

HERSHEY FELDER



IRVING BERLIN

STUDY GUIDE

GEFFEN
PLAYHOUSE

HERSHEY FELDER IRVING BERLIN

WORLD PREMIERE IN THE
GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE
NOVEMBER 11 – DECEMBER 21, 2014

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Hershey Felder as Irving Berlin: Research Notes for the Performance Song List

STUDY GUIDE WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY

Jennifer Zakkai

This publication is to be used for educational purposes only.

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SECTION 1

ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION



ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

RANDALL ARNEY



WELCOME TO *HERSHEY FELDER AS IRVING BERLIN*.

Hershey Felder is a longtime member of the Geffen family, and we are thrilled to be premiering his newest work about the life and music of this tremendous American icon. For years, Gil Cates suggested to Hershey that he take on Berlin as a subject. In the midst of exploring heroes in the world of classical music, Hershey wasn't inclined toward the subject. But in the last couple of years, Hershey has discovered and developed a story – a true “American dream” story that, needless to say, has a soundtrack we all know and love.

As Hershey's passion for the subject grew, he began a relationship with Berlin's daughters and has been able to gain tremendous insight into the man he is portraying. As always, he has combined biography, musicality and personality to create a rich and multi-faceted character. Through his storytelling, we are introduced to this complicated man behind America's most beloved and enduring music.

As director, Trevor Hay, a longtime collaborator of Hershey's, has helped to create the elegance and fluidity that is so crucial with this type of storytelling. With a team of superb designers, Trevor is able to transport us with ease through 101 years of Berlin's extraordinary life.

We have produced many of Hershey's plays, each unique and lovely in their own right. But having begun with Gershwin, Berlin feels like an appropriate next step in the American Songbook, and we are so pleased to be part of that journey.

SYNOPSIS

Through his unique blend of storytelling, acting and musical performance, Hershey Felder brings to life the inspiring story of songwriter Irving Berlin, who had a major impact on American popular music during the first half of the 20th century. Berlin's journey epitomizes the pursuit of the American Dream: after his family fled anti-Semitism in Czarist Russia and settled in New York City, he worked from an early age to overcome hardships and build a successful life as the composer of enduring songs such as "God Bless America" and "White Christmas."

RUNNING TIME

Approximately two hours. *There will be no intermission.*

PERFORMANCE NOTE

Racist terms are referenced and addressed in the early part of Irving Berlin's life story.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES

HERSHEY FELDER (Irving Berlin/Playwright)

Broadway, London's West End: *George Gershwin Alone* (Helen Hayes Theatre, Duchess Theatre). Composers Sonata 1999-2014 – *George Gershwin Alone*, *Monsieur Chopin*, *Beethoven As I Knew Him*, *Maestro: The Art of Leonard Bernstein*, *Franz Liszt in Musik* – at dozens of theatres across the U.S. and around the world. Winner of 2007 Los Angeles Ovation Awards, Best Musical and Best Actor for *George Gershwin Alone*. Compositions and recordings include *Aliyah*, *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*; *Fairytale*, a musical; *Les Anges de Paris*, *Suite for Violin and Piano*; *Song Settings*; *Saltimbanques for Piano and Orchestra*; *Etudes Thematiques for Piano*; *An American Story* for Actor and Orchestra. Worldwide live broadcasts, *George Gershwin Alone*. As director, Mr. Felder premiered Mona Golabek in *The Pianist of Willesden Lane* at the Geffen Playhouse in April 2012 and recently premiered Chris Lemmon in *Jack Lemmon Returns*. Mr. Felder has been a Scholar in Residence at Harvard University's Department of Music and is married to Kim Campbell, former Prime Minister of Canada.

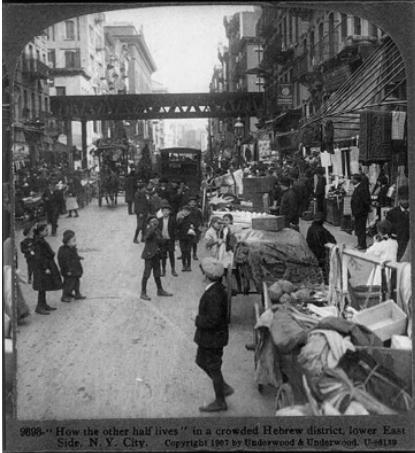
TREVOR HAY (Director)

