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Tickets to His Head: Larry Gelbart (1928-) as Writer and Adaptor.

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TICKETS TO HIS HEAD:
LARRY GELBART (1928- ) AS WRITER AND ADAPTOR

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Theatre

by
Jules A. Malarcher, III
B.A., Loyola University, 1983
M.A., St. John's College, 1992
December 1997
Frankly, it's a pain in the keester for me to have to shoot the God damn thing so everybody else can see it, but the studio can't sell tickets to my head, right?

—Buddy Fidler,

City of Angels by Larry Gelbart
DEDICATION

For my parents, who may not always have understood what I was getting myself into, but never stopped believing in me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first thank my adviser, Professor Gresdna Doty of the Department of Theatre for her generous and unflagging enthusiasm for my project. The other members of my committee, Professors Bill Harbin, Robert J. Edgeworth, Les Wade, and Femi Euba have all helped to make my study at LSU a productive, enjoyable and scholarly time for me. All of my teachers and fellow students have my thanks for their support of everything I have tried to accomplish there.

As for my subject, Larry Gelbart has my boundless gratitude for his assistance with facts and contacts necessary to complete this document, for the enjoyment his works have given me, and finally for the friendship I have received from him on a much more personal level. His family, especially his wife, Patricia Marshall, has welcomed me openly so that the facts reflect the man, and for that, my thanks. Also, my thanks to the curator of the Larry Gelbart Collection in the Arts Special Collection at the University of California at Los Angeles, Brigitte Kueppers, who has provided me with the best possible assistance through decades of material.

My family and friends know how much they mean to me, but I would like to acknowledge them formally for how much they have meant to this study: my parents, Jules and Juanita Malarcher; my brother, André, and his wife Ann; my sister, Renée: friends, who have provided places to stay on the road, a reassuring voice, or an extra pair of eyes.
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ABSTRACT

Larry Gelbart (1928-) has dominated the field of comedy writing in the latter half of the twentieth century the way George S. Kaufman (1889-1961) dominated the first half. Comedy, according to Gelbart, is a “tic—a way of making myself comfortable. I can’t imagine not having comedy to lean on. I tend to write things with a circus-like atmosphere. In my mind, there’s a circus—three rings—all the time.”

The three comedy rings in his head may be classified according to the areas where his unique talents especially emerge: (1) talent to adapt comedy from one medium to another, or from one historical period to another; (2) talent with words, to use precise language to detail character, layer meaning, or simply get the biggest laugh; and (3) talent to satirize—to show the world what his eyes see and his ears hear, and invite the audience to become angry, too. The rings in Gelbart’s head constantly rearrange themselves, for he has been an ardent student of comedy and the human condition throughout his career.

Gelbart, although involved in some of the most historically important or successful projects in radio (Duffy’s Tavern [1946], The Bob Hope Show [1948]), theatre (A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum [1962], Sly Fox [1976], City of Angels [1989], Mastergate [1989]), television (Caesar’s Hour [1957], M*A*S*H [1972]), and film (Oh, God! [1976], Tootsie [1983]), prefers to stay out of
the public eye. His work in radio, theatre, film, and television has paralleled the explosion of the entertainment industry in this century. Because of the large amount of collaboration and adaptation in his more than fifty-year career, it becomes a complicated subject for the scholar who endeavors to separate the material of a single voice in a writing room, or the contributions made to a comic masterpiece originally staged centuries before.

The examination of his remarkable career confirms Gelbart to be what his colleague, the writer-director Mel Brooks, called, “One of the funniest comedy writers that has ever lived. One of the truly great comedy writers of our epoch.”
INTRODUCTION: A WRITER'S THREE RING CIRCUS

A seemingly off-the-cuff interview, conducted with Larry Gelbart by talk-show host John McLaughlin, actually reached an audience on the CNBC television network in the spring of 1990. It reveals three truths of Gelbart's career: first, the broad scope and great variety of his work; second, the lack of public awareness of the man and his accomplishments; and finally, Gelbart's quick wit in what amounts to a classic comedy situation, an interview subject faced with less-than-skillful questions. For the sake of readability, the frequent laughter of the two men (and the audience) has been omitted from the transcribed excerpt:

McLAUGHLIN. Looking at your life, we find the following dominant facts: You were born in nineteen hundred and twenty-nine—
GELBART. Eight.
McLAUGHLIN. Nineteen twenty-eight?
GELBART. I hope the rest of the facts are better than that one.
McLAUGHLIN. Don't count on it.
GELBART. We're off to a flying crash. Go ahead. When did I die?
McLAUGHLIN. First question: How are you coping with the aging process?
GELBART. Oh, I guess so. Who knows? I never did it before, you know . . . I mean some of it—
McLAUGHLIN. You age once.
GELBART. That's it. If you're lucky.
McLAUGHLIN. So you're getting used to it . . .
GELBART. No.
McLAUGHLIN. But you're now sixty-one, and you're turning sixty-two this year.
GELBART. No, I'm sixty-two, turning sixty-three, 'cause we changed the birth date, right?
McLAUGHLIN. When's your birthday?
GELBART. February 25, 1928. I thought.
McLAUGHLIN. Pisces.
GELBART. Pisces.
MCLAUGHLIN. Ahhhh. Fish.
GELBART. Two.
MCLAUGHLIN. Nineteen twenty-eight, and in 1943—you were fourteen years of age—you went from Chicago, where you were born, to Los Angeles.
GELBART. [implying that This is Your Life is about to break out] Have you got my old schoolteacher back there?
MCLAUGHLIN. Is that right?
GELBART. That's right. Yeh.
MCLAUGHLIN. Fourteen years of age you lived in Los Angeles, and there you wrote comedy for... [grasping] Sid Caesar?
GELBART. Nope.
MCLAUGHLIN. No? Who?
GELBART. When I was sixteen, I wrote comedy for Danny Thomas, and went on to write for other people in radio.
MCLAUGHLIN. So you finished high school, then went to work.
GELBART. I went to work while I was in high school.
MCLAUGHLIN. And who else'd you write for? Jack Paar?
MCLAUGHLIN. Sid Caesar?
GELBART. Sid Caesar.
MCLAUGHLIN. Later on.
GELBART. Jack Paar in his first incarnation, when he came on as a replacement for Jack Benny during his radio season...
MCLAUGHLIN. The first major dramatic event in your life was A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum?
GELBART. Yes.
MCLAUGHLIN. And that was in nineteen hundred and [again, grasping] fifty-three?
GELBART. Sixty... two.
MCLAUGHLIN. Nineteen sixty-two?
GELBART. Right.
MCLAUGHLIN. I'm sorry. Nineteen sixty-two, and then you left town almost immediately and you went to London.
GELBART. Right.
MCLAUGHLIN. And you stayed there 'til 1971.
GELBART. Yes!
MCLAUGHLIN. Ah!
GELBART. The truth finally catches up. Right.
MCLAUGHLIN. Larry, I don’t want you to think that the dates of your career are not burned in my memory.
GELBART. I know. I think your memory's been burned up, is what it is. Too many dates...
MCLAUGHLIN. As long as it gets me through this show, Larry!
GELBART. Very good. And you call yourself a doctor! [pause] Yes?
MCLAUGHLIN. Why did you spend nine years in London, hanging
around Annabelle's,¹ and doing other cavortings, instead of
sticking—staying with the grindstone?
GELBART. It's a good question. It's a very good question. I don't
know, except by that time, I'd done twenty-two or twenty-three
years, depending on who the researcher is.
MCLAUGHLIN. Of work?
GELBART. Of work.
MCLAUGHLIN. That's not unknown, Larry, to do twenty-three years
of work.
GELBART. I know. I understand, but I think I was tired, and I think I
just took—
MCLAUGHLIN. Nine years off as a sabbatical?
GELBART. Yeh.
MCLAUGHLIN. Now, you weren't flush at that time, because you
weren't gaining the royalties and the revenues from M*A*S*H.
GELBART. That's right.
MCLAUGHLIN. So, then you came back in 1972 . . .
GELBART. Right. And was flushed.
MCLAUGHLIN. And you were summoned. Who summoned you?
GELBART. Gene Reynolds called me. Gene Reynolds was a producer
at Twentieth-Century Fox, and Bill Self, who was the head of TV
for Fox, had the happy idea of doing M*A*S*H as a TV series.
He sold the idea to CBS, and I 'signed on,' as they say, to do the
pilot.
MCLAUGHLIN. And you did ninety-seven episodes?
GELBART. Right.
MCLAUGHLIN. That's the first four seasons?
GELBART. Yeh.
MCLAUGHLIN. And you've been resting—that finished up when? In
1976?
GELBART. No, I finished in '76. The series—
MCLAUGHLIN. You finished in '76?
GELBART. Right.
MCLAUGHLIN. I'm trying to figure out what happened from '76 to . . .
[grasping] this great success [i.e., City of Angels]. Well, you did
. . . [clueless] . . . Tell us what you did!
GELBART. I did a series on NBC, called United States. Very, very
short duration, but a very prideful experience.
MCLAUGHLIN. Yeh. That was a success d'estime . . .
GELBART. Yes.
MCLAUGHLIN. Not a box office success.

¹ Annabelle's has been a "in" club in Berkeley Square in London since the '60s.
GELBART. No.
MCLAUGHLIN. [confirming] Yeh.
GELBART. No.
MCLAUGHLIN. Please, continue. [immediately] There are a few more of those that have milestoned your career.
GELBART. Milestones?
MCLAUGHLIN. Yeh.
GELBART. I guess Tootsie's a milestone. Oh, God! was a milestone, in a way . . .
MCLAUGHLIN. Tootsie was a milestone?
GELBART. Yeh, Tootsie was a milestone. Should we stop at Tootsie?
MCLAUGHLIN. You wanna tell us something about the other four that flopped?
GELBART. No. I got more than four that flopped!
MCLAUGHLIN. Well, we'll discuss those, but this is in a sense a . . . revival of you . . . City of Angels.
GELBART. Yes, I've had a talent transplant, and it seems to be working.2

Gelbart has dominated the field of comedy writing in the latter half of the twentieth century the way that George S. Kaufman (1889-1961) dominated the first half. Kaufman collaborated through much of his career, with writers such as Marc Connely, Edna Ferber and Moss Hart; Gelbart's body of work shows a similar pattern, with Woody Allen, Neil Simon and Burt Shevelove, among others. Kaufman, especially once he established himself as a director, became a much-sought-after script doctor.3 Similarly, Gelbart's has become one of the first names mentioned when a comedy screenplay needs help.

Gelbart has promoted his profession through a tireless advocacy of the writer in the Hollywood film industry, but more than that, through the high standards he demands of himself. As a writer, he commands the respect of his colleagues, who

---

2 McLaughlin, host John McLaughlin, CNBC, 29 June 1990.
3 See Meredith, Scott, George S. Kaufman and his Friends (New York: Doubleday, 1974).
recognize in Gelbart an artist who has performed every kind of service a writer might be called upon to provide: adaptor, collaborator, polisher, script doctor, mentor, teacher and even labor representative. Within his body of work, Gelbart's most overt defense of the writer occurs near the climax of his musical comedy *City of Angels* (1989), where the protagonist, the writer Stine, stands up for his craft:

> Jesus, where the hell is everybody when they first deliver the typing paper? Where are all the “helpers” when those boxes full of silence come in? Blank. Both sides. No clue, no instructions enclosed on how to take just twenty-six letters and endlessly rearrange them so that you can turn them into a mirror of a part of our lives. Try it sometime. Try doing what I do before I do it. 

Gelbart does not issue such challenges lightly. Throughout his career he has demanded increasingly better writing of his colleagues, collaborators, proteges, and himself. He rewrites television programs as he watches them, even though they may be *M*A*S*H* reruns of his own work completed decades earlier. Although Stine’s monologue seems to describe a lonely existence, Gelbart claims the opposite to be the case: “Writing isn’t lonely. You’re dealing with a million people, characters you’ve created, ideas, action.”

An examination of Gelbart’s career shows a tendency he says he has, “to be attracted to things that seem impossible—and many later prove to be.” His chosen field, comedy, he feels chose him: “It’s a tic—a way of making myself comfortable. I

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4 In 1977, Gelbart and Fay Kanin chaired the committee that negotiated the new Writers Guild of America, West (WGAw), contract with the producers and studios.
can't imagine not having comedy to lean on. I tend to write things with a circus-like atmosphere. In my mind, there's a circus—three rings—all the time. "9

The three comedy rings in his head may be classified according to the areas where his unique talents especially emerge: (1) the talent to adapt comedy from one medium to another, or from one historical period to another; (2) the talent with words, to use precise language to detail character, layer meaning, or simply get the biggest laugh; and (3) the talent to satirize—to show the world what his eyes see and his ears hear, and invite the audience to become angry, too. The rings in Gelbart's head constantly rearrange themselves, for he has been an ardent student of comedy and the human condition throughout his career. He understands well that sharpening his skills will in turn improve his ability to make serious social commentary.

In the course of his career, Gelbart learned to write for different individuals and media, always keeping the humor pointed and contextual. For example, the early episodes of television's *M*A*S*H* taught Gelbart a lesson about making the most of a half hour:

By the time we got through editing them, they didn't seem as good as I thought they were. . . . Invariably you shoot more than you need, and you start cutting down. The one thing you can't cut is exposition, so I found the shows that were highly expository weren't that funny, because all of the story set-ups were done in a rather plodding, kind of routine, way. . . . I realized that exposition ought to be as entertaining as possible, and sometimes I find myself guilty of overdoing it—of giving the audience a piece of information, but trying to make it so entertaining, that sometimes it goes by as just a joke or just a reference or just a cuteness, and not material to be stored. 10

At any point in his career, the three rings may vary in size, but they retain their fundamental significance. For example, early in Gelbart’s life, he learned the power of the story from his father, Harry, a barber. This power informs the ring of adaptation, since much of his work rests in shaping a story to fit his present audience and his present needs. From his mother, he learned that one may wither an opponent with wit, an example of the ring of satire. Finally, his love of words populates the ring of language with puns, Yiddishisms, malapropisms, reversals, and above all diction appropriate to characters as diverse as a Roman slave and an American head nurse in a war zone.

Apart from a handful of newspaper or magazine reviews and feature articles detailing some aspect of Gelbart’s career, usually plugging his latest work, and brief descriptions in biographies of his colleagues and collaborators, such as in Eric Lax’s biography of Woody Allen or Joanne Gordon’s scholarly assessment of Stephen Sondheim’s career, no comprehensive (or anything resembling a comprehensive) study of Larry Gelbart’s career exists.

One reason for this oversight may be the fact that Gelbart, although involved in some of the most historically important or successful projects in radio (Duffy’s Tavern [1946]), theatre (A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum [1962]), television (M*A*S*H [1972]), and film (Tootsie [1983]), prefers to stay out of the public eye. Still, Gelbart is one of the most respected writers of comedy in America today, respected by the very writers with whom he collaborates and against whom he competes. The collaborations and adaptations in Gelbart’s career may also contribute to the scholarly oversight—unless they are members of long-standing
teams and thus enjoy a substantial body of work, those who write with others, or
adapt the work of others, are relatively neglected when compared to solitary workers.
A career like Gelbart’s becomes a necessarily complicated subject for the scholar who
endeavors to separate the material of a single voice in a writing room, or the
contributions made to a comic masterpiece originally staged centuries before.

Moreover, sheer breadth complicates any examination of Gelbart’s body of
work: the several media for which he has written, and the extended length of his
professional career. Gelbart’s work in the various dramatic media—radio, theatre,
film, and television—has paralleled the explosion of the entertainment industry in
this century. For a sixty-nine-year-old writer to have worked in the “golden age” of
radio boggles the mind, yet Gelbart’s career has spanned six decades.

Rather than examine Gelbart’s work in a purely chronological order, and
suffer the enormous complications of a career that often tackled five, six, or seven
projects simultaneously, I have decided to focus in each chapter on one medium
within one period. The appropriateness of this breakdown surfaces most clearly when
one considers the very clean dividing line of 1963, when he moved to England: after
writing mostly for television in the previous decade, he used a theatre piece, *A Funny
Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), to break with television. Once in
England, he began writing and polishing several movies. The chapters, therefore,
contain headings such as “Film II: 1973-1985,” or “Stage III: 1983-1991.” When I
subdivided Gelbart’s career in this way, I found myself better able to examine his
evolving approach to writing, and how he adapted to the evolution of the
entertainment industry. I sought to discover not only how Gelbart’s writing
technique changed to suit the various projects, but also what lessons of the medium he absorbed, including the differing treatment writers receive in each medium or period.

My personal journey through Gelbart's career began in the fall of 1992, when I was studying Roman comedy (Plautus and Terence) with Professor Steven Schierling at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. He agreed that a paper documenting the connections between Plautus and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*—from a classical studies perspective—would be "entertaining if not scholarly." To my surprise and chagrin, no work had yet been done on the subject. After searching the Modern Language Association (MLA) bibliographies and several other sources in vain, I wrote a letter to Larry Gelbart at an address I found in a writers index. In my letter I pointed out that not only was there nothing written about the *Forum* adaptation, but also no comprehensive examination of his work. I asked him whether anyone was studying his career in depth, and if not, could I claim him as my subject? Two weeks later, I received an autographed copy of the *Forum* script, with the inscription, "To Jay Malarcher, When do we start? Best, Larry Gelbart."

For the purposes of this examination, the greatest resource has been Gelbart himself. From my initial letter to him in 1992 to the email we trade today, he has never allowed his busy schedule to interfere with thoughtful responses to my queries. He has been open, candid, and honest, leaving me to make connections and draw conclusions. When his memory failed to supply a needed date or name, his enormous archive at the University of California in Los Angeles has served my
purposes. In the Larry Gelbart Collection of the Arts Special Collections are papers—letters, scripts, clippings and contracts—dating back to his high school days. He has allowed me access to videotapes still in his personal collection, many of them containing interviews and features: the documentaries of television producer Michael Hirsh, who has chronicled much of Gelbart’s M*A*S*H (1972-76) experience, has proved especially valuable. Gelbart has also been vital in securing interviews with many of his associates, including Stephen Sondheim, Woody Allen, Jack Paar, and Cy Coleman, all of whose respect for Gelbart comes through clearly. Harold Prince, the Broadway producer and director, called my choice of subject “exciting and appropriate,” realizing how little has been published about such a significant figure in American comedy.

I conducted the interviews over the span of several years, some in person, and some over the telephone. I first met Larry Gelbart face to face in 1994, when I was fortunate enough to travel to London, where he still spends part of his summers. My research has also taken me to the Billy Rose Collection at the New York Public Library, which possesses the only videotape records of performances such as City of Angels; to the Museum of Broadcasting in New York, where I watched tapes of specials, Caesar’s Hour (1957), and other television credits of Gelbart’s; to the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, where I found six cents in an envelope within Bob Fosse’s archives; to the American Film Institute in Hollywood, where I found additional clippings and source material. In every place, I found myself laughing aloud, not only entertained by the scripts, but also always conscious of the treasure I have happened upon in studying Gelbart’s career.
Because of the popular nature of my subject's works, I depended a great deal upon material from newspapers and magazines. This study has also benefited greatly from the many and various sites on the world wide web, including several searchable archives for publications like the New York Times,11 wire stories about recent Gelbart projects, the authoritative Internet Movie Database (IMDb),12 and the score of home pages devoted to M*A*S*H.13 Another unusual source bears mentioning: the running commentary by director Sydney Pollack on a laserdisc release of Tootsie.14

The best writing in what follows belongs to the examples from Gelbart's scripts. His body of work deserves to be examined not only for its quality, longevity and variety, but also for its influence in broadening the scope of film, television and theatrical comedy.

11 www.@times.aol.com
12 www.imdb.com
13 For example, www.avimail.com/entertain/mash.faq contains a list of frequently asked questions about the series.
CHAPTER 1: L’ENFANT TERRIFIQUE

Early Life and Radio: 1928-1950

- Maxwell House Coffee Time (1944)
- Duffy’s Tavern (1945)
- Command Performance (1946)
- The Jack Paar Show (1947)
- The Joan Davis Show (1947)
- The Jack Carson Show (1947)
- The Bob Hope Show (1948)

’Shush!’ her mother commanded. ‘You’ll scare it away.’ Then she asked: ‘Is there someone here?’ Nothing happened. She asked it again, and suddenly their hands began rotating the table until the word Y-E-S was spelled out.

‘Is it you, momma?’ Mrs. Gelbart asked. Again the word Y-E-S.

‘Your granddaughter is here. Marcia. Do you want to speak with Marcia?’

‘N-O,’ the board replied.

‘This is me, momma. Frieda. Your daughter. Do you want to speak to me?’

‘N-O,’ said the ouija board.

Mrs. Gelbart glanced up and saw her husband in the doorway.

‘Momma,’ she said, ‘do you want to speak to your son-in-law, Harry?’

‘Y-E-S,’ the board spelled out quickly.

Harry rushed into the room, signaling frantically with his hands.

‘No, no,’ he whispered to his wife. ‘Listen, tell her I’m not in.’

If a sense of humor may be passed from parent to offspring, then writer Larry Gelbart has to be considered the recipient of some unusually dominant genes. His mother, Frieda Sturner Gelbart, born in Dumbrova, Poland in 1907, possessed, according to her son, “a fast, caustic and wicked wit,” the result of “being Jewish, coming from a shtetl.” Emigrating from Europe when she was fifteen years old, she

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1 The focal work of each chapter will be listed in small capital letters.
"was immediately put behind a sewing machine in a sweat shop in Chicago." Three
years later, she married Harry Gelbart.

Born in Jakobstadt, Latvia, in 1907, Harry apprenticed at age twelve to become
a barber, a career he continues to practice to this day. From Latvia, he began to
 corres pond with an Aunt Minnie, who lived in Chicago; at age sixteen, he sailed
 aboard the S.S. Germania to New York, with a railroad ticket to Chicago, seventy-five
 Latvian rubles, and two packs of cigarettes. Harry rented a room from his Aunt
 Minnie and Uncle Asher, who owned a grocery in Chicago, and his uncle got him his
 first American barbering job. Harry moved from shop to shop, raising his wage each
t ime, until he landed at Woolf's. Eventually Harry worked three locations: weekdays
 at Woolf's in the predominantly Jewish Lawndale community on the West Side,
 weekends downtown (in "the Loop"), and in his own home, after hours. Along with
 the acquired skills of his profession, Harry was perfectly suited to another aspect of
 the tonsorial arts: he enjoyed, and excelled in telling funny stories and anecdotes.

His clientele consisted of a cross-section of the Chicago population—
businessmen, entertainers, sports figures, and even gangsters. In time, and with his
move to the West Coast in 1943, Harry Gelbart could claim in his career to have
 bar bered Bugsy Siegel, Mickey Cohen, Max Baer, Barney Ross, Walter Winchell,
 Charlie Chaplin, David O. Selznick, William S. Paley, Gregory Peck, Kirk Douglas, and
 other celebrities, including President John F. Kennedy and, quite incredibly, Jack

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4 Irving Lehrer, "The Invisible Haircut," ts., in the Arts Special Collection of the University of
 California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Larry Gelbart Collection, (1954) 12.
5 Lehrer 14.

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Ruby as well. A sense of Harry’s world view might be found in his experience cutting the hair of Jascha Heifetz. He gauged the virtuoso violinist and told him, “With your hands you’d have made a great barber. What a waste!”

Larry Simon Gelbart, born to Frieda and Harry on 25 February 1928, spoke Yiddish for the first five years of his life, understandable enough, since he lived in the home of two Jewish émigrés from different parts of Europe. The young Gelbart noticed the relationship between his mother’s health, which was poor, and the subjects of her humor: doctors, medicine, and death. She made “brittle comments about anything that frightened her. I picked up on her humor,” he recalled. Once he began school, both elementary and Hebrew, Larry became a sponge for language. Thus, a third characteristic of Gelbart’s sense of humor—after his mother’s wit and his father’s stories—his fun with language, emerges as an environmental rather than a genetic trait.

Gelbart admits not having been a particularly good student; his only mention in the 1942 John C. Marshall High School (Chicago) Review portrays “Freshy Lawrence Gelbart” in a candid photograph reading a book. Of importance in the yearbook picture are Gelbart’s glasses, an accessory to his look that he has maintained throughout his life. Gelbart was perhaps not as bookish as the yearbook might indicate: he remembers that “We were not a house of words. There were no books in

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7 Harry Gelbart, letter to John Reznikoff, 26 Sept. 1995, UCLA Gelbart Collection, 1.
my house, except for a Passover Haggadah and the Racing Form. Furthermore, his parents were not exactly in a position to assist their son with English homework, since they were learning the language themselves. When not in school, Gelbart would often practice the clarinet and saxophone, or sit in on the bull sessions at his father’s place of business, absorbing the characters and the rhythms of their speech. Gelbart summarized the lure of the barber shop: “Jokes were the currency of communication. As soon as I was able to understand the jokes in English, I became fascinated by the storytelling aspect.”

His home town not only offered Gelbart a neighborhood barber shop for entertainment; Chicago possessed several movie palaces that, in the ‘30s and ‘40s, presented variety acts between features. On any given Saturday, Gelbart might see a Tracy-Hepburn or a John Ford film, and enjoy a live performance by the touring Ritz Brothers. In interviews throughout his life, Gelbart often points to the influence of the Ritz Brothers. Their brand of humor had to have impressed itself on Gelbart’s teenage mind: in a stage where the human brain absorbs languages and sharpens language skills, Gelbart absorbed English in the form of wit. A brief example or two of the Ritz Brothers’ style will illustrate the form and function of language in their routines:

HARRIGAN. This has gone far enough!
GARRYTY. It’s gone too far!
MULLIGAN. It’s even gone further than that!

10 Linda T. Dennison, “In the Beginning,” Writer’s Digest 75 no. 4 (April 1995): 38. Gelbart’s wife, Patricia Marshall, points out that their home in Beverly Hills is filled with books, and “it’s a sincere endeavor to show that he can read, and that he does read” (Personal interview 1 Oct. 1996).
12 Dennison 38.
13 The Gorilla, motion picture, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1939.
[The three, as detectives, interrogate a suspect:]
HARRIGAN. Where were you last night?
KITTY. Me? Why I—
GARRITY. Answer yes or no!
KITTY. I was . . .
MULLIGAN. What were you doing there?
KITTY. Where?
HARRIGAN. How should we know?
GARRITY. Besides, I don't like your looks.
KITTY. Did you ever take a good look at yourself?
MULLIGAN and HARRIGAN. Yeh!
HARRIGAN. Listen, where were you last night?
KITTY. I spent the night with Shakespeare.
GARRITY. Where is he?
KITTY. He's dead.
MULLIGAN, HARRIGAN and GARRITY. Dead!
MULLIGAN. A murder mystery!
HARRIGAN. Have you any idea who did it?
KITTY. Look, Shakespeare's been dead for hundreds of years.
HARRIGAN. Hundreds—This is a fine time to call us in on the case.
GARRITY. Say! But she couldn't have done it!
MULLIGAN. How do you know?
GARRITY. She can't be hundreds of years old.  

Harry Ritz, the most verbal of the trio, often played a foreign character and derived a great deal of his humor from puns: "Nein, nein, a thousand times nein! (turns to audience) That's nine thousand!"  

Besides the comedy acts on film and on stage, Gelbart also enjoyed the performances of big bands. His interest in music at this stage in his life perhaps outdistanced his love of comedy: in an interview about his time with the television series M*A*S*H, he alluded to the value of persistence and practice: "I started playing the clarinet when I was eight years old. By the time I was nine, I was getting pretty

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14 The Gorilla.
15 One in a Million, motion picture, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1936.
good at it. By the time I was ten, I was terrific." The many movies and acts that Gelbart witnessed in his early years would come to provide continuous fodder for his own creative output, and he would find himself sometimes working for, and with, the very people who entertained him as a youngster in Chicago.

In 1943, after Gelbart’s sophomore year at Marshall High School, Harry took the advice of his brothers-in-law who were living on the West Coast and moved his family—Frieda, daughter Marcia, and Larry—to Los Angeles. California during World War II was booming, and just as his parents had done in their teens, fifteen-year-old Larry Gelbart became an émigré destined for a better life in a new world.

Once he had registered at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles, Gelbart quickly became active in the dramatic productions of his adopted school. He also registered for classes in radio announcing and band, where he played woodwinds. He formed a band and helped support the family with additional income. On many occasions during the war, Gelbart would team with fellow Fairfax High School student André Previn (1929-) for piano and clarinet duets at the USO or Hollywood Canteen. He also earned extra money and school credit by working afternoons at the nearby Ace Slipcover Factory.

Because of the school’s proximity to the Hollywood studios, Gelbart came into contact with children of those in the movie business along with schoolmates who...

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17 Koslow 2.
18 Lehrer 40.
19 Larry Gelbart, personal interview, 7 Nov. 1996. André George Previn was born in Berlin, Germany, fleeing that country in 1938 and settling in Los Angeles a year later. Previn has risen in his field to become a respected conductor, composer, and pianist.
20 Koslow 2.
dreamed of getting into films themselves. He created monologues and brief skits for auditioning friends. One such sketch, written in 1943, was “WAC-Happy,” a scene between two young people, a teenage boy pretending to be a doctor, and a young woman in for her Women’s Army Corps physical pretending to be a fan dancer. A brief excerpt will illustrate its style and comic content:

BOY. Let’s see . . . do you have any habit forming habits?
GIRL. Well, I bite nails.
BOY. That’s not so bad.
GIRL. Oh, but I mean other people’s!!
BOY. Are your teeth good?
GIRL. All seven of ‘em.
BOY. How ‘bout your ears?
GIRL. All seven of ‘em.21

Gelbart wrote this dialogue for Carol Morris, the younger sister of actor Robert Mitchum, and performed it with her at an audition at Paramount Studios. His performance led to his own screen test, but nothing came of that.22 What one does see in the script, however, is a sense of the requirements of the comic form, but the set-up, “I bite nails,” is quite clumsy by Gelbart’s later standards, since it is not a normal idiom (missing the “my”). Still, one sees the fun with language that would characterize his later work (“habit forming habits”), and the use of unexpected repetition (“all seven of ‘em”) demonstrates his familiarity, at age fifteen, with the classic banter of the straight-man and comic, à la the Marx Brothers, the Ritz Brothers, or Abbott and Costello.23

21 Larry Gelbart, “WAC-Happy,” ms. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 7.
22 The part he tested for was won by the singer Mel Tormé (Gelbart personal interview 11 Oct. 1996).
23 Bud Abbott and Lou Costello were an American comedy team on radio and in films (fl. 1940s and ’50s). They are probably most famous for their “Who’s on First?” routine, in which Abbott played the straight-man manager of a baseball team to Costello’s perplexed player character.
Harry Gelbart had difficulty acquiring his California barber's license; to make ends meet, he gave haircuts in his home or the client’s, sometimes to people he knew from back East. One of his clients from Chicago, entertainer Danny Thomas (1912-91), moved out West himself, to work on Fanny Brice’s *Maxwell House Coffee Time*. Thomas had made a name for himself in the Midwest and advanced his career onto the national radio show in a segment where he played a “Walter Mitty-type” character called Jerry Dingle, a postman who took out his frustrations in the form of “quick responses he should have said” to the people who did the frustrating. Dingle would envision himself as that other person—“anything from a brain surgeon to a test pilot.”

Harry shaved Thomas at CBS each Sunday before his weekly radio appearance. On one Sunday in May 1944, he told his client, “Mr. Thomas, what you need is a good comedy writer.” When Thomas asked the identity, Harry responded, “My son, the comedy writer.” Thomas invited a submission, and Harry went home to have his son write an audition piece. Gelbart remembers that the offer “came totally from his [father’s] own imagination, his own ambitions for me and I guess for himself. It’s nothing we ever discussed; I did not encourage it and I was quite surprised when I found out he had done it.”

Gelbart wrote a piece that followed the formula of Thomas’s segment, and in his fantasy postman Dingle envisioned himself as a barber, a logical enough choice

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24 Lehrer 20.
25 Larry Gelbart, interview by the Oral History Center of Southern Methodist University, 15 Aug. 1983, transcript in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 1-2.
27 Gelbart Oral History 2.
given Gelbart's experience with the world of work. Thomas liked it enough to pass it on to the head writer on his show, Mac Benoff. Once he was accepted to the program, Gelbart would finish his classes every day at Fairfax High and head to Benoff's house to join the writing sessions. Some of the jokes he pitched—"not a lot, but some"—ended up on the air, and Gelbart felt "very encouraged." Even though he was becoming known to writers at CBS, the security guards around the studio assumed the young Gelbart was a starstruck kid hanging around for an autograph. For his two months of service to Danny Thomas and Mac Benoff, Gelbart received a total of forty dollars for what he calls his "mini-contract," money he spent on a new sports jacket.

However, forty dollars was not all that Gelbart would garner from his experience writing for Thomas. Besides the boost to his confidence, the sixteen-year-old managed to boost his career opportunities. George Gruskin, an agent with the William Morris Agency in Los Angeles, noticed Gelbart and offered to represent him. Gruskin had been a writer himself, and recognized Gelbart's talent and ability to hold his own with the writers on the Fanny Brice show. Since the "seasoned professional" was still underage, Harry Gelbart had to sign the agency contract for his son. It is impossible to underestimate the importance that the Danny Thomas break had on Gelbart's future; without it, Gelbart candidly admits, "I wouldn't have the life I have."

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28 Gelbart Oral History 3.  
29 Gelbart Oral History 5.  
30 Koslow 2.  

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Meanwhile, back at Fairfax High School, Gelbart participated in the production of his school's shows, being elected "Assistant Lord High," apparently a kind of producer's role, responsible for coordinating the writing of the script, and making sure everyone knew his or her responsibilities. Although Gelbart did not know his wife, Patricia Marshall, in high school, she reasons that another factor that shaped his sense of humor belongs to his high school years: he was a tall (gangly), bespectacled and not too good-looking teenager, and humor became his means to popularity and a certain comfort level. When he was graduated in June of 1945, Gelbart knew that college would not be his next stop, because his agent had secured him a position writing for the very successful radio program *Duffy's Tavern*.

*Duffy's Tavern* was the brainchild of Ed Gardner (1901-1963), who produced the show, directed it, supervised the writing of the script, and also starred as the bartender, Archie. The program was famous for its opening, a monologue in the guise of a telephone conversation between Archie and his boss, the owner who is never heard: "Hello, Duffy's Tavern, where the elite meet to eat... Oh, hello, Duffy." Gardner was, according to Gelbart, "like most great comedians, a wonderful editor," just as Bob Hope and Sid Caesar proved to be later in Gelbart's career. Whereas Gelbart had informally "pitched jokes" on *Maxwell House Coffee Time*, on *Duffy's Tavern* he became a part of a polished team, one that included head writer Bill

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22 Gelbart e-mail interview 21 May 1996.
23 Marshall interview.
34 Koslow 3.
36 Gelbart Oral History 3.
Manhoff and Sid Dorfman. Gelbart did not have a chance to work on the program with Abe Burrows (1911-1985), who would eventually write the Broadway classics *Guys and Dolls* and *How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. Burrows left *Duffy's Tavern* the day Gelbart started, although Gelbart readily admits, "I wasn't there to replace him in any sense." He worked with the highly respected Burrows two years later on *The Joan Davis Show*.

The kind of comedy present in *Duffy's Tavern* appealed to Gelbart, especially in the language-based humor: puns, ambiguities, malapropisms, and double entendres. "I loved playing with words and that show was mostly word play," Gelbart recalled. Although puns are certainly not a new comic device, the trend in American humor dating from the middle of the twentieth century may owe much to the experience of (mostly Jewish) comedians who, like Gelbart, acquired the intricacies of English through the lens of a first- or second-generation immigrant. An example of the humor derived from a confrontation with unfamiliar language may be found in this brief menu description in a monologue by Archie, the bartender: "What a dinner I got for them... Crespes Suzettes, Pate de Faux Pas... Milk-fed caviar... Breast of Guinea toast on hen... tarnished with parsley." Some comedians, such as the stand-up comic Norm Crosby (fl. 1960s), have built their careers entirely upon such malapropisms.

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37 Manhoff is probably best known as the author of the play *The Owl and the Pussycat* (1965). In the 1970s, Dorfman wrote several *M*A*S*H* episodes.
38 Gelbart Oral History 4.
40 *Duffy's Tavern*, radio program, 2 Oct. 1946, script in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 2.
Another type of humor present in Duffy’s Tavern and a staple of Gelbart’s later humor may be found in the corruption of the cliche, turning something trite into something new. The humor here is double-edged: not only does it arise from the alteration of the phrase, but also from the larger truth created thereby; e.g., “I been hobbing with big shots like Crosby and Hutton and Alan Ladd . . . and one can’t be cast among pearls without becoming a bit of a swine.” Gelbart’s play Mastergate: A Play on Words (1989), which turns the many cliches of political double-speak inside-out, owes much to the training Gelbart received in these early days. With regard to the style that Ed “Archie” Gardner cultivated, Gelbart observed that “You could learn what he was doing, and it served, in a sense, as my college education because I never went on . . . after graduating high school I was too involved with Duffy’s on a day-to-day basis. I felt that though I was losing something, I was gaining tremendous practical experience.” Actually, Gelbart enrolled in a night class at Los Angeles’ City College, but dropped the class after a few weeks because of poor performance in some writing assignments.

Although still legally a minor in 1945, Gelbart was treated well by his fellow writers, and he believes he “pulled his weight” with them. Gardner, whose opinion mattered most, given the many functions he performed, was “a very mercurial man, a very difficult man: but I was kind of a novelty. I only cost them $50 a week and so he could afford this kind of a toy that I was.” Gardner seems to have been amused by

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41 Duffy’s Tavern 3.
42 Gelbart Oral History 4.
43 Larry Gelbart, personal interview 1 Oct. 1996.
44 Gelbart Oral History 3.
45 Gelbart Oral History 3.
Gelbart's youth: his inscription on a signed publicity photo in the UCLA archives reads, "To Larry—L'Enfant Terrifique—from the old Frenchman/ Ed 'Archie' Gardner/Duffy's Tavern." Even the use of "terrifique" follows the pattern of word play that so typified the show.46

In the midst of his Duffy's Tavern tenure, Gelbart received his draft notice and, in 1946, reported to Camp Beale, in Marysville, California, for a ten-day indoctrination into the US Army. He was soon shipped to Camp Polk (now Fort Polk), Louisiana, which he located "two miles north of hell."47 A friend of Harry Gelbart's, Irving Yergin, interceded on Larry's behalf and helped secure him an assignment writing for the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS), which meant that he could be billeted in Los Angeles, at his parents' home. Once he had been promoted to sergeant, he even treated himself to [semi-tailored] "kind of officers' uniforms,"48 an attempt perhaps to improve his own self-image, and certainly in keeping with his lifelong habit of dressing impeccably.

Gelbart recalled that "It was a peculiar circumstance that I was young enough to be drafted and yet had already had some experience in civilian broadcasting."49 Since the war was over, the war-time staff had disappeared and a mix of civilians (one was future Jack Benny writer Hal Goldman) and a few servicemen generated the scripts for Command Performance, the radio show for which Gelbart wrote during his one year and eleven days in the army.

46 Gelbart relates another photo from Gardner was signed, "To Larry—who should become the world's greatest comedy writer, when he passes from puberty to adultery" (Gelbart handmade revisions).
47 Koslow 3.
48 Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS) interview, 4 Aug. 1983, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 11.
49 AFRS 3.
Gelbart familiarized himself with the format of the show, and soon became responsible for the weekly writing. Producer-director Claire Weidenaar found getting celebrities a bit more difficult after the war. Bing Crosby, Gelbart remembered, refused to appear any more, except when General Eisenhower offered to give him an award of some kind on the air. Still, *Command Performance* was able to attract some "very impressive people." The show itself was fairly straightforward, a mix of celebrity performers and military humor and letters. As the standard opening declared, "The greatest entertainers in America as requested by YOU, the men and women in the United States Armed Forces throughout the world!" Guests included singers and orchestras, comics, movie stars, and other personalities: Mary Pickford, Mel Blanc, Ed Gardner, Bela Lugosi, Kay Kyser, Frank Sinatra, Hedda Hopper, Judy Garland, Mel Tormé, Bob Hope, Edgar Bergen, and Jimmy Durante. Servicemen would write in with suggestions for guests and performances; one such request (though not necessarily during Gelbart's time on the program) was to have Betty Grable cook a steak on the air, a clever double fantasy. The letters were real or created; Gelbart explained that *Command Performance* would manufacture requests "If we were able to get a personality and no one had especially asked for him or her."

Examples of the kind of humor present on *Command Performance* may be drawn from an appearance Gelbart himself made 15 June 1948, a year after he had left the military. Returning as a guest on the show for which he had written, Gelbart

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50 AFRS 5.
51 AFRS 6.
52 AFRS 5.
delivered a monologue in the form of a letter to the current staff of the program:

"When I was in the army I had a swell commanding officer... a captain. You know what a captain is... that’s a second lieutenant with a thyroid condition." The rapid-fire monologue style with tenuous segues is reminiscent of Bob Hope, for whom Gelbart would soon be writing. Another example of a one-liner in Hope's style, which Gelbart performed: "But you know, everybody's going crazy over television. Of course, the sets are still pretty expensive. A fellow I know couldn't afford one, so he did the next best thing—he married a tattooed lady... But they got a divorce—he'd seen the picture before!"

Gelbart found a similarity between what performers delivered on commercial radio of the time and those he observed on Command Performance, since neither required costuming, rehearsals or memorization: "They walked in, they did it, they left. I mean, you could do that on Lux Radio Theater and get $5,000 for it, or you could do it at AFRS and do it for scale and the pleasure of having done it. But in neither case did you work any harder."

Within the military structure, Gelbart sometimes had to perform the odd night guard duty. He was given a service revolver and a holster, and as he remembers, "I had to hang around, I guess to prevent people from stealing jokes or something!" In spite of his military obligations, Gelbart found time to supply material for Duffy's

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53 Command Performance #336, radio program, Armed Forces Radio Service, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 3.
54 Command Performance #336, 4.
55 AFRS 7.
Tavern each week, since “nobody seemed to mind.” Working on more than one project or script at a time would become a common circumstance for Gelbart throughout his career.

Gelbart’s closest associate on Duffy’s Tavern was Sid Dorfman (1916-88), who became his writing partner. Dorfman and Gelbart collaborated on sketches for Gardner and his guests, and the two shared a desire to succeed in the business in more than an artistic way. When Gelbart requested a raise to $100 per week, and Gardner refused, both Gelbart and Dorfman left the show. By then the two had become a team and set out to make their fortunes writing for someone besides Gardner. They quickly landed an assignment writing for Eddie Cantor’s radio program, a two-week tryout period that ended after one week, when Dorfman contracted hepatitis. The Cantor engagement just “sort of fizzled out,” according to Gelbart, and no text of a Cantor-Al Jolson routine survives the stint.

Despite the fact that Gelbart had voluntarily moved from a secure and successful writing job on Duffy’s Tavern, he did not really have a firm job offer waiting. Luckily, Dorfman recovered and the two joined Larry Marks to write an “audition” script (the radio equivalent of a television pilot) for an unknown entity named Jack Paar (1918- ), who practically pleaded his way into doing a summer replacement show in Jack Benny’s CBS Sunday night time slot. The team finished writing the script in March 1947, and Paar and his staff recorded it inexpensively at

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57 AFRS 12.
58 Gelbart Oral History 5. Gelbart admits that Gardner did not usually fire writers, they just knew when they needed to move on (personal interview 9 Dec. 1992).
59 Jack Paar, P. S. Jack Paar (New York: Doubleday, 1983) 78. Paar has become a television legend for his provocative and emotional style as host of such shows as The Tonight Show (aka The Jack Paar Show).
the AFRS studios with a G. I. audience. When the record was sent around to prospective sponsors, Lucky Strike cigarettes immediately picked up Paar. He describes the show as “a different kind of radio program [from what] the big old vaudeville stars of that day who dominated radio were doing. We did not have a continuing theme, or running characters, or a story line.”

