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THE FIRST TIME I WROTE A MUSICAL

By Ira Levin

I got the idea for it back in 1957, on waking after a night of heated lovemaking, the best time for getting fresh ideas. (Young playwrights take note.)

“Idea for a musical comedy: Girl jewel-thief vs. the world’s greatest detective, or a young rising one.” That was what I wrote in my bedside notebook that morning, September 28th. I was then, and perhaps still am, much under the influence of a book called *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. Its author, a Hungarian playwright and teacher named Lajos Egri, was big on conflict between determined characters. A female jewel thief and a male detective seemed like a perfect match-up.

Egri’s book had been assigned in a writing course I took at NYU. Since graduation I had written several television plays, a well received suspense novel, the TV and stage adaptations of Mac Hyman’s novel *No Time for Sergeants*, and a suspense play (today they’re called thrillers) that had been optioned but not yet produced.

Not a musical comedy though.

Yet the jewel thief and the detective seemed fit for nothing else. I immediately saw her leaping around the stage in her black cat-suit, snatching diamonds hither and yon, and him, not the world’s greatest detective but definitely its most idealistic and ambitious one, falling madly in love with his criminal quarry.

The idea germinated, in the form of bundles of notes jotted on 3x5 slips of paper, over the next few years, while the suspense play was produced – a four-performance flop – and I wrote two plays that had begun germinating earlier. One was produced, a comedy called *Critic’s Choice*, a hit thanks in large part to its star, Henry Fonda.

In May of 1961 I sat down with my bundles of notes and began writing what I was then calling *Cat and Mouse*. I undertook to write the whole thing: book, lyrics, and music too. The job – if anything that was so much fun can be called a job – was finished by midsummer. Scripts were mimeographed and my primitive musical notations, the fruit of a few years of childhood piano lessons, were transcribed by a professional copyist.

Then came the hard part – the submissions and auditions to and for the entire pantheon of producers and directors who were active then: David Merrick, Feuer and Martin, Hal Prince, Morton Da Costa, Cheryl Crawford, Irene Selznick, Frank Loesser, Kermit Bloomgarden... I could go on.

Everyone liked the book and lyrics. As for the music though...

I was stubborn – until that other play was produced, and folded after two performances.

My agent then was Flora Roberts, a plump mother hen with a melodious voice and the uncanny ability to juggle three telephone calls at once. Since her death in 1998, her first name has become The Legendary, and deservedly so. In the wake of that failed play, she sat me down and persuaded me to have lunch with one of her composer clients, Milton Schafer. He had written the music for the moderately successful *Bravo Giovanni* and a song cycle that Danny Kaye had recorded.

Milt and I hit it off well. He was enthusiastic about the book and lyrics of *Cat and Mouse*, and proposed to sketch out music for some of the lyrics without hearing my music.

The results, accomplished in a few weeks, were delightful, abundantly convincing me of the inadequacy of my own music. Milt and I agreed, with Flora's blessing and that of our wives, to go full speed ahead with a collaboration.

"Full speed ahead" took about a year. Some of my lyrics were retained, floating on Milt's music, and he wrote several new songs to which I wrote new lyrics. I also did some rewriting of the book. We were both painstaking almost to the point of madness, which is why the work took so long.

When it was done though, we got a prime producer – Herman Levin (no relation), fresh from his triumphant production of *My Fair Lady*. An ace director, Joe Layton, agreed to direct and choreograph for us.

But we had to wait one more year; Herman and Joe had another musical in the works, *The Girl Who Came to Supper*. And that, when it eventually came to town, was a disaster – such a huge one that Herman went into a depression, dropped his option on *Cat and Mouse*, and swore off the theater forever.

Joe stayed with us, though, and after yet another year or so of auditions and negotiations, we acquired two new producers, Norman Rosemont and Jerry Adler.

Then, all the way from Germany, the writer Gunter Grass threw a monkey wrench in the works. His new book, published here to much praise and major advertising, bore the title *Cat and Mouse*. Today a production might capitalize on the publicity, trusting potential audiences not to confuse a turn-of-the-century musical about a cat-suited girl

and a Keystone Kop with a somber tract about post-war Germany. Back then we all felt that a name-change was mandatory. *Drat! The Cat!* – a phrase lifted from the show’s opening number – was the best I could come up with. I didn’t like it then, I don’t like it now. Several critics didn’t like it either. (More advice for young playwrights: Never use two exclamation points in a title. One, you can get away with; two, no.)

Drat! The Cat! opened on Broadway on October 10, 1965, with Lesley Ann Warren looking smashing in her catsuit and Elliot Gould sweating in his uniform. (His wife at the time, Barbra Streisand, had given the show a pre-opening boost by recording “He Touched Me,” a transgendered version of his Act One ballad. I still have the opening night telegram she sent me, sweetly signed Barbra Gould.)

Audience reaction was enthusiastic, as it had been throughout the previews, but the critical reaction was fifty-fifty. Walter Kerr loved it but he was still at the *Herald-Tribune*. The man at the *Times* paid a lot of attention to the exclamation points.

Unfortunately the Philadelphia tryout had cost more than the producers had budgeted it for, in part because of the need to replace a featured actor who couldn’t retain his lines. No money was left for an uphill fight in New York, and *Drat! The Cat!* folded after eight performances.

The first time I wrote a musical was also the last time. I went home and set to work on a novel about a woman whose no-good actor husband allowed a coven of witches to get her impregnated by Satan.

But we all know that a cat has more than one life. In 1974, *Drat* had its second, a limited-run production Off-Off-Broadway. A third life came some ten years later, when a pirated recording of the Broadway production, lifted from the theater’s sound system, appeared on the shelves at Tower Records. Though the quality of the recording was poor, the entire score was there, along with the rumbling of the scenery and fragments of the audience’s laughter and applause. The folder of the FP was the one that Columbia Records had meant to use – featuring Lesley Ann in her cat-suit, what else?

Milt Schafer and I, though glad to have the memento, were outraged; our work had been appropriated without our permission and without payment. We talked about suing the company that produced the record, but then had second thoughts. The company was a small one and a lawsuit would be a costly nuisance; it couldn’t hurt, we decided, to have the score “out there,” being heard, even with poor tonal quality, by musical-theater aficionados.

Sure enough, during the next few years *Drat* became a “cult musical.” Ken Mandelbaum, the maven of failed musicals, cited it in his 1991 book *Not Since Carrie* as “perhaps the most delightful show to ever run a single week.”

Which led to the cat's fourth life. In 1997 a superb studio recording was made, with our permission and cooperation. The producer, Bruce Kimmel, dug up the original Broadway orchestrations and assembled a first-rate cast, including Susan Egan, Jason Graae, Judy Kaye, and Elaine Stritch. With the release of the CD, *Drat's* cult status grew.

And now, as I write this piece in May of 2005, *Drat! The Cat!* is enjoying its fifth life. Musicals Tonight!, a nonprofit organization that wisely uses only one exclamation point in its name, is presenting sixteen concert performances – one piano, eighteen talented actor-singers, one inventive director – in a small theater half a block down West 45th Street from the Al Hirschfeld Theater (then the Martin Beck) where *Drat* made its New York debut forty years ago. As Mel Miller, the artistic director of Musicals Tonight!, observes in his curtain speech, this production will run twice as long as the original. It's in its second week now, and selling out.

Will the cat have nine lives? One can only hope.