Directed the world premieres of *An American Story for Actor and Orchestra*, *Abe Lincoln's Piano* and *Hershey Felder As Franz Liszt In Musik*. He is Associate Director for Mona Golabek's *The Pianist of Willesden Lane* and for *Jack Lemmon Returns*. Former member of the historic Old Globe Theatre in San Diego where, at the age of nine, his first position was selling Old Globe memorabilia. Over the next 32 years, Mr. Hay went on to various aspects of production on more than 80 presentations, including the Broadway productions of Jack O'Brien's *Damn Yankees*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and Twyla Tharp's *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. Included in his 23 seasons at the Old Globe were eleven seasons of the Summer Shakespeare Festival Repertory, as well as work on Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County*, directed by Sam Gold, and Hershey Felder's *George Gershwin Alone*, *Monsieur Chopin* and *Maestro: The Art of Leonard Bernstein*.

SECTION 2

THEMES & TOPICS

ESCAPE FROM POVERTY



1899- "How the other half lives" in a crowded Hebrew district, lower East Side, N. Y. City. Copyright 1912 by Underwood & Underwood. U-8118

TIN PAN ALLEY

(noun) A district in a city concerned with the production of popular music, originally a small district in New York (dictionary.com)

PHOTO CREDIT

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, [reproduction number, e.g., LC-USZ62-123456]

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/Russlmm
tinyurl.com/ParlorBio
tinyurl.com/WikilrvBer

Immigrants have long contributed to America's development economically and culturally, both through what they bring with them from their homelands and how they seek to better their lives once in the United States. By using his talents, working hard and persevering, Irving Berlin not only created security and stability in his life, he also enriched American popular song.

Born in 1888, Berlin fled with his family from Russia, when faced with violent uprisings against Jews, called pogroms, as well as economic hardship. In 1893 they settled in the poor and crowded Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City. Immigrant families and boarders, who helped pay the rent, often lived together in small apartments, sleeping on any available surfaces, including floors. Cleanliness was hard to maintain, and families often went hungry, especially if parents and children could not find work.

In Russia, Berlin's father had been a cantor – the religious official in a Jewish house of worship who leads a congregation in prayer through singing. In New York, he could only find work in a meat market, and died when Berlin was thirteen years old (or at age eight, according to some sources). Berlin, who was already selling newspapers to help support his family, soon left home, lived on the streets and sang in cafes to earn enough money for food. While a singing waiter in a restaurant, he created parodies of popular songs, which led to writing original tunes and getting work as a “creative lyricist” with a Tin Pan Alley music publisher.

After his song “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” became a hit in 1911, success followed in vaudeville; on Broadway, where he created 19 shows; and in films, for which he wrote 18 scores. He also owned his own theater and publishing company, which allowed him to control the rights to his songs. His relentless work ethic, which sometimes propelled Berlin to write a song a day, sustained a career that lasted 60 years. He lived to be 101 years old.

DISCUSSION POINT

Why does success – in learning, work, and life – require perseverance?

GIVING BACK

PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain from Pixabay

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/lrvBArmy

tinyurl.com/GBAmer

tinyurl.com/WikilrvBer



“God Bless America,” is sometimes called America’s “second national anthem,” after “The Star Spangled Banner.” It was introduced in 1938 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the end of World War I, brought comfort throughout World War II, and was sung at numerous commemorative events after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. While patriotic, the song was also deeply personal to Berlin; according to his daughter, Mary Ellin Barrett, it reflected his gratitude for all that he’d been able to achieve in America.

Berlin acted on his appreciation by assigning the royalties for this song – amounting to millions of dollars over the years – to the Boy Scouts and Girls Scouts of America.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Berlin continued to write songs and give away the proceeds to government agencies and organizations such as the Red Cross. He also created a stage show, *This is the Army*, which was performed on Broadway and at military bases all over the world. The troupe of 300 soldiers that performed the show was the “first integrated outfit in the U.S. Army.” Berlin insisted that African American and white troupe members not only perform together but also “travel, eat, and room together” wherever they went.

Berlin oversaw the production for three and a half years, and performed a song from a revue he’d created when drafted into the Army in 1918 (or 1917, according to some sources). Used to staying up all night to work, he’d composed a personal rant, “Oh, How I Hate to get up in the Morning!” *This is the Army* was later turned into a successful movie. The Army Emergency Relief Fund received over 10 million dollars from the profits of the stage show and film.