The show consisted of topical, bright satire, a precursor to the self-referencing media satire that has since been the trademark of comedians like David Letterman. Paar often became the object of the satire on his own show, since he was far from a household name in 1947. His first monologue ended with this postscript: “The management has asked me to announce that immediately after this program there will be ENTERTAINMENT.” Because the returning men and women of the armed forces could especially identify with Paar, who fought at Guadalcanal, the writers exploited the new headliner’s veteran status in order to connect him readily with an audience:

ANNOUNCER. Friends, have you tried Jack Paar, the new comedian who has his whole family raving about him? During the war you couldn’t get JACK PAAR ... but his Draft Board did ... and now that materials are available again, PAAR is back on your grocer’s shelf—and in three convenient sizes ... funny ... hilarious ... and...

GIRL. (giggle) Oh make him stop!”

Paar called his radio show “the biggest break for an unknown ever,” and his continued success as talk show host on television showed Paar to be a keen observer

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60 Paar 78.

61 “Audition,” The Jack Paar Show, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 4.

62 Paar “Audition” 10.
and a satirical commentator. The sponsors of the radio program did not understand the premise of the show: they expected characters with funny voices, situation comedy, and the simple structure that had made hits of shows like *Amos and Andy* or *Fibber McGee and Molly*. Through Paar, Gelbart, Sid Dorfman and Larry Marks were able to lampoon the medium that had given them their starts.

As a replacement for Jack Benny’s hit show, Paar probably had a good chance of landing some of Benny’s regulars as guests on his show. In the first show, broadcast 1 June 1947, Paar set up the following dialogue by posing the question, “Have you ever wondered what the Guest Star and the comedian really think when they stand up there and compliment each other?” In this excerpt, Dennis Day, a singer for Benny, and Paar, spar:

DAY. Jack, is there anything I can do to get your show off to a good start? ... (I hope he asks me to sing “Glockamorra” ... I do it great ... to hear me you’d think I was a native Glocka-Moron).

PAAR. Well, it would be nice if you sang one of those Irish songs you’re so famous for ... (If he sings “Glockamorra” again, I’ll blow my brains out!)

DAY. I’d love to sing an Irish song, Jack ... after all, I can’t deny that I’m a son of old Ireland ... (If he only knew I’m really an Armenian ... (Kitzel) Ho Ho Hooooo).

PAAR. What’s it going to be, Dennis ... (I’m praying it’s not “Glockamorra.”)

DAY. How about “Glockamorra”?

PAAR. (big) MY FAVORITE NUMBER!63

Less than a month after penning the Paar audition, Gelbart and Dorfman joined another staff to write for comedienne Joan Davis (1912-1961). By this time, and writing two shows concurrently, Gelbart was making $500 per week, a significant

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63 *The Jack Paar Show* #1, 1 June 1947, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 7. “Kitzel” in the text prompts an imitation of a recurring character on *The Jack Benny Show*. 

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improvement over Army radio and *Duffy’s Tavern’s* $50. Davis’s radio show, in contrast to Paar’s, was a more traditional situation comedy, sometimes referred to by the title *Joanie’s Tea Room*, a reference to the setting. The show featured the writing talents of Abe Burrows, the writer who helped shape *Duffy’s Tavern* in its first four years. The formula that made *Duffy’s Tavern* a hit seems to have influenced Gelbart’s new assignment, right down to the show’s opening, a telephone call—“Joanie’s Tea Room. Joan Davis speaking.” Sponsored by the Lever Brothers soap company, *The Joan Davis Show* had more plot and fewer musical performances than *Duffy’s Tavern*, but the writers retained the puns and classic give-and-take that had appealed to Gelbart two years earlier.

As a situation comedy, the humor could take longer to germinate, as for example, where Davis rails against her “dream man,” Doctor Crenshaw: “In the two years I’ve known him, he’s ignored me, he’s never held my hand, he’s never kissed me, never proposed to me, never paid any attention to me —so I’ve finally come to a decision. I’m gonna jilt him.” The joke is focused on a single word, “jilt,” but requires the elaborate set-up for the effect. When Doctor Crenshaw arrives, Davis scrambles to improve her appearance: “Give me a comb! . . . Wait a minute, why should I bother about a comb—I’m gonna give him the brush.” Again, the joke relies on a single word, but this time it is a pun.

Another technique of the classic American humor that Gelbart would learn from Burrows was the use of the “topper,” or follow-up joke that catches the audience with a twist. [Footnotes]

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64 *The Joan Davis Show*, 31 March 1947, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 2.
65 Joan Davis, 4.
in mid-laugh and spawns even greater laughter. A fine example of this is found in Davis’s farewell poem:

JOAN. (reading) To Ronald J. Crenshaw:
Joan Davis loved you and you mocked her
Out of your life you have locked her
It hurt her, upset her and rocked her
Right smack in the puss it socked her
You must have seen how it shocked her
You who were a physician

VERNA. Physician... why did not you say doctor?
JOAN. Seemed too obvious.

Gelbart describes Burrows not only as a head writer, but as an educator, “a very forceful character and very much conscious of the fact that he was teaching as he was working with other writers.” Burrows possessed an Eastern sensibility, which in itself appealed to Gelbart, whose Los Angeles was much more “bucolic” in those days. Burrows displayed “a fine sense of the non-sequitur,” and the example above, where the word “physician” follows nonsensically after all the rhymes for “doctor,” illustrates this construction perfectly. Gelbart took away from the Joan Davis Show a broader sense of what could be brought into situation comedy. As he explained, Burrows injected material that was “more surprising” than standard situation comedy, “where a line has to pertain to something.”

Working concurrently for both Joan Davis and Jack Paar allowed Gelbart to expand his grasp of comedy writing almost as one might learn genres of literature in

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66 Joan Davis, 7.
67 Gelbart Oral History 5.
68 Gelbart Oral History 7.
69 Burrows’ style certainly influenced his collaborator Frank Loesser’s song “Marry the Man Today” from Guys and Dolls, where Adelaide misses the rhyme for “me” by mistakenly joining “you and I.”
70 Gelbart Oral History 7.
two different college classes. He noted that the star of the show made a difference in the latitude given to the writers.\footnote{Gelbart Oral History 8.} For example, a firmly established character such as Archie on \textit{Duffy's Tavern} demanded a stricter style than the more plastic form of newcomer Paar.

Once Gelbart finished the ten-show commitment to Paar, which ended with some "emotional upheaval," he and Dorfman contracted to write for Jack Carson, whose other staff writer was Marvin Fisher. Gelbart remembers the experience as "fun," but not "very instructive."\footnote{Gelbart Oral History 6.} Beginning in the fall of 1947, he wrote (for $750 per week) a season of \textit{The Jack Carson Show}, whose cast included Eve Arden, Arthur Treacher, and Dave Willock. The show followed the formula of Jack Benny's, where the star of the show played "the star of the show, with cast members as friends."\footnote{Gelbart Oral History 6.} Once again, Hy Averback would act as the announcer on the show, which was also known as \textit{The Sealtest Village Store}, sponsored by Sealtest Ice Cream on the NBC network. The program ran 5:30 - 6 p.m. PST on Thursdays. In June 1948, his contract for Carson completed, Gelbart also dissolved his three-year partnership with Sid Dorfman.

During the summer of 1948, Gelbart rejoined writer Larry Marks (from the Paar show) as a partner. The two collaborated on Gelbart's "stand-up" guest appearance on AFRS's \textit{Command Performance}, 18 June 1948; however, the two moved quickly into a major opportunity: Bob Hope (1903- ) wanted to reduce his...
large writing staff and hire a few, well-paid, top-notch comedy professionals. Paar had made a joke in his broadcast a year earlier that described Hope's writers up to 1948: "I saw Hope's staff coming out of the office, and it looked like classes letting out at UCLA," a reference to the young, inexperienced writers Hope tended to keep.74 Gelbart was young, too, barely twenty, but had already several years' experience to market.

"Larry and Larry," as Gelbart and Marks signed their Hope material, joined Al Schwartz, Charlie Lee and Marv Fisher as the writing team for Hope's radio shows in September 1948. When Schwartz wrote for Hope in 1943, he earned $75 a week;75 five years later, with a smaller staff and larger success, Hope was able to start Gelbart at $750 a week.76

Writing for Bob Hope meant writing for far more than a radio program. "Larry and Larry" contributed gags to Hope's stage shows that toured America and American camps of servicemen abroad, as well as "punching up" movie scripts to give Hope more of a comedic impact. Gelbart recalled the enrichment process as "an arrangement between us where no team or writer did more than two jokes a page; otherwise the script would have run nine hundred pages and Hope would have said not one word that wasn't funny."77 Hope was, according to Gelbart, "enormously witty, quick, very quick... I noticed that there was a dichotomy in Bob; his best stuff, I thought, was off the cuff—his ad-lib stuff—that was reserved for his private moments."78

74 "Audition" 3.
76 Marx 240.
77 Gelbart Oral History 9.
78 Gelbart Oral History 10.
The humor that was broadcast every Tuesday evening had a sense of repetition, running gags, and standard set-ups. "We were like farmers rotating crops," Gelbart quipped. This type of comedy necessarily becomes repetitious in quoted form, but illustrates well the Hope style. His female lead on his radio show was Doris Day, a singer who possessed a dependable comic sense. Character actress Irene Ryan played a recurring role as Day's chaperone. The commitment to staff-written running gags is evident in these variations on pain jokes from three different weeks:

DORIS. What's the matter with you, Miss Ryan... have you still got the same pain?
IRENE. No, this is a new one... but it's much worse, the doctor can't find it... it's a traveling pain.
HOPE. You mean it moves around?
IRENE. Yes, it has to... my body is so crowded with other pains, there's no room for it to settle down.

IRENE. The doctor says it's what they call a stubborn pain.
HOPE. Stubborn?
IRENE. Yes... it doesn't move... it just stands there and makes all the other pains go around it.

IRENE. ... it's what they call an elevator pain.
HOPE. Elevator pain?
IRENE. Yes, and it's awfully hard to treat because it keeps moving... he has to wait till it gets stuck between floors.

One running "competition" on Hope's radio program involved his announcer, Hy Averback (who also announced for Jack Paar and Jack Carson), whom Hope

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79 Gelbart Oral History 10.
80 Doris Day appeared in many films, such as Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew too Much* (1956), where she introduced the song, "Que será, será," which became her theme song, for her television series, *The Doris Day Show* (1968-73). She also starred in *The Thrill of It All* (1963), by Carl Reiner with a story credit for Gelbart. Irene Ryan is most famous as Granny on the situation comedy *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-71) and the grandmother on Broadway in *Pippin* (1972).
81 *The Bob Hope Show*, 28 Sept. 1948, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 4.
82 *The Bob Hope Show*, 5 Oct. 1948, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 8.
83 *The Bob Hope Show*, 12 Oct. 1948, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 10.
treated almost as he would Bing Crosby in his films, as competition with the ladies. In
the following example, the Hope writers have Averback stealing Hope’s running
“Gregory [Peck]” line:

DORIS. How do you do, Hy. My, Bob, he certainly is well dressed.
HY. (slightly affected) Thank you, Doris. But this suit is really just an
old thing. My tailor designed it from an imported fabric—it only
cost three hundred dollars.
DORIS. That’s a lot of money.
HOPE. Yeh—twelve unemployment checks.
DORIS. Hy, I’ve heard you on the air many times and I’d like to tell you
that I admire you very much.
HY. I have so much more than Gregory—why should I fight it?
HOPE. Boy, that’s my line.
HY. Well, now you know how to read it.
HOPE. Look, Averback—if you’re not careful you’ll be back wiping off
records for Arthur Godfrey.84

Hope’s comedy was topical, especially in monologues, and challenged his
writers to know what went on in the entertainment business, politics, and the world.
In the following example, Hope alludes to singer Mel Tormé, who was very popular
competition for Hope. He also generously shifts roles of straight-man and comic, a
skill that few performers even attempt:

HOPE. Singers, huh? Who’s your favorite?
HALOP. Well, my boy is Mel Tormé. He sends me. Does he send you,
Mr. Hope?
HOPE. He’s too small to send me—he just gives me a shove. But
aren’t you a little old to be a swooner?
HALOP. Oh, I don’t swoon. I just sit at home and get dizzy spells.85

Gelbart participated in many of Hope’s tours of bases around the world,
including the Berlin Airlift of 1949 and a trip to Korea a year later. Gelbart considered

84 *The Bob Hope Show*, 14 Sept. 1948, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, sc. 6, 1-2.
85 *The Bob Hope Show*, 14 Sept. 1948, sc. 4, 1.
the trips to be a far superior education to what he would have experienced had he entered an ordinary college program after graduation from Fairfax High. He also gained experience writing quickly, a skill that complemented his natural, off-hand wit. Hope provided an insight into these ad-lib writing assignments when he related that

Once we were in the middle of landing at a small base and when I saw we didn't have a paved landing strip, I hollered at them, 'Quick—give me some unpaved-landing jokes!' and by the time the wheels hit the ground, I was ready to greet the soldiers with 'I want to thank all the guys who mowed the runway for me.'

Korea figured importantly in Gelbart's future experience with the television series *M*A*S*H*, as he had a first-hand knowledge of what the Korean War was like "before MacArthur landed at Inchon." This touring "education" in the late '40s was paying him $1,000 each week, enough to buy himself a Cadillac convertible.

Writing for Hope was a group effort, but each writer or team (Larry and Larry, for example) was responsible for a segment, and everyone contributed to the monologue. Gelbart once described the process to an interviewer:

Hope's method was to read each monologue, with you there, and if he liked a joke he would put a check next to it on the left-hand margin. He would go through everybody's stuff and do that. And then he'd go right back to the first one again and read it all again and if that joke held up he would put a straight line through his first mark, making it sort of a cross that was a check also. If the joke held up after a third and final reading, he would circle the crossed check. So at the end of this process he'd have forty or fifty jokes that he really liked. Next came cutting out with scissors—the finalists—and pasting them together in a sequence. Then the sequence would get juggled.

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87 Marx 241.
88 Lehrer 51.
89 Gelbart Oral History 11.
Once during this paring down of the material, Gelbart tested the process by inserting a few intentionally lame jokes; some lasted to the final list. Gelbart reacted, “You’re kidding. It’s going to sound like a Hope monologue.” Hope became very upset, one of the very few times he and the entertainer had an unpleasant moment.

Because Hope’s radio program was on Tuesday nights, it was competing against the new medium of television in its most formidable person, Milton Berle (1908- ), known and beloved as “Uncle Miltie.” Most television history books relate the feud between Berle and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen (“Uncle Fultie”), who had competing time slots on the NBC and Dumont networks, respectively; few, if any, indicate the toll it took on Bob Hope and his weekly radio show. Hope became more nervous and fretful about radio; he feared going to television, and when offers came his way, he named ludicrously high prices. When one high price was accepted by NBC, Hope had no choice but to take the plunge.

Gelbart made the move from radio to television with Hope. His early experience in television would build on the education he received in radio: the wit and weight of an Ed Gardner wordplay, the self-referencing humor of Jack Paar, the surprises of Abe Burrows, and the perfection of a Hope one-liner. Gelbart, who had

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90 Gelbart Oral History 11.
91 Milton Berle, a “slapstick comedian,” was born in New York City. He was a “child actor in vaudeville and silent films. Berle was widely known for stealing material from other comics, with great success in nightclubs and on stage in the 1930s and 1940s. His visual, aggressive style of comedy carried little impact on radio, but the crazy costumes, grotesque makeup, and burlesque skits were credited with booming sales of television sets and keeping people at home on Tuesday nights” (Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia—AOL). Roman Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen gave inspirational lectures and sermons, and quickly became a familiar face on television. On Life is Worth Living (the formal title of the show), he would sometimes interject humor into his talks on morality and catechism, and acknowledged television’s demand for the visual by incorporating a blackboard on which he diagrammed his lessons (Brooks 350).
92 Marx 269.
gone from watching touring variety shows in his teens in Chicago to writing one of the most popular television shows of its time in his twenties, possessed the right kind of perspective to quip, "Vaudeville is dead, and TV is the box they put it in."  

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93 "The American Film Institute Seminar with Larry Gelbart," 16 April 1980, #T620, transcript in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 26.
CHAPTER 2: A CAVALCADE OF WRITERS

Television I: 1950-1963

- Specials
- *The Red Buttons Show* (1952)
- *Honestly, Celeste!* (1954)
- *Caesar’s Hour* (1956)
- *The Patrice Munsel Show* (1958)
- *Pat Boone Chevy Showroom* (1958)
- *The Danny Kaye Show* (1963)

The decade of the 1950s was one of experimentation by the creators of television programming. Not many people knew what to do with the new medium, and television historian Erik Barnouw has called 1948-1952, “a laboratory period.”¹ On any given night, one might see in a limited number of cities a limited lineup that included boxing and a game show based on charades. Little was produced specifically for the peculiar capabilities and requirements of TV. In the late ’40s, Larry Gelbart got his first glimpse of the most influential personality in the infancy of television comedy: Milton Berle. Berle was the Tuesday night competition for Bob Hope’s radio program, for which Gelbart and his partner, Larry Marks, were writing.

Hope had toyed with the idea of television, but according to one of his writers, Mel Shavelson, Hope’s initial experience was a disaster.² Paramount Pictures in Los Angeles had built an experimental television station and Hope and his staff mounted a

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ninety-minute show in 1947 that failed in all respects. According to Shavelson, radio performers were used to reading from scripts; therefore, “No one remembered their lines” on the television try-out. Afterwards Hope predicted, “This medium will never last.” Significantly, the earliest stars on television were theatre, vaudeville and burlesque entertainers who had always had to learn lines and were used to moving from point to point on a stage.

Bob Hope was a phenomenal box office star in movies at the time and his radio show, which toured the country and the world, helped him maintain his popularity with the public and sponsors. He could, for a time, delay his entry into television, which continued to lack appeal for him. Eventually, however, Hope received an offer he could not refuse. When approached by Hugh Davis, who represented a prospective sponsor, to star in a television special, Hope named an exorbitant price, $50,000. To his surprise, he received a counter offer of $40,000 for an Easter Sunday special, with a provision to do three more shows for an additional $150,000. When Hope accepted the offer in the early months of 1950, Gelbart and his fellow writers broke into television with the comedian, who had also raised Gelbart’s salary to $1,250 for each week’s work. Variety characterized the hour-long Easter special as demonstrating how “a lack of good material can thwart the best

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3 This experiment in television was pre-Gelbart. Shavelson later helped devise and write Danny Thomas’s television show Make Room for Daddy (1953). Besides Shavelson, Hope’s writers of this period included Melvin Frank and Norman Panama, who would figure in a later Gelbart project, the film Not with My Wife, You Don’t (1966).

4 James.

5 Arthur Marx, The Secret Life of Bob Hope (New York: Barricade, 1993) 264-5. This sum does not seem as dramatic when compared with Hope’s weekly radio show income of $46,000 (Marx 281).
intentions."6 Although Hope had assembled the best team of writers he could, their inexperience with television and its potential arguably stunted Hope’s initial growth in that medium. It is likely that the anointed procedure for writing, with lists of one-liners checked, crossed and circled, interfered with the creation of scenes with real characters in them. Moreover, the fact that Hope’s writers never met in one room together as a complete group may also have contributed to the reliance on the one-liner and isolated sight gag, since there was little give-and-take between writers to shape a complex scene. Gelbart compares the process to the Manhattan Project7 when he notes that the staff members “never knew which part of the bomb they were building.”8 He confirms that the writers were not writing television. “We were writing radio sketches with the occasional sight joke. If [Hope] . . . was to play a cowboy, we’d have him come in wearing eighteen holsters around his waist and a fifty-gallon hat. There was nothing essentially telegenic about what we were doing.”9

Hope’s television shows did not incorporate the new, experimental content that others were attempting in the early ’50s. The All-Star Revue, as his specials were called, contained many of the same elements found in his radio and touring stage shows: banter with the guest celebrity, some songs, and a few innuendoes directed at rising starlets. During his early television appearances, with his trademark

6 James.
7 The Manhattan Project created the atomic bombs that ended World War II. Gelbart’s metaphor is drawn from the Army’s insistence that each group—engineers, theoreticians and technicians—be barred from working with the others for the security of atomic secrets.
8 David Susskind, prod., Open End, WNTA-TV (New York), 14 Feb. 1960, transcript in the Arts Special Collection of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Larry Gelbart Collection, 6.
monologue under the camera's persistent scrutiny, Hope developed what became a staple of his routines, the cue card. Hope's finesse with reading cue cards is legendary; no performer has used cue cards as adroitly or necessarily as Hope.\textsuperscript{10} Gelbart admits that as far as adapting the monologue for television, he and his fellow writers "didn't even try. A monologue is a monologue."\textsuperscript{11} Coupled with the timing that distinguished his talent from his earliest days in show business, the incorporation of the cue cards helped Hope adapt to the new medium, and Gelbart views this adaptability as still more evidence of Hope's genius.\textsuperscript{12}

The experience that Larry Gelbart garnered in his four years (1948-1952) of comedy writing for Bob Hope honed his skills in tailoring material to the talents and needs of the performer. Once he became familiar with the process and the pitfalls, Gelbart began to resent the voracious appetite that performers such as Hope had for new, timely material. There was little opportunity for other, more personally rewarding growth when one had to "feed the monster"—the comedy writers' term for churning out gag after gag in a rigid style for a comedian.\textsuperscript{13} The relationship with his partner, Larry Marks, had also soured and he began to look for new opportunities.\textsuperscript{14}

While ostensibly writing television sketch comedy for Hope between 1950 and 1952, Gelbart had to endure the contrariety between what he was writing and the

\textsuperscript{10} Comedian and author Steve Allen recalled that Hope's dependence on cue cards extended even to party appearances: "I noticed Bob looking out into the crowd, beyond all of us. I turned around. And who do you think I saw, kneeling down in the mud... behind some bushes? Barney McNulty flipping the cue cards, with a flashlight shining on them" (qtd. in Marx 271).
\textsuperscript{11} Gelbart Oral History 12-3.
\textsuperscript{12} James.
\textsuperscript{13} See Eric Lax's chapter, "Feeding the Monster," in his treatment of Woody Allen's comedy style, \textit{On Being Funny}, for more about the toll such a process takes on comedy writers.
\textsuperscript{14} E-mail with the author, 19 June 1996.
sketches he watched on other programs. *Your Show of Shows*, which shared its producer, Max Liebman (1903-1981), with the Hope specials, was in its ascendancy as the quintessence of the television revue form—a successful variation on a Broadway revue. Other headliners that hosted the *All-Star Revue* on a rotational basis with Hope included Jack Carson, Danny Thomas (both of whom Gelbart had written for), the Ritz Brothers (whom Gelbart idolized as a youth), and Jimmy Durante.\(^{15}\) Gelbart recalls that Hope's team of writers did not write sketches in the true, classic, *vaudeville* sense of the term, because none of them had the background for sketches. He points out that he and his contemporary Bob Hope writers had all come from radio and "a radio sketch bore no relationship really to a theatre sketch, and essentially television was more theatre than it was radio."\(^{16}\) Gelbart has always been a critical reader, listener or viewer in whatever medium he has worked; his assessment of the Hope staff's shortcomings respects the fact that other performers (and writers) of the time had come from a theatrical background—burlesque, vaudeville and the legitimate theatre—and they knew that a sketch had to have a beginning, a middle and an end. The next step in Gelbart's education, therefore, once he parted Hope's team, would be in the subject area of sketch writing and under the mentorship of Red Buttons (1919- ).

Buttons had been, like Gelbart, a bit of a phenomenon because of his youthful success. In 1938, at the age of nineteen, he was already performing in the big-time

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\(^{16}\) Gelbart Oral History 13.
burlesque of New York City's Minsky's. He made a name for himself in the Catskills—the famous “Borscht Belt” of Jewish comedy resorts in the mountains north of New York City—and did some theatre roles in small revues and musical comedies, such as *Barefoot Boy with Cheek* (1947) and *Hold It!* (1948).\(^{17}\) All of Buttons' experience added up to a chance at his own television comedy series.

Buttons paid Gelbart $1,300 per week, with the agent's commission paid out of a separate deal.\(^{18}\) Despite the lucrative nature of the contract, the early days in New York were not particularly happy ones for Gelbart. It was a complete break from what he had been doing, a difficult transition from West to East Coast (all of his family and friends were in California), and more unsettling perhaps for a young writer, joining the staff of a television show that had no set form, no widely established personality: Buttons, although known in the region around New York, "burst upon the scene" nationally with this early television effort.\(^{19}\) *Duffy's Tavern’s* established format and Bob Hope's persona were well honed by the time Gelbart wrote for them; *The Red Buttons Show* would be more like *The Jack Paar Show* in that the show would be built from scratch around a performer who had tools and talents for his writers to exploit. "Red had a bag full of characters, just as Jackie Gleason did," Gelbart recalled.\(^{20}\) Among the recurring characters were Rocky Buttons (a punch-drunk boxer), the Kupke Kid (lovable little boy), the Sad Sack, and Keeglefarven, a dull-

\(^{17}\) Richard Watts, Jr., in the *New York Post*, called *Hold It!* "The sort of show you leave humming the hits of other musical comedies" (qtd. in Suskin 312).

\(^{18}\) Irving Lehrer, "The Invisible Haircut," ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 51.


\(^{20}\) London interview.
witted German who appeared in various occupations.\textsuperscript{21} In addition to the fictional personalities, Buttons frequently garnished his characters with a line or two imitating actors Jimmy Cagney or Lionel Barrymore.

Gelbart wrote the first script for Buttons with Sam Locke; the two followed Joe Stein, Will Glickman and Leo Solomon, who had penned the pilot for the show, but were immediately replaced after a disagreement with Buttons.\textsuperscript{22} Gelbart then wrote with Hal Collins after the departure of Locke the following week.\textsuperscript{23} Gelbart and Collins would build sketches around Buttons' familiar characters; the last section of the show would be a fixed domestic scene. Indicative of the unsettled atmosphere on the show was the replacement of the actress playing Buttons' wife in the series, Dorothy Joliffe, with Beverly Dennis just weeks into the run. The program's timeslot also underwent some upheaval: in December of its first season, \textit{The Red Buttons Show} moved from its original Tuesdays at 8:30 p.m. to Saturdays at 9:00 p.m.; it moved to Mondays at 9:30 p.m. a month after that.\textsuperscript{24}

When it premiered on CBS 14 October 1952, \textit{The Red Buttons Show} was an immediate and undeniable success. Gelbart's trial-and-error undertaking in scene construction must have been made a bit easier knowing that he was part of a hit

\textsuperscript{21} Brooks 520.
\textsuperscript{22} Stein and Glickman collaborated on several Broadway musicals in the '40s and '50s: \textit{Lend an Ear} (1948), \textit{Alive and Kicking} (1950, featuring Carl Reiner, David Burns and Jack Gilford), \textit{Plain and Fancy} (1954), \textit{Mr. Wonderful} (1956, featuring Pat Marshall, the future Mrs. Gelbart), and \textit{The Body Beautiful} (1958). Joe Stein is best known for his solo adaptation of Sholem Aleichem's stories that became the smash \textit{Fiddler on the Roof} (1964, starring Zero Mostel). Sam Locke collaborated (with lyricist John Latouche) on \textit{The Vamp} (1955), and it was Locke's play \textit{Fair Game} that became Gelbart's first screenplay adaptation (1961, unproduced).
\textsuperscript{23} Gelbart, on Susskind \textit{Open End}, 8.
\textsuperscript{24} Brooks 520.
series. In the early days of writing the Buttons show Gelbart had this epiphany: “I realized that there was more to being funny than just for the moment. That that moment had to lead to another moment, and that moment to another one.” He learned the importance of structure—beginning, middle, and end—when he understood that “If you could get a terrific payoff, great; but even more important was a sense of resolution, that the five, six, seven, eight minutes . . . went somewhere, there was a build and there was a climax.”

Red Buttons’ brand of humor facilitated such builds. Within his one liners, unlike Bob Hope, Buttons would often insert small jokes to ratchet up the final laugh: “. . . and that morning my maid . . . who is also my wife . . . said to me, ‘Mr. Buttons’. . . ” In this respect, his brand of humor was more like that of Danny Thomas than others for whom Gelbart had written. Gelbart was also fortunate to write once again for a comedian who knew what worked for him, who could edit the material for maximum effect, and who respected the written word. Buttons represented the first “author-actor” relationship that Gelbart enjoyed. As Gelbart remembers the process, Buttons was “very deferential to the material. There were no changes without consultation.” Buttons received a writer’s credit for his work on the script.

The structure of the Buttons show followed a simple formula: opening monologue, sketch, a performance by a guest artist, then Red’s “Strange Things” song. Each sketch featured one of Buttons’ stock characters. For example, on the

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26 “Buttons on Broadway” review (TheatreNet Enterprises, 1995).
27 Gelbart Oral History 15.
12 January 1953, show, he portrayed Rocky Buttons, a boxer who so tires himself dressing and undressing, trying to decide whether to fight, that he collapses during the handshake and is counted out before the match begins. The following week, Buttons played a juvenile delinquent allowed to spend the weekend with a judge and his wife. After several petty attempts to rob them, Buttons foils a major crime perpetrated by a fraudulent French dance instructor. In another, he portrayed Private Buttons, who inadvertently proves a hero by stumbling onto a Casablanca crime ring:

RED. You're blackmarket eers and you're not gonna get away with it!
(CARL and MAX whip out revolvers)
CARL. All right. (raises gun) This is curtains!
RED. (scared) That ain't curtains—that's a gun! Please don't kill me!
CARL. You asked for it!
RED. Who asked for it—it was your idea!
MAX. Come on—let's get it over with—drill him full of holes!
RED. You'll ruin the uniform—I'll get in trouble with the supply sergeant!
MARGO. Carl! Carl! The place is surrounded!
RED. That's right! It's surrounded by American soldiers. American soldiers from the greatest country in the world—America!28

Several notable techniques fill this brief excerpt: first, the characteristic twisting of clichés either at the end of the line or in the response, demonstrating once again the writers' ear for language, both for the situational clichés and the variation demanded to hold any comedic weight. The debt to Duffy's Tavern emerges clearly. In this example, the technique by which the clichés ("This is curtains" and "You asked for it") are subverted is the literal interpretation of the cliché. Another, though related, device lies in the avoidance of the obvious—skipping a detail—that proves unexpected and therefore humorous. That Buttons cares more for the uniform than the effect of

28 The Red Buttons Show, 1 Oct 1953, CBS, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 44-5.
the bullets on his body points perhaps to a larger truth: the wrath of supply sergeants.

Finally, the language once again forms the basis for the joke when Buttons repeats unnecessarily the words “America” or “American.” The opposite of skipping a detail, in this case Buttons provides unneeded clarification.

Another example of the situational cliche, what might be described as the dialogue audiences expect in certain stock situations, may be found in a sketch wherein Buttons is arrested for purse snatching:

RED. I ain’t sayin’ a word til I talk to my lawyer! I wanna see my lawyer! I wanna talk to him—get me my lawyer!
SERGEANT. We’re not letting him out of his cell just for that!29

As in the prior examples, clichés draw the audience farther into the twist. Without a reliance on the cliche set-ups, the punchlines would not be as effective.

Buttons’ experience in burlesque increased his awareness of audience expectations and triggers. The comic’s timing is crucial in the following example, since it includes both vaudeville physicality and a final laugh anchored by a pun:

RED. (taking letter) All right. (to SECOND) Hey, Charlie. In my coat—the right hand pocket—get me my glasses.
(SECOND takes glasses out of coat, hands them to ROCKY. RED takes the glasses, breathes on them, then with his “T” shirt wipes them off. Puts on the glasses, opens the letter, and reads: after a few seconds, he drops the letter to his side and frowns.)
ACE. Discouraging, ain’t it?
RED. It sure is—I still don’t know how to read!
SECOND. Then what do you need with the glasses?
RED. That phony eye doctor—he told me they were reading glasses!
They can’t read any better than I can.30

29 The Red Buttons Show, 2 March 1953, CBS, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 8.
30 The Red Buttons Show, 23 March 1953, CBS, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 5-6. Compare this reading bit with a similar one in Gelbart and Shevelove’s A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum:
PSEUDOLUS. (looks through pages, then to audience) I just remembered something frightening. I cannot read! (53-4).
Burt Shevelove (1915-1982) directed The Red Buttons Show. Larry Gelbart's professional relationship with Shevelove spanned two decades, and resulted in some of the most famous and acclaimed work of their careers. Unlike Gelbart, Shevelove attended college, receiving his A.B. in 1937 from Brown University, followed by graduate work in theatre at Yale University. He acted, wrote and directed throughout his college years, but his professional name became established when he directed a 1948 Broadway revue, Small Wonder, for which he also contributed lyrics under the pseudonym Billings Brown. The revue, which ran 138 performances, also marked the choreographic debut of dancer Gower Champion (1920-1980). Gelbart explains that he and Shevelove became friends because, "we learned that we laughed at the same things and, happily, always at the same time." In addition to Buttons' seminar in sketch comedy, Gelbart continued his comedy education with his new-found director, collaborator and friend, Burt Shevelove.

Gelbart took advantage of the 1953 summer hiatus from the Buttons show to visit his family and friends in Los Angeles. Attending a party hosted by writer Bob Shiller and his wife, Joyce, Gelbart met a young singer named Pat Marshall (1924- ), who had left her native Minneapolis in 1938 to sing on tour with Richard Himber's

31 Steven Suskin, Opening Night on Broadway: A Critical Quotebook of the Golden Era of the Musical Theatre, Oklahoma! (1943) to Fiddler on the Roof (1964) (New York: Schirmer, 1990) 625. Champion, who incidentally attended Fairfax High a few years before Gelbart, had contributed choreography to Tars and Spars (1944), the Coast Guard revue staged by Max Liebman and starring Sid Caesar.

big band. Eventually, she landed in New York and appeared on Broadway in the first two Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe musicals, *What's Up?* (1943) and *The Day Before Spring* (1945). She then moved to Hollywood to film *Good News* (1947), and while in Los Angeles, she met and married a building contractor named Dan Markowitz, with whom she had three children, Cathy, Gary and Paul. Marshall's response to Gelbart was immediate and mutual: “just magic... eyes across the room.” Gelbart returned to New York for the second season of *The Red Buttons Show*, but he and Marshall spent a great deal of time together once she returned later in 1953 to New York to sing regularly with Andy Williams on Steve Allen's *Tonight Show*.

In its second season, the popularity of *The Red Buttons Show* began to wane. The slip in ratings raised new concerns about the format of the show, and the pressures mounting on Buttons himself took their toll on his relationship with his writers, including Gelbart. “The first year was great. Red had two ears and he listened. [Then] he started believing the magazine covers and the reviews and he wouldn't listen quite as much as he did at the beginning,” Gelbart recalled. Mel Tolkin, a writer for Sid Caesar, assessed the Buttons situation:

> When he first came on, all he was interested in was in being funny, in getting across as a comedian. Then like so many other comics, he wanted to produce a little... to direct a little... to write a little. He wanted to call the shots a little... [Headliners like Buttons] become heads of corporations. This business of being funny has become the

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34 Suskin 175 and 701. Lerner and Loewe also collaborated on many hits, including *Brigadoon* (1947), *My Fair Lady* (1956) and *Camelot* (1960).
35 The film starred June Allyson, Peter Lawford and Mel Tormé.
36 Marshall interview.
37 Susskind 8.
least aspect of their careers. They're with lawyers... with accountants... with publicity people, and at the last minute, someone comes up and says, 'here's a script, you're on tonight.' And they're not ready.\textsuperscript{38}

The transformation from favorite to \textit{persona non grata} must have been a bit startling to the young writer. In the beginning of the stint, Buttons would lavish compliments on Gelbart: "Wherever we went—[the praise]... got to be a little embarrassing after a while—[Buttons would say]... 'This is my right arm, this is my right arm.'" Finally, Gelbart recalls, "There was an amputation."\textsuperscript{39} He left the show under acrimonious circumstances in March 1954, although since then he and Buttons have "kissed and made up."\textsuperscript{40}

After being dismissed from the Buttons show, Gelbart contributed to a pilot for comedian Jack Carter in April 1954.\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Love That Guy}, written by Neil and Danny Simon, and Reginald Rose (author of \textit{Twelve Angry Men} among other early television plays), with additional material by Gelbart, marked the first time that Gelbart worked with the Simon brothers. They replaced Gelbart on \textit{The Red Buttons Show}—two more writers that the producers shuffled in, then out, in an attempt to settle the production. Neil and Danny worked with Gelbart again a few years later on \textit{Caesar's Hour}. Gelbart's contributions to the Carter pilot seem to be along the lines of adding

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Susskind 10.
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Susskind 40.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} Gelbart London interview.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} Carter was a big name in early television. He vied for the host position on \textit{Texaco Star Theatre} in 1948, but lost out to Milton Berle. He hosted \textit{Cavalcade of Stars} in 1949 and 1950, on the Dumont network, but was drafted by NBC to host \textit{The Jack Carter Show} (1950-51), the Chicago lead-in to Sid Caesar's New York \textit{Your Show of Shows} on Saturday nights. Eventually the slot gave way to the \textit{All-Star Revue}. Carter also was under consideration to be Jack Paar's replacement on the \textit{Tonight Show} when the latter left the program in 1962.
\end{itemize}
specific music selections or suggestions to the script (e.g., Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody #2), and re-writing some dialogue:


The change in the build gave a finality to the joke: "Start now" seemed synonymous with the first two commands; "Go already!" could have been added as a fourth, but the replacement as the third element preserved the comedic "rule of threes."

Following his limited work on The Jack Carter Show pilot, Gelbart accepted a position in May 1954 as a staff writer for CBS, for the sum of $50,000 for 26 weeks' work.43 During the ensuing summer, however, he adapted a stage play by Arthur Ross for comedian Jack Benny (1894-1974) called The Face is Familiar. The script, for General Electric Theatre, concerned an ordinary man who cannot get noticed. As the narrator explains in the show's opening, "In every community, there are some people whose looks and personality set them apart from their fellows. Once met, these people are not easily forgotten. Conversely, there are those who are so undistinguished in appearance and manner that they go through life cloaked with anonymity."44 Eventually, the Jack Benny character robs a bank, but no one can identify the perpetrator. After Gelbart completed his adaptation, the script underwent changes with which he disagreed, and he removed his name from the project.45

43 His second year salary at CBS reached $60,000 for 26 weeks (Lehrer 52).
44 Larry Gelbart, The Face is Familiar, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 1.
45 Gelbart personal interview 24 Sept. 1996
Back at CBS, Gelbart joined Hal Collins, a fellow writer for Buttons, to pen a new situation comedy titled *Honestly, Celeste!,* which premiered 10 October 1954, and ran two months. The star, film actress Celeste Holm (1919- ), brought a certain charm and polish to an otherwise listless concept: she portrayed Celeste Anders, a former journalism teacher from the Midwest who tries to make it as a reporter in New York City. The program afforded Holm an opportunity to headline a television program, but the situation comedy never achieved what might be called a “personality.” The humor differed from the rapid-fire vaudeville pace of Buttons, developing instead more character-driven laughs. Still, the following example ends with a punchline characteristic of Gelbart:

(in a shop, Celeste tries on a hat)
FIRST SALESWOMAN. Sophistication! It gives you that 'woman of the world' look!
(Celeste's face takes on a sophisticated, woman of the world look—little overdone)
FIRST SALESWOMAN. Yes—that's it!
CELESTE. Yes—but how long can I go around with my face like this?

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46 Among Holm's enduring film roles are Anne in *Gentleman's Agreement* (for which she received a Best Supporting Actress Academy Award in 1947), Karen in *All About Eve* (1950), and Liz Imbrie in *High Society* (1956).
47 Brooks 270.
48 *Honestly, Celeste!* CBS, show 6, ts. in the Larry Gelbart Collection, U of California, Los Angeles, n.d., 8. Compare this joke with the following from *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962):

[PSEUDOLUS is examining a courtesan to buy from LYCUS.
Stands with her back-to-back]
PSEUDOLUS. Isn't she a bit too short?
LYCUS. Definitely not.
PSEUDOLUS. (Wiggles, then): Too tall?
LYCUS. No. Like that you look perfect together.
PSEUDOLUS. Yes, but how often will we find ourselves in this position? (38).
After this brief assignment—*Honestly, Celeste!* was canceled in December 1954—Gelbart received word from his agent that he was to meet with Sid Caesar (1922-), who had completed the first season of the successor to *Your Show of Shows*, an hour-long variety show called simply *Caesar's Hour*. Gelbart offered Caesar several reasons why he wanted to write for him: “First, I saw your airplane number in [the wartime service comedy] *Tars and Spars* and I guess I did it in high school as often as you did it in the Coast Guard. In the second place, I wanted to write for the one comedian who didn’t come out of the movies and radio and was a pure television performer.” Caesar’s style reminded Gelbart of Harry Ritz, one of Gelbart’s childhood comedy heroes. For Gelbart, his new boss had the same knack of using eyes, face and body for very funny exaggeration. When Bob Hope found out that Caesar had hired Gelbart, the former cabled the latter, “Will Trade You Larry Gelbart for Two Oil Wells.”

Gelbart joined a staff in the fall of 1955 that had essentially moved with Caesar to his new show. The head writer was Mel Tolkin (1913-), a Russian emigre who wrote for almost all of Caesar’s television incarnations. Carl Reiner (1922-), a performer who, like Caesar, customarily sat in on the writing sessions, remained second banana. Howard Morris, the incomparable character actor on the show, also

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50 Caesar 144. Gelbart explained that Hope meant the telegram as a joke, and wasn’t seriously trying to re-acquire his services (e-mail with the author 28 May 1996).
51 Reiner, like Gelbart, has made an indelible mark on the comedy genre in every medium. He wrote and produced *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, for which he has been honored with a remarkable eleven Emmy Awards. For the big screen, he has directed such successful film comedies as *The Jerk, All of Me* and *Oh, God!*
made the move. Nanette Fabray became the leading lady of the troupe, since Imogene Coca spun off into a program of her own. Your Show of Shows’ producer, Max Liebman, became a producer of specials and left Caesar himself to produce the new venture. In its first year, Caesar’s Hour did not employ Mel Brooks (1926- ), who wrote for Coca’s show. According to Tolkin, “Caesar’s Hour began as a one-hour show with a story, and it was very difficult to write. And it was Carl who went to Sid and said, ‘What’re we doin’? Let’s do what we really know: songs, sketches.’ And I think Carl was responsible for the fact that we began to do the sketches. That’s the famous part, and that’s the good writing part.” Other writers in the room included Neil Simon, Sheldon Keller, Michael Stewart, and Selma Diamond.

All of the writers had their own idiosyncrasies, which created a chemistry or mix that allowed for what Tolkin terms, “good creative anger” among those competing to have their ideas heard. “We called it collaboration,” quips Gelbart today. Tolkin had his Russian accent; Neil Simon whispered or mumbled his ideas to Carl Reiner; Mel Brooks became infamous for his tardiness. According to Gelbart, “Mel was always late. He’d come in with The Wall Street Journal and a bagel... He

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52 The Imogene Coca Show, like Red Buttons’ effort, did not have a solidified format even for its one season. What began as a situation comedy about an actress became in a few weeks a comedy-variety offering. The last several months saw another change, this time to a domestic situation comedy (Brooks 283).
54 Michael Stewart’s Broadway credits include contributions to the revues Alive and Kicking (1950) and Razzle Dazzle (1951), and the books for the musicals Bye Bye Birdie (1960), Carnival (1961), and Hello, Dolly! (1963). These last three musicals were all for director Gower Champion. Keller became Gelbart’s writing partner soon after the cancellation of Caesar’s Hour. Selma Diamond later became known as a character actor in television’s Night Court and in movies such as My Favorite Year (1986).
55 Caesar 145.
56 Caesar’s Writers.
wanted to be a rich Jew," but Gelbart admits that Brooks would invariably have two or three good ideas to start his day, after which he would admonish his fellows, "See, you don't have to be on time to be gifted." But Brooks would frequently act out whole scenes or sing whole verses of songs, in contrast to the others, who lobbed ideas into the discussion. Gelbart in the writing room has been characterized as the normal one, most clearly by Neil Simon in his comedy based on his experience with Sid Caesar, *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* (1993). Simon's stage directions describe Kenny Franks (the Larry Gelbart character) as "Neatly dressed, sports jacket, tie, raincoat, tortoise-shell-framed glasses. He is surely the most sophisticated of the lot." Caesar notes that during his most excessive periods on the show, Gelbart was "the only one who came close to speaking up." Simon attempted to capture the feel of the writing room in the comedy, both in personnel and in the set. The room, in its actual disposition, was on the eleventh floor of the Milgrim Building, on 57th Street near Fifth Avenue.

