
There's No Business Like Show Business

Always: The Love Story of Irving Berlin

A play by Mark Nadler and KT
Sullivan

Prince Music Theater, 2006

Reviewed by Stephen Morse

“**R**umor had it that Irving Berlin could only play piano with one finger; there were lots of rumors.” With this line, Mark Nadler cheerfully opens the engaging *Always: The Love Story of Irving Berlin* at the Prince Music Theater in Philadelphia. Immediately the piano comes alive with a melody of Berlin’s greatest hits like “They Say It’s Wonderful,” “Now It Can Be Told,” and “Once Upon A Time Today.” From that point, the audience is transported to a bygone era.

This two-person show was conceived by Mark Nadler, who also stars as the title character and

sole musician, tickling the ivories just as Berlin did years ago. In the production notes, Nadler writes, “In the summer of 2002, KT [Sullivan, Nadler’s costar] and I were on our way to Australia to perform at the Adelaide Cabaret Festival. We had already created shows about the Gershwins and Richard Rodgers and we decided that the next master of the Great American Songbook to tackle was Irving Berlin.” But with 1,200 songs penned by Berlin during a career that spanned over 80 years, Nadler had to choose the repertoire for the play carefully.

Nadler chose well. Featuring many of Irving Berlin’s greatest hits, *Always* tells the story of Berlin’s life, combining a strong narrative structure with his best songs. Although Berlin was born a Jew and died a Jew, he was the genius behind the tune “White Christmas,” introduced to the masses in 1942 in

the midst of the Second World War. Berlin seemingly assimilated into Christian America with this hit, but the immensely popular tune put less of an emphasis on religion during the holiday season and inspired feelings of secularism, nationalism, and commercialism. Berlin did not deny his Jewish identity, but his ability to integrate his music into popular culture caused many people to forget that he was a Russian-Jewish immigrant.

The narration tells us that Irving Berlin was born as Israel Baline in Russia in 1888. Nineteenth-century Russia was a dangerous place for Jews due to frequent brutal pogroms. Nadler, in the character of the narrator, describes how Moses Baline, a poor cantor, decided that his wife Leah and their eight children (Israel was the youngest) could not live under such violent conditions, and so they sailed to America for a better life.

Nadler brings about many laughs as he integrates serious subjects with humor. He plays a jaunty tune while describing Israel Baline's trip to America in his second role as the Narrator. Then costar Sullivan chimes

in, "They settled on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, an area that's been called a gray, stone world where even on the most beautiful spring day, you could not see a blade of grass." It was there in Manhattan that Berlin learned English, having grown up speaking Yiddish. But rags to riches stories don't happen overnight. "In Russia, the Baline family had been incredibly poor, but in America, where the streets are paved with gold, they were even poorer," Nadler states. Times were difficult for the Balines—the family patriarch, Moses, never found steady work in America and died when Irving was thirteen.

But Israel Baline was an industrious youngster. He would wait on tables in the saloons of lower Manhattan. When he noticed that singing waiters took in more money than everyday waiters, he realized that he too could make money writing and singing songs. Before long, Israel Baline had become the primary wage earner for his family, thanks to his witty lyrics and original music.

The name Israel Baline couldn't cut it for a singer/songwriter. It lacked

edge. “He decided on Irving Berlin because Israel was a little too formal and Izzy a little too casual,” Sullivan explains. And thus, the great *American* songwriter was born.

In 1925, Berlin met Ellen Mackay during one of his performances at an uptown club. The two hit it off immediately. Mackay was a talented writer for *The New Yorker*, but she was also a Catholic girl and heiress to the Comstock Silver fortune. Clarence Mackay, Ellen’s father, was fiercely anti-Semitic and, as Nadler relates, refused to let the Berlin-Mackay marriage take place because Berlin was Jewish. But in a Romeo and Juliet moment, Mackay chose Berlin over her family and she was subsequently disinherited. Nadler and Sullivan complement each other well as the happy married couple and add chemistry to the stage.

Berlin and his Catholic wife raised their children as Protestants. Despite his own success, Berlin feared that his children’s lives would be more difficult if they were raised as Jews. World War II had a profound effect on Berlin, and he worried that the Nazi regime could one day invade America.

The first act ends in sadness when Berlin loses his first-born son. This event casts a pall over the audience, and I leave for intermission somewhat dispirited. But making the decision to return for Act Two proves well worth it. Dressed in different outfits, with a little more flair, Act Two is filled with the energy that was only half there in Act One. Nadler’s quick wit keeps the audience laughing despite the often serious subject matter. Humorously belting out classics like “Oh, How I Hate To Get Up in the Morning,” “This Is the Army,” and “To Be Home Again,” along with a dozen other tunes, the actors make the second act a showstopper.

The two actors pair up to sing a “World War Two Medley” that simply blows the audience away. During World War II, Berlin was too old to serve in the military. Nonetheless, he contributed to the war effort by writing the story and music for the early 1940s musical *This Is the Army*. This show was designed to raise soldiers’ morale and featured hundreds of United States servicemen as actors. During those dark days, Berlin’s masterpiece

succeeded in galvanizing the nation. Nadler and Sullivan incorporate several songs from *This Is the Army* into the play, and their energy recalls the importance of art as escapism for Americans in wartime.

Since he's confined to his seat at the piano for the entirety of the show, Nadler can't rely on fancy footwork or any acting besides his facial expressions. He occasionally uses his hands to gesture as he sings, but for the most part he must compensate for this limited mobility with vivid storytelling and musical talent. Nadler and Sullivan mangle some of their lines, but they redeem themselves with their delightful singing. The order of the songs does not match up chronologically to the years in which they were written, but that's part of the charm of Berlin: his songs are applicable and relevant to so many stages of life.

From the moment he rose to stardom, it was Berlin the American songwriter, not Izzy the Jew. As the composer of "God Bless America" (our country's unofficial national anthem), one can make the argument that Berlin

was as effective an assimilator into American culture as anyone. But his assimilation isn't without controversy. Berlin never wrote "I'm Dreaming of a White Chanukkah," but he penned the tune "Cohen Owes Me Ninety-Seven Dollars." This song has been the subject of debate in the Jewish world, as it perpetuates the stereotype that Jews are cheap.

Irving Berlin lived a long, prosperous, productive life, dying in 1989 within a year of his wife. He was 101. Despite being Jewish, Irving Berlin never wore the stamp of Judaism on his forehead. His ability to integrate with the American masses facilitated his success. He wasn't Irving Berlin, the Jewish songwriter. He was Irving Berlin, the American songwriter, and *Always* reminds the audience of just why Berlin was—and justifiably remains—one of the most popular American songwriters.

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