DISCUSSION POINT

What are some of the ways you have given back to your family, friends or community? What inspired you to do it? What was the impact, on others – and you?

AMERICAN POPULAR SONG

MELODY

(noun) The succession of single tones in musical compositions, as distinguished from harmony and rhythm (dictionary.com)

MUSIC NOTATION

(noun) Any system used to visually represent aurally perceived music through the use of written symbols (Wikipedia)

PHOTO CREDIT

Public Domain

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/WikilrvBer
tinyurl.com/ParlrvBer
tinyurl.com/CommlrvBer
tinyurl.com/PopWiki



Songs that arouse emotional responses in listeners and have wide appeal are known as “popular music.” They usually have strong melodies woven through verses that express feelings, and choruses that repeat and reinforce the messages of the songs. Berlin never moved outside these constraints as a composer – in fact, he seemed to thrive inside them. He had a knack for capturing feelings in simple words and putting them together in heartfelt and relatable ways. “What’ll I Do?” (1924) conveys a sense of heartbreak succinctly and eloquently:

*What’ll I do with just a photograph
To tell my troubles to?
When I’m alone
With only dreams of you
That won’t come true
What’ll I do?*

He was one of the few songwriters of his time who composed both words and music. Though he picked up singing from his cantor father and taught himself to play the piano, he could never read or write music notation. He would make up a melody then hire a music arranger to notate it and help set the musical accompaniment. While he did not have the skills to come up with this part of the music himself, he always had strong ideas about what would work harmonically. For this reason, he was thought to have an especially talented “ear” for songs, much in the same way imaginative designers are said to have a good “eye.”

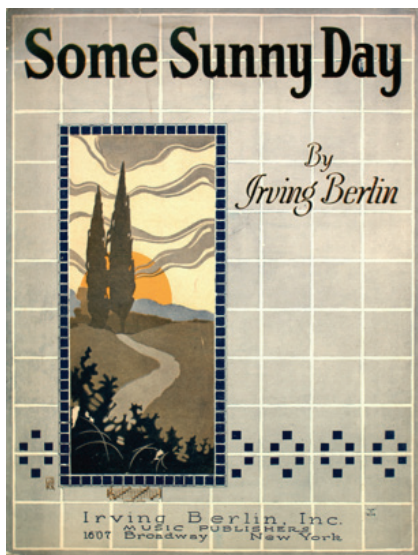


PHOTO CREDIT

Courtesy of the Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, The Johns Hopkins University

In addition to being naturally talented, Berlin was influenced, as were other songwriters of his day, by sources of American popular song that included European operetta, folk songs, and African American music, such as ragtime, which composer George Gershwin credits Berlin with introducing into American popular music.

As with the best songwriters, Berlin's musical choices deepened the expressive powers of the words, just as the words captured the feelings inherent in the music. The mellow, drawn-out then rising, more clipped notes of "White Christmas" complement the gentle sense of longing expressed in the first two lines:

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas

Just like the ones I used to know

Berlin was extraordinarily prolific and successful. He published 899 songs and, "...more than half became hits...282 of these made the 'Top Ten'...various artists' renditions of Berlin songs became the #1 hit of their day 35 times." Numerous well-known singers, such as Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Willie Nelson and Diana Krall, have recorded his songs over the years, and his classics, such as "God Bless America," "White Christmas" and "There's No Business Like Show Business" are still played to this day.

Popular song, like all art forms, has evolved over time, influenced by audience preferences – especially those of young people – and technology. The songs from Berlin's era fell out of favor, much to his dismay, when Elvis Presley and his brand of rock n' roll took off in the 1950s. Presley was eclipsed in the 1960s, when innovative British groups like the Beatles both built upon and broke with America's rhythm and blues to create new kinds of songs. Over time, popular music has come to encompass many different forms, including folk, soul, pop, rock, disco, punk and hip hop, which includes rapping and audio mixing, and has had a powerful impact on popular culture for decades.

Technology has played a huge role in the dissemination of popular music. In the 1800s, when music was played on pianos and sung live by families at home or performers in theaters, songs were distributed through printed sheet music. As tunes were recorded on wax and then vinyl discs, tapes, and digital systems, the devices on which they were played ranged from hand-cranked gramophones and electric turntables, to cassette and CD players, to computers and smart phones. Today, for many, a favorite brand of popular music is only a click away.

While songs have become more complex and sometimes fuse different musical styles, what is expressed has not changed that much. Human beings still long for and cherish loving connections with others, suffer disappointments, regret past mistakes and wonder about tomorrow.