In April of 1993, designer Tony Walton requested a floorplan from Gelbart (Fig. 1) for his *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* set. Gelbart also notes in his fax to Walton, "There were no phones in this room. You were called to the secretarial office if you got a call. You were not expected to make any." Neil Simon's stage directions call for a phone in the room. The singular piece of furniture connected to Gelbart in

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57 *Caesar's Writers*. Gelbart quoting Brooks. Brooks defended himself further by saying, "Shakespeare never got to work until 3 p.m."


59 Caesar 147. Caesar's biography is very honest in its depiction of Caesar's bouts with depression, alcohol and prescription drugs.

60 Tony Walton was the set designer for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962).

61 Larry Gelbart fax to Tony Walton, 7 April 1993, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.

62 Simon *Laughter* 3.
the real writing room was a present he made to Caesar one Christmas, a large gold chair—a throne in its most obvious significance. Other notable elements missing from Gelbart’s diagram included the coffee maker and “buffet” (usually catered by Sid Caesar’s brother, Dave), and the all-important typewriter.

By the time Gelbart joined the staff, Michael Stewart, the “recording secretary” among the writers, had replaced first-season typist Aaron Ruben, since Stewart “could do more than a hundred words a minute on the typewriter . . . He didn’t say very much but a lot of his concepts worked themselves into our scripts,” recalled Caesar. 

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63 Caesar’s Writers.
64 Caesar 145.
Typing a hundred words per minute seemed a necessity, because sometimes as many as a dozen writers were shouting out ideas simultaneously. Neil Simon remembers just “throwing out all of these lines and Sid was nodding for Michael Stewart and he wrote it all down. And I went home to watch the shows and I laughed and laughed, and my wife says, ‘That’s your joke, isn’t it?’ And I said, ‘I dunno.’ We never knew. They all came so fast.” Gelbart concurs: “Two minutes later you forgot they were yours.” The inability to attribute specific jokes or moments to one writer naturally makes the study of a particular writer’s contributions (such as Gelbart’s) more difficult. Indeed, everyone involved seems perfectly happy to praise the team, beginning with Caesar himself: he credits the success of the show to the writing.

Tolkin and Reiner are careful to point out that Your Show of Shows paved the way for much of Caesar’s Hour’s Success. As Tolkin explained, “Your Show of Shows began a lot of the things, grooves. We didn’t start with a blank page. We knew we could do a German professor, or we could do a domestic sketch. And a couple of new things occurred.” Caesar’s Hour’s compact sixty minutes compared to Your Show of Shows’ ninety minutes resulted in more concentrated comedy each week.

The program’s domestic “groove,” or regular sketch, entitled “The Commuters,” featured the Victors, played by Caesar and Fabray. Each week the couple faced a conflicted situation, either a rough commute home, or a brand-new

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65 Caesar’s Writers.
66 Caesar 143.
67 Reiner qtd. in Caesar 142.
68 Caesar’s Writers.
white carpet and rain-soaked guests, or the problems encountered trying to give away unwanted theatre tickets. Frequently, two writers would retire to another room to hash out a scene or part of a scene, or to develop an idea before springing it on the group as a whole (including Caesar, of course). Gelbart described how ideas emerged in the room: “Somebody said, ‘I saw a Japanese movie last night.’ The next thing we knew we were writing one. Or, ‘Does this ever happen to you? You come home, your wife says . . . and then you say . . . and then pretty soon . . .’ and that would become a sketch.”  

Tolkin addresses attribution in this way: “Some guy may just hit an idea, a notion. ‘When she walks in, she has such-and-such an attitude.’ And ten jokes come out of that line. You know, you make a basic joke about what a person is, and then you can make variations. So who wrote the joke?” Gelbart declares that “the miracle was that, ultimately, there was some kind of structure, because we were throwing lines.” Reiner remembers that “The only thing[s] people took credit for are the things they fought hard for. They fought hard and people fought against them, and if they got them in and it worked, fine. If it didn’t work, they were embarrassed.”

Brooks likens the atmosphere in the writers’ room to “a World Series ball club. We were all good hitters, good fielders, all good. And if we won the championship, let it be Larry Gelbart’s home run. We won.” Gelbart, too, has said that this assignment was like playing for the Yankees, but he often chooses a different metaphor—

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70 Gelbart Seminars 10.  
71 Caesar’s Writers.  
72 Caesar’s Writers.  
73 Caesar’s Writers.  
74 Caesar’s Writers.  
75 Gelbart Oral History 18.
regarding the writing room as a jam session. In an interview with Dick Schaap, he elaborated: "Except for the fact that we were all white and Jewish, we felt like we were the Duke Ellington Band. We had this kind of great sound together." Critics and historians often overlook the musicality of the group. Mel Tolkin played the piano and began his career as a songwriter; Mel Brooks earned his living for a while as a drummer in the Catskills; Gelbart played saxophone and clarinet, and Caesar himself played the saxophone. Gelbart has also said of the star, "Thinking of a writer as a composer, there is no greater instrument through which to hear your notes played than Sid Caesar."

The affinity for music might account partly for the many musical parodies presented on the show. Jazz ("Cool Seas"), doo-wop bands ("The Haircuts"), musical theatre and even grand opera all received their comeuppance on the program. This last object of satire, opera, intersected two talents of the cast and writers: music and foreign language. Sid Caesar's brilliant use of "doubletalk," the term for authentic-sounding gibberish in any number of tongues—German, Russian, Japanese, French, etc.—remains legendary. In a parody of I Pagliacci, titled Galipacci, Caesar applies his clown make-up as he sings a mock aria to the tune of a popular song (as was the show's custom), in this case Cole Porter's "Just One of Those Things." Mel Brooks likened the writing of opera parodies, as well as the regular segment entitled "Mr. Caesar's Specialty"—pantomime—to commedia dell'arte. The parallels are

76 Gelbart Oral History 19.
77 Gelbart Seminars 10.
78 Jacket blurb on Sid Caesar, Where Have I Been?
79 Caesar's Writers.
inescapable; in the following example, from Galipacci, little of the performance is scripted ("10" refers to the sequence number of settings in the overall sketch):

10. Sid goes into wagon to make-up
    [Aria to tune of JUST ONE OF THOSE THINGS . . . Big laugh at end]
    SID. Laugh, laugh . . . 'What am I laughing at?'

The above is the entirety of the scripted scene for Caesar to act. The writers room and rehearsals gave everyone—performers, writers, director—a sense of security with the material that precluded the need for any more elaboration in the script. Gelbart noted that Caesar's presence throughout the writing "was a blessing for all of us. By the time Sid went into rehearsal he knew every word of the script by heart." When the sequence aired, however, an unexpected problem with a prop provided Caesar with an opportunity to ad-lib, and Gelbart with one of his fondest memories of the show. He remembered the scene at a Writers Guild-sponsored reunion, Caesar's Writers (1996):

[Sid's] sitting in front of the mirror, and he's making up, his heart is broken and he's making up with a black mascara pencil, and he's double-talking, 'Just One of Those Things.' And the orchestra's lush and he's in the moment, he really lived—I mean, that was great acting, in all the sketches. At any rate, he goes with the pencil and he makes a line and it breaks. On camera, live—what, thirty million people watching? No lines. No dialogue, no nothing. And we're all thinking, 'What is he going to do?' He takes the pencil and he makes another line. Then he makes one this way. Then he makes one this way. [TIC-TAC TOE-BOARD] Bang. Bang. Zero. Bang. Bang. Ruup! And ends up, 'Just One of Those Things.' It was glorious, it was just incredible.

Besides music and musical performance, Caesar's Hour often satirized movies, both popular and foreign. Gelbart noted that the writing in early television

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80 Caesar's Hour, show #33, 10 Oct. 1955, NBC, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 6.
81 Gelbart Seminars 10.
aimed at an audience in large cities; New York and Chicago were the cities they wrote for, and it was in these metropolitan centers that an audience would be likely to see a Broadway musical, an opera, or the latest foreign film. Besides, the writers wrote what they themselves saw around them and what they found funny. "We paid the audience a high compliment: we thought that whoever they were, they would get what we were doing, whoever we were," Gelbart explained.82

One particular parody of a popular genre, the gangster film, also allowed the team to ridicule movie musicals. Called "Bullets over Broadway,"83 the story involved a gangster (Caesar) who falls for a cigarette girl (Nanette Fabray) who rebuffs him because he is uncouth. He spends the remainder of the sketch attempting (with his gang) to acquire "couth." The following excerpt occurs just after Fabray's torch song, "You Can't Put a Price Tag on Love:"

HOWIE. Boy, that girl's got Moxie.
SID. She's loaded with moxie. What's your name?
NAN. Moxie Hart!
SID. I told you. Look honey, if you play it real smart, I could buy a lot of things for you.
NAN. I just told you . . . you can't put a price tag on love! (Bell tone and she begins singing) . . . You can buy a chicken or a . . .
SID. I heard you! I heard you! But the whole thing is settled. You're mine, do you hear. Mou! Mine!84

One characteristic of the writing in Caesar's Hour emerges in this passage: very often Caesar (or others) will indicate the connectedness of the dialogue ("I told you," "I just told you," "I heard you"), creating signposts for the audiences and the live performers,

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82 Gelbart Seminars 6.
83 Woody Allen's 1994 film did not share the plot of this sketch, merely the title, for which Caesar generously granted its use (Allen interview, 10 Aug. 1995).
84 Caesar's Hour, show #31, 26 Sept. 1955, NBC, ts in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 6.
and timing laughs, so that the next part of the line will be heard and appreciated. This device also allows Caesar to address a line partly to one character while moving the action to another: [to Howie:] “I told you. [To Nanette:] Look honey . . .”

Much of the time, these extended parodies occupied more than half of Caesar’s Hour’s sixty minutes. “Bullets over Broadway,” for example, runs thirty-three pages; another parody, “Aggravation Boulevard,” runs nearly forty. These lengths are commensurate with a script for a half-hour situation comedy, and each script was written in the space of only a few days. As Caesar recalls, “The show had to be written by Wednesday night, because we had to show it to scenery, we had to show it to costumes, everything had to be made.”85

One idea that everyone involved attributes to Gelbart, a parody of behind-the-scenes studio films, titled “Aggravation Boulevard,” was based partly on the misfortune of actor John Gilbert, whose career was ruined when sound came into movies. Caesar recalled that “Larry came up with this, with the character. And it turned out to be one of the finest shows we’d ever done.”86

[During the filming of a silent movie, “The Sheik of Oxford,” an assistant breaks in to announce that talkies have been invented]

CARL (the director). It means we scrap the picture right now. And we’ll shoot this entire picture in sound! A new era is beginning! History is being made. We’ll be able to hear the sound of guns . . . the song of birds . . . the noise of the city . . . Mucus will come to the screen . . . Do you realize what this means, Rex?

SID. (In an obnoxious squeak) At last the world will hear my voice! We’ll start reshooting the picture over in sound tomorrow. I have a new interest in life. At last I’ll talk . . . I’ll talk . . . I’ll talk.

FADEOUT87

85 Caesar’s Writers.
86 Caesar’s Writers.
87 Caesar’s Hour, show #41, 26 Dec. 1955, NBC, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 12.
The clever payoff precluded Caesar from speaking until the last speech of the scene, so an elaborate “star” entrance—all in white, with white hounds—was concocted that played up Caesar’s brooding character, to justify his taciturn nature. In the next scene, the movie has premiered, and Caesar cannot understand the reaction.

SID. [still squeaking] Why are they laughing? Why are they laughing? Why are they laughing?
NAN. Darling, they’re not laughing . . . I don’t hear any laughing . . .
SID. They’re laughing all right. Even the dogs are laughing! And I see why. I told them I didn’t want to wear those pants. They look like crazy bloomers. That’s why they’re laughing. And look at that scenery . . . Anyone could see it’s cardboard . . . come on, let’s get out of here! Let’s go home to the party where I can be with my friends.

The humor here is timeless and classic; simply put, it presents Man in all his blindness, unable to see the truth of his own folly. According to Howard Morris, Caesar had “the ability to reveal man to himself.” This, then, may be the next step in Gelbart’s education: from The Red Buttons Show, where Gelbart learned to construct a sketch, he moved on to Caesar’s Hour, where the leading man became an Everyman—through an identifiable pantomime or a befuddling moment in his own living room—and Gelbart learned to write the Human Comedy.

Carl Reiner considers the following exchange, the work of Gelbart and Neil Simon, as the funniest sequence he had on Caesar’s Hour (the other actor in the sketch is Milt Kamen, ordinarily Caesar’s stand-in):

SID. And now for tonight’s drama . . . it’s a story of intrigue and mystery on the Orient Express. I call it “A Streetcar Named

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88 Caesar’s Hour #41, 15.
90 Caesar’s Writers.
Desire" . . . I know, I know. We're fighting it out in court. We'll see whose it is. Anyway, here is the story . . .

MILT. (looking at diamond in box) . . . It's incredible! Unbelievable!
CARL. It's the Kumber som diamond. 104 carats . . . absolutely flawless . . . (he closes the box). I don't have to remind you that absolute secrecy must be maintained if we are going to get the diamond to Istanbul. There are enemies everywhere. Every nasty nation in Europe would like to get their hands on the Kumber som.

MILT. I understand fully, sir . . .
CARL. Now remember, you are to take the diamond from Paris to Istanbul. When you arrive there you will be approached by a man in a black coat wearing a red carnation. He will say these words to you . . . "Gimme that diamond." Don't give it to him. He tries to get everybody's diamonds that way.

MILT. Then to whom do I deliver it?
CARL. When you get to Istanbul, you will meet a woman with long red hair, wearing one gold earring. You will give the diamond to her. That woman will be me.

MILT. You mean you'll be in disguise.
CARL. No. I'm in disguise now. And to make sure that no one will suspect what you are delivering . . . you will carry the fabulous Kumber som diamond in a brown paper bag.91

Once again, a clichéd situation, one that might have been a premise for a Buttons sketch, is handled in a completely different manner. The audience is not to laugh at the outrageousness of the pun, or the stupidity of the spies, but at the predicament itself, at those times when absurdity is the only reality.

While Gelbart's professional life was reaching new heights, his personal life seemed to be as well. He had been seeing Pat Marshall for several years, while she sang on The Tonight Show, replaced star Janis Paige in The Pajama Game (1954), and starred in Mr. Wonderful (1956).92 Her divorce became final in 1956, so Pat

91 Caesar's Hour, show #76, 2 Feb. 1957, NBC, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, n.p. Reiner explained that the prop in the bag was a doorknob (Caesar's Writers).
92 Marshall interview. The Pajama Game was directed by George Abbott and Jerome Robbins, whose work on A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum (1962) a few years later would help Gelbart achieve his first Broadway success. The Pajama Game also featured choreography by Bob
Marshall left her current show and her husband behind to marry Larry Gelbart on 25 November 1956. Soon after the wedding, the couple purchased a 22-acre farm in Ghent, New York, near Chatham, to serve as a “getaway” and summer home. Marshall brought her three children to the marriage, making Gelbart an instant father. The eldest son, Gary Markowitz, recalls that at the time Gelbart seemed “skinny, with glasses, and young—younger than my mother.”

Gelbart, meanwhile, was finishing the last season of Caesar’s Hour, which had replaced Nanette Fabray, who wanted more money, with Janet Blair. The network canceled Caesar in May 1957 due to poor ratings. Pat Weaver, who understood and believed in Caesar’s live format, was out as head of NBC. The show fell behind The Lawrence Welk Show in popularity, and as Reiner pointed out, “Welk was funnier.” Putting Reiner’s sarcasm aside, the reason emerges more fully when one considers that Caesar’s drinking and pill popping had begun to interfere with his ability to do his job. Caesar’s excesses had strained his ability to perform, and strained his relationships with those around him. Newlywed Gelbart had to find another job to support his family and two houses. ABC hired him to write for a young Metropolitan

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Fosse, who would draft Gelbart to write the book for The Conquering Hero (1961). Mr. Wonderful’s book was by Joe Stein and Will Glickman, with whom Gelbart had worked on several television programs. John McClain, writing for the New York Journal-American, said that Mr. Wonderful’s plot “has all the subtlety and surprise of a Sanitation Department truck” (Suskin 452).

93 Marshall interview.
94 Marshall interview.
95 Gary Markowitz telephone interview, 9 March 1996.
96 Caesar 162-3.
97 Caesar’s Writers. Lawrence Welk was an accordion-playing bandleader known for his champagne bubble motif and odd Scandinavian-American accent.
98 Caesar 166.
Opera soprano, Patrice Munsel, who was given her own half-hour variety show on Friday nights.

_The Patrice Munsel Show_ allowed its star to sing solos, duets with guests, and even engage in comedy sketches, thus displaying her versatility. The program was written by Gelbart and Sheldon Keller, a fellow Caesar writer who had become Gelbart's new partner. Keller's relationship with Gelbart would span two decades, in both television and film. _The Patrice Munsel Show_ understandably highlighted musical performance, but the comedy seems to have held to the quality that Gelbart had attained while with Caesar. Again, the sketches emphasized the human condition, often using the "Isn't this always the way?" point of departure.

Although the situations may seem a continuation of Caesar-style scenes, the call for physicality was greatly diminished; scenes relied more on dialogue (and thus the writers) than had been the case with _Caesar's Hour_. The following example demonstrates the cleverness of the situations chosen, the cleverness of the dialogue, and the resulting diminution of a reliance on Caesar-style physicality:

[Comparison of relationships before and after marriage. Both take place in a restaurant. Between Eddie Albert and Patrice Munsel]

ALBERT. My dear... (He pulls a chair out for her)
PAT. Thank you.
ALBERT. (offering case) Cigarette?
PAT. (takes one) Do you have a match?
ALBERT. It's lit. I lit them all before I picked you up... Is this table all right?
PAT. It's divine.
ALBERT. Good, I want everything to be perfect.
CAPTAIN. A Cocktail before dinner?
ALBERT. Delightful. Champagne, my dear?
PAT. It tickles my nose.

99 Brooks 477.
ALBERT. (to Captain) A Bottle of champagne and a box of kleenex, please.

CAPTAIN. Yes, sir. Would you care to study the menu?
ALBERT. I'll order for the two of us. Just bring us the most expensive thing you have—medium rare.

CAPTAIN. Yes, monsieur. (he leaves)
ALBERT. Enjoying yourself, darling?

PAT. Completely.
ALBERT. Comfortable?

PAT. Very. Except I am a little chilly.
ALBERT. Chilly. Why, you poor dear—why didn't you say something.

calls off) Captain! (Captain appears)

CAPTAIN. Yes, monsieur?
ALBERT. Fur coat, please.

CAPTAIN. I don't believe that's on the menu.
ALBERT. We'll take one a la carte. And quickly—you know my temper!

CAPTAIN. Yes, monsieur. (he goes)

PAT. You're so considerate.

ALBERT. This is nothing. You know what I have planned for later?

PAT. What?
ALBERT. From here we fly to Rome for our coffee. Then to Havana for a cha-cha-cha. And then on to Boston where a new Broadway show is giving its first performance.

PAT. I didn't know there was a new show in Boston.

ALBERT. I had one written just for tonight.

PAT. (into camera) Isn't he a dream?

The second half of the scene replays the dinner with one important change: we now see the couple after several years of marriage. The following brief excerpt should illustrate the payoff:

PAT. I'll have the steak.

ALBERT. (Looks at her a second, then to Captain) Would you leave us alone for a minute?

[Pat and Albert engage in a short, whispered conversation. Occasionally, a word is heard—"Steak!" "Five dollars!" etc. It ends abruptly.]

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100 *The Patrice Munsel Show*, ABC television network, 4 Oct. 1957, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 14-16. This sketch—from October 1957—loosely echoes the tone of a classic Caesar routine, “The Five Dollar Date,” in its before-and-after comparison of menu and places to go for a date in 1938 and 1949. It was, in fact, the very first piece performed by Caesar in his very first television show, *The Admiral Broadway Revue* (1949).
PAT. (to Captain) I'll have the meat loaf.
CAPTAIN. Instead of the steak?
PAT. My husband's allergic to steak. Every time I order it he breaks out into an argument.  

Clearly, Caesar could have played the husband's role to Nanette Fabray's (or Janet Blair's) wife, and this excerpt suggests that the comedy portions of The Patrice Munsel Show maintained the standards (though more limited in subject) of the Caesar show in the writing. The twist of the cliché at the end—breaking out implies an allergic reaction—shows that Gelbart continued the wordplay of Duffy's Tavern and The Red Buttons Show. The difference seems to be, however, that Gelbart had by 1958 assimilated the style and made it his own.

When Patrice Munsel's variety show was canceled in December 1957, a fortunate set of circumstances allowed Gelbart to stay at ABC but return to work for an old boss in a new series, Sid Caesar Invites You. Gelbart joined forces with fellow writers (and Caesar's Hour alumni) Neil and Danny Simon, Mel Brooks and Mike Stewart. By this time, Sid Caesar commanded only a half hour of television each week, on Sunday nights. It seems that there was less heart in this program, and according to his autobiography, Where Have I Been?, he was in a period of self-doubt and depression that threatened his ability to perform. The series was off the air by May, but Gelbart would soon be writing for another show—and another star, Pat Boone—regularly, and Sid Caesar for a brief period of specials.

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102 Caesar 169ff.
With *The Pat Boone Chevy Showroom*, Gelbart received a solo writing credit for the first time in his fifteen-year career. The show premiered 3 October 1957, and featured the young pop singer Pat Boone (1935-) with a variety of guests, some of whom appeared fairly regularly: Arthur Godfrey (on whose show Pat Boone became widely known), Dinah Shore, Nat “King” Cole, and Johnny Mathis. Gelbart's job seemed to be the writing of clever introductions to songs, and quick, light banter between them. The emphasis lay, therefore, in the one-liner, and not in the fully formed sketch. An example of the brief material Gelbart provided follows:

[Gary Crosby, the son of Bing and the leader of his own singing group, remains missing at the beginning of the show and enters late. He speaks to a chorus member who is in mid-routine]

GARY. This the Pat Boone show?
(She nods “yes”)
GARY. You’re not Pat Boone.
(She nods “no”)
GARY. You believe in love at first sight?
(She nods “no”)
GARY. I’ll give you another look later.103

Because of the nature of the dialogue, Gelbart seems to have formulated Hope-style one-liners. If the guest were a heartthrob, he or she would receive self-deprecating or egotistical lines. If the guest were shy and quiet, Gelbart might provide pushy or wild lines to subvert audience expectations. In any case, the comedy played a secondary role to the singing of Boone and his guests. Gelbart’s job seemed to be to make everyone likable and attractive. One week, Boone introduced the guest as if he were introducing the sponsor’s product—Chevrolet’s ad slogan at the time was “the car

103 *The Pat Boone Show*, 29 Jan. 1959, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 12.
that's wanted for all it's worth”—perhaps highlighting the latent sexual nature of both sweet singing stars and new cars:

PAT. . . . my guest tonight—the star with the magic-mirror finish—the girl that's wanted for all she's worth—the 1959 Dinah Shore. How was that?

DINAH. Beautiful, Pat. I thank you from the bottom of my glove compartment.  

Again, the celebrities engage in a very simple, set up/knock down banter. The twist of the cliché at the end from Dinah Shore seems formulaic by Gelbart's standards.

Despite the simple humor of the program, perhaps warranted by Pat Boone's lack of comedy training, the program ran three seasons. Gelbart provided the second season's scripts, between October 1958 and May 1959. During Gelbart's association with the program, a few weeks after the US Naval Academy Choir appeared on the Boone show, the program originated from the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. The production provided America with a tour of the grounds, and a taste of the midshipman's life at the academy. Perhaps Gelbart saw the opportunity to write more military jokes as a familiar “groove” after four years of military tours with Bob Hope. *The Pat Boone Chevy Showroom*, however, never stressed the comedy.

For the next four years (1958-1962), Gelbart's entire television output consisted of specials, usually written with one other person, Sheldon Keller or Woody Allen. Pat Marshall remembers the time as very tentative, since she and Larry did not know when (or if) the next job would come along. In November 1958, Gelbart

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104 *The Pat Boone Show*, 5 Feb. 1959, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 3.
105 *The Pat Boone Show*, 28 May 1959, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
106 Marshall interview.
wrote the first of two *Chevrolet Golden Anniversary Shows* with Woody Allen (1932- ). Gelbart initially believed he would be writing the script alone in consultation with the star, Sid Caesar, but one day Milt Kamen, Caesar's regular stand-in, walked in on a writing session with a new face, Woody Allen. "I've got the young Larry Gelbart with me," he told Caesar, describing his find. Gelbart—not even thirty-one years old at the time—pointed to himself and pleaded, "I thought I was the young Larry Gelbart."107

*The Chevy Show*, as the special was usually referred to, featured Shirley MacLaine and Art Carney as support to Caesar. All were excellent comedians, and the writers provided the cast with worthy material. The first of two long sketches was "Hothouse 90," a parody of *Playhouse 90*, a popular TV dramatic series. The setting was an English manor house, and the subject of the satire stories like Daphne DuMaurier's *Rebecca*. *The Chevy Show* sketch changes the object of obsession; here, Caesar remains obsessed with his deceased first wife, Cecily:

**SHIRLEY.** Am I as special as Cecily?
**SID.** Don't ever mention Cecily's name in the house, or I'll . . .

[END of ACT I]108

Gelbart and Allen pointed satirical fingers at television conventions as much as florid and melodramatic writing. Later in the sketch, Caesar's character loses touch with reality even more:

**SID.** Don't sit in that chair. Cecily used to sit in that chair. It's like sitting on her memory.

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107 Woody Allen telephone interview, 10 Aug. 1995. Caesar in his biography records the response as "Wait a minute, I am the young Larry Gelbart" (144) and Eric Lax's biography of Allen records it as, "The young Larry Gelbart is here" (111).

[She moves to another chair, far away from the first]
SID. Don’t sit in that chair. She used to put her feet on that chair when she sat in [pointing to first] that chair. She was a very long girl.
SHIRLEY. Please get a hold of yourself.
SID. Don’t touch my hair. Cecily gave me that hair.
SHIRLEY. John, please.
SID. Don’t call me John. She called me John.\footnote{109}

The final sketch of the show was a take-off on \textit{American Bandstand}, with Art Carney playing the Dick Clark-based host.\footnote{110} The “Teentime” sketch, as it was called, stated perhaps too honestly the dynamic at work on such shows. Carney’s MC character tells the teens, “Thanks for coming here instead of doing your homework,” and “Here’s a record I get an awful lot of money for playing.” This sketch caused much grief among the sponsors, who, according to Gelbart,

came in with the cross faces and said, ‘We can’t offend teenagers,’ because, I don’t know, they steal a lot of Chevys, I guess. They just went page by page and said, ‘This is controversial, and this is wrong, and this is too strong.’ [On the other hand, sponsors love] Dinah Shore, who is a lovely person, standing there and singing, and you can’t offend anyone with ‘Tea for Two,’ you know?”\footnote{111}

Next, in September 1959, Gelbart wrote a special, starring Art Carney, with his new partner, Sheldon (“Shelley”) Keller, a colleague from \textit{Caesar’s Hour}. Keller and Gelbart maintained a good writing relationship (although not continually as partners) for nearly twenty years. Producer David Susskind recalled the genesis of the project:

I went to Larry and Shelley and Burt Shevelove, who I felt was a fine director, and I said, ‘I think Carney is a man of amazing talents and of dramatic versatility, and we’d like to do a unique show, ranging from

\footnote{109} \textit{The Chevy Show} 19.\footnote{110} Perhaps prophetically, given Dick Clark’s lengthy career with that show and others, Carney introduces himself as “Your MC for the rest of your life” (42).\footnote{111} Susskind 14.
comedy to drama, and in the comedy area, comedy with a point of view, with a thematic idea each show.\textsuperscript{112}

For the specials, Gelbart would once again be working in television with Burt Shevelove, his director on \textit{The Red Buttons Show}, and more personally, his libretto collaborator on \textit{A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum}. The critical response was positive to the Carney specials, which brought Gelbart and his partner a Sylvania Award for the writing.

The point of view or thematic idea for the first Carney special, entitled \textit{Small World, Isn't It?} explored the ability to know so much more of the world through increases in travel or technology. In this first example, Carney plays an American tourist: “Yes, sir. We've been to London, Paris, France, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Greece, Turkey and here we are in Rome. I tell you—it's been a wonderful four days.”\textsuperscript{113} This elaborate set-up recalls the humor of \textit{The Joan Davis Show}, for example, in the unexpected truth of the punchline. Later in the same sketch, Carney attempts to charge his meal, as he would do back home. The waiter refuses him.

\begin{center}
\textit{CARNEY. [to waiter] Look, my friend, you don’t seem to understand. We Americans sign for everything. We sign for meals, for hotels, our travel. The American economy is based on signing for everything. It’s nothing new. Why, you take our Declaration of Independence. They all signed that. Nobody paid cash for it.}\textsuperscript{114}
\end{center}

The world is made smaller not only by air travel, but also by technology, as the next sketch points out. The humor again collaterally lampoons the medium of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{112} Susskind 28.
\item \textsuperscript{113} \textit{Small World, Isn't It?}, Prod. David Susskind, 12 Oct. 1959, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 8.
\item \textsuperscript{114} \textit{Small World} 13.
\end{itemize}
television—specifically, Edward R. Murrow and his *Person to Person* program—while demonstrating the interconnectedness of the world. First of all, to make the sketch more visual, the writers offer a poke at Murrow’s ubiquitous cigarette. Carney is seen loading a cigarette holder with several cigarettes (as one would load a rifle), taking a cigarette out of the pack—it is already lit, *etc.* Carney is interviewing (the *Danny Thomas Show* actor) Hans Conreid, who plays Plato Aristophanes, a Greek tycoon:

> CARNEY. (off camera) Tell me, Plato. How does it feel to be one of the richest men in the world?
> CONREID. Everyone asks me that question. Is simple answer. Money is nothing without love. And I am most fortunate man in the world.
> CARNEY. (off camera) How is that?
> CONREID. I love money. I kiss it, I hug it, I love it.\[^116\]

This comedy could easily be put into Sid Caesar’s mouth (the exaggerated and over-the-top punchline sounds like a Mel Brooks line), yet the punchlines here are spoken by Hans Conreid, and not Art Carney, the star of the show. In a Caesar sketch, Carney’s role would have been played by Carl Reiner, and Conreid’s by Caesar. Gelbart recalls that his relationship with Carney on these specials was exceptional:

> Art was another guy who just said, ‘Tell me what to do and point me to the stage and I’ll get out there and do it.’ He was wonderful. He’s very versatile, and not an ounce of pretension or difficulty in his bones. He was fun, and in this business you don’t always have fun.\[^117\]

On the other hand, Carney’s female co-star, Hermione Gingold, actually spat on the script when she did not like a line she was given.\[^118\]

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\[^115\] Compare the “already lit” gag in *The Patrice Munsel Show*.
\[^116\] *Small World* 40.
\[^117\] Gelbart Oral History 18
In the last special written by Gelbart and Keller for Carney, “The Best of Anything,” the writers satirize the presence of so many awards shows. The show aired 4 March 1960, and, to make their thematic point early, Carney’s introduction to the program is presented an “Inny” award, “for making the best introduction of the evening.” The humor ranges from cheap, blackout humor—a man in a fright mask accepting an award for publishing “The Ugly American”—to satires of congressional hearings that foreshadow Gelbart’s own stage play Mastergate (1989). Perhaps the most esoteric yet hilarious scene in the special parodied composer-conductor Leonard Bernstein’s televised lectures, a part of the series Omnibus, in which Bernstein patiently talked television viewers through the intricacies of classical music forms:

[Camera pulls back. Follows him away from the orchestra to the blackboard]
CARNEY. What am I doing now? I’m walking. And where am I walking to? A blackboard. Now I’m picking up a piece of chalk. Next week, I’m going to explain chalk, but for now let’s stay with Beethoven. To begin with, we’re concerned with the four opening notes . . . Four terribly simple notes. Simple, and yet, as it turns out . . . the happiest possible choice. Now, let’s hear the first three of the four notes of the fifth, please.

[Music: orchestra plays first three notes. Carney writes 3 “g’s” on blackboard]
CARNEY. Three “G’s.” That was their first offer. But I got them up to seventy-five hundred.

[Writes “$7500” on the blackboard]

Gelbart remembers meeting the object of the satire, Leonard Bernstein, at a party after the special aired and being told how hilarious his mockery of Liberace was.

119 The Best of Anything, prod. David Susskind, 4 March 1960, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 4.
120 Best of Anything 28.
121 Best of Anything 44-5.
122 Bob Costas, Later . . . with Bob Costas, NBC, Oct 1989. Liberace was a celebrated, flamboyant pianist of the 1950s and ‘60s.
Gelbart and Keller followed the tradition of satire they learned with Sid Caesar, where any subject was open to ridicule. It is difficult to imagine a parody of classical music, public television, etc., performed on network television today. In order to establish a large enough audience base, television writers have systematically written for a less and less sophisticated or discriminating audience, in hopes of reaching more viewers. Gelbart explains the situation in another way:

The audiences [in the 1950s] were smarter. It was an earlier time in television, sets were more expensive, only the more affluent people bought sets. Most of them were better educated. The audience has been 'dumbed down' to a very great degree, and so has the comedy—so they'll get it.\(^1\)\(^2\)\(^3\)

Gelbart followed the Carney special with one for singer Judy Garland, and since this was a rare solo writing effort, the similarities to the *Pat Boone Chevy Showroom* arise again. This script was, however, more comedic than those written for Pat Boone, although most of the writing still introduced and linked songs. Burt Shevelove once again directed a Gelbart script, called simply *Judy Garland and Her Guests*, which aired 19 March 1963. Gelbart tailored the comedy to the established characters of the guests, comedian Phil Silvers and singer-actor Robert Goulet. In a way, the special owes much to the style of banter heard on the Hope shows, and Silvers certainly provided a sure conduit for Gelbart's gags. For example:

GARLAND. (timidly) Excuse me, sir. I'd like to audition for your next musical.
SILVERS. What do you do?
GARLAND. I'm a singer.
SILVER. Let's see your legs.
GARLAND. I said, I'm a singer.

\(^{123}\) *Caesar's Writers.*
SILVERS. All right. You're a singer. I'm a looker. Oh, never mind. Let's hear you sing.\textsuperscript{124}

The scene provided a necessary introduction to a song, but Gelbart's touch actually allowed humor to emerge in a formula often devoid of real laughs. As with the Hope shows, the guests sometimes engaged in good-natured feuding:

GOULET. Somehow I never think of you as bald, Phil.
SILVERS. (to Goulet) Bless you. (to Garland) I like him. Didn't I say I liked him?
GOULET. To me it just seems as if you had a very wide part.
SILVERS. I hate him. Didn't I say I hated him? I just can't stand petty jealousy.\textsuperscript{125}

The final television series for which Gelbart wrote before leaving for England in 1963 exemplified a change occurring in TV over the previous few years: \textit{The Danny Kaye Show} would originate from Hollywood, California, and not New York. Gelbart contracted only a few weeks' work on the show, mostly in the areas of development and helping to co-write the first two shows. Danny Kaye (1913-1987), a veteran of stage and both screens, would host a variety show that would exploit his talents.\textsuperscript{126}

Kaye was, like Sid Caesar, a master of foreign accents, a reasonably good singer (especially comic patter songs), and a very "human" comedian. Gelbart, however, characterizes Kaye's delivery as more "precious" than Caesar's, meaning he focused the material on his cuteness, whereas Caesar stressed the humanity and thus

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Judy Garland and Her Guests}, 7 Feb. 1963, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 16.
\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Judy Garland and Her Guests} 36-7.
\textsuperscript{126} Kaye received his comedy training in the resort hotels of the Catskills. There he met Sylvia Fine, who became his wife and the arranger of the special material that showcased his talent for dialects and patter songs. Their cooperation led to such strong Kaye vehicles as \textit{The Court Jester} (1956) and \textit{The Five Pennies} (1959). Kaye also starred in \textit{The Secret Life of Walter Mitty} (1947) and \textit{Hans Christian Andersen} (1952) and was known around the world for his work on behalf of UNICEF. Kaye received two honorary Oscars.
the truth. Gelbart worked to develop the concept of the program, his notes concerning Kaye's television vehicle disclose a good deal about his own frame of mind regarding comedy. In an eight-page collection of ideas for the new show, several common themes emerge. He suggested a quotation from the writings of President John F. Kennedy for the close of the first show, to be spoken by Kaye, and the thought seems to incorporate Gelbart's own feelings about the power of humor:

There are three things which are real.
God, human folly, and laughter.
The first two are beyond human comprehension
So we must do what we can with the third.

Gelbart joined a writing team composed of Herbert Baker, Mel Tolkin, Sheldon Keller, Saul Ilson, and Ernest Chambers. He compartmentalized his ideas into recurring "departments," which might be visited over and over throughout the season; the second set of ideas concerned one-time sketch pitches. Throughout, Gelbart provides ideas without fixing a format for the show. It seemed to be a priority for Gelbart and his fellow writers to leave the show flexible until a successful formula could be found. Mentions of the "human" edge to comedy occur frequently in his notes: for example, the "Department of Human Foibles" would personify each of the seven deadly sins. Gelbart's experience with Caesar certainly allowed him to appreciate the timelessness and classic nature of comedy springing from Man's shortcomings.

One of Gelbart's one-time sketch ideas, called "As Told To," involved Kaye as a ghost writer helping an actress compile her memoirs. In the course of the sketch we...

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128 "Primer" (notes for The Danny Kaye Show) ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 1.
find that “she has given up little of her past she so proudly announces she has given up (booze, lechery, etc.). Kaye, of course, finds himself the victim of her excesses.”129

Gelbart spent only a few weeks with The Danny Kaye Show—long enough for a few meetings and his son’s bar mitzvah (Gary Markowitz’s birth father still lived and worked in California).130 Immediately after the required meetings and celebrations, Gelbart and his family took the train back East, and boarded the Queen Mary for England. Thus, in late 1963, Gelbart said good-bye to America, and crossed the Atlantic on a ship much more elegant than the one on which his father traveled in the opposite direction some forty years earlier.

After nearly two decades of “feeding the monster,” writing comedy for the persona of one comedian after another, Gelbart did not, like Mel Brooks or Woody Allen, strike out on his own to perform his material himself. Instead, he began more and more to parlay his success into writing for all media, sometimes simultaneous to his work in television. Above all, he kept his options and his eyes open for new opportunities to keep working. A doodle in the form of a business card on one of his Caesar’s Hour scripts displays Gelbart’s subconscious affirmation of his strength, and provides an apt summary of his vocation:

L. Gelbart
Situations . . .
Monologues . . .
One-liners . . .
ES6-7023
‘Where the comic is always right.’131

129 “Primer” 8.
130 Marshall interview.
131 Caesar’s Hour, 24 Oct. 1955, NBC, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 1.
CHAPTER 3: OUT OF TOWN WITH A MUSICAL; OR, A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY FROM THE FORUM THEATRE

Stage I: 1951-1962

- *My L.A.* (1951)
- *The Conquering Hero* (1961)
- *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962)

Several ironies suffuse Larry Gelbart’s first attempt at writing for the stage:

first, when he began his collaboration on the revue *My L.A.* (1951) in the late ‘40s, he had lived in the city for only five or six years, thus making the title a bit of a misnomer; second, the production ran all of four performances, still emphasizing the short time that Gelbart and his L.A. were to be acquainted; finally, and once again underscoring the transitory nature of Gelbart’s relationship with his adopted hometown, within a year of *My L.A.*’s short life on the southern California stage, Gelbart would move to New York to write for the fledgling medium of television.

*My L.A.* was based on a column of the same name by Matt Weinstock that appeared regularly in the *Daily News*. Wilhelm von Trenk-Trebisch,¹ a German expatriate who came to Hollywood during World War II and acted in “countless” films, promoted the idea for the revue. He worked to get the project underway with

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¹ “Willy” Trenk-Trebisch had acted for Max Reinhardt and Bertolt Brecht in Germany before coming to Hollywood in the 1940s. Gelbart relates that Trebisch was a Jewish émigré, and “being Jewish, naturally he played mainly Nazis and headwaiters” (Peter Stone, “Conversation with Larry Gelbart,” *Dramatists Guild Quarterly* [Spring 1991] 11).
Walter Marisch, an unemployed actor and, according to Gelbart, "a very handsome devil."\(^2\) For a period of about four years, Trenk-Trebisch was able to "subsidize his living, and a few associates" with his work on *My L.A.*\(^3\) The show was unusual and controversial because Trenk capitalized the show by selling public shares, like stocks.\(^4\)

At the time, Gelbart was part of the writing team for the revue that also included Larry Marks, and Bill Manhoff,\(^5\) with music and lyrics provided by Sammy Fain and Paul Frances Webster, respectively.\(^6\) The publicity for the show increased the awareness in the press (and thus the public) that there were some major delays in getting the show into shape. It was performed at the Forum in Los Angeles, a theatre whose name, at least, would figure prominently in Gelbart's most celebrated theatre work, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962). *My L.A.* premiered 7 December 1951, and cost $400,000 to produce, which breaks down to a formidable $100,000 per performance.

The revue billed itself as a lighthearted look at places, people and lifestyles of the greater Los Angeles area. The subjects lampooned included the Farmer's Market, driving habits, and Forest Lawn Cemetery, from which comes the following bit of dialogue. Note the importance of setting to carry the humor:

FIRST WOMAN. (in the middle of a sentence) ... that's exactly the way I feel about it.

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\(^3\) Larry Gelbart, interview by Oral History Center of Southern Methodist University, 15 Aug. 1983, transcript in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 19.

\(^4\) *Los Angeles News* clip in UCLA Gelbart collection. n.d.

\(^5\) Gelbart and Marks continued in their normal weekly routine (i.e., on the Hope staff) during the writing of the revue (Gelbart Oral History 19).

\(^6\) Fain and Webster had collaborated on *Dear Hearts and Gentle People*, and would later help to create the Broadway musicals *Alive and Kicking* (1950), *Catch a Star!* (1955) and *Christine* (1960). None of these ran more than 50 performances.
SECOND WOMAN. Imagine a woman with her hips wearing a flowered print.
FIRST WOMAN. And that low neckline at her age...
SECOND WOMAN. ... and for such an occasion.
FIRST WOMAN. Well, let's be honest.... She didn't even know how to dress when she was alive.7

The style of the comedy appears to be consistent throughout. Its failings emerge in the inefficiency with which payoffs are accrued. In the following example, the "Main Street" sketch, an Angeleno spouts his unhappiness with the city and his desire to move to New Orleans:

ANDY. I'm through with this no-good town.
(A WINO turns from the bar at this and moves belligerently toward ANDY... holding onto his glass and slipping his coat off one shoulder)
WINO. Who said that? — who's talking that way about my town?
ANDY. I said it...
WINO. I won't stand for that kind of talk, see? I love this town.
ANDY. Well, that's too bad 'cause I say it's a dump, hear? Los Angeles is a dump.
WINO. Oh... Los Angeles? I thought this was San Bernardino. (as he puts his coat back on his shoulder and staggers to his place at the bar) They ought to put a sign up or something.8

Much of the humor, as above, seems justly placed in any situation comedy on radio of the time, and this next example, a man-in-the-street interview entitled "Meet the Angelenos," could easily have been a Bob Hope sketch (Marks and Gelbart were still writing for Hope at the time). Its payoff involves the discovery of a young man who actually was born in L.A.:

ANNOUNCER. What's your name, fella?
NATIVE SON. Melvin Cooper.
ANNOUNCER. Pleased to meet you, Melvin. Would you like to tell us where you're from?
NATIVE SON. Los Angeles.

