

Three Dance Episodes from *On the Town*

Leonard Bernstein

In 1944, Leonard Bernstein joined with choreographer Jerome Robbins to create the ballet *Fancy Free*, which depicted three sailors on leave in New York City. Oliver Smith, who had created the sets for *Fancy Free*, urged Bernstein and Robbins to expand the ballet into a full-length stage work. Betty Comden and Adolph Green — who, like Bernstein, had not worked on Broadway previously — were enlisted to create the book and lyrics.

Like the ballet that inspired it, *On the Town* follows the adventures of three sailors during their first visit to New York — their astonishment at the city itself and their romantic entanglements. Where *Fancy Free* had been a relatively simple ballet divertissement spotlighting the three sailors, *On the Town* evolved into an entirely different show, fleshed out with such memorable characters as Hildy the cabdriver, Claire de Loon (the libidinous anthropologist), and Ivy Smith, seen on a “Miss Turnstiles” subway poster, who also performs as a Coney Island belly dancer. *On the Town* lifted spirits during the dark months when World War II still had a distance to go before American life could return to normal, and it stands as a paean to New York, a valentine to a great city, a frolic celebrating the American urban spirit in all its zany audacity.

The sailing was not always smooth during the six months in which the team created *On the Town*. Both Bernstein and Green spent stints in the hospital — the former for deviated-septum surgery, the latter to have his tonsils removed. As a result, Comden and Green ended up crafting some of their unforgettable lyrics in more than usually sanitary surroundings. “The floor nurses and patients in nearby rooms were alternately amused and irritated by the singing and laughter that erupted from Room 669,” Bernstein’s sister, Shirley, recalled later.

By August, Bernstein had recovered sufficiently to travel by train to California to conduct some Ballet Theatre (now American Ballet Theatre) performances of *Fancy Free*. It was while en route that he penned “New York, New York”; ironically, this big production number, a virtual anthem to the nation’s largest metropolis, came into being as its composer was passing through Nebraska.

The estimable George Abbott agreed to direct the show. His participation not only guaranteed that deep-pocketed supporters would provide financing, but also led to a movie deal with MGM, starring Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra. When the film was made (1949), MGM declined to have Abbott direct, and because Louis B. Mayer disliked Bernstein’s score, it was

IN SHORT

Born: August 25, 1918, in Lawrence, Massachusetts; this year, worldwide events celebrate the centennial of his birth.

Died: October 14, 1990, in New York City

Work composed: the musical, June to December, 1944; in 1945–46 Bernstein revised sections of the show into his Three Dance Episodes from *On the Town*.

World premiere: the show *On the Town*, Broadway premiere December 28, 1944, at the Adelphi Theatre; the composer conducted the San Francisco Symphony in the premiere of Three Dance Episodes from *On the Town* on February 13, 1946, at the Civic Auditorium, San Francisco.

New York Philharmonic premiere: June 15, 1946, Sydney Baron, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: December 31, 2017, Bramwell Tovey, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 11 minutes

largely rewritten for the film — by other composers. Hershy Kay signed on as the show’s orchestrator (with contributions by Don Walker, Elliot Jacoby, Ted Royal, and Bernstein himself) and Max Goberman was hired as conductor. Bernstein, however, conducted the first theatrical performance when *On the Town* opened its ten-day tryout run in Boston. The critics were warmly disposed, though far from elated, and the song “Lonely Town” was cited as a standout in the score. After a certain amount of tweaking, *On the Town* opened on Broadway on December 28, 1944. It proved a hit and ran for more than a year.

In the wake of the show’s success, Bernstein crafted the Three Dance Episodes from *On the Town*. In the first section, Gabey (the dreamy

romantic among the three sailors) imagines himself not as a shy serviceman but rather as a great lover. The second is an evocative scene in which a young girl falls for — and is jilted by — another sailor, to the strains of the bluesy tune “Lonely Town.” The final Episode bristles with the snazzy strains of “New York, New York,” the biggest hit from *On the Town*.

Instrumentation: flute (doubling piccolo), oboe (doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet and one doubling bass clarinet), alto saxophone, two horns, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani, suspended cymbal, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, trap set, wood block, xylophone, slide whistle, piano, and strings.

At the Time

In 1944, sailors on shore leave in New York City, like the characters in *On the Town*, might have experienced:

The Stage Door Canteen — on 44th Street just off Times Square, where servicemen could mingle with Broadway stars like Helen Hayes, Alfred Lunt, Gertrude Lawrence, and Tallulah Bankhead. The hot spot was operated by the American Theatre Wing (best known today for the Tony Awards).

Women Taxi Drivers — like *On the Town*’s Hildy. Rationing of gasoline, metal, and auto parts during the war meant fewer private cars on the road, and increased demand for taxi service. With so many men serving in the armed forces, women took over driving duties.

Times Square, Dimmed Out — in May 1942, when New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia ordered that exterior building lights and advertising signs be turned off, or directed downward, so city landmarks would be less visible to potential enemy surveillance.

Brooklyn Navy Yard — where sailors would likely have disembarked on the East River. It employed 70,000 people ’round-the-clock during the war, producing the battleships *Iowa* and *Missouri*, among others.

Cris Alexander (Chip) and Nancy Walker (Hildy) in the original 1944 production of On the Town