DISCUSSION
POINT

As a young person, what was, or is, the popular music of your time?
How did it, or does it, touch your heart and mind?

LOVE AND MARRIAGE



BALLAD

(noun) A slow popular song that is typically about love (merriam-webster.com)

PHOTO CREDIT

clipart.com

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/ParlorBio

Some of Berlin's most enduring songs are ballads that express the attraction, devotion, delight and devastation that can course through the experience of romantic love.

A song that drew directly on his personal life, "When I Lost You," was written in response to the death of his first wife in 1912, five months after they were married. Dorothy Goetz, the sister of a fellow songwriter, had contracted typhoid while on their honeymoon.

The birds ceased their song

Right turned to wrong

Sweetheart when I lost you

A day turned to years

The world seemed in tears

Sweetheart when I lost you

Berlin later found love again with Ellin MacKay, who came from an affluent Catholic family and whose father was at first strongly opposed to her marriage to a Jewish songwriter who made his living in show business. They eloped and were happily married for 62 years. To her, Berlin assigned the royalties to "Always" (1925), a declaration of eternal devotion.

I'll be loving you always

With a love that's true always.

When the things you've planned

Need a helping hand,

I will understand always.

One of Berlin's most infectious love songs came from the movie *Top Hat* (1935), starring the legendary dancers Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Astaire's character used the Academy Award-winning song to woo Rogers' character – successfully.

Heaven, I'm in Heaven,

And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak;

And I seem to find the happiness I seek

When we're out together dancing, cheek to cheek.

DISCUSSION POINT

What is your favorite romantic song? How do its lyrics and melody convey how it feels to love or be loved?

STORYTELLING

Hershey Felder’s unique one-person musical biographies differ from traditional plays. Where he often speaks directly to the audience, in a play there is usually an invisible “fourth wall” at the front of the stage, behind which characters interact as if the audience is not there.

By alternating between offering narration and enacting a main character, as well as related characters, Mr. Felder’s presentations are akin to dramatic storytelling, in which events are described and brought to life, and the audience fills in the details with their imaginations. In traditional plays, as the story unfolds through the dialogue and behavior of the characters, the audience experiences the events right along with them.

WRITING ACTIVITY

Think of a pivotal event in your life (which you’d feel comfortable sharing with others) that had an unexpected or surprising result. What happened? What was the outcome?

Structure the event with a beginning, middle and end by describing what led up to the event, what occurred during it and how it was resolved.

If you were to share this event in a 10-minute time frame, what parts of the story would you narrate for your listeners? What kind of sensory details would hold their attention?

In what parts would you bring the people in the story to life? How would you use your voice and gestures?

Share your ideas for telling the story of the event, with a partner. Then reflect on any insights you gained about the event itself and how to tell the story effectively.

When you have the time, sketch out the whole story, internalize it, and tell it to one or more listeners – in no more than 10 minutes!

SECTION 3

PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANKIE OCASIO

What is your official title and how long have you worked at the Geffen?

I am the Executive Assistant to the Managing Director, Ken Novice. This coming January it will be eight years since I came to the Geffen.

What are your primary responsibilities?

I support all the administrative activities of the Managing Director's office, such as overseeing the calendar, setting up meetings, following up on contractual negotiations and meeting deadlines. I also stay on top of communications with other departments.

What is your background in theater?

As a teenager in Puerto Rico, I was into all kinds of dancing – ballet, jazz, modern. At the University there, I took theater to explore different ways to make a living. Acting was my major but I also worked in the technical and design departments. As a senior, I attended Cal State Long Beach, where I got a lot of experience in musicals. While trying to get work as a performer in LA, I made my living at the Long Beach Public Library; in addition to handling regular library jobs I acted out stories for children during readings. Frustrated with LA, I went to visit my sister in Germany and traveled all over Europe for three months. When I got back, a friend

asked me to help him write a play, which got different juices going and inspired me to get another B.A. at Cal State San Bernardino in Dramatic Literature, which taught me about plays, directing and dramaturgy.

What work led to your present position at the Geffen?