8 My LA., 9.
ANNOUNCER. No, no—I mean originally.
NATIVE SON. Los Angeles.
ANNOUNCER. You don't seem to know what I mean—where were you born?
NATIVE SON. Los Angeles. Right over on Third Street.
ANNOUNCER. No kidding?
NATIVE SON. Honest.
ANNOUNCER. Oh come on Melvin . . . you know as well as I do that nobody was ever born in Los Angeles. Let's have the truth, kid . . . Chicago? New York? Pittsburgh?
NATIVE SON. No really . . . I was born right here in L.A.
ANNOUNCER. Melvin, I've been here at Hollywood and Vine doing this show for three years and in that time I've met Bearded Ladies, Three or four midgets, an India Rubber man, a four hundred and eighty pound woman, and a two-headed calf . . . but Melvin . . . (puts hand on Melvin's shoulder) You're the biggest freak I ever met!9

Perhaps the final irony concerning My L.A. is that Gelbart would return to Los Angeles as a subject for a stage musical forty years later, for City of Angels (1989), which is itself set during the period that Gelbart wrote his first stage piece. In his introduction to the published version of City of Angels, Gelbart relates that his experience working on My L.A. had two positive effects. The bug to write for the theater had been implanted so deeply it could only be removed by major surgery (such surgery usually performed by theater critics—and always without anesthesia). And it demonstrated for me, since all of the material dealt with life in Los Angeles, just how theatrically marvelous that marvelously theatrical city was . . . I just hoped that somewhere down the freeway, I'd get another chance to use the city as the setting for a show, a show that would mercifully live for at least five performances.10

Gelbart's first theatre experience was not a particularly rewarding one for him, artistically or financially. My L.A., to heap another irony upon the venture, included a

song about the cemetery, but it might have summarized the experience those involved had with the show: “You haven’t lived till you’ve died in L.A.”

“It just seemed to me we were writing that show forever,” Gelbart recalls. He says he was once told that the best way to work in theatre was to “Do a show with friends, and make sure you’re all doing the same show.’ That wasn’t true of My L.A. We were all neophytes and Trenk had us kind of mesmerized.” Still, the opportunity to write for something besides the commercial radio market allowed Gelbart “a wonderful respite.” He would not enjoy such a theatre respite again for another six years, while writing television in New York for Patrice Munsel, Pat Boone, Art Carney and Sid Caesar.

Gelbart teamed up in 1956 with Charles Spalding, who was an insider in politics, very close to the Kennedy family, as Gelbart remembers. Spalding had aspirations to be in the arts, and wished to collaborate with Gelbart on the book to a musical called The Golden Kazoo, adapted from a novel by John G. Schneider. The plot involves the packaging of the presidential candidates in the (future) 1960 election. Given Spalding’s closeness to Kennedy—the eventual nominee and winner four years later—and Gelbart’s future interest in political satire (Mastergate, Power Failure, M*A*S*H, etc.), the idea held some appeal for the two men. The script was outlined during Gelbart’s summer break from Caesar’s Hour, and the first draft was completed in August of the same year. With Gelbart’s return to Caesar in September

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12 Gelbart Oral History 24.
and his impending marriage to Patricia Marshall in November, the project never reached a composer, lyricist, or second draft.

In late 1957, a friend of Gelbart's, the television writer and director Burt Shevelove (1918-1982) was talking to his friend, Stephen Sondheim (1926-) after the prestige success of the latter's *West Side Story*. According to Shevelove, he and a group of friends were sitting around deploring the absence of low comedy on Broadway at that time: "There were plenty of touching, even tragic, lovers, plenty of dream ballets, and plenty of important truths, stated and restated, but no fun."¹⁵ Sondheim remembers telling Shevelove that he would like to write a musical with him, and that "Burt said, 'I have an idea,' and it was the plays of Plautus."¹⁶ Shevelove proposed a musical based on the conventions of ancient Roman comedy, and gave Sondheim the Loeb editions of Plautus to read.¹⁷ Since *West Side Story* was Sondheim's first Broadway credit, but for lyrics only, he looked forward to the opportunity to contribute both music and lyrics to the project.¹⁸ *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* would, in fact, carry the distinction of being the first Broadway musical of Sondheim's for which he wrote the complete vocal score.

In 1948, Shevelove contributed pseudonymous lyrics for a Broadway musical revue he directed called *Small Wonder*, so he was no stranger to the stage; however, and of more interest to the development of *Forum*, Shevelove had even earlier provided lyrics for a musicalization of Plautus's *Mostellaria (The Haunted House)*

¹⁶ Stephen Sondheim, Telephone interview, 23 May 1996.
¹⁷ Sondheim interview.

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while an undergraduate at Brown University,\textsuperscript{19} and during his tenure as resident
director of the Yale Dramat he created a musical for the club entitled \textit{When in Rome} (1946), based on a combination of Plautus's \textit{Miles Gloriosus} and \textit{Pseudolus}.\textsuperscript{20}

This precursor to \textit{A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum}, \textit{When in Rome}, shared many characteristics with that Broadway musical. First, it mined the comedies of Plautus for situations and characters that would work in the twentieth century. Second, \textit{When in Rome} interspersed songs between scenes, including one titled “A Couple of Greeks on a Roman Holiday.” According to Shevelove, “The faculty and students adored it.”\textsuperscript{21} Such a reaction seems reasonable at an Ivy League school, but would such a concept play on Broadway, in a commercial setting? Shevelove had faith that it would.

Shevelove had for years been talking up a show to Gelbart based on the plays of Plautus.\textsuperscript{22} Now that he had Sondheim on board, Shevelove contacted Gelbart, who was completing his writing time on \textit{Caesar's Hour} and about to begin writing specials for Sid Caesar, Art Carney, \textit{et al.} Sondheim, meanwhile, approached Jerome Robbins (the director of \textit{West Side Story}), who was “looking for a farce.”\textsuperscript{23} Sondheim gathered up the small, red Loeb translations and, according to Sondheim, “I gave them to Jerry Robbins, because I thought he would be a good director for it. And he

\textsuperscript{19} Carol Ilson, in her treatment of producer Harold Prince, indicates that Shevelove wrote this while an undergraduate at Yale (73). Shevelove attended Brown University for his undergraduate degree and later attended Yale's graduate program in theatre (Gelbart and Sondheim interviews).

\textsuperscript{20} Carol Ilson, \textit{Harold Prince: From Pajama Game to Phantom of the Opera} (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1989), 74.

\textsuperscript{21} Shevelove 31.

\textsuperscript{22} Gelbart Oral History 21.

\textsuperscript{23} Ilson 74.
said, 'Oh, they’re great.' He took them on vacation with him."²⁴ Sondheim asked Harold Prince whether he would like to produce the piece, but Prince turned the opportunity down, saying, in effect, "you know, farce is just not my thing."²⁵ By early 1958, the first of ten eventual drafts of the script was completed (labeled simply "A Roman Comedy" in lieu of an actual title). Robbins’ s close associate, Leland Hayward, was the show’s producer. By the end of the year, Hayward was out—the first of many changes in director and producer to come.

Playwright Peter Stone, in his Dramatists Guild Quarterly interview with Gelbart, points out that A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum "has the odd distinction of having the book outnumber the score in collaboration," since most musicals have a single librettist, and a team of lyricist and composer.²⁶ Shevelove and Gelbart decided upon "ground rules" from the outset of their writing; Shevelove described some of them thus:

> We would preserve the classic unities of time, place, and action. We would use the classic characters of Plautus. We would have no anachronisms or sly references to today. But we realized we would have to invent a plot (the original plots are negligible) to accommodate all the characters we wanted to use.²⁷

The usual writing arrangement, since all three lived in New York, was to assemble at Sondheim’s house on East 49th Street in Manhattan. Gelbart and Shevelove would sprawl on the ground floor and chart the plot while Sondheim sat

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²⁴ Sondheim interview.
²⁵ Sondheim interview. Prince maintains that he wanted to do Forum from the very beginning: “I had the same conviction about it that I had with West Side, but my partner Bobby Griffith wasn’t crazy about it” (Craig Zadan, Sondheim & Co. [New York: Harper & Row, 1989] 66).
²⁶ Stone 17.
²⁷ Shevelove 31.
one floor above at his piano. Often, the librettists would work afternoons in Sondheim's house without the composer, since Sondheim preferred to work late at night. Therefore, the team often worked apart at the same address. Because "Larry had a family and Burt had a social life," according to Sondheim, he often worked nights alone.28

Despite not physically working in the same space much of the time, the team realized that the collaborative responsibility of creating a musical lies in the selflessness of accepting that a good moment in the script actually belongs in a song, or that an idea in a song belongs elsewhere, or even that an entire song needs to be cut to allow the plot to gain momentum.29 Because of the necessities of give-and-take, Sondheim might have provided a solution to a problem in the script musically, or Gelbart/Shevelove might have added an extra "zing" to a song. Sondheim, after thirty-five years or so, does not remember specific instances (or even that it happened all that often). He does credit Gelbart, by way of example, with the final joke of the song "Free," where Hero sings, "F-R-double-" and Pseudolus chimes in with "No, the long way! . . . F - R - E - E . . . FREE!"30 Gelbart remembers the collaboration as a very positive experience, "a show where everybody was cooking together, and it was wonderful, just wonderful."31

The showy, vaudeville-style ending for the song "Free" indicates a basic understanding that the team possessed with regard to tone: Burt Shevelove referred

28 Sondheim interview.
29 Sondheim points out that the song "Pretty Little Picture" was cut from the 1996 revival starring Nathan Lane because "the first 45 minutes is already so song heavy" (Sondheim interview).
30 Sondheim interview.
31 Gelbart oral history 24. Cf. his regard for the Caesar's Hour writing team as a kind of jam session.
to *Forum* as "a scenario for vaudevillians," and considered it essentially a combination of Roman comedy and the modern low comedy of American comedians. As such, Shevelove, Gelbart and Sondheim wrote the early draft(s) with comedian Phil Silvers in mind. "We realized very early in the research that the crafty slave was obviously the forerunner of the character that Silvers was playing at the time—Sergeant Bilko," Gelbart recalls. Because of the vaudeville style that the authors had in mind, and the specific type of performer which that style demands, Gelbart laments that the tradition and the actors to play it are all but dead today.

When Gelbart and his partners presented the early draft to Silvers in 1958, he balked, calling the material "old schtick" and missing the whole point of the project. In hindsight, Gelbart admits that Silvers was handled badly by the team:

I don't think he got a lot of scripts that asked him to be in a toga and to play a character whose name was fairly unpronounceable. I'm sure it all looked like kind of minor league Shakespeare. Had we put him in a room and played for him and read the stuff, and given him a sense of the burlesque and vaudeville and farce that it contained, I think he'd have done it.

Since the play had not yet been picked up and formally capitalized for production, the members of the team had no other choice but to write (or direct) other projects in order to pay the bills. Gelbart continued to write television shows, many of which were directed by Shevelove. Sondheim, in the middle of 1958, took a

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35 Zadan 73.

hiatus from *Forum* and accepted a job writing lyrics only for the musical *Gypsy*.

Jerome Robbins—once he began work as director of *Gypsy* and his close associate Leland Hayward dropped out as *Forum*’s producer—bowed out himself as director of *Forum*.

Gelbart and Shevelove continued to revise the book for the musical while Sondheim worked on *Gypsy*. They concentrated on making the plot intricate and the dialogue “elegant and timeless.” As Gelbart explains, “We wanted to make it work without anachronisms—we didn’t want it to sound modern, but we didn’t want it to sound ancient, either.”

Constructions emerged that sounded formally rhythmic: “You say she just arrived from Crete? Part of *Forum*’s richness lies in basing several (though diverse) jokes on this diction: when frightened by the soldiers, Pseudolus has trouble enunciating, “Who seeks the house of Marcus Lycus?;” conversely the grieving captain has no trouble with “Her bridal bower becomes a burial bier of bitter bereavement.”

In another example, Pseudolus asks the procurer, “Tell me, have you anything lying about in there, anything to satisfy an Olympian appetite?” The actor in rehearsal continually said, “lying around in there,” and couldn’t hear the difference. Gelbart told the actor that “lying around” suggests “slothfulness and laziness to... an audience.” Gelbart could also have pointed to the set-up: Pseudolus asks for

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37 Larry Gelbart, interview by Gene Searchinger, June 1987, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 9.
38 *Forum* 41.
39 *Forum* 75.
40 *Forum* 120.
41 *Forum* 37.
42 Searchinger 9.
“anything” (funny as understatement) not “anybody.” Bodies lie around, things tend
to lie about. Attention to nuances of usage such as these have been a hallmark of
Gelbart’s writing.

The farce is so intricately plotted that each alteration necessitated a change
elsewhere in the script. Sondheim is laudatory with regard to the work of Shevelove
and Gelbart, and his respect for the book emerges when he calls it “almost a senior
thesis on two thousand years of comedy with an intricate Swiss watch-like farce
plot.”43 If his early radio work on Duffy’s Tavern served as a college education, Gelbart
is quick to point out that Forum was “post-graduate,” with a minor in patience: “I
learned a good deal about looking for other solutions and disabusing yourself of
characters and situations which you loved, but you knew you had to lose because the
new outline wouldn’t accommodate them.”44 Eventually the hard work on the book
paid off, resulting in what Sondheim considers “the best farce ever written.”45

Legendary producer David Merrick,46 who was co-producing Gypsy with
Leland Hayward, picked up the option on Forum for $4,000 once Hayward abandoned
it. In early 1959, therefore, Forum had Merrick as producer, Sondheim on leave with
Gypsy, and no director. Perhaps the collaborators had done their work “too well,”
Gelbart reflects. “So many directors are used to ‘saving’ material or imposing

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their notions on it... [Forum] didn't need interpretation. We lost a lot of very good people because they couldn't squeeze themselves over the whole thing."\(^{47}\) A year later, with Gypsy open and doing well, Robbins told Sondheim that he'd like to solve the problem that Forum was facing, namely the lack of director; however, he would agree to do so only if Merrick stepped aside as producer, because the two did not work well together.\(^{48}\) Hal Prince was willing also to try to convince his partner, Bobby Griffith, to produce the show themselves with Robbins in the director's chair, since, as Sondheim observed, "anything that Jerry wanted to do was okay by Hal."\(^{49}\)

Sondheim describes the strange dealings that had to be undertaken in order to have both Jerome Robbins and Hal Prince a part of the production:

Jerry made the stipulation that I had to get it back from Merrick without mentioning Jerry’s name, 'cause obviously, he didn't want to be the villain. It was very tricky, so I went to Merrick and I lied to him—the only time professionally in my life that I've ever lied—and I said we just wanted to take it back... that we weren't going to get it ready in time... some malarkey like that. I got it back and immediately gave it back to Hal, and then Jerry was aboard.*\(^{50}\)

Merrick received his $4,000 option payment back, saying in a knowing way that if Robbins left again as director, he would expect the opportunity to renew his option.\(^{51}\) Robbins left for Paris without signing a contract and Hal Prince set about to acquire some sort of security for the production. Prince describes his attempts to give the show to the Theatre Guild: "[N]ot only did we not get the subscription, but they

\(^{47}\) Gelbart Oral History 22-23.
\(^{48}\) Sondheim interview. Evidently, Robbins and Merrick clashed during Gypsy (Zadan 65).
\(^{49}\) Sondheim interview.
\(^{50}\) Sondheim interview.
\(^{51}\) Zadan 65-6. Merrick set an all-time Broadway record by having eleven shows of his running simultaneously in 1960. (Horn 17). Perhaps this is one reason the creators of Forum felt comfortable asking for their property back.

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didn’t even approve it for consideration. They thought it was confusing and unfunny.52

In the midst of the uncertainty whether A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum would ever reach an audience, Gelbart received an offer in mid-1960 from Bob Fosse (1927-1987) to write the book for a satirical musical based on Preston Sturges’s 1947 film Hail the Conquering Hero.53 “I leapt at the chance,” recalls Gelbart; besides a set story, Fosse “also had a theatre and a date and this was a show that was going to get on, as opposed to Forum, which just went on and on without ever getting on.”54 Fosse had just finished his first directorial opportunity with the hit musical Redhead (1959), which starred his (new) wife Gwen Verdon, and was eager to continue directing.55 The rest of the creative team was already in place when Gelbart came aboard: Norman Gimbel would write lyrics for Mark (Moose) Charlap’s music,56 Fosse would choreograph and direct, while Robert Whitehead and Roger L. Stevens (with ANTA57) would produce.

The Conquering Hero, as the new musical was called, followed the film’s story of a mild-mannered fellow returning home with some well-wishing marine buddies who paint a rosy war record for their new pal. The lies escalate, and the

52 Qtd. in Zadan 66-7.
53 Martin Gottfried, All His Jazz: The Life and Death of Bob Fosse (New York: Bantam, 1990), 120.
54 Gelbart Oral History 20.
55 Gottfried 120.
56 Charlap was most famous for composing Peter Pan (1954; with some additional music by Jule Styne), and Gimbel had worked with Charlap on 1958’s Whoop-Up (Suskin).
57 The American National Theater and Academy, a “utopian” non-profit venture begun in the Thirties, aspired to create a national theatre, as the name implies. When this was made impossible for various reasons, it rethought its mission and established an Experimental Theater that survived union squabbles and other troubles until it disbanded in 1950. ANTA remained a body that attempted to
“hero,” Woodrow Truesmith, has to talk his way out of the charade while being
campaigned for mayor. Fosse’s two most memorable production numbers were the
“Okinawa Ballet,” wherein the male dancers portrayed overly glorified American
soldiers, while the female dancers portrayed the Japanese—in “deep Second Position
plié.” The ballet battle took place not to music, but to narration by Truesmith’s
mother. She tells her friend about the jungles: “You know how things get when you
let them go!” Fosse impressed his innovative style on another production number,
which took place at the political rally near the climax of the musical. Again, instead of
music, the dancers moved to a kind of rap: “Every time a word was emphasized, [the
company] would take up the cry and start a different kind of dance to it.”

Initially, Fosse envisioned Donald O’Connor for the lead, but he proved
unavailable. Thus, Fosse had to do “what he hated most in the theatre—audition
actors.” The role of Truesmith was eventually won by Tom Poston, a familiar
television character actor. Fosse was never entirely comfortable with the casting of
the lead, and as the show began to founder, the relationship (what there was of it)
deteriorated. But, then again, Fosse’s relationship with the rest of the show’s creative

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59 Qtd in Suskin 157.
60 Beddow 71.
61 Gottfried 121.
62 Poston (1921-) was a regular on the Steve Allen Show (playing a recurring character who couldn’t
even remember his own name) and on the quiz program To Tell the Truth. His persona on television
seems to have caused problems with the creation of the Truesmith character: as Poston explained to
Gelbart, “There’s a certain part of the audience that expects me to do lines a certain way. I don’t want
to do it the way they expect it... And there’s another part of the audience that knows I don’t want to
do it that way... and are expecting the switch... so I don’t want to do it that way either. So I found
a third way to do it” (Qtd. in Gottfried 127-8).

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team strained under the pressure of a show that just did not work. The differences between Gelbart and Fosse arose from the latter’s attempt to rewrite the book. Gelbart was absent from rehearsals for a brief period, and returned to find changes in the script being rehearsed that he had not written. Fosse’s biographer, Martin Gottfried, described the ensuing exchange between writer and director thus:

When Gelbart inquired about the authorship of this dialogue, Bob said, ‘You were off fucking around somewhere.’ He didn’t take his eyes away from the actors, he didn’t turn to look at Gelbart, but he added, ‘Somebody had to make the changes.’ It was implicit in that remark that he had written the dialogue.

‘Okay,’ Gelbart said, suppressing his anger. ‘Well, now that I’m back I’d like to do it myself. I see what you want. I see what you need. Now let me put it into my own words. I’d like to do that.’

At that point in the conversation, Fosse went into the severe, thrashing convulsions of a grand mal epileptic seizure, but before Gelbart realized what was happening to the director, he quipped, “A simple ‘No’ would have been sufficient.” The next afternoon, Gelbart visited the recovering Fosse at his apartment. Although Fosse praised Gelbart’s abilities as a writer, he proclaimed an unwillingness to work with him ever again. One is reminded of the advice Gelbart was given, namely to write musicals with friends who are writing the same show.

Gelbart’s book searched for a stage identity with the flashback ballets and choreographed rallies (both more Fosse’s domain than his); moreover, the dialogue

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63 Beddow 70.
64 Gelbart and his wife, Pat, had traveled to Los Angeles, where the couple had adopted a newborn baby. According to Gelbart, “It had to be done at that precise moment” (E-mail with the author 21 May 1996).
65 Gottfried 124.
66 Gottfried 124.
67 Gottfried 124.
between characters often relied on the stock situation from the film original. Still, Gelbart's work may be seen in some of the changes he made. The mayor, consistent with Gelbart's depictions of politicians, boldly announces, "I don't have anything to say, so I'll just read this speech." Later, deploring the hero worship surrounding Truesmith, the mayor states that "If the war goes on, you won't be able to swing a dead cat without knocking over a couple of heroes!" 68

As far as the adaptation is concerned, Gelbart had two opposite audiences to contend with: first, those who considered the original film, *Hail the Conquering Hero*, "sacred" and who were disappointed with the changes that Gelbart brought to Sturges's satire, 69 and second, those who did not appreciate an anti-war and anti-hero musical: according to cast member Beddow, "Gelbart's book was very amusing, but its antiwar message led some reviewers to label it 'un-American.'" 70 This was, after all, Eisenhower-era America, still reeling from the House Committee on Un-American Activities; the next decade, the '60s, proved to be the time for anti-war polemics.

Gelbart also had to contend with opposing pressures in the process of adaptation itself. Certainly he was not unaccustomed to collaborating on a project with others; up to this point in his career, he had already written countless radio and television scripts, and two musicals, *My L.A.* and the as-yet-unproduced *Forum*, as a part of various teams. He had learned to be protective of his words, as a result of his earlier work in radio. As Gelbart explains, "It was words, words, words. They were all that mattered. And I saw masters of the medium—up close, first hand experience—

69 Gelbart Oral History 21.
fight censors and sponsors (Ed Gardner, Fred Allen, Bob Hope) for the right to say the words they meant to say." On Forum, he had already dissected text and reworked it to fit the requirements of a Broadway musical, and he certainly benefitted from Shevelove's experience on that account. With The Conquering Hero, Gelbart had to conform an already strong, satirical screenplay to a director's vision of experimental staging and dance techniques.

When the show opened in New Haven on Saturday, 19 November 1960, the whole show, including the book for the musical, was in trouble; Fosse believed The Conquering Hero would "make serious comments on war, politics, and sociology." For example, the "Okinawa Ballet" attacked the use of propaganda, since the female dancers who caricatured the Japanese embodied a clichéd version of the enemy. They clenched knives in their teeth and spun plates on their fixed bayonets, as if they were a performing troupe of marauders. The male dancers, on the other hand, provided an equally anti-propaganda vision by portraying almost god-like versions of GIs. The uniforms were golden, and the soldiers even put gold glitter in their hair. Fosse's desire for a serious message created friction, since, according to Gelbart, Fosse "kept pushing intellectual and political points that were passé, but he was very enamored of them because they were new to him."

In early December, when The Conquering Hero moved to its next tryout stop, Washington D.C.'s National Theatre, Fosse began to behave more irrationally toward

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70 Beddow 70.
71 E-mail with the author 21 May 1996.
72 Gottfried 126.
73 Beddow 70.
74 Gottfried 126.
his cast and collaborators. His behavior toward the producers was difficult to chart, since he was avoiding any kind of contact with them. The authors—Gelbart, Charlap and Gimbel—complained to Whitehead, who realized exactly what was happening. Fosse had missed rehearsals several times or left with his wife under the strain of trying to do everything.

The final tryout city was Philadelphia, where the pressure and incivility came to a head. At a production meeting, Fosse delivered the opinion that Poston needed to be replaced as lead. With so little time, a replacement seemed out of the question. The understudy, Bob Kaliban, wouldn't sell a ticket, as the producer was careful to point out. Fosse suggested himself as a replacement (in keeping with his desire to do everything on the project). The production team and the authors met in the theatre after that night’s performance and watched Fosse “audition” for the role. Fosse’s idiosyncratic persona led Gelbart to remark, “He’s doing Pal Joey,” without realizing that Fosse had played the role years before. Gwen Verdon, who sneaked in behind the team, tried to laugh hard enough to sell Fosse selling himself, “which only made it worse, because it wasn’t funny,” Gelbart noted.

Afterwards, the producer, Robert Whitehead, met with Fosse and told him that he could not continue as director; after alienating the rest of the creative team, his attitude toward the leading actor proved beyond anyone’s beneficial doubts that

75 Gottfried 128.
76 Gottfried 128.
77 Gottfried 129.
78 Gottfried 129.
79 Gottfried 129.
80 Gottfried 130.
the only hope for *The Conquering Hero* was to bring in a new director and choreographer for damage control. "If in fact you don’t have any faith in the leading man," Gelbart asked, "how are you going to turn around and direct him again tomorrow?" Fosse, before he left the next day, rehearsed the opening parade with his dancers and said good-bye. In her memoir, Beddow records that Fosse told the group, "I've been fired, and now I have just a short time left before I have to leave the theater. I don't want anyone to quit, and I want you all to be just as professional and work just as hard for my replacement as you have for me." She does not mention any references to the producers by Fosse. Martin Gottfried, however, relates that Fosse called the firing "the worst moment in his life." He also quotes Fosse as saying to his cast, "I got the show together, I hired all the actors, the ideas for the sets and costumes were mine, and then, the first thing that goes wrong, they fire me. . . . I should have produced it myself."

Philadelphia represented the last chance to bring the pieces of *The Conquering Hero* together. On Christmas Eve, Gelbart and his wife were entertaining the stage and film director Arthur Penn and his wife. As Gelbart recalls the moment, "I was telling the Penns about what an awful experience it was all proving to be, chiefly because of Fosse and his extra collaborators, Sturm and Drang. It was then that I said, 'If Hitler's alive, I hope he's out of town with a musical.'" With this

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81 Gottfried 130.
82 Beddow 71.
83 Gottfried 131.
84 E-mail to the author, 21 May 1996.
witticism, Gelbart became the author of what has to be the most quoted line about
the tryout process in the history of Broadway.

In Philadelphia, the producers brought in Albert Marre as director and Todd
Bolender as choreographer to replace Fosse. He sought an injunction from the American Arbitration
Association to protect the choreography of *The Conquering Hero*. He wrote a 500-
word telegram to the *New York Times* in which he stated, “I am hopeful that the
association will enforce my rights by restraining the producers from altering these
ballets without my consent.”

The first step that Fosse and his lawyer, Jack Pearlman, took was to ask the
producers for a “letter of guarantee promising the use of his dance routines in their
original forms or not at all.” When the producers refused to issue such a guarantee,
Fosse lowered his demands to protection for just the “Okinawa Ballet” and the
political rally number at the end of the show. The producers balked at this
“compromise” as well, and publicly acknowledged the hiring of Marre and Bolender,

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85 Marre directed the successful musical *Kismet* in 1953. Bolender was a “ballet choreographer”
(Gottfried 135), perhaps an attempt to give some discipline to Fosse’s unconventional style.
86 *Dance Observer*, April 1961, 58. This brief review is pro-Fosse and misspells Poston’s name.
87 Gottfried 135.
89 Calta 42.
the latter to “supervise the dances;” Whitehead declared that Fosse would receive program credit for the dances.90

*The Conquering Hero*'s production team decided to postpone the Broadway opening a week and a half, from 5 January to 16 January 1961. When it did open, the Playbill did not credit Fosse for his choreography as Whitehead had assured; in fact, no one was listed as stage director or choreographer. Some critics took this breach in the program as an indication of someone's knowledge that the work was lacking: Richard Watts, Jr., pointed out that “It is symbolic that no director was willing to bear public responsibility for the poor waif,” or as Howard Taubman, for the *New York Times*, concluded, “Whoever mixed the ingredients failed to produce either freshness or excitement.”91 Not all the reviews were negative from top to bottom. John McClain called the production “utterly charming,” and lauded Gelbart's script as a “rarity... a good, workable little book.”92 By far, though, most of the praise (when there was praise) was heaped upon the dance numbers. Walter Kerr noted in his review that “There's a dance quite early on that has its tongue in its toes and that suggests a whole new profitable vein for musical comedy.”93 The biting satire Fosse desired became, by opening night, simply a spoof, but an entertaining one. McClain, too, alluded to the ballet, calling it “a Fosse-type number... that shook the house up.”94

On January 18, the day after Taubman's review was printed, the *New York Times* announced that “*The Conquering Hero*, which met with a generally

90 Calta 42.
92 Qtd. in Suskin 159.
93 Qtd. in Suskin 157.
94 Qtd. in Suskin 159.
unfavorable critical reception, will be withdrawn Saturday night at the ANTA Theatre."95 The article also pointed to an “outlay of more than $300,000. Of that amount, ANTA invested $100,000.” ANTA’s share was raised through a second mortgage on the theatre.

No doubt the bad press concerning the shake-up and the lack of credit in the program allowed some critics to assume a bad show a priori; such assumptions might also have fueled decidedly dismissive criticism, as Watts’s review in the Post: he summed up the production as “astonishingly stale, flat, and unprofitable.”96 When The Conquering Hero closed after seven official performances, it looked as if Gelbart’s string of stage failures was intact: “I was keeping my record going,” he mused. His last word on the subject: “It was a traumatic experience for everybody . . . It was not a very good show; I didn’t learn anything except never to do Hail the Conquering Hero again.”97

Fosse’s case kept The Conquering Hero alive in arbitration (if not on stage) until September, 1961, when the American Arbitration Association awarded him a nominal six cents in damages. The fight between Fosse and Whitehead lasted nearly a year, but the unanimous decision vindicated Fosse’s claim that his choreography deserved to be left unaltered or else not used at all. Fosse’s lawyer pointed to the precedent that grew from the case: “Our claim was that Mr. Whitehead had no right to use Mr. Fosse’s choreography after he was fired.”98 Margery Beddow states that the

96 Qtd. in Suskin 159.
97 Gelbart Oral History 20-1.
decision of the arbitrators led directly to the payment of royalties to directors and choreographers for their contributions to the development of new works.99

In the spring of 1961, when Gelbart returned his attention to *Roman Comedy*, the first substantial modification occurred with the passing of Hal Prince's mentor and partner, Robert Griffith, who died suddenly of a heart attack June 7. Prince decided to continue as sole producer. The second major alteration occurred once again in the person of director. Jerome Robbins, who had returned to the post once the property was retrieved from producer David Merrick, sent word from Europe through a third party that he no longer wished to head the project. This action disappointed and angered the creators of the musical, and Gelbart cabled Robbins that “Your cowardly withdrawal is consistent with your well-earned reputation for immorality.”100 The resignation of Robbins also placed Sondheim in a tight position vis-à-vis Merrick: the composer had given Merrick his word that the team would return the option to Merrick to produce the show in the event that Robbins bowed out. Instead, Hal Prince soon found a replacement for Robbins in veteran Broadway director George Abbott.101 Sondheim had to write a letter of apology to Merrick, since the option was not forthcoming and the announcement of Abbott as director would soon make that clear to all involved, especially Merrick. In the letter, Sondheim

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99 Beddow 71. A very good example of the relationship between choreography and royalties may be found in *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), which was directed and choreographed by Jerome Robbins.

100 E-mail between Gelbart and Bob Elisberg, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, n.d.

101 Prince’s first producer credit was Abbott’s *The Pajama Game* in 1954, but he had also stage managed several previous Abbott ventures. George Abbott (1887-1994) began his theatre training as a student of George Pierce Baker’s playwriting classes at Yale. He went to New York as an actor in 1913, and wrote his first play, *The Fall Guy*, in 1925. He continued to write, direct, and eventually produce, for the remainder of his 107 years. His notable hits to this point in his life included *Beggar’s Holiday*.
explained that "I am embarrassed by the turn of events on *The Roman Comedy.* As you predicted, Jerry slithered away."\textsuperscript{102} Merrick was therefore shut out of the venture and forced to watch Abbott, whom he had wanted all along, direct it.\textsuperscript{103}

After Hal Prince secured the services of George Abbott and performed the difficult task of persuading him "to take the material seriously,"\textsuperscript{104} Prince put the production on hold until after his own current directorial effort, *Take Her, She's Mine*, went up. Meanwhile, the creators needed to find a leading actor for the role of Pseudolus, since Phil Silvers declined the role.\textsuperscript{105} They turned to Milton Berle, who agreed to do the show after Gelbart read the script ("in the best sort of thirties moviemusical fashion") and Sondheim played the songs for him in Abbott's office.\textsuperscript{106} Prince scheduled the opening of the musical for late spring 1962. It was now officially called *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, based on the standard comic's opening, "A funny thing happened to me on the way to the theatre tonight. . . ." On 13 September 1961, a headline in *Variety* announced, "Berle for 'Funny Thing'; George Abbott to Stage."

Berle had signed to play Pseudolus, slave to Senex and his wife, Domina. Hero, son of Senex, desires a virgin courtesan, Philia, who lives next door; he entreats

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{102} Qtd. in Suskin 243.
\item \textsuperscript{103} Zadan 66.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Letter from Prince to the author. 18 Sept. 1995.
\item \textsuperscript{105} At the end of December, 1960, Merrick (of course) produced a vehicle for Silvers called *Do Re Mi.* Critic Robert Coleman wrote that "It's a pleasure to watch clever *farceurs* at work, particularly when they've got good material" (Qtd. in Suskin 183). Recall Shevelove's comment about the lack of low comedy on Broadway.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Gelbart Oral History 23. Cf. their approach with Silvers, above p. 91.
\end{itemize}
Pseudolus to assist him, in return for freedom. Obstacles in Pseudolus's way include the owner of the virgin, a pimp named Marcus Lycus; the buyer of the virgin, a braggart warrior named Miles Gloriosus; and the slave-in-chief of Senex's household, a neurotic named Hysterium. The other neighbor, Erronius, returns from abroad and eventually sets everything right by recognizing a token on the virgin and the warrior—a ring containing a gaggle of geese. At the end, Pseudolus is granted his freedom.107

Abbott, meanwhile, got behind the work whose subplots and sub-sub-plots he had initially called "sophomoric."108 He "told the authors to trim, to remove what he thought were complications in the excess;" according to Gelbart, "he quite properly left the job to us."109 Abbott also found fault with the first song, "Invocation." Shevelove and Gelbart had pointed out to Sondheim months earlier that the original opening number, "Love Is in the Air," did not match the tone of the rest of the show. Sondheim created "Invocation" and this was the song that Abbott was faced with when he became director. Abbott preferred the more traditional opening that "Love Is in the Air" represented, because he knew that "you have to start a show with a hummable song."110

As soon as Berle became their Pseudolus, it seems, the authors and Abbott began to have problems with the star's demands. He told Gelbart that "This isn't what I said yes to,"111 and therefore wanted script approval; he objected that Abbott's

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108 Brown 172.
109 Gelbart email with the author 27 May 1996.
110 Zadan 71.
111 Gelbart Oral History 24.
requested cuts deprived him of laughs, that Pseudolus was not funny enough, and basically asserted that the audience would not care about the character. Moreover, Berle wanted some pieces of other characters' business for himself. "He wanted to wear the dress," Sondheim remembers, alluding to the device in the second act where the slave Hysterium must impersonate the dead virgin, for which the song "Lovely" was written. Berle argued that his audience identified him with wearing dresses from his earliest days on television. This concession was not possible; neither Abbott nor the authors believed Berle important enough to sacrifice the integrity of the musical that had already gone through numerous re-writes to reach a level of viability.

As autumn neared its end, the team once again found itself without a star. The producer and director, though, were in place and firmly behind the project. Prince had contracted Tony Walton to design the set and costumes. The setting would conform to the unity of place, as Shevelove and Gelbart had intended from the start, and would depict three houses: those of Senex, Lycus and Erronius. The doors and alleyways would provide ample entrance and exit options for the farce and its climactic chase scene. The costumes were cartoonish and serviceable, and with touches that maintained comedic tradition; for example, Senex's costume bore the characteristic

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112 Letter from Milton Berle to Shevelove, Gelbart and Sondheim, October 1961, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
113 Sondheim interview. Sondheim also explained that originally, "Lovely" was to be used only in the second act coercion scene. In the out-of-town tryouts, "That'll Show Him" was moved and a "preprise" of "Lovely" inserted in its place.
114 Pseudolus's costume was coarse, thick wool, and caused Mostel, who was very heavy with a bad leg, to perspire a great deal. Gelbart said the costume was "like a sauna with two pairs of pants." Mostel asked for, and received, an air-conditioned dressing room. His dressing room, therefore, became the most desirable place to hang-out backstage (Brown 184).
rope above and below the stomach to accentuate the middle-age paunch, a staple of farce actors since at least seventeenth-century France.

By far one of the most contentious facets of the creation of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* has to be the casting of Zero Mostel as Pseudolus. When Mostel was sent the script by Prince, the actor initially refused to consider the role, until his wife Kate told him pointblank: “If you don’t take it, I’m going to stab you in the balls!” Prince wanted Mostel for Pseudolus, but the authors envisioned someone with more of a vaudeville and less of a serious acting background. Gelbart maintains that “there was no reluctance about Zero whatsoever.” Since Red Buttons’s name was suggested for the role at this time, and knowing Gelbart’s loyalty to friends in the business, one has to believe that Mostel’s was not the first name that jumped to Gelbart’s lips once Berle exited the scene. Perhaps part of the confusion in the accounts of the situation stems from the fact that Mostel had been a long-time candidate for the role of Marcus Lycus, the pimp, because, as Sondheim states, “he had that oily quality.” Still, Abbott liked Mostel118 and Prince pitched the idea adamantly to the writers; the late date—it was by now December 1961, six months from a scheduled Broadway opening—might have made the compromise, however unsatisfactory to Gelbart and Shevelove, un-reluctant.

Once cast, Mostel campaigned heavily for his friend, Jack Gilford, for the part of Hysterium, who won the role. David Burns, Ruth Kobart, Ronald Holgate, John

115 Zadan 67.
116 Qtd. in Brown 173.
117 Sondheim interview.
118 Mostel had worked under Abbott in *Beggar’s Holiday* (1946).
Carradine, and film veteran Raymond Walburn landed other important roles.

Rehearsals began in January; Kate Mostel taught her husband the songs at home because Zero couldn't read music.\textsuperscript{119} David Burns, the show's Senex, performed the duties of Prologus, the master of ceremonies that sings "Love Is in the Air."\textsuperscript{120} The ending of the show concerned many. Kate Mostel, in her memoir, recalled that "there was still no finale, and the play continued to drift" to a dry close.\textsuperscript{121} As it stood, Pseudolus (by now a freedman), came downstage and asked the audience to

\begin{verbatim}
PSEUDOLUS. Come back tomorrow night and see Hysterium win his freedom—
HYSTERIUM. Oh, Pseudolus!
PSEUDOLUS. Or die in the attempt!
\end{verbatim}

Curtain.\textsuperscript{122}

\textit{A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum} premiered March 31, 1962, for its tryout at the Shubert Theatre in New Haven. By that time, Gelbart insists,

The show didn't work because we had put it through a strainer and taken out a lot of complications in the plot, subplot, sub-subplot, as George Abbott suggested. But upon seeing it we realized we had done it a great deal of damage because a lot of fun was in the organized confusion. So we put it all back—and probably a little more.\textsuperscript{123}

The reviews in New Haven gave the creators little to be optimistic about. The young romantic leads, Philia and Hero, were both replaced; Sondheim added extra choruses to "Everybody Ought to Have a Maid," because "that was the only song that worked in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[119] Mostel 6.
\item[120] Burns was a veteran of Broadway for decades. His notices for Alive and Kicking (1950) called him "a comedian who can make practically anything funny" (Qtd. in Suskin 35). His television credits include a regular role on The Imogene Coca Show (1954-5).
\item[121] Mostel 11.
\item[122] Forum draft in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, n.d., 120.
\item[123] Zadan 70.
\end{footnotes}
The audience in New Haven laughed at the show (and perhaps hummed during the opening), but they did not "like the show," Abbott recalled.

When the production next played in Washington, D.C., the prospects did not look any better for the musical. At some points, they looked decidedly worse. At one matinee, the company played to an audience of fifty; the reviewer for The Washington Post, Richard Coe, suggested closing the show out of town. It was now the middle of April, three weeks before the Broadway opening, and no one had any strong ideas about how to correct the show's failings. Prince knew, though, that he did not want to concede defeat and close the show. He still believed in the property.

Gelbart also characterizes the situation as troublesome, but that "all of the cutting, the re-instating, the differences of opinion took place in the most professional, least heated sort of process you can imagine. No voice was ever raised, no insult ever hurled, no ego ever bruised." Nevertheless, Prince recalled that the lack of ideas put everyone on edge: "the authors . . . weren't getting along well at that point. Steve [Sondheim] needed somebody else to tell him what to do." That somebody turned out to be Jerome Robbins.

Robbins returned to the Roman Comedy project, which by now had its title in place, but not its final form. The arrival had manifold effects: first, and perhaps most poignant, were the remnants of McCarthyism and the blacklisting period in the

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124 Sondheim interview.
125 Qtd. in Brown 176.
126 Ilson 79.
128 Gelbart email with the author 28 May 1996.
129 Qtd. in Ilson 80.
1950s. Robbins had named names, including Madeline Gilford, Jack's wife. Both Zero Mostel and Jack Gilford had been blacklisted. When Mostel heard that Robbins was the only hope, he gathered his strength and accepted Robbins for the good of the show, agreeing to work with the friendly witness. He told the producer, who brought the possibility of Robbins to him, "Listen, Hal, I'm a professional and Jerry's a professional, and if he can help the show, get him. Besides, we of the left do not blacklist." Gilford, though, had qualms about working with Robbins, but his wife told him not to be "a schmuck," and asked, "why should all of us who fought against McCarthyism be further penalized?" Second, the unkind words of Gelbart's telegram to Robbins were hanging over them when he joined them in Washington.

Robbins found most fault with the opening of the show and the final chase scene blocking. He asked for a better opening number, and Sondheim pulled "Invocation" out. That song came closer to fulfilling the show's needs, but still did not set the correct tone. In a weekend, Sondheim wrote a new number, "Comedy Tonight," which was given to Zero Mostel, who became the de facto Prologus, to sing. Ironically the new song not only told the audience what mood to expect, but it came closest of the three songs to the Plautine model. It interspersed a bouncy, hummable, clever ditty with a prologue born of Plautus. Compare the advice of the Plautus comedy Casina's prologuist, "Put care and other people's money (debt) out of your mind." with "Invocation":

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130 Qtd. in Mostel 8.
131 Qtd. in Mostel 9.
132 Gelbart email to Bob Elisberg. n.d.
133 Mostel 10.
134 My translation of "eicite ex animo curam atque alienum aes." (L.23).
Forget war, forget woe,
Forget matters weighty and great,
Allow matters weighty to wait
For a while.135

which appeared in the final version, “Comedy Tonight,” as “weighty affairs will just have to wait.”136 The interspersed dialogue within “Comedy Tonight” also explains the stage layout and provides some exposition as a Plautus prologue would do; it does not, however, explain the entire plot, as in the ancient Roman comedies. Additionally, the new opening provided Sondheim, Shevelove and Gelbart with the finale that had been eluding them. Sondheim simply tied the loose ends at the close of the show within a reprise of “Comedy Tonight.” The new material was in place when Forum began previews May 2 at New York’s Alvin Theatre, and it proved to be the difference between a flop and a hit.

_A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum_ opened 8 May 1962, and closed 29 August 1964 after 964 performances. The initial New York reviews were not consistently raves; some had doubts about its roots in Roman comedy, “… claiming some debt to Plautus,”137 or its freshness, “the comic events of 1962AD make Plautus, Shevelove, Gelbart and Abbott seem a little old-hat.”138 By and large, though, the reviews praised the production from top to bottom. Howard Taubman, writing for the _New York Times_, “got” the intentions of the authors:

Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, authors of the book, are willing to pay full credit, if not royalties, to Plautus, their distinguished antecedent. They admit they have helped themselves to his plays. Who

135 Forum 141-2.
136 Forum 20.
hasn't among comic writers in the last two millenniums? And whom did Plautus crib from?\textsuperscript{139} 

Regarding the authors, Taubman observed that “Their book resorts to outrageous puns and to lines that ought to make you cringe. . . . Resist these slickly paced old comic routines, if you can. Try and keep a straight face . . .”\textsuperscript{140}

The musical and its performers won five Antoinette Perry (Tony) Awards. \textit{Forum} received awards for Best Musical, Best Producer of a Musical (Hal Prince), Best Direction of a Musical (George Abbott), Best Actor in a Musical (Zero Mostel), Best Supporting or Featured Actor in a Musical (David Burns). In addition, Jack Gilford and Ruth Kobart received supporting nominations for their work.

Gelbart felt so connected to \textit{Forum} that in 1963, when the London production was to begin development, he and his family decided to move to England for the occasion. They booked first-class passage on the \textit{Queen Mary} and settled in a house in Knightsbridge, at 22 Ovington Gardens. Gelbart remembers that “We planned to stay nine months and we ended up staying nine years.”\textsuperscript{141}

The Broadway musical \textit{A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum} holds a significance in Larry Gelbart’s career beyond simply his first stage success. Gelbart notes that he had been writing sketches, one-liners, and other material for numerous years and numerous performers, but

\begin{quote}
When Burt Shevelove and I finished our work on the book of ‘Forum,’ I knew I could do it—with a lot of help, but I could do it. That’s the first time I permitted myself to think of myself as a writer, not just a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{139} Howard Taubman, “Theatre: ‘A Funny Thing Happened . . .’ \textit{New York Times}, 9 May 1962. (To answer Taubman’s last rhetorical question: Plautus adapted the works of Greek new comedy writers such as Menander, Philemon and Diphilus).

\textsuperscript{140} Taubman 9 May 1962.

clever monkey who could turn out material in a comedian's voice, rhythm and style.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{142} Ts. of \textit{Hollywood Scriptletter} interview (July 1981) in UCLA Gelbart Collection, 1.
CHAPTER 4: A VERY SMALL BUSINESS . . . RIGHTS AND RE-WRITES

Film I: 1961-1969

- *Fair Game* (1961)
- *The Notorious Landlady* (1962)
- *The Thrill of It All* (1963)
- *THE WRONG BOX* (1966)
- *Not With My Wife, You Don't* (1966)
- *Chercher La Femme* (1967)
- *The Chastity Belt* (1968)
- *A Fine Pair* (1968)

Between the close of *The Conquering Hero* (1961) and the production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), while writing a television special with Sheldon Keller, Larry Gelbart accepted an invitation from Charles K. Feldman to come to California to write his first screenplay.¹ As with the majority of Gelbart's writing in his career, his screenplay for *Fair Game* was not an original script: it had been a fairly successful Broadway play, written by Sam Locke, with whom Gelbart had briefly written *The Red Buttons Show* in 1952. Despite his past relationship with the play's author, Gelbart attributed the 187 Broadway performances of *Fair Game* mostly to the performance and drawing power of its star, Sam Levene.²

Gelbart recalled his first taste of the Hollywood film world and producer Feldman: "I came out here and he put me in a little office at Columbia pictures on

² Larry Gelbart, interview by Oral History Center of Southern Methodist University, 15 Aug. 1983, transcript in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 27. Sam Levene acted in theatre and movies for fifty years. His early roles include Lt. Abrams in several of the "Thin Man" films in the '30s and '40s.
Gower and Sunset, just across the street from CBS, where I had written for Danny Thomas. It’s a very small business.”3 Once he had settled down to write, Gelbart received another quick lesson about the system he was joining. Feldman told Gelbart to “forget Sam Levene:” he had hired William Holden to play the part.4 Richard Quine, the director of *Fair Game*, read and loved Gelbart’s first twelve pages of the screenplay, but delayed meeting with his writer until he finished pre-production on his current venture, *The Notorious Landlady*.5 With not much input except Quine’s, “I’m in love . . . never read twelve such great pages,” Gelbart had little else to do but finish the first draft. Since this was his first work in film—apart from loose gags for a few Bob Hope movies6—he didn’t have much to guide him except the script of Sam Locke’s play.7 Feldman further asked that the setting be moved from Seventh Avenue to a place unspecified: “Make up something,” he advised.8

Gelbart finished the first draft by September, 1961; the whole did not fulfill the promise of the first twelve pages. The director for *Fair Game* was already at work on *The Notorious Landlady*, and Gelbart believes that Quine never did get a chance to read the completed draft. Producer Feldman read it, and after voicing lukewarm opinions of it, told Gelbart, “It doesn’t really matter because you’ve got to do it over

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5 Richard Quine was a successful actor, director, producer and writer of films. His directorial efforts include *The Solid Gold Cadillac* (1956), *Operation Mad Ball* (1957), *Bell, Book and Candle* (1958), and *Sex and the Single Girl* (1964).
6 These included *Fancy Pants* (1949), *The Lemon Drop Kid* (1951) and *The Road to Bali* (1952). In the summer of 1952, Gelbart and his partner, Lawrence Marks, also provided additional (uncredited) dialogue for a few Warner Bros. films.
7 Gelbart Oral History 28.
8 Gelbart Oral History 28.
again. I lost Holden and the part’s now going to be played by Jeanne Moreau, the French actress.”9 Such strange shifts in the concepts of movie projects planted seeds, perhaps, for characters and situations that would appear many years later in Gelbart’s Broadway musical City of Angels (1989). He would receive a reprieve from Fair Game, however, before he had a chance to attempt the second draft.

Quine called Gelbart on the telephone and asked, “If I can spring you from Fair Game, can you come over and work on The Notorious Landlady?”10 Gelbart characterized the situation as beneficial to all involved: he was “sprung” from writing Fair Game, Quine acquired script help with The Notorious Landlady, and Feldman probably felt relief, because, as Gelbart recalls, “Fair Game never got made.”11

The Notorious Landlady (1962) falls into a rather narrow genre of mystery comedies. The film originated as a short story, “The Notorious Tenant,” by Margery Sharp. For the screenplay, the notorious character changed from the tenant to the landlady, played by Kim Novak. Jack Lemmon, who had worked with Quine and Novak in Bell, Book and Candle (1958) would play the confused American lodger who falls in love with his recently widowed and possibly homicidal landlady. Writer-director Blake Edwards (1922- )12 penned the adapted screenplay that went into preproduction with Richard Quine as director and Fred Kohlmar as producer.13 When

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10 Gelbart Oral History 28.
11 Gelbart Oral History 29.
12 Peter Gurm established Edwards in television. His films include Breakfast at Tiffany’s (1961), and Days of Wine and Roses (1963). In 1964 he cowrote, produced, and directed The Pink Panther and A Shot in the Dark, which starred Peter Sellers as Inspector Clouseau. Later films include 10 (1979), S.O.B. (1981), and Victor/Victoria (1982). He adapted this last movie for the Broadway stage in 1995. 13 Gelbart also relates that at one point, Edwards was asked to take over the picture as director because Quine, who had a “longtime on again-off again relationship with Kim Novak kind of went off the rails.
he replaced Ian Hunter, who had rewritten Edwards' script, Gelbart quickly managed the material, improving the dialogue and adding some complexity to an already complex farce. The humor ranges from the situational to the almost constant wordplay of Lemmon and others. For example, when Lemmon's character, William Gridley, attempts to rent a flat from Novak, he flirtatiously refers to their common nationality:

GRIDLEY. We are both displaced persons, right? But I don't have a place. . . . Mrs. Hardwicke, I appeal to you as a fellow American. (beat) Don't I appeal to you?14

Later, Gridley's boss, played by Fred Astaire,15 queries Gridley about the whereabouts of Mr. Hardwicke:

AMBRUSTER. Her husband might be away on a business trip abroad, in which case, he could drop in anytime. Jet planes, you know. He could be in Afghanistan for breakfast and you could be in the middle of a scandal by lunch.16

This last line uses antithesis to frame the puns, where different meanings of "be in" set up other parallels: breakfast and lunch, and the sophisticated assonance of "Afghanistan" and "scandal." Gelbart also makes use of seemingly random alliteration for an enhanced comic tone.17 Note the alliterative "master that monosyllable" in the following:

and wasn't able to go forward with his work. Blake, who was an old buddy of Quine's declined and Quine eventually pulled himself together" (e-mail 25 Oct. 1996).

14 Larry Gelbart, The Notorious Landlady, screenplay, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
15 The Notorious Landlady made use of George and Ira Gershwin's song "A Foggy Day" as its recurring theme. Fred Astaire himself introduced the song in the musical film Damsel in Distress twenty-five years earlier. Despite this connection, it is Jack Lemmon who sings snatches of the lyric for The Notorious Landlady.
16 Gelbart Notorious Landlady.
17 An especially favorite technique in his later stage work. Cf. Sly Fox, Mastergate, etc.
GRIDLEY. I have a pretty first name, too: Bill. Kind of exotic, isn't it? Do you think you could learn to master that monosyllable?

HARDWICKE. There's always the Berlitz school.

This exchange, with its sarcasm, understatement, hyperbole, and Novak's final sarcastic retort, exemplifies the witty dialogue throughout the film.

The dialogue provided by Gelbart had to mesh with the plot already developed by Blake Edwards, and the rewrite author Ian Hunter. As Gelbart explains, "There wasn't a lot of plot tinkering... Next to some of the other things I've tortured myself with, that screenplay was a piece of cake."18 Certainly this experience would qualify as another lesson for Gelbart—working on a project of another as a rewrite artist or script doctor, and not merely an adapter (as he had done for The Conquering Hero, The Face is Familiar, etc.). Gelbart did not realize when he entered into the arrangement, however, that he would learn this lesson from both sides.

Rewriting behind him, as he was chagrined to find out, was the playwright and screenwriter S. N. Behrman.19 One day, Gelbart heard "gales of laughter" emanating from Producer Kohlmar's office (which was right next to Gelbart's). He placed a drinking glass between the wall and his ear, and listened to Behrman and Kohlmar laugh at Behrman's rewrite of Gelbart's rewrite of Edwards. "I was really crushed," Gelbart admits. "That was a new experience. I'd never been officially replaced." Contractually, there was little Gelbart could do except continue to write, re-

18 E-mail 25 Oct. 1996.
19 Samuel Nathaniel Behrman (1893-1973), was an American playwright whose comedies are distinguished by their sophisticated wit and piquant social comment. His first successful comedy, The Second Man (1927), was followed by several other hits, including Biography (1932), Rain from Heaven (1934), End of Summer (1936), and No Time for Comedy (1939). His other works include Portrait of Max (1960), a memoir of Sir Max Beerbohm ("S. N. Behrman," Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia, Online, AOL).
write, and be re-written.\textsuperscript{20} Although Gelbart would repeatedly perform and receive the same treatment throughout his career, "It's never pleasant, either way."\textsuperscript{21}

After his stay in California, Gelbart returned in early fall to New York and \textit{A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum} (which was about to go into rehearsals). Carl Reiner, Gelbart's friend from the \textit{Caesar's Hour} days, visited the Gelbarts' farm in upstate New York to develop a film idea that he had pitched to Universal. Reiner was by this time already living in California, so collaboration on the project limited itself to a shared story credit for Gelbart and Reiner, since the former's other projects held him to New York for an unknown period of time. After the two men put the story together, Reiner returned to California to write the screenplay for and direct \textit{The Thrill of It All} (1963). The clever and satirical comedy starred Doris Day and James Garner in a story about a housewife who becomes a celebrity through advertising exploitation. The movie combines elements of each man's interests: Reiner's domestic world (best exemplified by television's \textit{The Dick van Dyke Show}), and Gelbart's views on media infiltration of the American way of life.

Once Gelbart returned to New York, \textit{A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum} absorbed him in rehearsals and rewrites. His next film project would not arise until well after he and his family moved to London in October, 1963, for the opening of the British \textit{Forum}. In late 1964, after nearly a year of relaxation and travel with his family, Larry began to discuss with Pat the possibility of staying a good deal longer in London than the nine months they had planned. The social atmosphere in

\textsuperscript{20} Gelbart maintains that little if any of Behrman's work appears in the final film (Oral History 29). \textsuperscript{21} Oral History 28.
London, as well as the schools for the children, added to the attraction of London. As Gelbart explained in a British magazine at the time,

This is where it's all happening, here in Britain, the new nerve center of hip. It's very 'in' to be British. My bad luck is that it's 'in' to be Jewish in America these days and I'm not there. Everybody's saying hip Jewish words like 'nosh,' 'chutzpa' and 'magilla.'

The Gelbarts would remain in Great Britain through the decade, but Larry needed to find some work to keep himself occupied and to bring in some income during the next few years. He wrote a piece for King Magazine in Britain titled, “The Americanization of Bernie,” in which he essayed to explain the popularity of Jewish writers, entertainers and policy makers in the United States. For the most part, however, he found work in writing movies. His collaborator and friend, Burt Shevelove, in England also to oversee and enjoy the success of Forum, approached Gelbart with a project idea he had been given by a friend. John Fearnley, composer Richard Rodgers' casting director, suggested that the Forum librettists try their hands at an obscure nineteenth-century novel, The Wrong Box, by Robert Louis Stevenson and his step-son, Lloyd Osbourne.

Fearnley noticed the Forum-like qualities of the novel and thought that Gelbart and Shevelove could make a good film out of it. Since the book was in the public domain, hence no need to negotiate rights, the two read the book, liked the premise, and set about writing the screenplay “on spec” (i.e., on speculation, without

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22 “King's Occasion with Peter Cook/Dudley Moore Larry Gelbart/Burt Shevelove,” King, Dec. 1965, 38. Comedian Jackie Mason's widespread appeal, including appearances on The Ed Sullivan Show at this time, corroborates Gelbart's claims about the "in-ness" of Jewish comedy in the United States.
a producer or studio already committed to the script). Gelbart and Shevelove also noticed the similarities between *Forum* and *The Wrong Box*: the central story involved duplicity and greed, with a pair of painfully naive youths falling in love, and an elaborate chase as its climax.

Initially, Gelbart and Shevelove intended to call the film *When Antidisestablishmentarianism Was in Flower*, but decided against it, reverting instead to the novel’s title. The adapters reduced the number of characters involved, common enough when compacting a novel into two hours of screen time, thus focusing the action of the story on two related families. *The Wrong Box* concerns the winning of a tontine—a lottery where the last survivor collects the sum—by one of two brothers. The story proper begins when the antepenultimate member, Ebenezer Hackett, dies, leaving only Joseph and Masterman Finsbury (played by Ralph Richardson and John Mills, respectively). Each brother has dependent family members who stand to gain should the head of their household win. Joseph Finsbury, a character who lives for insignificant bits of knowledge, maintains a household consisting of Morris, John, and the beautiful Julia. She becomes the love interest of Michael, Masterman Finsbury’s only heir. An interesting crossing of purposes arises because Masterman will stop at nothing to win the tontine for Michael, while Morris and John have dedicated their lives to protecting the longevity of Joseph, and will stop at nothing to win the tontine

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25 Gelbart Hampstead interview.
26 Gelbart Telephone interview 9 Dec. 1992. Perhaps after *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, they didn’t wish to be stereotyped as writers who needed more than twelve syllables for their titles.
for themselves. Julia, Michael and Joseph remain honest enough (with regard to the tontine at least) throughout.

The film opens with the explanation of the tontine at its establishment, then quickly moves through some sixty years of comic death vignettes showing the manner in which the other members of the tontine dropped out of the contest. Some lampoon the colonial nature of the British Empire of the time, since many die in remote locales. For example, a big-game hunter in Africa tells his native guide:

HUNTER. Not yet, Tumba. You must learn the white man's ways. It is not sporting to shoot until the rhino is charging.  
(He turns back to face CAMERA, his eyes widening in horror.)

Some of Gelbart and Shevelove's vignettes did not make the film, so the colonialist commentary has been diminished somewhat by the director, Bryan Forbes (1926- ).

The following sequence, three scenes in three different settings, was cut out of the final film, but it illustrates more completely the authors' sense of fun at the expense of British imperialism:

PLANTER. (impatiently) Nonsense! Of course the natives are dying like flies, but you must understand, Englishmen simply do not get cholera!

ARCHEOLOGIST. (airily) Nonsense! Not remove the ruby from the idol's eye because of some idiotic curse?

MISSIONARY. (sanctimoniously) Nonsense! Allow me a few minutes with their chieftain and I'll put an end to their cannibalism?

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27 *The Wrong Box*. Screenplay, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 7.
28 Forbes has been an active actor, writer, director and producer. His credits include writing and directing *King Rat* (1965) and *The L-Shaped Room* (1963).
29 *The Wrong Box* 5-6.

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The rule of threes enhances the humorous effect here, since each man begins with an attitude and a "Nonsense!," and continues with a pronouncement that falls into the "famous last words" category of comedy, ending in parallel alliteration—cholera/curse/cannibalism.30

Masterman, pretending to be dying, sends Michael to get Joseph, whom Masterman has decided to kill off without delay. Michael goes next door, a sight gag established by the brothers’ estrangement for forty years, and meets for the first time his cousin Julia. Michael and Julia were cast with actors much older than Gelbart and Shevelove had envisioned, because Forbes used his wife, the actress Nanette Newman, for Julia, and Michael Caine for the role of Michael Finsbury.31 Another lesson in the reality of filmmaking for Gelbart, casting, reduced somewhat the intended naivété between the lovers, making them in the end simply silly twenty-five-year-olds. In Forbes’ defense, however, the novel indicates somewhat older lovers (Michael is a lawyer in the book, and merely a medical student in the film). Once the love between Michael and Julia becomes apparent, he admonishes her:

MICHAEL. Julia, we are both old enough to know what kisses lead to. And may I be blunt, our children would be idiots.
JULIA. Is there insanity in your family?
MICHAEL. Certainly not! But it is a proved medical fact that if cousins marry—
JULIA. (cuts in) We are not cousins, actually . . .
MICHAEL. No?
JULIA. Uncle Joseph is just my guardian. (MICHAEL’s face lights up) I am an orphan.
MICHAEL. You are!

30 Although critics and scholars find many relationships of this kind ex post facto, in point of fact Gelbart brought this use of alliteration to Bryan Forbes’ attention and defended the retention of it (letter, 28 Sept. 1965, 2).
31 Gelbart Hampstead interview.
They rush into each other's arms and kiss.
MICHAEL. I am, too. An orphan.  

Exchanges such as this one in the film invite comparisons with Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), since that play ends with the impending marriage between actual first cousins. *The Wrong Box* adds the inconsistency of both being orphans, making Michael's initial admonition illogical: if he were an orphan himself, why would he concern himself with inbreeding? Julia recalls her parents' deaths vaguely:

JULIA. My father was a missionary. He spread the word in distant lands. The last we saw of him, he was off to bring the gospel to the natives up the Amazon. Then we received word that he'd been eaten by his Bible Class.

MICHAEL. And your mother?
JULIA. She, too. They never eat one without the other.

After the discipline of making Plautus acceptable to Broadway audiences—with no anachronisms or winking awareness—Gelbart and Shevelove had an easier time with Stevenson's restrained prose. The more formal the language, the riper it is for parody, and the adapters created a consistently English absurdity in the language. In addition, they maintained some characteristic language—John's "brayvo," for example—from the novel. That the two screenwriters were American added to the mix, and became the subject of curiosity by critics. Gelbart claims some chauvinism on the part of the reviewers, and it seems even the actors involved. On the other hand, Ralph Richardson, whose training in the theatre probably led to a respect for

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32 *The Wrong Box* 67-8.
33 The Wrong Box 68. Perhaps Forbes deleted the missionary (and thus the three colonials) from the opening deaths sequence to maintain this joke.
34 Gelbart Oral History 32.
35 King's 38.
authorial authority, asked Gelbart if he might change a "maybe" in his script to "perhaps," to maintain the more regular Victorian usage. The fact that Richardson thought enough to ask about the possibility of a change floored Gelbart, who was not used to such treatment in the film industry.36 Despite the efforts to replicate British speech of a hundred years ago, some anachronistic language does creep into the screenplay. For example, when Michael presses Dr. Slattery for a blunt medical diagnosis, the doctor says that Finsbury's grandfather suffered a "conniption fit."37 Evidently, the writers could not resist the comic paradox of a doctor using such a vague, common term.

The plot complicates itself after a train accident separates Morris and John from their uncle Joseph. Morris and John come upon a dead body which they assume to be their uncle's (in reality a dead mass murderer's, the "Bournemouth Strangler"), and attempt to hide it until Masterman dies, at which time they will produce their corpse. To this end, they employ the services of Dr. Pratt, played in the film by Peter Sellars, who supplies a blank death certificate. The character of Dr. Pratt does not appear in the novel, although the need for a death certificate (and so a venal doctor) does. The Pratt character is a cameo tour de force, and few if any reviews neglected the extraordinary effect of Sellars' scenes on the film.

The confusion created by the mistaken delivery of a statue to Morris and the corpse of the "Bournemouth Strangler" to Michael leads to a hectic chase scene that

36 Gelbart Hampstead interview.
37 The Wrong Box 71. Gelbart would use this same joke in Movie Movie (1978), when the doctor tells Spats that his final symptom would be a conniption fit.

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races at various speeds through the remainder of the film. The structure seems almost exactly the same as that of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. To borrow again Stephen Sondheim's "Swiss watch" metaphor: half of the plot winds the spring, the other half runs it down. Where *Forum* generated several virgins (Philia, Hysterium and Domina) for the chase, *The Wrong Box* generates several hearses, containing variously a live Masterman, the deceased Ebenezer Hackett, and the box of tontine money. The black comedy culminates appropriately enough in a cemetery. Joseph names Julia his heir, guaranteeing that Michael and Julia will share the tontine (whichever brother eventually survives), since Michael makes their engagement public by introducing her as "Julia Finsbury . . . soon to become Julia Finsbury."

Gelbart and Shevelove were able to imbue their screenplay with the quick, low humor epitomized by their *Forum*, along with the language-based humor of which Gelbart is so fond. The puns and ambiguous usages follow the traditions which Gelbart and Shevelove absorbed in America, while the constant use of black humor and understatement mark the piece as British. For example, one of Julia's first speeches to Michael includes this use of understatement:

> JULIA. I'm sorry to seem so inhospitable, but last year over three hundred girls in Greater London were attacked and many of them *unnecessarily* mutilated [italics mine].

This style of comedy appears constantly in Oscar Wilde's plays and novels. In another scene, the returning Joseph is greeted at Masterman's front door by the painfully slow butler, Peacock. He alludes to the estrangement from his brother's house:

> JOSEPH. Peacock, dear Peacock! How long has it been?

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38 *The Wrong Box* 16.
PEACOCK. (closing the door) I got here as fast as I could, sir. 39

The film makes frequent use of paradoxical language, as noted with Dr. Slattery's "conniption fit" above, and when John and Morris stumble upon the dead body that means the end of their dreams of the tontine:

JOHN. (removing his own hat) We should say a prayer or something.
MORRIS. Not at a time like this! 40

Arguably the lowest humor in the movie resides in the two Dr. Pratt scenes. Septic conditions abound in Pratt's office/apartment: it is dark, dusty, and full of cats. At one point Pratt uses a rectal thermometer to sign his name, a kitten to blot his name on the death certificate, and a beaker to drink his liquor. In addition to these sight gags, the script contains a few oblique references to Pratt's unfortunate practice:

MORRIS. I did not come here for reasons of my personal health.
PRATT. What is the young lady's name? 41

The comedy in The Wrong Box, therefore, tends toward the dark and the low, appropriate for a comedy with death at its comic center and restrictive social attitudes at the core of its satire.

The script that Larry Gelbart and Burt Shevelove derived from the novel The Wrong Box resembles the original, but with enough changes to merit a descriptive credit that the film was "Suggested by a story by Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne." 42 In fact, the history of the novel contains a strain of adaptation itself. The original novel was written by Stevenson's stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, who wanted

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39 The Wrong Box 53.
40 The Wrong Box 37.
41 The Wrong Box 62.
42 The Wrong Box title page.

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some help with the work. Stevenson revised it for publication, but the majority of the novel remained Osbourne's, because as the young writer recalled,

Louis [Stevenson] had to follow the text very closely, being unable to break without jeopardising the succeeding chapters. He breathed into it of course, his own incomparable power, humour and vivacity, and forced the thing to live as it had never lived before.\footnote{Qtd. in Graham Balfour, \textit{The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson}, 2 vols. (1901), ii. 34.}

This passage recalls once again similarities with \textit{Forum}, with its "Swiss-watch" construction and "Rubik's Cube" complexity. Gelbart and Shevelove changed the plot, especially the ending, deleted and changed characters, and basically made the script their own. Once they completed the screenplay, they quickly sold it to Columbia Pictures. They acted also as co-producers, and so were present for the casting and shooting of it. Forbes made the film in Bath, and during filming Gelbart made notes to the director about changes, most of which were ignored. In a letter dated 28 September 1965, he goes through the shooting script page by page (much as he had done for \textit{Not With My Wife, You Don't}) and explains the reasoning behind his comments. For instance, a rewrite that Forbes had shot of Masterman and Michael's first scene omitted the important plot information that Masterman and Joseph had not spoken in forty years, making Michael's subsequent introductory scenes with Julia and Morris "totally baffling."\footnote{Gelbart letter to Forbes, 28 Sept. 1965, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 2.}

Other jokes were clarified, tightened up, and reworded for grammatical or stylistic consistency in the notes: in one scene, "doctor" replaced "apothecary" because, as logic would dictate, "it is more reasonable and common practice to send
for a doctor when someone is ill," according to Gelbart. Gelbart has mixed feelings today about the movie, because so much of the work of the adapters remains, yet the director’s hand distorted Gelbart’s own image of the film.

Part of Gelbart’s education about the film industry that took place in the ‘60s included the experience of having others make the film version of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. As a result of being excluded from most of the creation of the adaptation, he feels little connection to the movie. The screenplay was adapted—very loosely—by Melvin Frank (the producer of the film) and Michael Pertwee. Although the screenplay was based on the play, much of the action had been discarded for new, often unrelated business. The director, Richard Lester, wanted to depict actual living conditions in ancient Rome. This sociological approach left many of the best parts of *Forum* out of the motion picture. Gelbart noted that the structure was harmed also by the screenwriters: “When they got Phil Silvers to play Lycus they started writing more for him. And you know that piece is like a Rubik’s Cube. If you change one thing, that changes another, which changes still another...”

Gelbart did not visit the set in Spain where Lester filmed his *Forum*. In fact, so much bad blood arose during the filming that Lester even barred screenwriter and producer Melvin Frank from the area. The screenwriter, Gelbart was finding out in each film project, had few rights compared to the author of a stage play. The film industry was moving from the producer’s medium of the ‘30s and ‘40s, through the

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45 Gelbart letter to Forbes, 4.
47 Brown 237.
Actor's Studio period of the '50s, to the director's medium of the auteur-filled '60s. Filmmakers like Stanley Kubrick, Richard Lester and François Truffaut began to assert complete control of their films, a trend which has become more prevalent in the decades that followed. The screenwriter has historically been ignored in Hollywood, and Gelbart offers his own theory why: In the beginning, there was the image. Silent films didn't need writers. The stories were readily available from classics and all a picture needed was a clever sign painter. So the author was never really part of the process until relatively recently.48

Zero Mostel, who reprised his role as Pseudolus for the film, explained some of the problems of Lester's version:

The great thing about the piece on the stage was that it was one set, sixteen characters, three houses, and you did it very simply. You go to the movie and there's horses, zebras, peacocks all over the place, your father's mustache, orphans, winos, donkeys with hard-ons . . .49

Moreover, most of the original score was dispensed with and replaced by insipid variations on "Comedy Tonight." Gelbart summed his reaction to the film by saying that he felt that watching the premiere was like being hit by a truck and backed over for two hours.50

Melvin Frank, the screenwriter and producer of the film *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, had been part of a writing team with Norman Panama that stretched back several decades. Besides numerous films for Bob Hope and others, Panama and Frank penned a military comedy entitled *The Big Brass*. The

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48 The Dick Cavett Show, 8 Nov. 1989, and "Saturday Night at the Movies" interview.

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script had been around Hollywood for a long time—at one point with a cast that starred Clark Gable, Lana Turner and Spencer Tracy. When Melvin Frank and Norman Panama split professionally in 1965, Panama inherited *The Big Brass* as part of the “community property” settlement. He revived the project as director and enlisted British playwright Peter Barnes (1931-) to collaborate on the revisions.

Because the story was not Barnes’ “cup of tea,” and because the material still could not be tamed, Panama soon found himself in need of another collaborator, and turned to Gelbart in January, 1966. Production on *The Wrong Box* had been concluded, but would not premiere until May 1966, and Gelbart was eager to find another project. Gelbart received the massive (160+ pp.) script from Panama on 27 January 1966 and the next day wrote out twenty-two pages of notes and suggestions. In the space of five years, therefore, Gelbart had learned to accept that in film the writing often takes place in the re-writing. His notes are so specific as to offer almost a primer in screenwriting. It is also clear that editing in movies does not take place only on Moviolas.

*The Big Brass* used a backdrop of the US Air Force in Cold War-era Europe for a romantic comedy about three central characters: Tom Ferris and “Tank” Martin served together in the Korean War, but Ferris eventually married Julie, the woman whose attention both men sought. The film explores the effect that the return of “Tank” Martin has on the Ferris marriage, especially on Tom’s jealous nature. A

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51 Gelbart Hampstead interview.
52 Gelbart interview. Barnes is most famous for the play *The Ruling Class* (1968), notorious as one of the first scripts produced after the dissolution of the British Lord Chamberlain’s office of censorship.
flashback—the Korean War—takes up half of the film, and illuminates the history of the threesome. "There's no way to clock this," Gelbart explained once, but the film contained "probably the world's longest flashback." The movie also boasted several special moments, including clips from the RKO film *Mighty Joe Young* (1949), an intercut Bob Hope troop entertainment (relating directly to Gelbart's career experience), and "hair-raising, low-level flying" around monuments and other picturesque European sites. In addition, an animated character, the "Green-Eyed Monster" of jealousy, appeared in the title sequence and recurred within the film.

Gelbart's first incisions involved the use of this animated "Green Eyed Monster." As Gelbart points out to Panama: "I like it for the opening titles, but I'm not sure the idea isn't going to get coy with repetition . . . the introduction of the character has, of course, added quite a bit of time to a script that always has had a time problem." He continued to scrutinize the script, promising Panama that he would analyze by page and scene, and give a good reason for what he has suggested.

For a screenplay the length and complexity of *The Big Brass*, Gelbart's main concerns (it seems from the notes to Panama) lay in the elimination of redundant information, rectification of time indicators, and tightening of the jokes. His facility with language allowed him to make suggestions that would put the screenplay into a form that could be managed in pre-production; that is, after Gelbart's notes, the story at least would work and casting, etc., could be done.

53 Gelbart Oral History 30.
54 Variety review 21 Sept. 1966.
55 Larry Gelbart notes to Norman Panama, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 28 Jan. 1966, 1.
56 Gelbart notes to Panama 2.
First, Gelbart tried to eliminate redundant or superfluous information: often in the original, characters identified themselves line after line, which is unnecessary once the audience is introduced to them. Another example illustrates Gelbart's doctoring:

Page 20
Last third of the page. I found Tom's speech about the Danish Air Attaché and the Hasselblad too long and unclear. His next speech about not meaning anything, it's his job, etc., is repetitive.\textsuperscript{57}

Gelbart's concern lies with length, clarity and repetition. He repeatedly cuts pieces of business that do not relate organically to the plot point at hand, and always suggests "an out." For example, something as simple as ordering a drink had become a mini-scene between Tank and a bartender. Gelbart pointed out that since there was "no payoff whatsoever," a simple gesture by Tank would be sufficient.\textsuperscript{58} One of the lessons in editing material that Gelbart learned on \textit{Caesar's Hour} and \textit{A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum} was that sometimes you have to "kill your babies," that is, sacrifice a joke you love for the good of the overall script. Some cuts seemed easier than others for Gelbart to suggest; for example, a running food joke leads Gelbart to plead, "Enough with the marinated fish balls already."\textsuperscript{59}

Gelbart's sense of fun with language appears in his new suggested lines that presage humor found in \textit{M*A*S*H} and \textit{Mastergate}; here, Gelbart points out the paradox of soldiers fighting:

\begin{quote}
JULIE. That brawl will be very bad on your record.
TOM. Just a little fight. It relieves the tension of fighting all the time.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{57} Gelbart notes to Panama 6.
\textsuperscript{58} Gelbart notes to Panama 7.
\textsuperscript{59} Gelbart notes to Panama 15.
\textsuperscript{60} Gelbart notes to Panama 9.
For a scene wherein Tom, dressed in Arab robes, steals the jet of a Middle Eastern magnate, Gelbart re-writes characteristically compact plays on words:

TOM. One word of this and—(gestures finger across throat) C.I.A.
blockhead. Let's get the Shah on the road!61

The screenplay that Panama sent Gelbart did include some indications for cuts, and for the most part, Gelbart applauds and supports them. Additional material, however, seems to raise flags with him. As he points out to Panama: “The minute I see new dialogue I instinctively begin re-writing.”62 At one point, Gelbart notes that “The ‘Wow! Wow!’ inserts have a strong Dick Lester flavor—which my polite way [sic] of saying I don’t like them.”63 Evidently, Gelbart’s experience of the Forum film production made anything Lester-esque seem unpleasant.

Another major change occurred in the title. The Big Brass ultimately became Not With My Wife, You Don’t, and starred George C. Scott, Tony Curtis, Virna Lisi, and Carroll O’Connor. The final film, which was made in the spring and summer of 1966, runs a svelte 118 minutes, which means that about forty pages of dialogue and business were excised by Gelbart and Panama. Perhaps because the story dated back several decades—the film seemed “terribly old-fashioned” to Gelbart.64 One reviewer called the 1966 movie “The best comedy of 1945,” to emphasize the point.65

Through Norman Panama, film director Roman Polanski (1933-) approached Gelbart about doctoring a script entitled Chercher La Femme, which Polanski had

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61 Gelbart notes to Panama 19.
62 Gelbart notes to Panama 3.
63 Gelbart notes to Panama 6.
64 Gelbart Oral History 30.
65 Cue magazine 1966, clipping in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
written with his long-time collaborator, Gerard Brach. Once he received the script, which had been translated by David Stone, Gelbart prepared a fifty-page treatment dated 15 January 1966. For the next two years, he would revise scripts for the project, which also went by the unfortunate title, *The Impotence of Being Ernest.*

Gelbart completed the first draft (which ran 157 pages) by 14 April 1966. For a while, his association with Polanski was, in Gelbart’s words, “very enjoyable.” Gelbart awaited suggestions and comments on the first draft from his director-collaborator.

In the meantime, Gelbart went to Italy to work on a comedy by screenwriter Luigi Magni for director Pasquale Festa Campanile, *The Chastity Belt* (1969). Once again, Gelbart re-wrote a sex comedy starring Tony Curtis, but nothing about this movie provides Gelbart with many memories to take from it. Curtis’ character locks his wife, played by Monica Vitti, in a chastity belt and leaves for the Crusades. The remainder of the film follows the key through many hands, but never Vitti’s. Because of the plot line and Gelbart’s involvement, someone had the idea to call the film, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Crusades,* which for whatever reason—good sense or the fear of a lawsuit—became alternately titled, *On the Way to the Crusades I met a Girl Who . . .* but is most commonly listed as simply *The Chastity Belt.* Gelbart’s re-writes for the project resulted in one draft, dated 31 October 1966. One reviewer called the film a “rather insulting one-liner which lasts far too long.”

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66 Larry Gelbart, “Chercher la Femme,” treatment in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
67 Gelbart Hampstead interview.
Another Italian film of this period that Gelbart doctored was Francesco Maselli's *A Fine Pair* (1968), which starred Rock Hudson as a police officer who becomes the dupe of a beautiful jewel thief, only to turn the tables on her in larceny and love. Gelbart merely did polish work on *The Chastity Belt* and *A Fine Pair*, providing “the sauce” for the movies.⁶⁹ Both assignments were “quickies—literally—*A Fine Pair*’s running time is about seventy minutes. I think it's all they could get away with.”⁷⁰

When Gelbart returned to Polanski’s *Chercher La Femme* in late 1966, he continued to do major re-writing on the screenplay. By the time Polanski responded to the second revision, it was clear that Gelbart’s work did not fulfill the director’s vision of what the film would be. According to Gelbart, Polanski told him, “I can’t do this picture. I love the script, but it is more you than it is me now. I don’t know how to do it.”⁷¹ Such honesty from a filmmaker must have been refreshing for Gelbart, and it speaks to the kind of personal involvement Polanski brings to his films.⁷² The matter of getting paid for his script work remained.

Polanski had already sold the idea for *Chercher La Femme* to Filmways Productions, so Gelbart and his lawyer communicated their desire for payment to that company once Gelbart dropped out of the project. Martin Ransahoff, the head of Filmways, refused to pay Gelbart for his work on the script. Having spent two-and-a-

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⁶⁹ Gelbart Hampstead interview. Gelbart’s use of sauce is in reference to the “spaghetti western” mentality in Italian filmmaking at the time: productions featured one or two American actors in a B-grade Italian movie.

⁷⁰ Gelbart Hampstead Interview.

⁷¹ Qtd. in Hampstead interview.

half years on the project, writing in that time a treatment and three drafts, Gelbart sued. Ransahoff settled out of court, according to Gelbart, "five minutes before we had to go into the actual courtroom."\textsuperscript{73} Neither Polanski nor anyone else ever made \textit{Chercher la Femme}. Gelbart sat down in his home in Highgate "so full of anger" that he wrote out the first forty pages of an untitled stage play,\textsuperscript{74} but his screenwriting career, for the '60s at any rate, ended in a lawsuit and in exasperation.

\footnotetext[73]{Gelbart Hampstead interview.}
\footnotetext[74]{Gelbart Hampstead interview. See p. 175 below.}
CHAPTER 5: YOU PULL DOWN YOUR PANTS A LOT

Television II: 1966-1980

- *The Marty Feldman Comedy Machine* (1972)
- *M*A*S*H* (1972)
- *Roll-Out* (1973)
- *Karen* (1975)
- *United States* (1980)

Mention London in the 1960s, and images of The Beatles, Twiggy, Carnaby Street, “mods” and “rockers” all come to mind. While the United States mired itself in the Vietnam War, the British created a culture that invaded America from the other direction. British film, theatre and television were all arguably the greatest in the world during that period, one of loosening social restraints; in 1968, for example, the Lord Chamberlain of Great Britain ceased the more than two-hundred-year-old policy of censoring all of the plays produced in that country.¹ This was the England into which Gelbart moved his family in 1963. Without the regular income from television residuals that he would receive in years to come, Gelbart found England not only a safer place to raise a family of seven, but also a less expensive one to do so. After twenty-two years of professional writing, Gelbart took what he has called a “sabbatical” of sorts,² an opportunity to spend time with his family, write the odd film or television pilot, and recharge his creative batteries.³

¹ The practice was begun during the reign of Elizabeth I, but a later decree (1737) remained in force into this century.
Gelbart did not do much writing during the ‘60s; he wrote opening episodes to two situation comedies for comedians Phil Silvers (whom Gelbart knew from his *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* days, and from the Judy Garland television special) and Tim Conway. After scripting the film adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne’s *The Wrong Box* with close friend Burt Shevelove, Gelbart wrote a pilot in October 1966 for *The Phil Silvers Show*, a situation comedy also known as *Bel-Air Patrol*, because of the main characters’ occupation. Silvers became widely known to audiences in the ’50s as “Sergeant Bilko” and the new show again placed the comedian in a uniform, but this time as a private security officer in Los Angeles. The pilot, which Silvers filmed, was not bought by a network and the project terminated.

Two years later, amid a few script-doctoring projects, Gelbart flew to California to write a pilot for *The Tim Conway Show*. He adopted the pseudonym Vincent Healy for the assignment, which he completed in October 1968. Conway, known to audiences for his work as the naïve ensign on *McHale’s Navy* (1962-66) and later for his character work on *The Carol Burnett Show* (1975-78), starred as the sole proprietor of a small airline, a precursor of sorts to the later and more successful NBC situation comedy *Wings*. *The Tim Conway Show*, by contrast, was picked up by CBS and ran only the first six months of 1970, but without Gelbart on staff. By that year, he had moved on to other projects and had no pressing reason to leave England.

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*Gelbart chose the pseudonym as a gibe to an old Chicago friend, who had changed his name to what he considered a more upscale one (Gelbart telephone interview 9 July 1997).*
After several years in London, and after the several re-write jobs on Italian and French films (in addition to the pilots for Silvers and Conway that led nowhere for him), Gelbart had to have been restless to do some meaningful work. The 1970s began with a burst of activity, with *Jump!* on stage in Nottingham and London, *The Marty Feldman Comedy Machine* on British and American television, and a new project that for Gelbart "felt right, just seemed so right right from the start."5

In mid-1970, Marty Starger, then head of ABC television in the United States, contacted Gelbart about developing a series around the British comedian Marty Feldman (1933-82), whom Gelbart knew from the comic's work as a performer and writer on British television.6 Starger believed that Feldman, already popular in his native England, would benefit from having an American at the helm of the new comedy program, since the plan called for using it to promote Feldman to American audiences when the shows repeated in this country.7

Gelbart had little reason to say no. His stage play, *Jump!* had already been written and was simply waiting for a production (see Chapter 6). Thus, with few projects on his plate at the moment, he accepted the position as creator-producer-writer of *The Marty Feldman Comedy Machine* from Starger and the British ATV Network's Sir Lew Grade. After a few preliminary meetings with Feldman and Grade's associate, Ken Ewing, Gelbart decided that the project's February 1971 target

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date simply could not be met. In a letter to Grade, he suggested that ABC allow the series to begin in January 1972, with full understanding that we are given the additional time gained to put together the sort of staff we know it is necessary to have to maintain the high level and standard we both have in mind for this series. Understandably, this affects the profit situation regarding the series, but if we go ahead as it is now envisaged, in such a rushed and ill-prepared way, the chances for the show's success are greatly reduced and its failure would be far more damaging to its profit potential.

Gelbart knew what a top-notch writing staff was capable of, having worked in radio on *Duffy's Tavern*, in television on *Caesar's Hour*, and everywhere with Bob Hope. In the same letter, he cited the “shallow pool” of writers available to him in England, and felt the yearlong delay necessary in order to find the right people, and not just grab unknowns from agents or casual recommendations.

In composing the Feldman staff, Gelbart felt pressure from the two sides of the Atlantic. For one thing, he hoped to land some of the *Monty Python's Flying Circus* team as writers, since their brand of humor had not yet reached the United States. Complicating their acquisition, Gelbart knew, was their probable insistence on being writer-performers; ABC's executive in charge of the program, Greg Garrison, had already made it clear to Gelbart that the network wanted a preponderance of American celebrities and personalities in support of Feldman. One Monty Python member, American-born Terry Gilliam, did supply short animated films to several

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8 Larry Gelbart, letter to Sir Lew Grade, 18 November 1970, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 1.
9 Gelbart letter to Grade.
10 *Monty Python's Flying Circus* premiered in November 1969, and ran into 1974. Its brand of humor functioned as the antithesis of standard television comedy: rude topics, sketches that failed to produce an ending, and stream of consciousness segues from one routine to the next. Since the television series left the air, many of the members—most notably John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle and Terry Jones—have continued writing and performing (often together) in films.
episodes, as well as the opening and closing animated titles; Gelbart pursued another, Eric Idle, because of his work with Feldman on the British television comedy series *At Last the 1948 Show* (1967), but Idle's work on the program was brief and unremarkable.\textsuperscript{11} Gelbart also used British comedy legend Spike Milligan—of *Goon Show* fame\textsuperscript{12}—as a writer-performer, and retained a young American writing team, Barry Levinson and Rudy De Luca,\textsuperscript{13} for the Feldman writers room.

In early 1971, a long-time friend, the producer and director Gene Reynolds (1925- ), visited London with his wife, Bonnie. During their stay, the couple went to dinner with the Gelbarts.\textsuperscript{14} He mentioned to Gelbart that the two should work on something together—an innocuous enough statement, and a fairly common remark in the entertainment industry.\textsuperscript{15} Gelbart returned the sentiment, and Reynolds returned to California, assuring him that he would contact him should the right project come along.

*The Marty Feldman Comedy Machine* went into pre-production in the late spring of 1971, and the half-hour show followed a straightforward format, a

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Gelbart email with the author 13 July 1997.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} The *Goon Show* radio series could be considered the British humor equivalent of the Marx Brothers, for the inventiveness and influence of its members (Milligan, Peter Sellers, and Harry Secombe) on later comedy. It played on BBC radio from November 1952 to January 1960, but still enjoys a large cult following via recordings.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Levinson is today known more as the director of such films as *Diner* (1982), *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987), and *Ram Man* (1988). Since the early '70s, De Luca has been a close associate (co-writer, performer) of Mel Brooks on *Silent Movie* (1976) and other films.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Gene Reynolds, a native of Detroit, moved as a child with his family to California, where he quickly landed roles in films, including some extra work in the Roach Studio's *Our Gang* series. He appeared in many films, among them *Boys Town* (1938). He moved to directing, and in the 1960s became a successful television director, working on *The Andy Griffith Show, Leave It to Beaver*, and others. He started producing in 1968 with television's *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, and a year later, *Room 222*. Reynolds and Gelbart have been friends since the 1940s, when the two met at Los Angeles' State Beach, according to Reynolds (Hirsh *Memories*).
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Gene Reynolds, interview by Michael Hirsh for *Memories of M*A*S*H* (documentary, 1983), from Hirsh's personal copy.
\end{itemize}

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combination of sketches, songs, blackouts (brief, one-joke bits), and other staples of variety shows. The comedy followed the dictates of "British humor," a rather vague term for often surrealistic and oblique satire based on the corruption of expected behavior in any given situation. Vehicles for the satire include odd or misplaced songs, characters, genders and dialects.

The program maintained a choreographer, Irving Davies, on staff for weekly production numbers and also brought in other dance acts, such as The Golddiggers, Dean Martin's house dancers, whose appearance helped satisfy ABC's request for American talent. Guest stars performed in songs and sketches with Feldman and Milligan; for example, the female guest in the first episode was JoAnn Pflug, an actress whose current film release was Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H*. Pflug's *M*A*S*H connection created an odd foreshadowing: by the time *The Marty Feldman Comedy Machine* reached its first audience (in the UK) in February 1972, Gelbart's life would be irrevocably linked to the television version of that Korean War-set hospital comedy.

In June 1971, once *The Marty Feldman Comedy Machine* took Gelbart's full-time attention, he received a call from Gene Reynolds, who had just received word himself from Twentieth Century-Fox Studio's William (Bill) Self, who wanted to develop a television series based on *M*A*S*H* for CBS. Reynolds immediately thought of Gelbart for the pilot scriptwriter, and contacted his old friend whom he knew was eager to find a new project. In their initial telephone conversation,

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16 Feldman had appeared as a regular on *Dean Martin Presents* in 1970 for NBC (ImDb).
Reynolds asked whether Gelbart had seen the Altman film; Gelbart had, just a few days earlier.\textsuperscript{17}

Gelbart expressed interest, but with a few reservations: first, he wanted to remain faithful to the tone and spirit of the motion picture; second, although he knew the sexual situations and language had to be toned down for television, still he wanted to "tackle some sort of areas that TV hasn't gone into yet;" and finally, he did not want to create simply another service "gang" comedy—with Vietnam in full conflict, he believed it would be a disservice to the public to produce just another \textit{Hogan's Heroes}, \textit{McHale's Navy}, or even \textit{Sgt. Bilko}.\textsuperscript{18} Reynolds agreed completely and made plans to fly to London to meet with Gelbart about developing the series. On his end, Gelbart acquired a copy of the novel to read. He negotiated with Twentieth Century-Fox for a pilot episode writing fee, and a consequent royalty to be paid him as creator of the series—should the network buy into the idea of a "serious" situation comedy. Gelbart explained that his royalties for $M*A*S*H$ were "better than usual," because, he believed, no one considered the program would enjoy a long run: eleven years.\textsuperscript{19}

In mid-June 1971, therefore, Gene Reynolds and Larry Gelbart began to refine the ideas, characters and situations in the novel and film for use as a half-hour

\textsuperscript{17} Larry Gelbart, Oral History Center of Southern Methodist University interview (OHC #295), 15 Aug. 1983, 33.

\textsuperscript{18} Gelbart Oral History 33. \textit{Hogan's Heroes} replicated standard screwball situation comedy fodder in an unusual setting: a Nazi POW camp. \textit{McHale's Navy} starred Ernest Borgnine as the commander of a PT boat full of misfits in the Pacific (and for a brief time, the Mediterranean) during World War II. \textit{Sgt. Bilko}, aka \textit{The Phil Silvers Show} and \textit{You'll Never Get Rich}, was the most successful service sit-com before $M*A*S*H$, due in large part to its writing and star. Gelbart also seems to want to make clear that he did not want to do another \textit{Bilko} because its premise had already been done so successfully, not because he found it lacking (Gelbart Oral History 33).

\textsuperscript{19} Gelbart Oral History 33.
television program. Since Gelbart was working on *The Marty Feldman Comedy Machine* full time at ATV studios in Elstree, some distance from London, Reynolds consulted with Gelbart on lunch breaks there, and after work on "leisurely strolls through Kenwood Park" near Gelbart's Highgate home.\(^{20}\) The two assembled several production details that they knew they wanted to retain from the film version, as, for example, the public address speaker. They decided which characters should remain for the series, since the film contained several substantial roles because of the many plot lines. The character of Duke Forrest, for example, did not appear in the television version, thus reducing the number of "heroes" in the series. Further, another surgeon, Dr. Oliver Harmon "Spearchucker" Jones, did not last past the first few episodes because Gelbart and Reynolds discovered in their research that there simply were not any African-American surgeons in Korea.\(^{21}\)

*M*A*S*H* appeared in 1968 as a novel by Richard Hooker, the pseudonym of Dr. Richard Hornberger of Maine, who had served as a physician in a mobile army surgical hospital (MASH) unit during the Korean War. In it, he recounts the kind of life doctors, nurses and support personnel led in mobile army surgical hospitals near the front lines, and the odd sense of humor, self and reality such a life engendered.\(^{22}\) The film adaptation, by Ring Lardner, Jr., became the basis for a hit 1970 film by Robert Altman, which starred Donald Sutherland and Elliott Gould as two counterculture surgeons, Capt. Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce and Capt.

\(^{20}\) Gelbart Oral History 34.
\(^{21}\) Gelbart, Michael Hirsh interview.
“Trapper” John McIntyre, respectively. They occupied a tent called “The Swamp,” and came into conflict with Majors Frank Burns and Margaret “Hot Lips” Houlihan. The commanding officer, Lt. Col. Henry Blake, and his clerk, Cpl. Walter “Radar” O’Reilly (so-called because of his clairvoyance), comprised the remaining core characters of the film.

After two weeks of detailed story conferences, Reynolds and Gelbart settled on the “story” for the pilot, based on an episode from the book that did not make it to the completed film. In the novel, Hawkeye arranges for admission to his alma mater for his Korean houseboy, Ho-Jon, and raises tuition money from his colleagues in the camp. Reynolds returned to Los Angeles to present the pilot concept to Alan Wagner at CBS, who approved the idea. Reynolds let Gelbart know, so that the latter could begin writing. More than two months later, after “not a call, not a postcard, nothing,” Gelbart finally heard from Reynolds, Wednesday, 15 September 1971. He was calling to check on the progress of the script. “I just mailed it,” Gelbart replied. He then quickly secured the services of a typist to whom he dictated the entire script in two days. Gelbart credits the quickness to the detailed synopsis that he and Reynolds worked out in late June, the time away from it that allowed ideas to simmer in his head, and the “rightness” of the project for his current situation, the basic material, the affection—professional and personal—that Gene and I held for each other. It just made it feel very right, and truly, however corny it sounds, it felt good right from FADE IN. I knew I was working with material and characters that were going to be—when I say ‘successful,’ I don’t mean an eleven-year run on television—that that script was going to come out fine.

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23 Gelbart Oral History 35.
24 Gelbart Oral History 35.
25 Gelbart, personal interview by Michael Hirsh.
The pilot, perhaps more than any other single episode, reflects Gelbart's approach to the material and the stance he hoped the show would assume; its components provide an understanding of Gelbart's past and future techniques and strategies. For instance, Hawkeye narrates the pilot as if it were a letter home to his father. This conceit would serve in several other "Dear Dad" episodes. The first episode also refers back to the film and novel in several details, such as the piped-in Japanese pop songs on the public address system, or the retention of terms like "meatball surgery" and "finest kind" that seem to have disappeared by the middle of the first season. Gelbart's phraseology, however, emerges clearly in the series, especially in the character of Hawkeye Pierce. For example, in the pilot, the surgeon tells Ho-Jon at one point, "You just go back there and become the best possible you you can." Anyone familiar with Gelbart's manner of speaking would instantly recognize him in this line. Further, Gelbart has nothing but praise for Alan Alda's work as Hawkeye Pierce, admitting that "The lines came out of his mouth the way I heard them as I was writing them."

Reynolds loved the first draft of the M*A*S*H pilot, and wrote Gelbart that he would send him comments and suggestions from Bill Self and Richard Berger (two Fox executives) for a second draft, which Reynolds believed would be "concerned

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27 In a telephone interview with Gelbart on 9 July 1997, he completed the line as it was being quoted back to him and acknowledged his own distinctive manner of speech in it.
with censorable material for the most part."29 Reynolds was correct in his assumption, and in November, Gelbart received a three-page list of "Program Practices pre-production notes."30 The comments ranged from simple observations such as "We would not be able to show the operating room scenes in bloody detail as did the movie," to the bowdlerizing requests that words such as "boobs," "dammit," and references to the chaplain's "cross action" be deleted. Gelbart's reactions to the letter are recorded on his copy in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, and include a check mark or an "ok" next to certain items, and "NO" next to others. He replied to Reynolds with a letter dated November 30, 1971, in which he included changes for items he agreed with, and arguments for items he wished might remain as they were.31

In Gelbart's response to changes demanded by the network, the consistency of his reasoning indicates the clarity of his concept. For example, regarding the use of "boobs," Gelbart pleads that "Trapper has to say something that has some bite in it, something that Hot Lips can be offended by so that Frank's anger... is justified. I would like to change the line to: 'Fine, but if you don't move, I'll have to saw around your B-cups.'"32 Later, in response to the use of "dammit," Gelbart points out that If we are not allowed to introduce some salt into the character's speeches we are going to look like any other service comedy. My fear is that the censor has drained a lot of vitality out of the script by making—despite his compromises here and there—everyone conform to the general pattern of bland, TV dialogue. I don't want the characters to talk dirty or be shocking—I just want them to sound real and reality in this case means they are a group of men doing a rotten

31 Larry Gelbart, letter to Gene Reynolds, 30 Nov. 1971, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
32 Gelbart letter to Gene Reynolds, 30 Nov. 1971, 1.
job and hating it and some of this feeling should be allowed to manifest itself in their speech.\textsuperscript{33}

Gelbart also appeals to the double standard that would be created were \textit{M*A*S*H} to be censored for language and innuendo that CBS allowed into \textit{All in the Family}, its current hit situation comedy.\textsuperscript{34} Gelbart admits that \textit{All in the Family} broke ground for all television writing to follow; \textit{M*A*S*H} could not have been as daring without the precedent of producer Norman Lear's revolution.\textsuperscript{35}

Gelbart flew to California in the last weeks of 1971 to oversee the filming of the pilot, and by the time he arrived, Reynolds and associate producer Burt Metcalfe had cast the various members of the 4077\textsuperscript{th} MASH unit. Alan Alda, television's Hawkeye Pierce, held out until he received assurances that the series would not play the war lightly,\textsuperscript{36} perfectly in line with Gelbart's previously stated condition for his involvement. Once \textit{M*A*S*H} was picked up by CBS and scheduled in a fall 1972 time slot, and once his commitment to the Feldman show was completed, Gelbart moved his family back to California, specifically to Beverly Hills, and the beginning of a new chapter in their lives. From March 1972 to 1976, Gelbart's life would almost exclusively revolve around the new series.

\textsuperscript{33} Gelbart letter to Gene Reynolds, 30 Nov. 1971, 2.
\textsuperscript{34} Gelbart letter to Gene Reynolds, 30 Nov. 1971, 2. \textit{All in the Family}, created by producer Norman Lear from the British comedy \textit{Till Death Do Us Part}, is generally recognized as having revolutionized television comedy, according to Tim Brooks' \textit{The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows: 1946-Present} (New York: Ballantine, 1979), 20. In it, a conservative bigot named Archie Bunker battles the world from his easy chair and essays to educate his son-in-law and others around him about the ways of the world.
\textsuperscript{36} Raymond Strait, \textit{Alan Alda: A Biography} (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 114.
Many episodes in the first season followed the standard formula of the pilot: Hawkeye and Trapper get into big trouble (usually followed by a visit from a general) and are exonerated after displaying their vitally necessary talents in the operating room. Gelbart admits that the early episodes exhibit an uncertainty on the part of the writers and producers about where to take the show: “I think as we got more confidence in the scripts and the series itself, they got darker. They did get darker, but we were finding our way. I think the truth is we didn’t really find our way until about six or seven episodes in.”

To illustrate this last point, the eighth episode, “Cowboy,” written by Bob Klane, includes a moment unusual for situation comedies: a distraught helicopter pilot nicknamed Cowboy agrees to take Col. Blake to headquarters, thinking Blake to be the man responsible for denying his request to be sent home. Blake does not realize how revengeful Cowboy is until he is being pushed out of the helicopter by the pilot, but Hawkeye and the others use the radio to talk Cowboy down and Blake to safety. The episode shows the power possible in a series that does not shirk the responsibilities of presenting human beings within the pressure of war. Such moments of true drama helped M*A*S*H inaugurate a newly recognized genre in television entertainment, the “dramedy,” and the series frequently combined elements of high and low comedy with those of serious observations about the wastefulness of war. In fact, Gelbart’s favorite description of M*A*S*H has long been that of “the Marx Brothers crossed with All Quiet on the Western Front.”

37 Gelbart, Michael Hirsh interview.  
38 The Dick Cavett Show, 1989.
One addition to the cast of characters Gelbart borrowed from the novel and the film was Cpl. Max Klinger (played by Jamie Farr). Klinger, a soldier so desperate to get out of the Army and the war that he wore women's clothes to get a discharge, had originally been designed as a single appearance in the episode "Chief Surgeon Who?" Farr had made such an impression playing the part that he was written into the later episode "Dear Dad" (also a Gelbart script), and grew to become a regular, then featured, character in the series. In "Chief Surgeon Who?" the episode's director, E. W. Swackhammer, asked that Klinger be played in a stereotypical effeminate, "swishy" way. When the producers saw how Swackhammer had missed the point—that Klinger was a desperate heterosexual—Reynolds redirected the exchange between Klinger and the bemused general to conform to Gelbart and his conception of the part. Gelbart borrowed the Klinger character from the World War II experience of iconoclastic stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce, who donned dresses to try to get out of the Navy. Gelbart also created other recurring characters during his four years with the series, most notably Dr. Sidney Freedman (played by Allan Arbus) as an army psychiatrist, and the CIA operative Col. Flagg (Edward Winter).

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Alan Alda considered “Sometimes You Hear the Bullet” to be the series’ true groundbreaking episode, because it represented “the first time on our show that a sympathetic and charming character had died.”\textsuperscript{41} The seventeenth show of the first season, this landmark episode concerned Hawkeye’s chance meeting with an old friend from back home, Tommy (played by James Callahan), who was passing through the hospital on the way to the front. Tommy enlisted in the infantry to write a book about the realities of battle, but within the battle, he is mortally wounded and dies on Hawkeye’s operating table. To Carl Kelinschmitt’s original script, Gelbart added the coda of Hawkeye confronting an underage Marine (played by Ronny Howard) with the decision to send the boy home. Hawkeye had just seen his friend die and cannot bring himself to allow another life to be put in jeopardy when he holds the power (morally and legally) to save the boy’s life:

\begin{quote}
MARINE. I’m never going to forgive you for this. Not for the rest of my life.
HAWKEYE. Let’s hope it’s a long and healthy hate.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

The twisted sentiment marks this line as classic Gelbart, who claims that this episode demonstrated something about the series and about network television:

\begin{quote}
[A] half hour doesn’t have to be a twenty-four-minute smile button. You can shake an audience; you can move an audience. You can make them literally feel unhappy and they don’t hate you for it. In fact, there’s a sense of relief that they can give vent to some of those feelings instead of being constantly being courted with comedy . . . lulled with comedy.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{43} Gelbart, Michael Hirsh interview.
The episode therefore demonstrated another way that *M*A*S*H* transformed television, through the use of multiple story lines to add depth to subject matter, to balance comedy with drama, or to comment on one sub-plot with another.

Not all of the show’s scripts exhibited such moving and dramatic situations. When he remembers some of the early episodes, Gelbart is frankly embarrassed:

The one about Major Fred C. Dobbs? The worst. Then there’s the treatment of women. We all got our consciousness raised over the years. Margaret [Hot Lips] had been liberated in terms of the 1950s, but the times made us have to think of the 1970s. Rape jokes . . . I shudder now. But at the time, we were trying to please. You pull down your pants a lot when you’re trying to please.44

The first season did not please many. Scheduled on Sunday nights opposite *The F.B.I.* on ABC and *The Wonderful World of Disney* on NBC, *M*A*S*H* ended the year ranked near the bottom of the Nielson reports in forty-sixth place. When it looked as if the series might be cancelled before it truly had a chance to find itself, a reprieve arrived in the form of a good word from a fan, Mrs. William Paley, to the man who held the fate of the series in his hands—her husband, CBS President William S. Paley.45 *M*A*S*H* received a second life and a scheduling change. In its second season, CBS placed it on Saturday nights at 8:30, sandwiched between the hits *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. By season’s end, *M*A*S*H* had risen to fourth place and had become a hit for Fox and the network. Gelbart wryly noted that “We could have repaired flat tires in that time slot and gotten a good rating.”46

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45 Kalter 53.
46 Kalter 53.
Gelbart also changed job titles between the first and second years: in the first season, he served officially as Executive Story Editor; for the remainder of his time with the show, he would share the title Producer with Reynolds. Gelbart moved an old friend and former writing partner, Laurence Marks (Bob Hope's "Larry & Larry"), into his old position as Executive Story Editor, but Gelbart still wrote, rewrote or polished every script produced during the show's first four years.

In addition to Marks, who wrote several episodes, Gelbart also brought aboard other friends and colleagues from his days in radio and early television. Sheldon Keller, who wrote for Sid Caesar and Patrice Munsel with Gelbart, scripted several $M*A*S*H$ episodes, including "Dear Dad . . . Again" and "For Want of a Boot." Sid Dorfman, a Gelbart partner from his radio days, also wrote several scripts. Perhaps the closest friend Gelbart involved in $M*A*S*H$ was Hy Averback. He had been the announcer for Jack Paar and Bob Hope while Gelbart wrote for them, and Averback, soon after leaving Hope's company, began to direct film and television. By the time $M*A*S*H$ appeared in the early '70s, he had become a television director of some note. He had also become Gelbart's best friend. Furthermore, since he had toured with Hope in the late '40s and early '50s (he and Gelbart even roomed together on the road), Averback shared the experience of seeing Korea during the war, which had to have added relevance to his $M*A*S*H$ work.

Gelbart's memories of Korea went beyond the ubiquitous aroma of kim chee, the pickled cabbage that epitomizes the national cuisine. One experience on tour seems to have clarified his personal associations to $M*A*S*H$, and he related this
story at the wrap-party press conference on the final day of shooting in 1983, a dozen years after he had composed the first episode in London:

Long before there was a film, long before there was a book, I was in Korea with Bob Hope as one of his writing staff. He took a number of us with him to write the Christmas show, in the various camp appearances that we all know he does, or did, until peace unfortunately broke out, and he couldn’t do it any more.

I was in Korea—I was in Seoul—I was in Kimpo Aerodrome when... Bob landed in a two-seater jet fighter, sitting in the back. Up front was a very handsome, dashing, robust, terrific first lieutenant pilot. Bob said, ‘Hey, Larr! Come on here, John. John, say hello to Larr, Larr John. Write him into the show.’ And I went off with this lieutenant, and I wrote him just a stand-up for Bob to do jokes with, John from Pennsylvania.

It was edited into the Christmas broadcast—radio—and two days later, he was killed. The pilot. He was flying his jet when he moved low into a valley—and the North Koreans used to string piano wire from one peak to another and it would cut the tail off of any jet who was coming in low. And he, like a lot of other people, never had a chance.

A few weeks later, I’m back in the States and listening to the broadcast, and there’s John doing jokes with Bob... people laughing at a dead man... and it was for me a foretaste of what, finally, we [on M*A*S*H] all did: laughter, death, up one second and just destroyed the next. And it was kind of a bell tone all these years... that’s what the Korean War was to me.47

The second season began with a “second pilot” designed to introduce the 4077th to the new, larger audience on Saturday nights. It made use of an important lesson Gelbart had learned in writing for network television, namely that the exposition is frequently unfunny, but necessary, so if the show runs long, the jokes are the first things to be cut. He discovered that several early episodes were not as funny as he thought they would be; he began to remedy the situation by making the

47 Larry Gelbart at the final press conference following the last day of filming M*A*S*H, n.d.. Videotape in Gelbart’s private collection.
exposition as funny as possible.48 The opening episode of the second season, titled “Divided We Stand,” concerned a visit to the hospital by an army observer. The exposition for the show took place during a briefing in which each character is described to the observer. In this way, audiences were reintroduced to the cast in an entertaining way.

In the second season, Gelbart could count on a routine on the M*A*S*H lot. The program enjoyed a unique position among the weekly prime-time television shows in its use of a single motion picture camera. All other series used a “switched” form of shooting that used several (usually three) cameras to capture takes from a variety of angles. The best angle would be edited against another to assemble the finished program. M*A*S*H, on the other hand, had a much more cinematographic feel to it. Directors had to cover the action from a single camera; performers had to concentrate through repetitions of lines for the different angles. The writers, on the other hand, could write for a show that made use of more than a couple of sofas and a coffee table.49 They were not locked into a standard situation comedy set.

The weekly routine, therefore, might take the cast and crew from the Fox Malibu ranch where the exteriors were shot, to the interiors standing in Stage 9 at the Fox Studios in Hollywood. Gelbart made himself available during the week’s shooting schedule. He would frequently deliver the new script in its fully polished form to the cast for an initial read-through on Monday morning (earlier drafts were used to inform the crews which parts of the set would be needed, or what had to be

created for the following week). Gelbart sat through the reading with the cast and corrected any unforeseen flaws in the lines. The cast respected the material on *M*A*S*H* immensely; once, during the screening of that week’s dailies, Gelbart watched Alan Alda tell his scene partner to “Close the noor.” Gelbart asked Alda why he used such a peculiar word instead of “door,” and the actor replied, “We thought you meant something by it.” Gelbart explained, “Well, that’s a typo.” If a line needed a new direction, or needed to be “punched up,” Gelbart had the habit of walking over to the wall and facing it. After a little while of thought, he would turn and, in the opinion of Alan Alda, present the perfect line. Alda also facetiously noted in a recent tribute to Gelbart that others would try to emulate Gelbart’s technique, but “the walls never spoke to them.” If more extreme changes needed making, Gelbart would ride his bicycle back to his office on the lot, and re-work the scene. The director, meanwhile, would begin to block for the camera those scenes that could be filmed earliest.

After a day of reading and a day of rehearsal—a luxury in the network television business—the script would be shot in three days. The producers (Reynolds, Gelbart and Metcalfe) spent their lunch hours looking at dailies or rough cuts of previous weeks’ shows, or possibly sitting in on mixing sessions for finished films, where effects or the “cursed” laugh track would be added. Every fourth week,

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51 Writers Guild Tribute.
52 Gelbart Oral 37.
53 Gelbart Oral History 38. Everyone involved in the production of *M*A*S*H*, it seems, despised the network laugh track, which appeared in nearly every scene (except the operating rooms) of every episode. Only the rarest episode did not use it, such as “O.R.,” set entirely in the operating room.
the production would spend a day doing "pick-ups" (re-shoots of marred shots, or scenes
that had not been finished due to time constraints) for the most recent weeks;
sometimes a whole new scene would be shot to replace a deleted one and to fill to
time. Gelbart worked to produce the best possible half-hour he could each week.
Harry Morgan, who joined the cast for the fourth season, recognized Gelbart as the
"creative heart" of M*A*S*H, and it was Gelbart's closeness to the pulse of the show, matched with the quickness of his talent, that allowed him to perform the necessary work on more than a hundred M*A*S*H scripts.

The second season contained several remarkable episodes. Two in particular, because of the writers, deserve special mention. For a season and a half, M*A*S*H had been written exclusively by men. Reynolds and Gelbart had scheduled an episode to center around Maj. Margaret Houlihan (played by Loretta Swit). When Reynolds came upon the writing team of Linda Bloodworth and Mary Kay Place, two women who had written an unproduced Mary Tyler Moore Show script, he asked them whether they'd be interested in writing it. Bloodworth recalled that she and her partner received the kind of break that happens very rarely in the business, and "Hot

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55 Gelbart's four years with M*A*S*H amounted to 97 produced scripts, but the many "eaten" (unproduced) ones bring the total to around 116.
56 Waldron 267. Place became better known as an actress and Bloodworth created two successful series for CBS in the 1980s, Designing Women and Evening Shade. Bloodworth once made the observation that the best job an aspiring writer could get would be cutting Larry Gelbart's grass (Larry Gelbart Tribute, WGAw, 28 Jan. 1997).
Lips and Empty Arms,” the episode they wrote, produced the desired effect: Hot Lips Houlihan gained more dimension as a character.  

Another script from the second season, “George,” bears mentioning for two reasons. First, it dealt with homosexuality in the military, remarkable for a television situation comedy in 1974; second, it represented the first of many writing credits for Gelbart’s stepson, Gary Markowitz. Markowitz and his writing partner at the time, John Regier, submitted the script about Hawkeye and Trapper’s attempts to keep Frank Burns from exposing and discharging a homosexual private. This M*A*S*H script allowed Gelbart to coin the term “stepotism” to describe the favoritism some would find in the arrangement. Markowitz, however, continued to write for M*A*S*H well after his father left the series, and today continues to write and produce on his own.  

Between the second and third seasons, Gelbart and Reynolds traveled to Korea to interview and research for the series. The show had always used as much research as it could garner—interviews with former MASH doctors, nurses, and orderlies, veterans of Korea, etc.—and also made use of a physician, Dr. Walter Dishell, as technical adviser. Dishell noted in an interview that whereas actors on other programs asked the right way to hold a scalpel, the actors on M*A*S*H would ask, “How would a doctor feel about doing this [procedure]?” For the first season, Gelbart made notes in two large black notebooks about Korea, the ’50s, or anything

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58 Markowitz's latest series, Fast Track, on the Showtime cable network, deals with NASCAR racing. It debuted in August 1997. Gelbart also serves the program as executive producer.  
that might have proved useful. Gelbart credits the trip to Korea in 1974 with the improved stories and humanity of the next season, and after Gelbart left the show, Reynolds, then Metcalfe, continued the attention to the research that has helped make \( M*A*S*H \) a lasting possession in American popular culture.

The third season proved a very successful one as well, not only for the research, but also for the acquisition of a new and very experienced writing team, Jim Fritzell and Everett Greenbaum. Fritzell and Greenbaum's scripts would become some of \( M*A*S*H \)'s most celebrated: "Welcome to Korea," "Margaret's Marriage," and "Abyssinia, Henry." This last episode, also coincidentally the last of the third season, marked a farewell to the character of Col. Blake (played by McLean Stevenson). Gelbart and Reynolds had decided to make the loss of Stevenson's character a true loss, by taking the opportunity to make the point that not everyone came home from war. The episode, which Gelbart directed, ended with Radar entering the operating room and informing the staff that Blake's plane had been shot down over the Sea of Japan, and that there were no survivors. Gelbart and Reynolds intentionally held back the last page of the script—the fate of Henry Blake—until the last moment, so that, according to Gelbart, "The actors wouldn't be tempted to play the payoff the whole week." Had the cast and crew been extraordinarily observant, they might have caught hints in Gelbart's direction, such as the frequent placement of a human skeleton framed into shots of Blake.

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60 Kalter 31.
61 Fritzell and Greenbaum had worked as television comedy writers since the '50s, for shows like Mr. Peepers and The Andy Griffith Show (Waldron 272).
62 Reynolds, Memories of M*A*S*H interview.
Reaction to the episode was swift and often angry. Reynolds recalls sitting in his office around six o’clock one evening and receiving a call from a distraught viewer. “You didn’t have to do it. It was unnecessary,” the woman told the producer. “Do what?” Reynolds replied, oblivious to the reason for the call. “Kill Henry Blake,” she answered. The caller, from the East Coast, had already seen the episode several hours ahead of Reynolds’ West Coast time zone, and began a barrage of letters to the producers. Gelbart and Reynolds answered the mail with personal, handwritten responses, and even informed the fans that during the week in which CBS aired “Abyssinia, Henry,” an airplane had taken off from Saigon with a plane load of young Vietnamese children trying to escape the war; the plane had crashed on the runway killing almost everyone on board. Gelbart and Reynolds respectfully submitted in their responses that they thought that incident merited being upset. Gelbart recalled also a letter from a young fan that typified the positive response to the episode: “She felt she had joined that fraternity of people who had lost someone they loved in a war.”

The end of the third season meant not only the loss of Stevenson’s Henry Blake, but also Wayne Rogers’ Trapper John, character. In the fourth season, Gelbart and his fellow writers had the combined challenge and opportunity to establish two new characters, B. J. Hunnicutt (played by Mike Farrell) and the new commanding officer, Colonel Sherman Potter (played by Harry Morgan). “Welcome to Korea,” which won Gelbart and his fellow writers Fritzell and Greenbaum a Writers Guild

64 Gelbart, *Memories of M*A*S*H* interview.
Award, began a season replete with noteworthy episodes. In “Quo Vadis, Captain Chandler?” written by Burt Prelutsky and directed by Gelbart, the camp confronted a soldier who believed he was Christ. Other members of the cast besides Hawkeye narrated letters home in “Dear Mildred” (Potter’s letter), “Dear Peggy” (B. J.’s letter), and “Dear Ma” (Radar’s letter). Written by Gelbart and Simon Muntner, and directed by Gelbart, “Hawkeye” involved the title character in an episode-length monologue, another first in the half-hour genre. After a head injury, Hawkeye keeps himself alert by speaking to an uncomprehending Korean family and to himself. The *tour de force* performance by Alda brought to the screen a script that serves as an excellent example of Gelbart’s continual attempts to “surprise himself” as a writer. He acknowledged enjoying the risk: “For me, the least satisfying episodes were the ones that we knew would work.”

After four years of writing and producing one of television’s most iconoclastic situation comedies, Gelbart decided that he would prefer to leave the series rather than begin to repeat himself. He plainly admitted the motivation to end his association with *M*A*S*H* when he observed, “No one ever painted the same picture four years in a row.” Before he was able to move out of the Fox offices, however, he was confronted with a network demand for one more episode (Gelbart and Reynolds had reckoned the hour-long “Welcome to Korea” as two episodes, but CBS did not agree with that calculation). Reynolds and Gelbart recalled a story idea they had had during the first season, a variation on an Edward R. Murrow interview program the

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66 Larry Gelbart, qtd. In Waldron 281.
67 Gelbart, Michael Hirsh interview.
veteran CBS newsman had conducted during the Korean War. They developed a series of questions for each character to answer in writing, which were distributed to the actor playing the part. They enlisted the aid of Clete Roberts, a former war correspondent, to "interview" each character on screen, presenting the scripted questions and answers to create the episode. Gelbart had taken the actors' responses, edited and "punched them up," and even included a few surprise questions to be asked of the characters on camera. The result, a black-and-white episode with no real plot, demonstrated the talents of the cast, the actors' knowledge of their characters, and the penetrating humanity that had become the hallmark of *M*A*S*H*, and indeed, of Gelbart's art. He put his favorite speech of "The Interview," drawn from research completed long before, into the mouth of the chaplain, Father Mulcahy (played by William Christopher):

CLETE ROBERTS. Has this whole experience changed you in any way?
MULCAHY. When the doctors cut into a patient and it's cold, you know, the way it is now—today—steam rises from the body. And the doctor will . . . will warm himself over the open wound. Could anyone look on that and not feel changed?68

In the end, Gelbart could not find any more ways to say, "War is Hell." In the four years he worked on *M*A*S*H*, he moved television from the standard situation comedy in a living room (even *All in the Family*, revolutionary as it was, still used the familiar setting) to an operating room in a war zone. The numerous writing awards he received from the Writers Guild for *M*A*S*H* episodes, the many Emmy Awards and nominations, and the Peabody Award in 1976, all attest to the quality and power of *M*A*S*H*.

of the program while it ran. Part of the power, to be sure, lay in the reflection of the Vietnam War in M*A*S*H's Korean War analogue. Gelbart noted that perhaps America had learned more about what a real war was like from M*A*S*H, "than those war department people in Desert Storm who never showed one bit of suffering, who never showed any of the results of war, where it was really a video game."69

From a business standpoint, another change engendered by M*A*S*H may be found in its syndication history; the series "changed the rules," showing networks and affiliates that "syndicated shows could be opposite first run shows on television."70 Today, the program is syndicated to almost every domestic market (showing twice daily in many of them), and more than a dozen foreign countries. M*A*S*H home pages bear witness to the continuing popularity of the show; there are even world wide web sites in German, Czech and Japanese. Near the end of M*A*S*H's run, the Smithsonian Institution asked Twentieth Century-Fox for a set to preserve the cultural phenomenon that lasted eleven seasons and changed the face of television comedy-drama. The studio sent the Operating Room and "the Swamp," Hawkeye's tent that he shared over the years with friends and rivals alike.

M*A*S*H was not the only series Gelbart oversaw in the early '70s. Eight months after his return from London in 1972, Gelbart completed another pilot for a series that CBS had contracted him to do; that show, however, did not enjoy the success, or even the warm reception by the network, that M*A*S*H had. He called the new comedy Win a Few, Lose a Few, about a middle-aged Jewish man at the

69 Gelbart, Memories of M*A*S*H interview.
70 Gelbart, Memories of M*A*S*H interview.
height of his responsibilities, who has to play a multiplicity of roles. Gelbart knew he could write a truthful central character, because he had the experience in the craft of writing, and because, he said, "Every word in it is true. I wasn't writing about a black family. I wasn't writing about a woman; I was writing a middle-class, Jewish man, and I couldn't go wrong."71 He admitted a few years after the pilot failed, "I'm not sure it's a half hour series. I can't say they found it controversial ... they're looking for five years, but I know I know I could have made something out of it."

Part of the skill in creating a script is to recognize the format, genre or medium to which a piece belongs. Gelbart was not certain himself whether Win a Few, Lose a Few could be made into a half-hour situation comedy: perhaps it would make a good ninety-minute film, and then the ideas would be exhausted. He also was not sure about American television tastes: "I was used to English television. I thought if you wrote about the human condition, there would be a market for it."72 When he received the rejection of Win a Few, Lose a Few from CBS President Perry Lafferty, his good friend told him, "We hated it ... We just hated it." Gelbart knew then that his concept had hit a nerve, and the network's inability to handle the project reinforced his feelings about it.73

In the middle years of the decade, Reynolds and Gelbart embarked upon two very different projects—but each with an obvious root in M*A*S*H—Roll Out and Karen. The first, a service comedy set in World War II, concerned an African-

71 Gelbart, Michael Hirsch interview.
72 Gelbart, Michael Hirsch interview.
73 Gelbart, Michael Hirsch interview.
American company of soldiers who operated the main transport services (the “Red Ball Express”) of the Army. Gelbart and Reynolds based the Roll Out series on an actual outfit, and the urge may have subconsciously grown out of their own reaction to the deleted character from the first few episodes of M*A*S*H, “Spearchucker” Jones. Roll Out premiered in October 1973; its cast included Stu Gillam, Garrett Morris, and Ed Begley, Jr. (as the unworldly, young, white officer). The connection to the military and thus to M*A*S*H seems plain enough. The producers, however, did not similarly devote themselves to this series, which ran less than six months.

Where Roll Out borrowed M*A*S*H’s wartime setting, Gelbart’s next project, Karen, borrowed its attempt at serious, conscious social commentary. ABC approached Reynolds and Gelbart in 1974 and told them that the network would buy any show—without a pilot episode—that the two developed as a vehicle for Karen Valentine. “I guess we heard cash registers ringing more than inspiration in our ears,” Gelbart admitted. The show, a situation comedy lightly skimming serious social issues of the day, concerned a young woman, Karen Angelo (Valentine), who worked in Washington, DC, for a Common Cause-type organization called Open America. The premise therefore allowed the writers and producers the opportunity to dramatize issues of concern to them.

Karen suffered from several obstacles. First, the leading actress did not seem capable of carrying such a show, and she seemed a bit miscast. Gelbart admitted

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74 Brooks 533.
75 Gelbart Oral History 41. Karen Valentine was familiar to Gene Reynolds already, having starred in his schoolhouse series Room 222 (1971-74).
76 Gelbart Oral History 41.
recently that he did not realize at the time Valentine’s weaknesses in these regards.77 Second, the half-hour situation comedy that \texttt{M*A*S*H} revolutionized could not sustain all “dramedies,” and actually Reynolds would have much more success with his later, hour-long series \textit{Lou Grant}, a spin-off of \textit{The Mary Tyler Moore Show}, that once again allowed Reynolds a forum for issues of the day. \texttt{M*A*S*H} demanded most of Reynolds and Gelbart’s time during the spring of 1975, leaving them little room to develop and sustain worthwhile projects. Although a worthwhile effort—“We were standing in the gutter, but our eyes were on the stars,” Gelbart concluded78—\textit{Karen} was also doomed to a six-month run.

Gelbart has often said that he left \texttt{M*A*S*H} because he did not want to repeat himself.79 In one sense, with \textit{Roll Out} and \textit{Karen} he was doing just that, but in a piecemeal, uninspired way. After the inability to get \textit{Win a Few, Lose a Few} on the air and the lack of success with the two later series that did get on the air, he began to sour on network television in general, and looked to other areas, such as the stage and film, for a new creative outlet. Moreover, he did not maintain a connection to a new situation comedy, \textit{Three’s Company}, that he helped to develop in late 1975 from the British series \textit{Man About the House}.80

For his work rewriting the pilot of \textit{Three’s Company}, Gelbart received “a price hitherto unequalled for a pilot script—$50,000, a surprising amount in 1976.”81

78 Gelbart Oral History 41.
79 Waldron 282.
80 Gary Markowitz came up with the title for the new situation comedy (Markowitz interview).
head of ABC at the time, Michael Eisner, wanted Gelbart to continue with the series "badly." In a meeting with Gelbart, Eisner reportedly asked the writer, "What do you want, the building? My office? My desk?" Gelbart declined the offers from ABC, busy as he was away from television, with the play *Sly Fox* (1975) and the films *Oh, God!* (1976) and *Movie Movie* (1978). He enjoyed the release from the burden of a weekly series, and his family life improved accordingly.

Gelbart's connection to television might have ended with *Three's Company*, but another project excited him enough to take on series life once again in 1979. He and his wife went to a screening of Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973); the film had actually been shown as a mini-series on Swedish television, then re-cut as a feature film. Pat Marshall commented to her husband that such an honest, naked look at marriage should be on American television. Gelbart had the same reaction to the film, and offered the idea to CBS as a vehicle for Linda Lavin, who decided instead to do the situation comedy *Alice*. Later, he proposed it to Mary Tyler Moore and her husband, Grant Tinker. Moore, according to Gelbart, did not want to wait until the entire season was written, a prerequisite for Gelbart's involvement. When he decided to re-enter the world of the weekly television series, he made sure the work would be done on his terms, and one of them was that all of

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82 Lawrence 217.
85 Gelbart *Museum of Broadcasting* 38.
the scripts would be written before a single episode was shot, a luxury of British television practices that Gelbart adopted.86

In December 1978, he went to NBC, whose top decision-maker, Fred Silverman, seemed a stable enough executive to approach with an idea that would not reach the cameras for more than a year.87 He characterized the series to Silverman with one line: “a show about the one marriage in two that doesn’t end in divorce.”88 Silverman liked the idea, coming as it did from a writer and producer with Gelbart’s credentials, and bought the show. Gelbart began collaborating on the venture in early 1979 with his son, Gary Markowitz. The program would be produced by Larry Gelbart Productions, with Markowitz as producer, and Gelbart as executive producer. Markowitz came up with the title for the series, United States, a play on marriage as “the state of being united.”89

Once Gelbart, Markowitz, Cathy Gelbart (the eldest daughter) and a few close writer-friends (like Everett Greenbaum, of M*A*S*H) finished the twenty-two scripts, and before their taping, Gelbart sat down with the cast (led by Beau Bridges and Helen Shaver) and read through all of them, making additional changes and polishing dialogue that had finally been spoken.90 In the middle of October 1979, while Gelbart wrestled with the screenplay for David Merrick’s Rough Cut, he oversaw the taping of the first few episodes. The pilot was called “All Our Weapons,” and

87 Gelbart Seminars 38.
88 Gelbart Museum of Broadcasting 38.
89 Markowitz interview.
90 Gelbart Museum of Broadcasting 39.
explored the dynamic in marital arguments of using the intimate knowledge of the other person against him or her. The show delivered the "different" feel that Gelbart had promised Silverman, but Gelbart realized networks "hear the word different so often that they figure it's going to be more of the same." One critic, Robert Lindsey, represented United States to his readers thus: "While the network describes the show as a situation comedy, it promises to be about as close to Three's Company or The Jeffersons, as Popeye the Sailor Man is to Victory at Sea." 

The look and sound of the show increased the dissimilarity to regular television fare. Instead of using three cameras and the studio with overhead lighting, Gelbart chose to use one camera, as with M*A*S*H, but on videotape rather than film. The lighting came from the floor to approximate interior home lighting. As executive producer, Gelbart knew that a great deal of money could be saved in using tape. The videotape "look" added to the authenticity of the show, which Gelbart evidently wanted to exploit. For example, in a manifesto-briefing memo that Gelbart wrote for the actors to rely on in interviews, he stated that "We want viewers to feel as though we've been eavesdropping on their lives." 

The sound of the show, sans laugh track, caught many viewers by surprise. The "acidity" of some of the exchanges between the husband and the wife stood more prominently without the cushioning effect of canned laughter. The eavesdropping effect made much of the dialogue seem insensitive rather than funny. For example,

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91 Larry Gelbart, The American Film Institute Seminar with Larry Gelbart, 16 April 1980, transcript in the AFI Center for Advanced Film Studies, 2.
92 Lindsey D33.
93 Larry Gelbart, untitled memo [United States], n.d., in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
in one episode Libby, the wife, complains to her husband that their children were learning about impotence on *The Ropers* (a television spin-off of *Three's Company*), he replies, "I didn't know about impotence until I met you."\(^{94}\)

Some viewers became uncomfortable with the series, and Markowitz related that some couples had to watch the show in two separate rooms.\(^{95}\) Clearly, television executives and fans did not know what to make of the show. When network censors attempted to have Gelbart change a line in the tag to the episode "Better than Burning," he wrote Senior Vice-President Perry Lafferty (who had since moved to NBC) an angry letter detailing how "galling and insulting" it was "when one realizes that only a half an hour separates us from *Saturday Night Live* on which people are using phrases like 'candy ass,' simulate pot smoking, if in fact it is a simulation, and do what is considered, generally, the most vulgar material on the air."\(^{96}\)

Gelbart also answered viewer mail, much of which congratulated him on a series that handled mature matters maturely. Some of the responses to *United States*, however, prompted sarcastic replies from Gelbart such as: "Sorry you find the series senseless. I must admit it's very hard for us to be as enjoyable as *Family Feud* [a very popular game show]. Perhaps we haven't learned the art of stooping low enough to please everyone."\(^{97}\)

The program, broadcast as it was at 10:30 p.m., and shuffled in the weekly schedule by the network, failed miserably in the ratings. Because NBC delayed the

\(^{94}\) Qtd. In Lindsey D33.
\(^{95}\) Markowitz interview.
\(^{96}\) Larry Gelbart, letter to Perry Lafferty, 2 Jan. 1980, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
\(^{97}\) Larry Gelbart, letter to E. Rocky, 11 April 1980, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
premiere of the series until April 1980, it found itself in a contractual bind that forced it to buy thirteen more episodes of the untried program. Of the thirty-five United States scripts, thirteen were produced and only eight of those reached an audience. Gelbart called the scheduling disaster “network euthanasia,” and attributed the mishandling to the difficulty NBC had in categorizing United States. He considered the program to be ahead of its time, and “it still is,” in his view.98 Markowitz became aware of the kind of aftershocks the series created in an unusual way: Ed Zwick, the creator-producer of ABC’s Thirtysomething (one of the most celebrated and successful television series of the 1980s) told him, “I’m doing United States. Sorry.”99 Evidently, Zwick’s success with a concept that had failed for Gelbart and Markowitz proved that the influence of United States extended beyond its eight weeks on the air.

In many ways, United States continued Gelbart’s attempt in Win a Few, Lose a Few to portray the human condition in an examination of a life not unlike his own. He asked himself with Win a Few, Lose a Few in 1972, “Why not something very un-clever, very simple for television?” and answered with United States in 1980. He openly admits that many of the subjects covered in the later series arose from his own marriage to Pat.100 Questions of intimacy, infidelity (or merely the suspicion of infidelity), friendships outside of the marital circle, child-rearing styles and many otherwise taboo subjects and crises appeared in an adult setting on United States.

99 Markowitz interview. Ironically, in the New York Times feature article previewing United States, the author refers to the leads as “a 30-ish” couple (Lindsey D33).
100 Larry Gelbart personal interview 1 Oct. 1996.
Gelbart's journey through the labyrinthine and often Byzantine practices of network television in the '70s took him from the martial to the marital, from the war in Korea to the war in the home. Because of the continuing success of *M*A*S*H* to 1983, Gelbart had the singular distinction in 1980 of having a show ranked first (*M*A*S*H*) and another ranked last (*United States*) in the same week. The legacy of Gelbart's experience in the decade remains, of course, with *M*A*S*H*. From the mid-'70s to today, the number 4077 may be as recognizable as 1066 and 1776—such is the impact that *M*A*S*H* has had on American culture.

The great good fortune of Gelbart's work with *M*A*S*H* emerges in its most striking form only when held against his other attempts in the decade to replicate the feat. Such a confluence of the best writers, producers, performers and directors working for a show that was not too far ahead of its time to be baffling, nor too much in its time to be derivative happens once in a career for the most fortunate entertainer. These two professional milestones for Gelbart—his work on *Caesar's Hour* in the 1950s and on *M*A*S*H* in the 1970s—raise his double achievement to unique and incontrovertible proportions among American comedy writers.
CHAPTER 6: HAVE YOU EVER READ VOLPONE?

Stage II: 1969-1976

- *Jump!* (1971)
- *Peter & the Wolf* (1970)
- *Sly Fox* (1976)

The frustration and anger that accompanied Larry Gelbart’s 1968 *Chercher la Femme* lawsuit against Filmways Productions’ Martin Ransahoff and director Roman Polanski prompted the writer to sit down at his typewriter and vent the first forty pages of a bitter, dark comedy called *Jump!* The play concerns a Jewish family crisis in which Albert, one of the sons, has stepped out on the ledge to commit suicide. The mother, Magda, is overly concerned; until the very end, the father cares more about rekindling his romantic relationship with Magda than about rescuing Albert. One by one, representatives of the society at large—rabbi, doctor, fireman, politician—pass through the apartment to offer their limited assistance. Throughout the play, an offstage mob on the street below chants, “Jump!” The play ends as Albert returns inside and marries his girlfriend, just as the mother unwittingly knocks the father, Herbert, off the ledge he has ventured onto in order to save his son.

Because Gelbart did not set out to write a play (he simply chose to do violence on the page rather than to others or himself), the script went untouched for several years.
months until Gelbart sent the draft to his friend and fellow playwright, Herb Gardner (1934–). Gardner responded in a very positive letter about *Jump!*

Oh, boy, it’s just wildly wildly funny. I am sitting here alone at my desk on a Saturday afternoon, laughing out loud continuously for half an hour. It’s surprizing [sic] and crazy and terrifying and everything good. Please finish so I can have more good times like this.¹

By that time, late 1968, Gelbart had been looking for a project to do, but did not consider *Jump!* the one. He had written several pilots for television, for comedian Phil Silvers and others, and eventually opted to help develop for Broadway a very successful play with music that he had seen in London. Based on Anglo-Irish author Jonathan Swift’s 1726 satire, *Gulliver’s Travels* would be Gelbart’s first stage musical since *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.* The project grew out of a production conceived, designed, written (with Gerald Frow), and directed by Irish scenic artist Sean Kenny (1932-1973) for a 1968 run at London’s Mermaid Theatre.³ Gelbart met with Kenny and broached the idea of doing a full-blown Broadway production of *Gulliver’s Travels.* Kenny agreed and Gelbart began to assail the material in the first months of 1969. His work, to reduce a large, often cryptic satire into its essential elements and most appreciable commentaries, allowed him the opportunity once again (after tackling Plautus and Robert Louis Stevenson) to explore the mind and work of a classic author.

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¹ Gardner is probably best known for his plays *A Thousand Clowns* (1964) and *I’m Not Rappaport* (1989).
² Herb Gardner, letter to Larry Gelbart, 1.
³ Larry Gelbart, telephone interview with the author, 8 Nov. 1996.
Gelbart conferred with his business manager, David Cogan, about the project, what royalties Gelbart could reasonably demand, and the subject of an advance from the producer. Kermit Bloomgarden agreed to produce (he had been the producer of Gelbart's aborted *The Golden Kazoo* from 1956), and negotiated with Gelbart and Kenny about royalties and the rights to use the latter's version as a basis for the new musical. The next step that Gelbart and Kenny faced, securing a collaborator for music and lyrics, brought suggestions from many sources. Because they wanted a contemporary score, names such as Paul McCartney and Donovan occurred to them. Two relative Broadway newcomers, David Shire and Richard Maltby, Jr., were suggested, and for some time Michael D'Abo seemed a good choice.

In the meantime, with the financial agreements in place, Gelbart began to plot the book for the musical, working from Swift's original and Kenny's script. In the spring of 1969, therefore, Gelbart divided his attention between *Gulliver's Travels* and the film *The Ecstasy Business*, which was scheduled to go into production later that year. Bloomgarden included an aside to Gelbart in one of his letters: "I spoke to Herb Gardner yesterday, who suggested I ask you about a script he read called 'Jump,'

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2 Bloomgarden produced many important plays, including *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *The Children's Hour* (1934). His musicals include the hits *The Most Happy Fella* (1956) and *The Music Man* (1957), as well as Stephen Sondheim's short-lived *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964).
3 Paul McCartney played the bass for The Beatles and co-wrote most of their hits with John Lennon. Donovan had hits in the late '60s with several borderline psychedelic songs, including "Atlantis," "Hurdy-Gurdy Man," and "Jennifer."
4 Flora Roberts, letter to Larry Gelbart, 30 April 1969.
5 Kermit Bloomgarden, letter to Larry Gelbart, 11 March 1969.
6 Gelbart would receive a $5,000 advance against a royalty of 2% of gross until the show broke even, after which he would receive 2½% of the profits, including all subsidiary rights. Additionally, he would receive sole authorship credit and have approval of the composer and lyricist (Alain Bernheim, letter to David Cogan, 13 March 1969).
which he liked immensely and thought I should follow up on," and Gelbart wrote the producer that he would indeed reexamine Jump!11 Because of the transoceanic nature of the production, with Bloomgarden (and soon Kenny) in America, and Gelbart and Bart in London, an extensive record of this production exists by way of the many letters that crossed between the parties.

Bloomgarden maintained that a Fall 1969 opening for Gulliver's Travels could still be achieved, quite an optimistic goal, since no composer had yet been hired.12 In May, to make matters worse, Kenny's side of the deal ran into snags—possibly because a designer wanted to direct the Broadway production—and Gelbart turned his attention fully to The Ecstasy Business screenplay.13 Gelbart's London solicitor, Alain Bernheim, wrote to Bloomgarden that the fall of 1970 might be a more feasible opening date for the musical, to give the team ample time to polish the material, and to give Gelbart the opportunity to work on The Marty Feldman Comedy Machine for television.14

By the middle of September 1969, Gelbart had constructed a first draft of Gulliver's Travels. Swift's story of a sailor-doctor who suffers several adventures through shipwreck, abandonment and serendipity, provided convenient divisions of scenes. The draft breaks Gulliver's many journeys into two acts, with Lilliput and Brobdignag sharing the first, and trips to Laputa, Glubbdubdrib, Luggnagg, and the land of the Houyhnhnms comprising the second. This early draft seems closer to

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11 Inferred from Bloomgarden's response in his letter to Gelbart, 11 March 1969.
12 Kermit Bloomgarden, letter to Alain Bernheim, 11 March 1969.
13 Inferred from Alain Bernheim's letter to Kermit Bloomgarden, 27 June 1969.
14 Bernheim's letter to Bloomgarden, 27 June 1969, 2.
Swift in many respects, and the changes in subsequent drafts may be attributed to the necessities of creating song lead-ins, and suggestions that the language become more "Gelbart" and less "Swift."15 One episode in particular, Gulliver in the land of the Houyhnhnms, maintains the flavor and spirit of Swift's original more in this initial version by Gelbart. In it, Gulliver finds himself attacked by Yahoos, a race of wild humans, and saved from harm by the Houyhnhnms, the rational and articulate horses that rule the land. These scenes allowed Gelbart to use the reversed situation to capture Swift's commentary on human pride.16 The Houyhnhnms question Gulliver's need to clothe himself, and he begins to disrobe:

MASTER. (studying him) Much whiter ... much smoother ... The claws of your forelegs are considerably shorter than the average Yahoos. (touching GULLIVER's trousers) And you seem to have no system for relieving or reproducing yourself.

GULLIVER. I most certainly do!17 (The MASTER cocks his head quizzically at GULLIVER's trousers) These are not part of me. They are called trousers. My—uh—system—is under these.

2ND HORSE. Just where a Yahoo's is.

GULLIVER. That may be. But mine is different.

MASTER. Show us and we will judge.

GULLIVER. (outraged) Show you?? It is not my habit to expose myself in front of horses.

MASTER. (sharply) We are Houyhnhnms.

GULLIVER. I don't expose myself in front of those either!

HORSE. Then your coverings are for concealment.

GULLIVER. Not at all. Where I come from they are worn to protect one from the elements and also they permit us to present a decent appearance.

MASTER. Without trousers, one is indecent?

GULLIVER. Of course.

15 Anonymous notes in Gelbart Collection at UCLA. n.d.
16 The fact that Gulliver begs to be made a Houyhnhnm in Swift's original seems to presage eerily Eugène Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* (1960), where the sole human being wishes to be transformed into a rhinoceros to satisfy his desire to belong to "superior" creatures.
17 In the first act, Gulliver has already proved this point, since Gelbart maintained Swift's sequence wherein Gulliver puts out a fire in the tiny Lilliputian palace by urinating on it (*Gulliver's Travels*, first draft, 29).
MASTER. (Indicating himself and the other HORSES) Are we indecent, then?

GULLIVER. Well, no. But then you’re— (after a pause) Houyhnhnms.

(The YAHOOs have grabbed GULLIVER's discarded clothing and each has put a bit of it on)

MASTER. (To GULLIVER, looking at YAHOOs) Just when you look less like them, they begin to look more like you.18

The Houyhnhnms seem always to get the better of arguments with Gulliver, and the Englishman often exposes prejudice, cultural bias and other irrational reasoning with his captors. The idea of concealment carries further into language when the Houyhnhnms admit no need for the verb “to lie” in their language:

MASTER. Ours is a perfect society, governed wholly by reason. We live in total calm and peace for, living by the dictates of reason, there is no area for dispute or contradiction, no room for what is not.19

Later, the Master states Swift’s message, an example perhaps of the ultimate “horse sense,” which seems also to characterize Gelbart’s opinions of language and its cultural debasement when abused:

MASTER. The use of speech is to enable us to understand one another and to receive information of facts. Surely no rational creatures would convey anything other than what is true.20

Gelbart’s career-long love of language and its power found corroboration in the mind of one of England’s greatest satirists. Gelbart would follow Swift’s models (and to a

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18 Gulliver’s Travels, first draft, 15 Sept. 1969, 2.7.33-35.
19 Gulliver’s Travels, first draft, 2.7.36.
20 Gulliver’s Travels, first draft, 2.7.37. Swift’s original reads as follows:

For he argued thus: that the use of speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive information of facts; now if anyone said the thing which was not, these ends were defeated; because I cannot properly be said to understand him; and I am so far from receiving information, that he leaves me worse than in ignorance, for I am led to believe a thing black when it is white, and short when it is long. And these were all the notions he had concerning that faculty of lying, so perfectly well understood among human creatures.

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certain degree Lewis Carroll's) for such later works as *Mastergate: A Play on Words* (1989).

During the first weeks of 1970, the project acquired a composer-lyricist, Lionel Bart (1930–), most famous for the musical *Oliver!* (1960), itself an adaptation of a classic work. On Sunday, the first of February, the newly completed team—Gelbart, Kenny and Bart—met at Bart's house at Reece Mews in London, to discuss the project. Gelbart summarized the lessons which Gulliver learns through the show:

> That he behaves in such a petty way with midgets, behaves in such a foolish way with giants. Found out that the sign that he thought was so marvelous has led to, apparently, a life of destruction. That there's no joy in the dead. There's no comfort in the fact that you might live forever. Man's got this Yahoo in him, and the ideal is impossible.\(^2\)

Despite this bleak litany, the team had to find a way to maintain an optimistic tone for the piece, especially the finale. They decided upon the thesis that the continuation of life's journeys must be the most important lesson.\(^2\)

The new musical would maintain the bare stage and projection screens of Kenny's Mermaid Theatre production: close-up footage of Gulliver projected onto the enormous screens for the Lilliput adventure, and the reverse for the Brobdingnagian king and Gulliver. As Kenny's notes for prospective backers explain, the production would utilize "full multi-media techniques" for moving pictures, slides (maps, clouds, etc.), stereo or quadraphonic sound, and special effects.\(^3\) Kenny offers the first glimpse of the giant Gulliver on the beach in Lilliput as an example:

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\(^{21}\) "Gulliver: Notes taken from tape recording of meeting at Reece Mews, Sunday, 1st February, 1970,” 3.

\(^{22}\) "Gulliver: Notes,” 4.

\(^{23}\) Sean Kenny, “Notes by Sean Kenny on *Gulliver's Travels*,” in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 1.
Two tall screens are positioned down stage left and right, on the screens are projected 12ft. high images of the soles of Gulliver's boots. Up stage Centre is a 20ft. by 20ft. screen on which is projected a moving image of the horizontal Gulliver with breathing stomach and chest and under side of chin. When Gulliver tries to rise we see his head rise up into screen and look down stage at Lilliputians grouped around his feet at front of stage.24

Besides Gelbart's interest in language, the team as a whole welcomed the chance to present the anti-war message that Swift's satire contained. Gelbart's first musical, The Conquering Hero (1961), depicted an anti-war and anti-propaganda subject "before its time." Now, in 1970, at the height of the Vietnam War, quite possibly the time had come for a satire of the human weakness for war-mongering. Perhaps not coincidentally, Gelbart would very soon write another doctor as the vehicle for anti-war sentiments—Captain Hawkeye Pierce in television's M*A*S*H.

Swift's original and Gelbart's musical both include an episode wherein Gulliver is "drafted" into fighting a petty war against Blefescu for the Lilliputian king. Gelbart noted in an article years later that the same process occurs today: the ruler seldom leads armies into harm's way; all wars are essentially fought by proxy.25 The most vicious condemnation of human aggression in both versions, though, occurs in Brobdingnag, when the giant king hears Gulliver's description of the destructive power of gunpowder. The king responds to the diminutive Englishman,

I can only conclude from all you have said, that the bulk of your natives must be the most pernicious race of odious little vermin that nature ever put upon the face of the earth!26

24 Kenny, 2.
25 "'Gulliver' LP: From the Classics to the Classroom," 2.
26 Gulliver's Travels, 10 July 1970, 76. Swift's original reads, "I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth."
One of the most remarkable discoveries Gelbart seems to have made about *Gulliver's Travels* was that “This play is devoted to the improvement of mankind without ever once giving a shit about mankind.” All of the adventures involve exotic, alien worlds on earth, and Gulliver remains the only human we know about (apart from the framing story’s fellow sailors, a few pirates and his family). Swift’s lessons filter through the strange inhabitants of Lilliput, Lagnnagg, *et al.*, and the consequence of the entirety of his adventures renders Gulliver mad. With the counterculture atmosphere of 1970, the drugs and psychedelic music, it became easy for Gelbart to note that it got “a little more trippy than travelly” in parts of the show. The relationship between rock music and the hallucinatory nature of some of Gulliver’s adventures (especially in the second act) clearly excited Bart. He envisioned a mantra chant for the Houyhnhnms, since it would serve to echo a horse’s whinny and to hint at their achieved perfection, and realized that the Yahoos would symbolize, and be symbolized by, a rock group. Despite the bias toward rock music, casting decisions for the lead seemed to favor a Broadway performer. For Gulliver, who would carry the show sometimes literally, the consensus seemed to be that they would pursue Michael Crawford.

By the middle of March 1970, Bart had charted his ideas for songs and their placements, and made a demo tape of the works-in-progress for his collaborators to

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27 “Gulliver” Notes, 34.
28 “Gulliver” Notes, 32.
29 Lionel Bart, “Some Important Notes,” 6 March 1970. The rock group most closely resembling Bart’s description of the Yahoo band, “screaming their hardly recognisable song as they shatter their musical instruments” would be The Who, who ended concerts by destroying their instruments and amplifiers. Crawford is most known today for originating the role of the Phantom in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *The Phantom of the Opera*, although he appeared in several Broadway musicals, including *Hello,*
listen and respond to. Gelbart's reactions ended up in a letter to Kenny, to query the designer-director before confronting Bart from two directions. Gelbart liked some of the songs, especially the opening, "Go Where You Must Go." He tells Kenny that Act II remains "in too nebulous a state," and finds fault with many songs whose lyrics failed to capture the moment, or to move the plot along. In a few weeks, the team would receive a similar letter from producer Bloomgarden, pointing to specific problems with the book and music. He noted that frequently the songs did not replace dialogue or scenes, but merely offered additional material. He closed with a reminder that the ending had to be upbeat.

The desire to create a very fresh, provocative musical that took advantage of multi-media technology forced the creators to look at every component of the piece from a variety of standpoints: the book writer had to imagine the staging and slides; the composer had to consider recorded music or voices; the designer had to contend with scenes blending into others with little or no standard preparations. Every voice, entrance, or costume change, therefore, was to be scrutinized in triplicate. Despite the scrutiny, the musical score seemed to depart the most from the innovative intentions: song ideas that attempted to counter the conventional ended up in conventional places in scenes; with one or two exceptions, all of the songs were solos or duets.

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*Dolly!*, and portrayed Hero in the Richard Lester film of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.*

31 Larry Gelbart, letter to Sean Kenny, 16 March 1970.
32 Kermit Bloomgarden, letter to Larry Gelbart, 1 April 1970.
33 Anonymous notes in Gelbart Collection at UCLA. n.d.
From a financial standpoint, the attempts to capitalize the show were failures. Kenny tried to remain positive, and solicited Gelbart’s help in getting Lionel Bart to make the necessary changes (including a few new songs) in the score. Kenny remained convinced that the right script and score would propel the venture into solvency. In a letter to Gelbart dated 15 November, Kenny admits the difficulty in selling the project to “normal” backers: “No ‘boy meets girl’ and no ‘hero’ who wins in the end.”

Bloomgarden in 1970 was a decade beyond his prime as a producer, according to Ruth H. Aarons of Aarons Management, and he had not been successful pursuing financing, relying on Sean Kenny to do a large part of the leg work in California and elsewhere. Kenny, however, seemed not to mind the extra work, since his stake in the production, as director, was so high. Kenny further suggested to Gelbart that the whole thing needed “a good hustler-co-producer . . . a go-getter, right hand man” with the immediate contacts that Kenny lacked in the industry. Kenny had to be fearful of what Aarons pointed out to Gelbart, namely that an established director, someone like Gower Champion, could help bring in investors.

Gelbart remained in England, working on several projects, while fund-raising and auditions continued in New York. Alain Bernheim, Gelbart’s solicitor in London, wrote Bloomgarden shortly after the new year and advised him that The Marty Feldman Comedy Machine demanded a great deal of Gelbart’s time, which could not

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36 Aarons, 2.
have pleased the producer. The projected fall 1970 opening came and went, and by the beginning of 1971, *Gulliver's Travels* remained unfinished, uncast, and underfinanced. Like the protagonist of the story, the musical *Gulliver* seemed to be held down by an army of small shortcomings.

Sean Kenny, *Gulliver's* staunchest advocate, continued to try to rally his collaborators back into the project. In a letter dated 5 February 1971, Kenny alludes to two “snags.” The show needed a pop song from Bart about the war games, and a better second act from Gelbart. Kenny told his librettist that “The [Land of the Dead and the Immortals] scenes lie flat with Gulliver just drifting through without motivation or direction and therefore the show does likewise.” He closed his letter on a troublingly optimistic note: “There is nothing to tell you about the money except to say that we have not got it yet, but we will.”

A few days later, the producer of the show sent his own status report to Lionel Bart and Larry Gelbart. A sense of foreboding permeates the letter. He refers to Bart’s attempt to have Bloomgarden produce *Gulliver's Travels* in London first, and it seems clear that an incomplete score motivated the composer to suggest London first, as a way of trying out songs in a staged production. Early in the project’s genesis, Kenny made it quite clear to the team that, because of the necessities of film production for the multi-media, holes in the piece had to be filled before staging.

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37 Alain Bernheim, letter to Kermit Bloomgarden, 13 Jan. 1971. Bernheim even suggested Ingo Preminger, the producer of the film *MASH*, as a possible source of financing for *Gulliver's Travels*.
38 Sean Kenny, letter to Larry Gelbart, 5 Feb. 1971, 2.
40 Kermit Bloomgarden, letter to Lionel Bart and Larry Gelbart, 8 Feb. 1971, 2.
41 "*Gulliver: Notes,*" 36.
Attempts to raise money from record companies interested in securing album rights were somewhat successful, but not to the extent that the bankroll would be complete. Bloomgarden refused to place (or take) blame, and exhorted his author and composer to finish, stating simply at the close, “Please give us what we need.”

Bloomgarden’s next letter, two weeks later, pleaded with Gelbart to finish the script, as “we need it for the balance of the money.” Only half of his $600,000 budget had been raised, and the producer told him,

I know that you’re up to your ass in your television work and that you’re making some needed dough. I’ve been up to my ass in keeping Gulliver alive and my funds have been drained by it. The show, because it could be a great one, and because of my needs, must go on.

While questions remained whether Gulliver’s Travels would ever reach New York, Gelbart’s A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum did return to Broadway in 1971, starring Phil Silvers and Larry Blyden, and directed by Gelbart’s collaborator, Burt Shevelove. The unfortunate Gulliver’s Travels did not go on, but instead ground to a halt early in June 1971, when Lionel Bart’s manager, Tony Defries, wrote Bloomgarden a letter stating that the recent work Bart had done on the score did not belong to Bloomgarden because it occurred after the expiration of Bart’s contract. Defries ends his letter with a request for a commitment by Bloomgarden to have the other half of the capital raised and a firm rehearsal date by the end of the month, or Bart would withdraw all rights to his score.

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42 Bloomgarden, letter to Bart and Gelbart, 3.
43 Kermit Bloomgarden, letter to Larry Gelbart, 21 May 1971.
44 Tony Defries, letter to Kermit Bloomgarden, 3 June 1971.
All that remained of *Gulliver's Travels*, therefore, were the very distinct score by Lionel Bart and the adapted book by Larry Gelbart. By the time Gelbart’s work on the project would reach the public, Kenny had died, Bart had bowed out, and the idea of a stage musical had also disappeared. All Gelbart possessed were the words, many of them his own and not Swift’s, the result of turning narration into dialogue and episode into action. For over a decade, from 1972 to 1985, no adventures befell Gelbart’s *Gulliver* (as he had christened the adaptation); it languished in a desk drawer until its writer encountered Patrick Williams (1939- ). He had composed the theme for Gelbart’s spin-off of *M*A*S*H*, *AfterMash*, and showed a keen interest in setting *Gulliver* to music, as a kind of symphonic poem with narration, much as Aaron Copland had done with Abraham Lincoln’s prose for *Lincoln Portrait*.

Gelbart wrote with confidence for the revivified project, because he knew it would have a fate different from the Broadway *Gulliver's Travels*: he was not “writing for a drawer... but for people to actually hear.” A concert piece required a return to narration as the storytelling medium; therefore, Gelbart had to do some reworking of the material from dialogue back to narration. Very little dialogue appears in the final version; almost as a travelogue, Gelbart painted pictures of the strange lands, and Gulliver’s travels in them, with words and Williams’ music.

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45 In 1979, Bart attempted to resurrect his side of the *Gulliver* project by attempting a concept album, with no input by Gelbart. Bart sought his former collaborator’s “blessing” for the process, which would include the talents of “Justin Hayward of The Moody Blues, Rodney Stewart, Elton John and other unlistable Queens,” according to Bart (letter to Gelbart, 9 Jan. 1979).
46 Williams composed many television themes, including *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and fifty-eight film scores, including *Breaking Away* and *Swing Shift*.
The piece received its world premiere at Yale University on 10 October 1985, with Williams conducting the Philharmonia of Yale and actor Tony Randall as narrator. For the commercial recording, London’s Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (whose music director, André Previn, was an old friend of Gelbart's) would play the score. The recording took place a month later; initially, Gelbart recorded a “dummy” narration track with the orchestra, to time the music cues, *etc.*, until a narrator could be cast for the project. Since the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra resided in London, Williams wondered whether a British narrator might be located quickly to join the sessions that were already underway. To the delight of the production’s company, Sir John Gielgud agreed to play the role.48

Much of the story had to be pared away for *Gulliver*. The entire second act of the musical—the journeys to Laggnagg, Laputa, and the Houyhnhnms—fell away by the second revised draft. Unfortunately, much of the satire had also been reduced or eliminated. For example, in Jonathan Swift’s original, the inventory of Gulliver’s pockets contained reference to a pocket watch, which the Lilliputians conjecture was

> either some unknown animal, or the god that he worships; but we are more inclined to the latter opinion, because he assured us (if we understood him right, for he expressed himself very imperfectly) that he seldom did anything without consulting it: he called it his oracle, and said it pointed out the time for every action of his life.49

Such a clever condemnation of slavery to the clock remains absent from Gelbart’s narrative. He simply states that “Gulliver’s watch was thought to contain a God, whose heartbeat they could hear inside.”50

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48 “*Gulliver LP: From the Classics to the Classroom,*” 1986.
50 *Gulliver*, liner notes, 4.
Despite a reduction in the amount of satire in Gelbart’s *Gulliver*, the central character’s destructive pride and the anti-war sentiments remained. More importantly, Gelbart’s narration had to become efficient, in order to relate the story in an entertaining manner within the musical setting. To this end, Gelbart’s penchant for compact word play emerged as a stylistic bond throughout the piece. In the first part, “A Voyage to Lilliput,” the narrator remarks that

> Alone among his people,  
> His Highness,  
> looking up from his lowness,  
> felt no fear of Gulliver.

Gelbart’s script divides lines as poetry would, so that his short phrases—very unlike Swift’s compound prose—scan more like verse, emphasize the running puns, and punctuate punch lines for the reader. In Gielgud’s script, the actor often marked the stress for the strange Swiftian place names, and the scansion for Gelbart’s lines, with certain words underlined to be stressed:

> For, in all of his life,  
> This was, without doubt,  
> The very worst time it had been to be him.\(^{51}\)

Besides the word-for-word play, Gelbart often employed the inverted (or literalized) cliché technique he had used in radio and *The Red Buttons Show*. Gelbart’s rendering of the most famous scene in *Gulliver’s Travels*, wherein the Lilliputian army binds Gulliver to the beach, contains this example,

> Without his knowledge,  
> Without his consent,

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\(^{51}\) *Gulliver*, “Gielgud’s Copy,” 3. The markings were taken from Gielgud’s own script.
As he lay sleeping,  
Someone had considered him fit to be tied.\textsuperscript{52}

Maintained in Gelbart’s recording of \textit{Gulliver} was the Brobdingnagian king’s “odious little vermin” speech, part of the piece’s overall anti-war message. More than anti-war, \textit{Gulliver} teaches a social justice lesson that seems to have become a favorite theme for the writer since \textit{M*A*S*H} and \textit{Oh, God} in the early 1970s. The constitution of Brobdingnag prohibited laws longer than twenty-two words (to harmonize with their twenty-two letter alphabet), “and these few were open to one interpretation only.” The giant king explained to Gulliver that in Brobdingnag,

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{l}
You will see a country at peace with its neighbors,  
Because it is at peace with itself.  
You will find a nation so politic  
There is no need for politics.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

Larry Gelbart spent three years of his life working around the story of Dr. Lemuel Gulliver and his fantastic voyages. Remarkable, and telling, too, is the fourteen-year span between the demise of the stage musical and the revival of the material in a very different form. Patrick Williams’ orchestral score, with its evocation of Henry Purcell’s music, bears little resemblance to the songs developed by Lionel Bart for the multi-media \textit{Gulliver’s Travels}, yet both attempted to frame Swift’s story in an appropriate mode. The very human Gulliver character, and the classic satire through which he moved remained constant, however.

Gelbart’s education in the human comedy clearly became more focused in this period, since England of the late 1960s conditioned how he and his family viewed

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Gulliver}, liner notes, 2.  
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Gulliver} liner notes, 10.
their native America during one of the most conflicted periods of its existence: the Vietnam war and its collateral protests; the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy; the country's entire "loss of innocence" had to have felt like a journey through lands where islands fly, the petty were the powerful, and the concerned man doubted his sanity and the basis of social reality.

From the end of 1970, when *Gulliver's Travels* finally fell apart, until he and his family returned to the United States a year and a half later, Gelbart's stage work consisted of two divergent projects, a return to his "angry" comedy begun years earlier, *Jump!*, and a re-write of the narration of Sergei Prokofiev's musical fable for children, *Peter and the Wolf*.

The return Gelbart made to *Jump!* in December 1970 allowed him to keep promises he had made to Herb Gardner and Kermit Bloomgarden (neither of whom had anything to do with the eventual production). Once Gelbart completed the second draft, revising it after a year or two of dormancy, he began looking for a producer to stage it. Gelbart asked fellow American Charles Marowitz (1934- ), who had successfully staged several American plays in London, whether he would be interested. Marowitz considered it "far too good to languish or be ignored," and began helping Gelbart tame the script into a structure that did justice to the play's premise and potential. Marowitz offered suggestions to Gelbart, criticism of the play, especially the sense that the piece simply links a series of vaudeville "turns" together as one authority figure after another comes and goes without solving the problem,

namely that Albert has climbed out onto the ledge and is threatening to jump. Marowitz also suggested improvements to the ending, pointing out that the “character with enough dramatic propulsion to end the play is Herbert,” and that “there seems to be an ‘impulse’ asking for the destruction of dad, just as there is an ‘impulse’ asking for Momma to be triumphant.”\textsuperscript{55}

The anger of the piece may be found in Gelbart’s uncharacteristic blue humor and rough language. The puns and quick turns of clichés have ceded to zingers and one-liners, including a particularly blunt one that actually belonged to Gelbart’s wife, Pat Marshall, which Gelbart co-opted for \textit{Jump!}:

\begin{quote}
MAGDA. I’ve got two boys.
RABBI. Really? You look so young.
MAGDA. I didn’t have them through my face.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the kind of humor present rests in the casting of the father. Herbert was played by Warren Mitchell, who created the father role in the British television situation comedy, \textit{’Til Death Do Us Part}. Mitchell’s Alf Garner became the model for Archie Bunker when \textit{’Til Death Do Us Part} arrived in the United States as Norman Lear’s \textit{All in the Family} (1971). As a kind of Jewish Archie Bunker, Herbert Gold tries in vain to impress his ideas about the world on those around him.

\textsuperscript{55} Marowitz, letter to Gelbart.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Jump!}, 40. Gelbart named this \textit{bon mot} of Marshall’s as one of the twelve funniest things he has ever encountered. The list may be found in UCLA’s Gelbart collection, and also includes references to Groucho Marx (who, at lunch with Gelbart, followed an order of “Omelet” with the musical tag “Christian soldiers”); W.C. Fields’ leaving a child alone with the following instructions: “Don’t open the door—and do not fall out of the window unless it’s absolutely necessary;” Harry Ritz (as the evil Queen in a “Snow White” parody); Robin Williams on \textit{Comic Relief}; Monty Python’s repulsive restaurant scene in \textit{The Meaning of Life}; Sid Caesar’s airplane movie take-off in \textit{Tars and Spurs}; Goodman Ace’s review of \textit{I am a Camera} (“No Leica”); and Jack Benny’s delayed response to a mugger’s “Your money or your life!”—“I’m thinking it over.”

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Gelbart drew a cartoon portrait of an American household to construct the Golds’ world: an opening stage direction indicates that the set contains “many television sets of various sizes; radios, tape recorder, hi-fi, stereo unit, speakers, movie and film projectors . . . About the room are half dozen telephones of different hues and shapes. No books.” This last note certainly condemns the contemporary preference for television over books, and may also reflect Gelbart’s own attempts throughout his life to overcome the sense of inadequacy regarding books. As the piece grew out of Gelbart’s frustrations, it is perhaps also not coincidental that the suicidal young man is described as “bespectacled,” and that his first action in the play (after silencing all of the televisions) is to write something, albeit a suicide note. He does so on the back of the only paper he can find, a bank check. The combination of elements seemingly allowed Gelbart vicariously to “end it all” as he became enmeshed in the Chercher La Femme litigation.

Because of the array of set-ups and zingers, compounded by the reduced word play, Jump! reads often like a tough Neil Simon comedy. For example, during one of Herbert and Magda’s many arguments,

HERBERT. (Getting her on the sofa) You turned into your mother!
MAGDA. And who turned into his father?
HERBERT. Some marriage! We’re my father married to your mother.

57 Larry Gelbart, Jump!, unpublished script in the UCLA Gelbart collection, 1.
59 The comparison of Jump! to Simon’s Plaza Suite offers some fascinating parallels: in the final act of Plaza Suite (1966), Roy Hubley finds that his daughter has locked herself in the bathroom on her wedding day and refuses to come out. Her parents try coaxing, bullying, and pleading to get her to come out, but with no success. The father even climbs out on the ledge to attempt to enter through the bathroom window.
60 Jump!, 21.
And later, when the husband pursues his uninterested wife:

HERBERT. (Suddenly embracing her) Magda, come to bed!
MAGDA. (Fighting him) I just made it.
HERBERT. Make it with me!61

This last example illustrates the sort of limited word play that Jump! contains.

Although the piece represents an uncharacteristic style for Gelbart, it nevertheless contains glimpses of the traditional Gelbart comic syntax:

MAGDA. (To herself) I understand. If not me, who? You spend enough years without understanding, you get to understand plenty.62

This style surfaced more fully, and successfully, in Gelbart’s later satire of movie writing of the 1930s and ‘40s, Movie Movie (1978).

Two of Jump!’s best moments occur in monologues by Magda and Herbert. In Magda’s, she frantically calls her husband’s office and unleashes a history of her marital trouble for several minutes, including the admission that “That’s where the other women came in; when the hair went out,” an antithesis true to Gelbart’s style. Finally, after spilling her story to the secretary on the phone, the following realization hits her: “This isn’t the Yankee Novelty Company? Oh, I’m sorry. I have the wrong number . . . But do you understand?”63

Herbert’s monologue, which Herb Gardner called “now a permanent part of my head” after reading the first draft,64 occurs when the father addresses the crowd yelling “Jump!” below:

61 Jump!, 17.
62 Jump!, 10.
63 Jump!, 11.
64 Gardner letter, 3.
HERBERT. Listen to me, you animals! (CROWD noises subside)
What're you yelling? Jump? Jump? Do you know what's standing up here? This is not a clown making a show for you. This is three years of college. And high school. And taxis when it rained. And you think just school? Piano lessons, trumpet, whatever he wanted. Bicycles, goggles for swimming; skis the latest. Records, machines, teeth like for a king. Jump, you're yelling? I got a hundred thousand dollars in this boy and you yell jump? Well, I tell him what to do . . . (Pointing to CROWD) Not you . . . or you . . . or you . . . (Points to ALBERT) Or you! (To CROWD) Me! I decide! (To ALBERT) You jump for them and we're through!65

The production history of *Jump!* is necessarily limited; the play has never been published, and except for a few readings by Gelbart's friends (including Gardner and Stanley Donen), would only be known by audiences that attended performances at the Queen's Theatre in London, and in Nottingham, where the London production tried out the material. After a favorable reception in Nottingham, the play flopped in the West End, running only seven weeks. Gelbart is at a loss to explain the causes for the different receptions, simply calling the whole episode "bizarre."66 He does recall, though, the variety of American accents the English cast presented: "we had people who sounded like they were from the Bronx, people who sounded like Tennessee Williams . . . the British, who turn out the best actors in the world, turn out the worst American accents."67

The *Times* review of the London production pointed to several shortcomings of the play, about which Gelbart and Marowitz were already aware. Roger Baker, in his

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65 *Jump!*, 31.
67 Gelbart London interview.

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review, noted that "The symbols come and go, as in a series of unconnected sketches."\textsuperscript{68} He also called attention to Marowitz's "almost brutal direction." The final word on \textit{Jump!} belongs to the actor who played the father, Warren Mitchell. When he ran into Gelbart at a party in London in 1994, he asked him, "Do you have any other plays I could fuck up for you?"\textsuperscript{69}

After the disastrous collapse of the stage musical \textit{Gulliver's Travels}, while he was readying \textit{Jump!} for rehearsals, Gelbart was thrilled to work on Sergei Prokofiev's \textit{Peter and the Wolf} for his old high school friend, conductor André Previn and his wife, actress Mia Farrow. It used characters in a brief story to demonstrate various orchestral sounds, based on each instrument's timbre and personality: the bassoon illustrated the doddering grandfather, the clarinet the devious cat, and so forth. Previn was interested in using the piece as an opportunity to work with his wife in a performance, and called upon Gelbart to adapt the rather plain narration into something a bit more fun.

First, Gelbart gathered various translations of Prokofiev's text (the composer himself had written the story with a friend), including the prologue that introduces the characters and matches them to their respective instrument sounds. The British Broadcasting Corporation provided a literal translation of Prokofiev's Russian script (to avoid plagiarizing extant translations),\textsuperscript{70} and Gelbart set about "punching up the

\textsuperscript{68} Roger Baker, "\textit{Jump!: Queen's}," \textit{The Times} (London), Sept. 1, 1971, 15a.
\textsuperscript{69} Gelbart London interview. The event referred to took place two nights before the interview.
\textsuperscript{70} Robin Lough, letter to Lawrence [sic] Gelbart, 3 May 1971. The BBC also erroneously listed Gelbart as "Lawrence" on the credits of the television production, causing the writer grief and the producers embarrassment (John Culshaw, letter to R.M. Fletcher, 14 July 1971).
material.” The literal translation runs three-and-a-half pages, while Gelbart’s runs five.

By infusing the story with a joke or two per plot point, Gelbart was able to maintain the spirit and spine of the tale while humorously pointing to truths and absurdities inherent both in the simple story of Peter’s heroism and also in the attempt to portray everything via a musical idiom. He begins the narration by stating that, “This is a story that happened long ago. Very long ago. Even before Disney invented the animals.” Next, the instruments are introduced, each with an accompanying pun or sly observation; for example, Gelbart tells us that Peter’s theme, played on the violins, belonged to the hero “as a result of pulling the right strings, no doubt.”

The fable itself begins when Peter enters a meadow; a bird chirps “All is quiet!” to Peter, whom Gelbart described as able to speak “fluent Chirp.” Later the devious cat stealthily stalks the bird, and thinks to itself, “Oh, it’s great to be a cat at a time like this.” Gelbart’s mind seized the same structure here for the line in Gulliver quoted above: “the very worst time it had been to be him.” In the original, literal narration of Peter and the Wolf, the grandfather warns Peter about wolves:

‘What if a wolf came out of the forest, what then?’
Peter thought Grandpapa was exaggerating and assured him that boys are not afraid of wolves.

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71 Larry Gelbart (adapter), Peter and the Wolf, Introduction.
72 Gelbart Peter, 1.
73 Gelbart Peter, 2.
74 Gelbart Peter, 2.
75 Peter and the Wolf also contains a repeat of the “fit to be tied” cliché: “The wolf snapped and snarled. He wanted to catch the bird so badly, he was fit to be tied—and Peter was preparing to oblige him” (3).
76 The Russian literally states that “Pioneers are not afraid,” a reference to the Soviet youth program, Pioneers, a political indoctrination arm of the Komsomol (Communist Youth Soviet). Pioneers wore blue shorts, white shirts and neckerchiefs, and looked somewhat like Communist Boy Scouts.
But Grandpapa took Peter by the hand, led him home and shut the garden gate firmly.\textsuperscript{77}

Gelbart's version recounts the event thus:

‘What if a wolf should come out of the forest, what then?’
Peter was not disturbed. Young boys work at not being afraid. But, fortunately, there are grown-ups to teach children fear.
Grandfather took Peter by the hand, led him behind the gate and locked it.\textsuperscript{78}

The addition of this simple observation of the human condition—that fear is taught—raises the passage to a higher level, one perhaps closer to the quality of the music it accompanies than the standard narration.

The remainder of the text continues the use of puns and twisted clichés, even venturing into meta-theatrical moments: when the wolf appears, Peter “ran home and got a very strong rope made especially for this part of the story.”\textsuperscript{79} Prokofiev included a musical joke at the end of the piece, which Gelbart enhanced. Within the wolf's theme in the parade, the duck's oboe motif may be heard, since the wolf swallowed the duck whole. Gelbart tags this musical lesson with a practical lesson of his own, “If you don't chew your food well, you always hear about it later.”\textsuperscript{80}

Gelbart's work on \textit{Peter and the Wolf} culminated in a recording conducted by John Williams and narrated by Dudley Moore. It developed from a chance meeting with Williams, when Gelbart mentioned that he had adapted the text; the conductor recalled that Dudley Moore had been scheduled to appear with the Boston Pops.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Peter and the Wolf}, BBC translation, n.d., 2.
\textsuperscript{78} Gelbart, \textit{Peter}, 2.
\textsuperscript{79} Gelbart, \textit{Peter}, 3.
\textsuperscript{80} Gelbart, \textit{Peter}, 4.
Orchestra, and needed program material. Once the recording appeared, one other incarnation of Gelbart's work on *Peter and the Wolf* surfaced through the American Ballet Theater: Michael Smuin directed a ballet version that used Gelbart's narration and sets designed by Gelbart's friend Tony Walton. On the 1992 tour for the ABT, several celebrities served as narrator: Dudley Moore (who had done the recording years earlier), humor columnist Art Buchwald in Washington, vocalist Bobby McFerrin in San Francisco, actresses Carol Burnett and Carol Kane in Los Angeles and even movie critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert in Chicago.⁸¹

In his last few years in London, Larry Gelbart wrote three works for the stage: the comedy *Jump!*, the musical *Gulliver's Travels*, and the narration for *Peter and the Wolf*. His next experience writing for the theatre would not come until his years writing *M*A*S*H* for television neared their end. After so many years of television, he looked forward to the opportunity that would soon arrive: "I welcomed the freedom of expression I would have on the stage [and the chance it offered] to do something beyond 24 minutes and 20 seconds."⁸² Early in 1975, his long-time friend, director Arthur Penn (1922- ), approached Gelbart with an idea to adapt another classic.⁸³

Penn had been instrumental in the success of New York's Actors Studio for a number of years, and wanted to mount a television special of *Volpone*, by Shakespeare's contemporary, Ben Jonson (1572?-1637). He envisioned using a number of actors

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⁸³ Arthur Penn studied for the stage with Michael Chekhov. Penn's Broadway directing credits include *An Evening with Nichols and May* (1960), *Toys in the Attic* (1960), and *The Miracle Worker* (1959), for
rarely seen on television—Al Pacino and Gene Hackman, for example—as a way of raising money for the school.84

By telephone, Penn asked Gelbart, “Have you ever read Volpone?” Gelbart lied and said, “Yes.” “Have you ever seen it?,” Penn next asked. “Yes,” replied Gelbart with another lie.85 Penn had both the title for the adaptation and its changed setting in mind: “I love it when people call up with whole ideas like that,” Gelbart said.86 Sly Fox, as Penn named the project, would be set in post-gold rush San Francisco. Once Gelbart began looking at the material, he noticed that the comedy was “a big canvas, the subject of human greed, avarice, insatiable appetite,” and he found that Penn’s setting “as much as anything typified man’s unquenchable thirst for gold, wealth, and urge to have what the other guy’s got.”87 Penn further suggested that Gelbart base his adaptation not on Jonson’s original, but on an adaptation by the Austrian playwright Stefan Zweig (1881-1942).

The CBS television network agreed to present the special, but, as Gelbart recalled, “they weren’t willing to put up the front money—that is, the money for the fellow writing the script, namely me.”88 Penn, who thought highly of what Gelbart had done with the material, then presented him with the idea of doing Sly Fox for the stage. “I needed no arm-twisting,” Gelbart recalled.89 The project had already given

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84 Gelbart Oral History 44.
85 Gelbart Oral History 44. Gelbart later admits in the Oral History that he never did read Jonson’s Volpone from start to finish (46), although he did make some notes in a paperback edition of the original.
86 Gelbart Oral History 45.
87 Lloyd clipping.
89 Freeman, 2.
the writer the freedom of updating Elizabethan poetry: "It allowed me to be modern and not anachronistic, and gave me license for earthy language and bawdiness and all seems right in that time and place. And it's American." The change from a television to a stage script allowed Gelbart increased license:

I wrote it in the spirit the play demanded and the language it demanded. I didn't think much about the demands of TV. But then when we moved it to the stage, I expanded it a bit in terms of language. When you're working in the theater, there's no one to say no, you can't say this or that.

Zweig's version reached American audiences in a 1928 Theatre Guild production that was itself a translation by Ruth Langner. Gelbart therefore describes his version as "an adaptation of an English translation of a German adaptation of an English play." The accuracy of this assessment emerges with an examination of the structure and comic tone of each version, as well as the success of each alteration. For example, not every critic enjoyed Gelbart's adaptation in its initial Broadway incarnation: Alan Rich, in his year-end review for *New York* magazine, skewered the attempt by saying that "Gelbart . . . apparently misreads tombstones; I judge the inspiration for *Sly Fox* to be 'O Rape Ben Jonson.'" Other critics felt it surpassed standard Broadway fare: Michael Feingold, writing for *The Village Voice*, found that "Comparing this

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90 Lloyd clipping.
91 Freeman, 2.
92 Gelbart telephone interview 22 Sept. 1992. Amazingly, Zweig received no program credit for *Sly Fox*. As Martin Gottfried, in the New York Post, pointed out: "legal complications, not deception, have held up his program credit" (18 Dec. 1976, 24). Gelbart relates that Zweig's lawyer allowed the use of his client's adaptation under the stipulation that Zweig's name *not* appear: "The man had never heard of George C. Scott, he never heard of Arthur Penn, and he thought, I guess, it was a bunch of amateurs with a lot of money who wanted to put this thing on" (Gelbart Oral History 47).
production with a more typical specimen of late Broadway decadence, like *California Suite*, would be, for me, like comparing an elegant meal to a dog's mess in the street."\(^9^4\)

The central plot of the original will illustrate Gelbart's "big canvas" on which he worked: Volpone is a rich Venetian who feigns impending death in order to defraud other greedy men out of gifts they hope will ingratiate themselves into Volpone's will. Volpone makes one too many jests at their expense, and it seems his own, for he ends up giving all of his wealth to Mosca, his parasite.\(^9^5\)

Zweig changed the opening of the piece, and in doing so, switched the audience's perspective. The Jonson version opens with Volpone embracing his wealth in perfect health—"Good morning to the day; and next my gold!" Zweig delays the revelation of Volpone's deceit by having the parasite, Mosca, instruct the servants of the house to be cheerful to their dying master:

\begin{quote}
*Der Herr ist müde, der Arme hat wieder schlecht geschlafen, ach, er hat eine böse Nacht verbracht, ich fürchte, ich fürchte, er wird nicht mehr oft die Glocken Venedigs schlagen hören.*\(^9^6\)
\end{quote}

The master is tired, the poor man had another awful night, ah, what a terrible night! I fear, I fear, he will not hear the bells of Venice chime the hours many times again.\(^9^7\)

By changing the opening, Zweig's version becomes much more modern, and much less like the *commedia dell'arte* model, in that it does not initially let the


\(^9^5\) Gelbart had the opportunity to write a parasite character in *Sly Fox*, which filled in a hole in his comedy education, because this common stock comedy figure (dating back to the ancients) did not fit into the composite *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

audience in on the scheme. Thus, the misled audience does not identify with Volpone, but more than likely with the scavengers.

Zweig's alteration allows for discussions between servants, a common comedy device that usually provides exposition; Jonson exposited the scheme by means of the scene between Mosca and Volpone which opened the original. In both versions servants entertain Volpone, but in the Zweig version, the servants gossip about their master before singing a song. The contrast between the two songs is telling: in Jonson's version, three comic figures—a dwarf, an hermaphrodite and a eunuch—sing of fools: "Fools they are the only nation/worth men's envy or admiration;" in Zweig's Volpone, generic servants sing of gold and its effect on human beings: "Das Geld, Das Geld vernarrt die Welt," which Langner, Zweig's Theatre Guild translator, renders, "Oh, gold makes fools of young and old." By shifting the emphasis from fools to gold, Zweig seems to feel compelled to hammer home the perceived theme of the play, that is, "A fool and his money are parted in five acts." In emphasizing the avarice, Zweig misses the variety of folly present in the play Volpone and in its title character, as for example, when Volpone attempts to seduce Celia, the virtuous wife of one of his aspiring heirs.

Gelbart sidesteps the problems of songs and their relation to theme by avoiding the songs entirely in Sly Fox. In fact, Gelbart avoids three significant elements of the first two Volpones for his comedy. Gone are the character

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names based upon members of the animal kingdom—Volpone the fox, Mosca
the fly, Voltore the vulture; instead, Gelbart presents the protagonist as Foxwell J. Sly and the scavengers in various unflattering appellations: Craven, Crouch and Truckle. *Sly Fox* also contains a change in its setting, from Renaissance Venice to Gold Rush-era San Francisco. Venice, the setting for many plays, including Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, was looked upon naturally as a place for deal making, and with the volume of money changing hands, a place for decadence, prostitution and con men. Jonson's satire contains elements of all these things, a view of Venice that Shakespeare ignores in favor of its mercantile reputation.

Gelbart and Penn were not the first to link *Volpone* with gold fever. A musical version of *Volpone*, entitled *Foxy*, appeared on Broadway in 1964. It starred Bert Lahr and reset the action to the Yukon territory. Gelbart did not use *Foxy* as a source in any way, nor did he see the musical—he was already in England for the London premiere of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

The third major change from Jonson’s original concerns the subplot and peripheral characters of Sir Politick Would-Be, Peregrine, and to a degree Lady Would-Be. Zweig streamlined the plot by eliminating the first two, and changing Lady Would-Be into a prostitute, Canina (Zweig maintained the animal names). Gelbart followed Zweig’s lead here, and did not reintroduce the characters. Canina, in keeping with the descriptive character names, became Miss Fancy in *Sly Fox*, and played a similar role in the plot. The elimination of
the Sir Politick-Peregrine scenes removes many of the references to England present in Jonson’s play. As a satirist, it seems, Jonson could not help poking fun at his own countrymen, despite the Venetian setting and the universality of the folly depicted in the main plot. Zweig and Gelbart both appreciated the essence of Volpone, and did not perceive a need to continue the subplot in their own versions. So far, the plot and characters of the three versions seem to resemble each other. More interesting, though exhausting, might be the attempt to reconcile the types of humor present in one or all of the pieces.

The characterization of Volpone is of course Jonson’s entirely. In Gelbart’s paperback of Jonson’s text, most of his underlining and margin notes relate to passages such as the following, which illustrates perfectly Jonson’s artistry—Volpone speaking: “I glory more in the cunning purchase of my wealth, than in the glad possession” (I, 1). The verse buoys the idea into an elegant observation worthy of the finest epigrammists. One can admire the multiple layers present in a satirist who creates a character who observes men for his advantage, even when those observed are spying on the observer. As Volpone lays open his logic: “I have no wife, no parent, child, ally, to give my substance to; but whom I make must be my heir; and this makes men observe me” (I, 1). This, then is the greatest debt to Jonson: a plot whose central character is so full of comic and human mischief. What remains for adaptation is the window dressing, the pun, the local reference, the unexpected shift in tone. Jonson’s setting afforded him opportunity for puns on Venice and Italian culture. In Act Two, Volpone disguises himself as a mountebank, and Sir
Politick overdoes the root of the English word by "recreating" the derivation: when Sir Politick is asked who the vagabonds are building a stage in the square, he replies, "Fellows, to mount a bank. Did your instructor in the dear tongues, never discourse to you of the Italian mountebanks?" The double-duty puns enhance the Venetian flavor that Jonson seems intent upon creating. Gelbart, likewise, in *Sly Fox*, includes references to regional color, as when Lawyer Craven protests that Sly is not dying in a timely fashion: "Yes, but when? My God, I've seen redwoods go quicker!" Of course, the mountebank references in Jonson derive some humor simply from the frequency of use that the word enjoys, rather like the repetition of someone intent upon using a new vocabulary word ten times in the same day. Gelbart conjures a similar kind of humorous discourse when he has one of the victims, Abner Truckle, complain to Simon Able (the Mosca character): "What!? I was assured the will was complete! You assured me! He assured me! Then you assured his assuring me! Somehow, I felt assured."

Despite the many elegant phrases and clever puns, Jonson is not above being low, as when he has Volpone (in disguise) rail against "These turdy-face-nasty-pasty-lousy-fartical rogues," or in the many jokes about disease and death that permeate all of the versions. Gelbart is a master of these brief excursions into sick or black comedy, as anyone who has watched even a few episodes of

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M*A*S*H on television could attest. Here are just a few examples from Sly Fox:

SLY. Is the good man here? I see so poorly. The doctors say I mustn’t use my eyes and ears at the same time.100

MISS FANCY. The doctor’s here?
ABLE. Two doctors. One for veins, one for arteries.101

ABLE. There’s no more to be had from Craven, not a cent.
SLY. You’re sure?
ABLE. The only thing you don’t own is his twitch.102

TRUCKLE. For God’s sake, no doctors! Sometimes they actually help. If a man’s going to die, let him die. This long, drawn-out torture; the pain, the agony—how much can I take?103

With a lawyer in the cast of characters, one expects to find some humor aimed at the legal profession beyond the name Voltore (“Vulture”) in the Jonson and Zweig versions, and Craven in Sly Fox. In the Zweig version, Voltore tells Volpone: “Rely on me . . . I will take your case, turpis causa, of course; but have no fear, it is our science to create confusion and muddy the waters” (“ist ja unsere Wissenschaft, Wirnis zu machen und alles Klare so lang umzurühren, bis die Wasser trüb sind”).104 In the margin to Zweig’s text, Gelbart jotted down a variation for his own version: “First, I’ll need a clear understanding of the case, so I can confuse it.” In the final published script, Craven explains, “Now, I’ll have to understand the case very clearly if I’m to

100 Gelbart, Sly Fox, 11.
101 Gelbart, Sly Fox, 24.
102 Gelbart, Sly Fox, 29.
103 Gelbart, Sly Fox, 19.
104 Zweig, 87.
properly obscure it in court,"\textsuperscript{105} and, for good measure, a few lines later, "We'll want the truth in court, and that takes a lot of rehearsing."\textsuperscript{106}

The most incredible plot point in \textit{Volpone}, a moment that is so striking, it is incorporated almost intact in each subsequent version, occurs when the insanely jealous Corvino (Truckle in \textit{Sly Fox}) has to offer his virtuous wife to the fox in order to preserve his place as heir. What perfects the scene is the device whereby Corvino himself invents the solution to the problem. Jonson compounds the humor once more by having Corvino, who had chided his wife for her supposed infidelities at the top of the scene, reverse his position immediately after Mosca exits. Corvino calls Celia in and tells her:

\begin{verbatim}
Go, and make thee ready straight,  
In all thy best attire, thy choicest jewels,  
Put them all on, and, with them, thy best looks:  
We are invited to a solemn feast,  
At old Volpone's where it shall appear  
How far I am free from jealousy or fear. (II, 3)
\end{verbatim}

Gelbart handled the seduction scene with a variety of techniques, but the spine of Jonson's \textit{Volpone} character remains the grounding for Sly. An excerpt will illustrate Gelbart's style, including his many low puns and localizing reference to the American West:

\begin{verbatim}
MRS. TRUCKLE. (Coming closer.) Grandmother Violet in Boston,  
when she was aged and plagued by gout, always used to lay  
little dogs on her legs and it never failed to help her. Let me  
bring you another blanket.  
SLY. (Not releasing her hand.) Do you really want me to get  
better, my dear?
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{105} Gelbart, \textit{Sly Fox}, 55-56.  
\textsuperscript{106} Gelbart, \textit{Sly Fox}, 56.
MRS. TRUCKLE. Oh, surely, sir. I'll say five Hail Marys for you and three Our Fathers.

SLY. Forget about Marys, Fathers and covering me with puppies. I know a magic cure. It was taught me by a hundred-year-old Indian who died on his wedding night.

MRS. TRUCKLE. Truly?

SLY. Put your hand here—under the quilt—now move it lightly and think only the kindest thoughts.

MRS. TRUCKLE. (Complying, tentatively.) I never heard of this.

SLY. (Moving her hand with his.) It's written out on buffalo skin. We can read it later. (Enjoys the proceedings a moment, then.) Ah, yes, very good.

MRS. TRUCKLE. I'm doing it right?

SLY. Lightly, lightly. Are you thinking kind thoughts?

MRS. TRUCKLE. (Nods.) Thoughts of virtue, sir.

SLY. Suit yourself.

MRS. TRUCKLE. Am I mistaken, sir?

SLY. Not yet.

MRS. TRUCKLE. You seem to be getting stronger.

SLY. Yes.

MRS. TRUCKLE. . . . and stronger.

SLY. Mmm . . . (He sits up.)

MRS. TRUCKLE. (Startled.) Sir! You have risen!

SLY. Let me count the ways!

MRS. TRUCKLE. It's a miracle! Madonna, a miracle!

SLY. (Embracing her.) You're the Madonna! When all hope was gone, you restored me! (MRS. TRUCKLE tries to get him to lie back.)

MRS. TRUCKLE. You must thank God for this, sir.

SLY. (Groping for her.) You're closer!107

All of the adaptations end with the same moment of truth: Mosca is named heir to further discomfit the scavengers. Volpone's coup de grace backfires, though, when he attempts to renounce the will and continue the master-servant relationship with Mosca. Mosca refuses to relinquish the estate to its previous owner. As Sly Fox presents the moment:

SLY: You're free. Better than that, we're partners. Fifty-fifty! Half of everything I own is yours.

107 Gelbart, Sly Fox, 48-9.
ABLE: Sir, you haven’t got anything left to give half away of.\textsuperscript{108}

Although Gelbart borrowed Zweig’s opening (where the audience is hoodwinked by the fox’s malady), he moved beyond both Jonson and Zweig by adding a crowning reversal in the last line of the play. Just when it seemed that the play would resolve and close as Jonson’s and Zweig’s had done, Gelbart hoodwinks the audience once again (at least the audience members who knew \textit{Volpone’s} traditional ending). As Sly exits dejectedly Stage Left once faced with Able’s final swindle, Able advances on the chest of treasures that he has just inherited. He opens the chest, and finds it empty. At this moment, Sly re-enters Stage Right and pronounces “There’s only one way to take it with you, my boy. Send it ahead” (86). Gelbart credits the original Sly, George C. Scott, with the idea for this ending.

The rehearsal history of the play reveals the extent to which the members of the production worked to make \textit{Sly Fox} the success that it was. After an initial reading of Gelbart’s television script at Arthur Penn’s house, with among others Art Carney, Lee Strasberg and Joe Silver, the director pronounced it, “indecently funny.”\textsuperscript{109} Lord Lew Grade came aboard as producer, and Penn sent copies to George C. Scott and Walter Matthau; both accepted, which seemed a good sign to Gelbart.\textsuperscript{110} Matthau eventually removed his name from consideration because he had just had surgery and didn’t want to travel to New York.\textsuperscript{111} Scott and his wife, Trish Van Devere,

\textsuperscript{108} Gelbart, \textit{Sly Fox}, 85.
\textsuperscript{109} Qtd. in Gelbart Oral History 45.
\textsuperscript{110} Gelbart Oral History 45.
\textsuperscript{111} Gelbart Oral History 46.
read the script on the way to London, where they were to film *Beauty and the Beast*. Van Devere took the script first, and realized, “It’s so unusual to read a really funny piece!”\(^{112}\) Scott read it with some reservations: “I wasn’t particularly interested in doing a classic on Broadway again, but Gelbart’s originality of approach appealed to me,” he said.\(^{113}\)

The show’s cast included Scott, Van Devere, Jack Gilford (from Gelbart’s *Forum* days), Hector Elizondo, Bob Dishy and Gretchen Wyler. All seemed well until the first reading in the Minskoff Building in New York, with the cast, Penn and Gelbart. “It was just awful. I couldn’t believe how bad it was. I said to myself, ‘If they think this is good, let me show them what I think is good,’” recalled Gelbart.\(^ {114}\) He then set about to re-write scene after scene. By the time the piece opened on Broadway, Gelbart realized that he had changed all but one page of the script he originally sent Penn.\(^ {115}\)

The show’s first try-out city was Baltimore, where the newly restored Mechanic Theatre housed *Sly Fox* the first two weeks of November 1976. The first reviews described Penn as “a man who’d just been told he has a fatal disease.” The article then quotes the director as saying that “We have our work cut out for us. . . . We have to tighten up . . . It will be tightened. We’re still feeling our way a little. I mean we just got into costume a few days ago. But we’re where we want to be at this

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\(^{114}\) Gelbart Oral, 46.

stage of the game." Gelbart handed new script pages to the cast every day, according to Van Devere, and he tried several endings. Scott described the situation as “frenetic since we started. We have been changing things every day, making improvements.”

Despite the editing that Gelbart had undertaken on the play in Baltimore, Penn realized that Gelbart had added to the comic potential of Volpone: “We’re simply looking for the truth. The play is unadorned right now. I’m sitting on a thousand jokes right now so we can find what’s underneath.” With a cast of such skill and polish, their contributions contributed to the mix. George C. Scott had appeared in Gelbart’s movie Not With My Wife, You Don’t in the mid-’60s, and in the comic lead of Neil Simon’s Plaza Suite on Broadway in 1968. Jack Gilford, the accomplished clown, told Penn in rehearsals, “Look, I can do two minutes of funny bits on falling asleep, but do you want it?”

The reviews in Baltimore were “genuinely sympathetic and generally optimistic,” according to Scott. The next tryout, at Boston’s Wilbur Theatre, impressed the cast with the favorable reception. Evidently, the company’s hard work, which continued through changes during their November 16 to December 4 Boston run, had started to pay off. Van Devere remembers the final preview period this way:

Boston just flipped, and then we came into New York and what did the Shuberts do to us? One week of previews, one week of benefits—

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120 Qtd. in Heuisler, 64.
people paying a hundred bucks a seat! They no more wanted to laugh than fly to the moon. Here we'd come from Boston where we've been beautifully received and it was like getting a sledge hammer right between the eyes. It was like a graveyard out there.\textsuperscript{122}

\textit{Sly Fox} opened officially December 14, 1976; after Scott left the role of Foxwell J. Sly, Robert Preston, then Vincent Gardenia, followed until the show amassed 495 performances. A successful tour in 1978, which Gelbart produced, starred Jackie Gleason in the lead and Cleavon Little as Able, the parasite. Gelbart learned first-hand how difficult Gleason could be, an opinion he had heard most of his professional career.\textsuperscript{123} Besides Gleason, Gelbart had difficulty with a reviewer of his show in Los Angeles: Gelbart watched actress Carol Lynley and NBC's \textit{America Alive} critic David Sheehan necking at a performance of \textit{Sly Fox}. Gelbart called the reviewer's boss and the review wasn't aired.\textsuperscript{124}

Gelbart's stage experiences during the late 1960s and early '70s afforded the writer several kinds of memories: the unsuccessful play, \textit{Jump!}, written in anger; the Broadway musical, \textit{Gulliver's Travels}, that never reached Broadway; the revival of his only hit, \textit{A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum}; narrations for stories that had been looked upon as children's fairy tales—to which Gelbart brought adult sensibilities—\textit{Gulliver} and \textit{Peter & the Wolf}; and above all, chances to adapt classic satires of human failings—\textit{Gulliver's Travels} and \textit{Volpone}. By the time Gelbart

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\item Qtd. in \textit{The Hollywood Drama-Logue}, 1.
\item William A. Henry, III, \textit{The Great One: The Life and Legend of Jackie Gleason}, New York: Random House, 1992, 26. Henry quotes Neil Simon as explaining that the motivation for completing \textit{Come Blow Your Horn} (his first play) came from not wanting "to get to be a middle-aged man ... writing gags for some abusive, unappreciative shit like Jackie Gleason" (109). 1960's \textit{Open End} with David Susskind, on which Gelbart appeared, contains references to Gleason's difficult handling of writers as well.
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reached the Broadway stage again, in the late 1980s, he would finally bring his own original stories to life, with *Mastergate: A Play on Words*, and *City of Angels*. 
CHAPTER 7: GUILDING THE LILIES

Film II: 1973-1985

- Oh, God! (1976)
- Movie Movie (1978)
- Rough Cut (1980)
- Neighbors (1981)
- TOOTSIE (1983)
- Hotel Royale (1983)
- Blame It on Rio (1985)

The second array of films, like Larry Gelbart’s second venture into television, proved to be a mixture of incredible successes and painful disappointments. Near the end of his association with television’s M*A*S*H, in the spring of 1975, Gelbart could no longer ignore the effects of the previous three years on his family and himself. “I found two of my kids growing up behind my back,” he recalled.1 Pat Marshall concluded that another reason for her husband’s departure from the hit series was that he wanted to write a movie.2 This new movie project permitted Gelbart to adapt Avery Corman’s novel Oh, God! into a screenplay, and if he wished, to direct it. Gelbart’s producer for many of his television specials, David Susskind, had acquired the rights to the property. Oh, God! had been circulating for so long, Gelbart noted, one could option it at no cost at all.3 Susskind and Gelbart sold the idea to Twentieth-Century Fox with Gelbart as writer and director, but before he

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2 Berges Clipping.
could think about directing the work, he first had to adapt it. Gelbart thought to co-write with Mel Brooks, whom he wanted also to play the title character, because the story is almost a ‘2,000-year-old-man’ routine. He also wanted former writing partner Woody Allen for Jerry Landers, God’s unassuming messenger.

Gelbart would direct *Oh, God!*, as the plan went, “partly to eliminate the issue of which one of them [Brooks or Allen] would direct it.” He had less to worry about than he imagined. After initially accepting the part of God, Mel Brooks declined. “I guess he couldn’t stand the demotion,” Gelbart quipped in an interview a few years later. In reality, Brooks doubted whether the material could “go the distance.” Woody Allen refused also, because, according to Gelbart, “he was doing his own stuff with God.”

Left without a collaborator or his dream cast, Gelbart set out to write his first draft, which he completed 1 June 1975. Besides the novel itself to work from, Gelbart also had a copy of the novelist’s attempt at a screenplay. He acquired it from Susskind’s Talent Associates, who, according to Gelbart, told him to use what he

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4 Gelbart London interview. The “2,000-Year-Old Man” developed as a popular routine—on television, on records and in animated short films—between Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks, who would play an interviewer and the ancient survivor, respectively. The routines consisted mainly of Brooks’ answering questions about historical figures, word origins and everyday experiences in an old, Jewish voice.

5 *Hollywood Scriptwriter*, 3.

6 Gefen 37, Berges, et al. Gelbart, who seems to have spread this observation throughout many interviews, implied in the London interview that Brooks held the remark against him for a brief time.

7 *Hollywood Scriptwriter*, 3. It seems clear that Brooks’ problem lay with the material and not with Gelbart, because at an American Film Institute seminar held around the time of *Oh, God!’s* release, Brooks called Gelbart “one of the funniest comedy writers that has ever lived. One of the truly great comedy writers of our epoch” (19 Oct. 1977). Perhaps the successful adaptation of *Oh, God!* contributed to Brooks’ high regards for his colleague.

8 Gelbart London interview. Allen’s writings, films and plays often deal with existential doubts about God. For a few examples, cf. his films *Love and Death*, *Annie Hall*, and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, and his play *God*. 

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wanted from Corman's attempt. He did not use much of anything outside of the novel, except for a few stage directions referring mostly to the costuming of God—"nylon windbreaker," "plastic raincoat"—and a few others, including an orchestra music cue. Gelbart spoke on the telephone once with Corman about the use of these directions, and the novelist "never objected" to their use; it seemed to Gelbart that Corman was "quite upset" that Gelbart had not used more of the latter's screenplay as a basis for his own. The significance of these bits of Corman's screenplay emerged only after the completion of the filming, when the screenwriter credit became an issue.

The story is a simple one: God visits an assistant supermarket manager in Tarzana, California, and tells him that the rumors of his death have been greatly exaggerated, and further, to spread His message that the world can work. In Corman's original novel, the narrator is a New Yorker, a Jewish free-lance writer and playwright who has a wife, Judy, but no children. Corman's God offers the writer an exclusive, and peppers His speech with Yiddish words and phrases. For example, when His messenger cannot get on The Tonight Show, God doubts His choice—"I think I bet on a pisher"—a doubt that never overtly arises in Gelbart's version. Gelbart toiled over the adaptation, changing the structure of the novel significantly, combining scenes and eliminating all of the publishing business that comprises the

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9 Notes by Gelbart in UCLA Collection. Talent Associates was the name of David Susskind's production company.
10 Notes by Gelbart in UCLA Collection.
11 Notes by Gelbart in UCLA Collection.
12 A "pisher" is defined in Leo Rosten's The Joys of Yiddish as "a young, inexperienced person; a 'young squirt'" (289).
climax of Corman’s novel. Instead, Gelbart’s Jerry Landers is not as distinctively Jewish as Corman’s protagonist, lives in California, and does not wish to parlay his relationship with God into a long-term book deal. Gelbart reset the story to California because it “is the place I think a good many people would like to see or live in,” Gelbart reflected, “at least that was so in ’77.” Likewise the choice of occupations rested on the fact that few people knew writers, but, as Gelbart noted, “Everyone’s been in a supermarket. Everyone’s seen a manager at work there.” Despite the fact that the first draft was written without the possibility of Brooks and Allen for the leads, nevertheless, some of the dialogue in the film could still reflect the indiosyncratic delivery of the two comedians, because Gelbart retained bits of Corman’s New York Jewish rhythms:

JERRY. If you wanted to see me, why didn’t you just—uh—appear over my bed?
GOD. Ah, Hollywood! Next question.
JERRY. People are always—uh—praying to you. Do you listen?
GOD. I can’t help hearing; I don’t always listen.
JERRY. Then you don’t care.
GOD. Of course I care. I care plenty. But what can I do?
JERRY. What can you do? But, you’re God!
GOD. Only for the big picture. I don’t get involved in details.

Without Brooks or Allen, Gelbart’s next impulse was to offer the God role to George Burns, who fit the character’s “senior citizen” type. As soon as he finished the first

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13 Gelbart email interview with the author, 1 Dec. 1996.
14 Gelbart email interview with the author, 1 Dec. 1996.
15 Oh, God!, screenplay Larry Gelbart, dir. Carl Reiner, Warner Bros, 1977. Corman’s God continues to explain why he doesn’t interfere with miracles:
Say a fella is going to eat a hamburger that’s not 100 percent beef. What do I do, knock it out of his hand? How would you like to live with Divine Hands popping out of the sky all the time? It would make people crazy (Corman 22).
draft, Gelbart gave it to his wife to read. She pronounced the work a hit, because “It’s what everyone wants to believe.”

Both Gelbart’s plan to direct *Oh, God!* and Susskind’s planned production of it fell through, because Fox nixed the deal, citing the gentleness of Gelbart’s script: “They were looking for something more off-the-wall. That was a popular term a couple of years ago.” The project stalled until producer Jerry Weintraub picked up the option on the property for one of his clients, singer John Denver, in a starring role (making the main character even less off-the-wall and more mainstream). Gelbart called Weintraub and suggested Burns for the God role, and once again the project became a going concern. Warner Brothers contracted Carl Reiner, Gelbart’s good friend from the Sid Caesar days and *The Thrill of It All*, to direct the film. Gelbart seems relieved to have escaped the director’s duties on *Oh, God!*; because, he said, “I still feel as though the movie is a first draft. I never felt that I licked all the script problems, and I didn’t want people asking me, on the [sound] stage, questions I couldn’t answer in my own office.” One example of this kind of flaw in the script is a scene in which Jerry is locked into a hotel room (to ensure security) to answer fifty questions with God’s help. Once he is finished writing out God’s answers, he delivers them unescorted to the evangelist, Rev. Willie Williams (played by Paul Sorvino), exposing the lack of planning of the religious leaders’ security measures, or—more likely—the lack of thorough thought on the part of the screenwriter.

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16 Qtd. in Gelbart London interview.
What Gelbart brought to the story of God's visitation upon a mere Californian reflects many of the common subjects of his satire: the debasement of language, the hypocrisy of powerful people, and man's inhumanity to man. He was even able to include a nod to the two children who had been "growing up behind his back" during his $M*A*S*H$ years: Jerry Landers' children in the movie were named Adam and Becky.

The artful use of antithesis, a common device for Gelbart, surfaces in $Oh, God!$ in lines such as the wife's, "No, I don't think you're crazy, which is why I think I'm crazy." In one of the many other argument scenes between Jerry and his wife, Bobbie (played by Teri Garr), he exclaims, "He thinks he's God, and I'm in no position to argue with him."

Corman's original centered the satire on the messenger's situation; Gelbart's widened the scope of the satire to include social concerns. During the Vietnam War, Americans heard news reports of "negative population enhancement" and other euphemisms for killing. Gelbart's God tells Jerry that "'Kill' is the word; it's not 'waste.' If I meant 'waste,' I would have written, 'Thou shalt not waste.' You're doing some very funny things with words down here." Another of Gelbart's pronouncements about language, spoken by God, occurs later in the film: "They've figured out so many ways of talking to each other that finally nobody can."

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21 This sentiment plays on the clichéd notion, "Who am I to argue?" that Gelbart would use in other forms, as when $City of Angels'$ Buddy Fidler introduces himself as "Buddy Fidler: producer, director, some say genius... Who am I to argue?" (Original London Cast Recording).
The climaxes of the novel and the film also differ, again emphasizing the contrast in focus of the two. Gelbart ended his screenplay to *Oh, God!* just after the court case, when Jerry and his family return to a “normal” life. As with *Miracle on 34th Street,* the film’s climax involves proving the identity of a supernatural being in a court of law. Gelbart’s hero pleads his own case; Corman’s uses a lawyer friend, Lester Hirsh. Thus, in the movie, God’s chosen continues to stand alone, and calls God to be his witness. Although born out of the same desperation, calling God to the witness stand in Corman’s novel remains simply lawyer’s rhetoric: “Didn’t we feel it? It was the possibility that God exists and if He exists, He could materialize to inhabit that chair.” Corman’s novel continues for another several chapters after the court scene, and ends with the first-person narrator’s attempt to sum up his experience with God: “I wish we could have gotten closer.”

Between the filming of *Oh, God!* in late 1976 and early 1977, and its release in fall 1977, both director Carl Reiner and original novelist Avery Corman wanted (separately) shared screenplay credit with Gelbart. The screenplay used during the filming read, "Screenplay by Carl Reiner— from a First Draft by Larry Gelbart." Gelbart collected $5,000 from Warner Bros. for that breach of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) rules. He dismissed Reiner’s main claim quickly, with a firm statement to the Arbitration Committee of the WGA, that the director “contributed far less than the required 50% of the final script” and that “the dramatic construction is

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23 *Miracle on 34th Street*, an oft-remade Christmas story, ends with Santa taking the witness stand. The defense wins when the United States Postal Service delivers all of its mail to this “Santa Claus.”


25 Corman 190.

26 Gelbart email interview 1 Dec. 1996.
mine. The characterizations are mine. The sequences are mine. The dialogue is almost totally mine."27 Reiner’s contributions seem limited to brief linking scenes, such as one between a mechanic and Jerry, as an excuse to get the latter into God’s taxicab.28 If Gelbart believed his sole screenplay credit for Oh, God! had been secured after the Reiner incident, Avery Corman’s suit dragged the issue on well into the summer of 1977. Eventually, Gelbart’s contention—that but a few stage directions were used from Corman’s screenplay—prevailed; the final credits read, “Screenplay by Larry Gelbart/From the Novel by Avery Corman.”29 Oh, God! was Gelbart’s first solo screenplay credit, but not without a fight.

Besides the Academy Award nomination, Oh, God! received the Writer’s Guild and Edgar Allen Poe awards. Film critics overwhelmingly liked it, but Gelbart’s next attempt at writing for the cinema would meet with mixed reviews. The idea for a “double feature” film began to germinate in Gelbart’s mind during the end of the M*A*S*H period, just as his desire to leave the series began to take hold of him. Film parody was not new to Gelbart, who realized that the concept of genre was a natural for him: “Mel Brooks does movie spoofs, Neil Simon does movie spoofs, I do movie spoofs. We all worked together back in live television days, and one of our staples was the movie spoof. We used to do twelve or fifteen of those things a month.”30 Gelbart

28 Gelbart, “Statement.”
29 Marge White (WGAW Credits Administrator), Letter to Warner Bros., Inc., 2 May 1977.
30 Doug deLisle, “‘Movie, Movie’ author,” The Times Record (Troy, NY), 8 Feb. 1979, 22. Brooks’ genre parodies included westerns, horror films, and the work of British director Alfred Hitchcock (Blazing Saddles [1973], Young Frankenstein [1974], and High Anxiety [1977], respectively); Simon contributed the Agatha Christie mystery parody Murder by Death (1976) and the private-eye parody The Cheap Detective (1979) to the form.
first approached Universal Studios to finance the picture, but their executives passed on it. Gelbart decided to write the screenplay on spec, and asked his fellow *Caesar’s Hour* writer and writing partner from the television special days, Sheldon Keller, to collaborate with him on the project. Keller had most recently written a few *M*A*S*H* episodes, so he and Gelbart were in touch when Gelbart’s new film idea needed writing. By the middle of 1976, the two had finished the first draft of *Double Feature*, as they titled the work.

As with his previous film, “there was some talk about my directing it—mostly from me,” Gelbart recalled. His take on directing seems to be that “I’ve always resisted [directing]. I’m always content to have someone direct who will serve the script, not necessarily save it—particularly when it doesn’t need saving.” Gelbart sent a copy to Marty Starger, one of the producers of *Sly Fox*, who liked the script enough to show it to Lord Grade (also a producer of *Sly Fox*). Grade and his production company, ITC Entertainment, believed that the nostalgia of the movie would be best served by Stanley Donen (1924-), who had experience directing Hollywood period pieces *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952) and *Lucky Lady* (1975). Donen put his current project on hold and agreed to direct *Double Feature*.

*Double Feature* drew from Gelbart’s experience as a child growing up in Chicago, where on Saturdays he would see a double or triple feature, shorts,

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31 *LA Weekly*, 17 March 1991, 102. As usual, Gelbart’s wish to direct did not carry with it a wholehearted effort on his part.
newsreels and a stage show. Gelbart reflects that those days are now long gone: "We called it a triple feature. Today it would be called a film festival." The script lovingly parodies the conventions of 1930s and '40s low-budget features that all used the same pool of actors, sets, and writers within a studio system. Thus, Double Feature attempted to recreate some of the internal, backlot machinery of the studios while it poked fun at their product. Donen's direction supported this idea in many ways, and his contributions seemed to suit the writers. Donen's first modification came in the title of the film: "I wanted to call it Movie Movie as in going to a movie-movie. That's the kind of film it was. I worried that George C. Scott in Double Feature would cause people to think they were going to see Patton and Islands in the Stream." By the time Donen's suggestion changed the title, in the latter half of June 1977, the shooting could begin: Movie Movie contains two extended parodies of '30s and '40s movies, specifically a "naive boxer fights to win in a corrupt world" story and a "producer's hit musical hinges on understudy and untried composer" backstage musical. The original order, based on an examination of early drafts, placed the musical before the boxing film; the changed order certainly plays better, especially since Donen and the studio decided that the "Dynamite Hands" tested better in black-and-white, while "Baxter's Beauties" worked better in color. It would make little

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34 Gelbart Interview 22 Nov. 1994.
35 DeLisle 22.
36 Qtd. in Casper 222.
37 The switch in order was at the expense of a joke that appears in both films: the doctor in each tells his patient to get dressed after an examination. As the film stands now, "Dynamite Hands" opens with the eye doctor telling his young female patient to get dressed after an eye exam. The joke seems lurid because it is ungrounded. Were the film to open with "Baxter's Beauties," where the doctor tells Spats Baxter to get dressed, the recurrence of the joke in the boxing film would be more justified.
sense to "revert" from color to black-and-white, and the explosion of color in the musical replicates somewhat the boom in color in the late '30s and early '40s.

The first parody, called “Dynamite Hands,” contains situations so clichéd and yet so preposterous that the juxtaposition accounts for a large part of the humor. The performances of the actors and the style of the art direction and cinematography contribute as well. The dialogue, however, carries the film to a higher plane. The lines are not merely stilted or naïve; these shortcomings are actually celebrated. Gelbart had been perfecting such techniques since Duffy's Tavern. For instance, when Joey Popchik (played by Harry Hamlin), the delivery boy who hopes to go to law school, finds out that his sister needs money for an eye operation, he exclaims, “25,000 grand? That's all the money in the world!” The unnecessary repetition of “grand” after “thousand” not only hearkens back to the humor of The Red Buttons Show, but in the moment adds to the innocence and unworldliness of Joey.

The corruption of clichés with opposites or the unexpected was nothing new to Gelbart, but in Movie Movie, more often than not the writers corrupted with a pun, as in an early moment in Dr. Blaine's (Art Carney) office: “If any part of the human body has a tendency to break down, I'm afraid the eyes have it.” Sometimes the puns run from idea to idea, creating mixed metaphors, as when Gloves Malloy (George C. Scott) tells Joey, “That's not fair, kid. Your sister's eyes are below the belt.”

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38 For an extended examination of Movie Movie's character choices and film homages, see Casper 220ff.

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Gelbart and Keller also expanded the corrupted cliché from a change of a word in a line to a change of a line in a paragraph of untouched clichés. The unexpected punchline caps this build:

GLOVES. It's a tough racket. You gotta understand it. You gotta run, sweat, spar, punch. You gotta give it and take it, take it and give it. You gotta turn your hands into iron, your body into steel. You gotta work 'til fightin's the only thing you think of, until you're sharp and fast, you can destroy a man in a ring.

JOEY. When's my first fight?

GLOVES. Tuesday.

Variations on this technique involve inserting a cliché into an incongruous situation. For example, after mercilessly thrashing his sister's new boyfriend—destroying the living room and throwing the young gangster down stairs—Joey shouts after him, "Next time I catch you here, there's gonna be trouble!" Another example of this occurs when Gloves is about to be shot by gangsters. He tells them, "Go ahead, go ahead, shoot! But killin' me never solved nothin'."

The climactic scene of "Dynamite Hands" resulted from a telephone call from Donen to Gelbart, who was vacationing in the Bahamas at the time. Donen's idea for a revised ending appealed to him, and Gelbart quickly wrote a new ending and sent it to the studio. By this time, Gelbart and Keller had dissolved their collaboration over some personal issues; these final re-writes, therefore, reflect Gelbart's solo work. The climactic moment of the film-within-a-film occurs when Joey makes his closing argument in the trial of Gloves' killer:

Gentlemen of the jury: the state cries out that the murder of Gloves Malloy be avenged. It cries so loud that I finished law school as fast as I could so that poetic justice could be served, and so that I personally

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40 Larry Gelbart, e-mail with the author, 10 Dec. 1996.
could prosecute the man responsible—Vince Marlowe, a cold-blooded killer, a man of the highest scum. We cannot bring Gloves Malloy’s death back to life, but we can send Vince Marlowe to the hot seat. Let us show the mad dogs of this city that they cannot gun down decent citizens. Let us show them that the state will not stand blindly by. [The squinting JUDGE is wiping his glasses] Let us strap Vince Marlowe into the electric chair and let him walk away only when he is dead.41

The uses of oxymoron (“highest scum”) and mixed metaphor attest to Gelbart’s sense of the absurd in language and situation.

Between the two feature films of *Movie Movie*, a coming attractions trailer touts a film called “Zero Hour,” a World War I flying aces film. The most remarkable quality of this segment is its similarity to *M*A*S*H*’s ironic movie night public address announcements, both in the film version and the television series. The narration, voiced by veteran announcer Westbrook van Voorhis, exhorts the audience to “Fight with them! Laugh with them! Love with them! And even die with them the death of heroes who will live forever!”

The second feature of *Movie Movie*, “Baxter’s Beauties of 1933,” tells the story of Broadway producer Spats Baxter (George C. Scott), who needs one last hit before he dies of a rare and incurable disease, in order to leave the profits to his estranged daughter. Thus, the race against the clock propels the story. Part of the humor in this second part (and in the trailer, “Zero Hour”) arises from seeing the same actors in new roles. Gelbart again drew from his experience attending movies in Chicago and Hollywood, where character actors and leads moved from film to film in the assembly line studio industry of the late ‘30s and ‘40s. Art Carney, for example, plays a doctor in both features, and a “priest with a heart” in the “Zero Hour” trailer.

The humor of “Baxter’s Beauties of 1933” is not as word-based as in “Dynamite Hands.” The incredible twists and coincidences of the musical parody underscore the reliance not on truth in this genre, but on the hopes and aspirations of good people. Everything, it seems, is stacked against Spats’ dream. For instance, when the Doctor informs Spats of the disease, the stakes rise with each line:

SPATS. Give it to me straight, Doc. I can take it.
DOCTOR. Alright, Spats, you have six months to live—
SPATS. Six months from now!
DOCTOR. From your last visit [checks book]. That was five months ago.
SPATS. Four weeks to live! Thirty days!
DOCTOR. This is February, Spats . . .

Gelbart and Keller also collaborated on the pastiche lyrics to the musical’s score. The lyrics to the song “I Just Need the Girl,” written by Gelbart alone, follow the tradition of self-conscious and satirical love songs like the Gershwins’ “Blah, Blah, Blah.” The musical moments in “Baxter’s Beauties of 1933” occur with the same clichéd lack of realism as the movie genre they parody. For example, Dick Cummings is able to summon out of nowhere an orchestral accompaniment for his tryout of “I

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42 Compare Ira Gershwin’s lyric:
Blah blah blah moon,
Blah blah blah above,
Blah blah blah croon,
Blah blah blah love.

with Gelbart’s:
June/Spoon/Croon/Moon:
I know all the words by heart.
I’m ready to start.
I just need the girl.

Gelbart’s pastiche makes horizontal, as it were, what Gershwin set vertically. Ralph Burns’ music for the song may have traveled a bit too far back in time for Movie Movie’s satire: the melody of “I Just Need the Girl” has more of a ‘20s flavor—a la “Jeepers, Creepers”—than a ‘30s melody line.

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Just Need the Girl," and he brushes off the presence of a grand piano on the roof of
his building by explaining, "It was stuffy in my room."43

Donen defended the final product, stating that for Movie Movie, "the form we
use is as different as the stories are familiar."44 He also pointed to an observation made
by Gelbart, that "films that are inspired by other films... always seem unable to
sustain themselves in full-feature length," as another rationale for a double feature of
shorter films.45 Originally, the piece opened with a newsreel to draw audiences back to
the period, but it only confused them. The newsreel was dropped, and a prologue
spoken by George Burns introduced and explained the film's concept. Apparently
Gelbart felt this solution a mistake: "Some of us don't agree with the decision, but
that's the way it is," he said.46 The critical response might have prompted Donen's
defense of the film, since Variety panned the picture, unable to see the love that
Gelbart, Keller and Donen had for the subject.47 All told, the critical response favored
Movie Movie roughly three-to-one.48 Donen summarized his feelings about the film in
this way: "It's a good script, a well-made film with good performances. I like it a lot."49

In the late summer of 1977, a year before Movie Movie's release, producer
David Merrick contacted Gelbart about writing the screenplay for a new film, