if they could find it then Miss Holliday might have a shot at giving a fine performance. The show moved to Philadelphia and opened on October 7th. There, some of the work began to pay off, and the cast and creative team's spirits began to rise. But it was short-lived. Miss Holliday missed a few performances, the reason cited being that she was suffering from a throat infection. That was not the real story, however – the problem was much, much worse. She'd been diagnosed with breast cancer. Pakula made the decision to close the show. Miss Holliday had a successful operation, but the cancer would return a few years later and eventually take her life.

How Elmer Bernstein came to write the incidental score to

Laurette isn't documented, but it's probably not much of a stretch to assume that Robert Mulligan, with whom he had done the film *The Rat Race*, may have recommended him to Mr. Pakula. The resulting eighteen minutes of incidental music is pure Elmer, some of it prefiguring the delicate colors that he would use for his masterpiece, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The music is scored for a small ensemble that never sounds small because Bernstein knew exactly how to write for small ensembles. This wasn't slumming for Mr. Bernstein – he obviously took the same care that he did with his film scores – the themes are beautiful and richly melodic in the classic Bernstein style.

Rashomon began life as two short stories written by the great Japanese writer, Ryunosuke Akutagawa. They were famously adapted for the screen by Akira Kurosawa in 1950. The film won an Academy Award and became an instant classic, telling the same story from multiple viewpoints.

In 1959, Fay and Michael Kanin adapted *Rashomon* for the stage, using many elements from the Kurosawa film that were not present in the short stories. The production, produced by David Susskind, opened on Broadway on January 27, 1959 and ran for 159 performances. The cast featured the then husband-and-wife team of Claire Bloom and Rod Steiger, and the supporting cast featured Oscar Homolka, Akim Tamiroff, and Ruth White, among others. The production was directed by Peter Glenville.

The reviews were mostly very good. Brooks Atkinson called it "A perfectly imagined microcosm of sound, color, and movement." Richard Watts wrote, "A stunning production," and Walter Kerr said, "A handsome and distinguished mounting of an inviting theatrical experiment."

The incidental music for *Rashomon* was composed by Laurence Rosenthal. Rosenthal, who was thirty-two at the time, had written the dance music for the Broadway musicals *The Music Man* and *Goldilocks*, and the original score to Arthur Laurents' play *A Clearing in the Woods*. He would go on to write several of the best film scores of the 1960s, including his classic music for *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, *The Miracle Worker*, *Hotel Paradiso*, *The Comedians*, and *Becket*, the latter three films all directed by his *Rashomon* director, Peter Glenville. He also wrote the score for the Broadway musical *Sherry!* based on *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. Of his score to *Rashomon*, Mr. Rosenthal wrote:

"*Rashomon* is a kind of pure theatre, a complex of color, sound, and movement. The dialogue is sparse and economical. Much of what the play says is conveyed by graphic and aural means, and by mime. The musical accompaniment for such a play performs a special function, often becoming an 'actor,' or at least a kind of inward counterpart of the actor's external manifestation of word and movement. What is usually background music in a play here becomes foreground music, propelling and igniting the dramatic action, rather than serving merely for atmosphere and sound."

The score is marvelous and very inventive, making use of certain traditional sounds of the Kabuki theatre and Oriental music – drums, high, whistling flutes, bells, sticks, gongs, all suggestive of Japanese music filtered through Rosenthal's musical sensibilities. Some of the instruments used include harp, vibraphone, hand-drums, Nigerian squeeze drum, Balinese and Burmese gongs, Chinese wood-block drum, Indian ankle-bells, Tibetan rice-drums, Turkish antique cymbals, an American dulcitone, an antelope horn from Africa, and others – all very exotic, and Rosenthal's use of them is masterful and colorful.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* opened on Broadway on February 10, 1949 at the Morosco Theatre. The result was an instant classic. Brooks Atkinson summed it all up in the first paragraph of his *New York Times* review:

"Arthur Miller has written a superb drama. From every point of view *Death of a Salesman*, which was acted at the Morosco last evening, is rich and memorable drama. It is so simple in style and so inevitable in theme that it scarcely seems like a thing that has been written and acted. For Mr. Miller has looked with compassion into the hearts of some ordinary Americans and quietly transferred their hope and anguish to the theatre. Under Elia Kazan's masterly direction, Lee J. Cobb gives a heroic performance, and every member of the cast plays like a person inspired."

The play ran for 742 performances, winning a whole slew of awards, including the Tony Award for Best Play, Best Supporting Actor (Arthur Kennedy), Best Scenic Design (Jo Mielziner), Author (Arthur Miller), Producer (Kermit Bloomgarden and Walter Fried), and Best Director (Elia Kazan). It also won a Pulitzer Prize.

Over the years there have been several notable Broadway revivals – one in 1975 starring George C. Scott, one in 1984 starring Dustin Hoffman, and the acclaimed 1999 production starring Brian Dennehy, which also won a slew of awards, including Tony Awards for Best Revival, Best Actor, Best Featured Actress in a Play, and Best Director. The point is, that the play seems to have lost none of its power or relevance through the years. It touched a nerve in 1949 and it touches a nerve today.

The incidental music for the play was written by Alex North. One of North's first film scores was for a documentary called *People of the Cumberland*, directed by Elia Kazan, who asked him to do the incidental music for a new Arthur Miller play about a salesman. And it was that incidental score and his incidental score to the Broadway production of *The Innocents* (in 1950) that caught the attention of Hollywood, where he would soon become one of the greatest film composers in history, turning out brilliant scores to *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Viva Zapata* (both for Kazan), *I'll Cry Tomorrow*, *The Bad Seed*, *The Rainmaker*, *Spartacus*, *Cleopatra*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and many others. He was nominated for fourteen Academy Awards, but shockingly never took home the prize. Ironically, he's probably best known for his song "Unchained Melody" (from the film *Unchained*) – that song, with lyrics by Hy Zaret, is one of the most recorded songs of the 20th century.

North's incidental music for *Death of a Salesman* is classic North, scored for a very small ensemble that somehow never seems small, but just seems right. He would later use many of the themes in the film version, but there's something about these lean and spare original versions that are haunting and wonderful.

Kritzerland released all three of these scores – *Laurette* was coupled with a Bernstein film score called *Prince Jack*, while *Rashomon* and *Death of a Salesman* were coupled together. For this release, we've put the three theater scores together and completely remastered them. Technology has come a long way since these were originally released on CD, so we asked Chris Malone, who is one of the best music restoration experts and who has saved many wonderful works from oblivion, to work his magic here.

— Bruce Kimmel