While at the University in Puerto Rico I took a break and joined the Navy for four years. My work as a Captain's Yeoman was like being an executive assistant, only for the captain of a large amphibious cargo ship. In 1996, musician Paul Simon and Steve Eich – the executive producer of Simon's musical, *The Capeman*, who later became Managing Director of the Geffen – called the performing arts center in San Juan where I was working to find someone to help with auditions. Through that process Steve and Paul brought me to New York to be one of the stage managers of the workshops and Broadway production. I was with the show for two and a half years, and stage-managed other musicals in New York, as well as regional opera, for several years after that. In 2004, after I'd moved back to Puerto Rico, I became the government's Special Events Officer and liaison for a huge cultural project with the Kennedy Center



in Washington, D.C., in which 23 music, dance and theater companies performed at the Center during a month-long festival. Throughout the years, Steve Eich had stayed in touch with me. During his last year at the Geffen, he hired me to assist him and learn about all the operations of the theater.

What do you find most challenging about your work?

I am committed to supporting Ken with the business side to help make the theater as successful as possible. I do miss the creativity of being a stage manager and directly involved with productions. But I've had many amazing experiences in professional theater that I can look back on with pride and joy.

What do you find most satisfying?

When Steve Eich called, I was ready to give up my gypsy life as a stage manager. At the Geffen, I am under the roof of my "temple." As long as I am in this theater, I am home. ■

SECTION 4

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

Going to the theater is a unique experience, and we all need to be mindful of “audience etiquette,” or how to behave at the theater.

The audience plays an essential role at the performance of a play. Without an audience, the actors are only rehearsing. Audience members’ concentrated silence and responses, such as laughing and applauding, provide energy to the actors as they bring the performance to life.

Since the actors can hear and see the audience, it is important not to engage in behaviors that might disturb or distract them – and fellow audience members. These actions include:

- Talking
- Texting
- Allowing cell phones to ring
- Taking photographs or video
- Getting up to leave before intermission or the end of the show (unless it is a true emergency)
- Eating or drinking
- Unwrapping candy or cough drops
- Touching or leaning on the stage.

Audience Awareness Activity: Before going to the Geffen Playhouse for the first time, compare and contrast the experience of seeing a live play with

- going to the movies
- attending a live sporting event
- watching television.

DISCUSSION POINT

If you were onstage performing a play, how would you want the audience to behave?

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Depending on the time available and your group members' interests, guide them to respond to the questions suggested below. Encourage everyone to participate, while having respect for differing opinions. Individuals can share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group. Then ask for a volunteer to share their group's answers with the larger group.

- Overall, how did you feel while watching the performance? Engrossed? Distant? Entertained? Tense? Bored? Excited? What made you feel this way?
- What did you find most impressive about Irving Berlin's life? Most surprising? Why?
- With which aspects of Berlin's life experiences did you identify? Why?
- What knowledge or insights did you gain about:
 - the Jewish immigrant experience in the U.S. during the early 20th century?
 - the relationship between perseverance and success?
 - popular songs from the first half of the 20th century?
 - the popular music industry?
- What is your favorite Irving Berlin song? How did it make you feel to hear it? Share specific reasons and details.
- What did you appreciate about the performance by Hershey Felder? Share the details.
- How did the set, lighting, sound and visuals add to your understanding of what Irving Berlin experienced in his life?
- If you could assemble up to 3 popular songs as a score for your life at the moment, what songs would you use? Why?

SECTION 5

RESOURCES

LEARN about Hershey Felder’s body of work in “Hershey Felder: Artists and Repertoire” in the October 2014 issue of *American Theatre*.

LEARN about Irving Berlin’s artistry and life; view photos and listen to recordings at tinyurl.com/FeinBer.

WATCH Irving Berlin’s *Holiday Inn*, which includes “White Christmas” sung by Bing Crosby – available on DVD at the Los Angeles Public Library.

WATCH Fred Astaire sing and dance with Ginger Rogers in “Cheek to Cheek” in *Top Hat* at tinyurl.com/AstRgsCh2.

WATCH Irving Berlin sing “Oh, How I Hate to get up in the Morning!” in *This is the Army* at tinyurl.com/BerMorn.

LEARN about Jewish history in the United States through an interactive timeline at tinyurl.com/JwHisLC.

LEARN about the lives of Jewish Russian immigrants on the Lower East Side of New York at tinyurl.com/RussImm.

LEARN about American Popular Song at tinyurl.com/ParSong.

LISTEN to NPR features on some of Berlin’s most iconic songs, such as “White Christmas” and “Cheek to Cheek” at tinyurl.com/BerSgNPR.

LEARN about the principles underlying effective storytelling at tinyurl.com/StorTell.

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And many more!



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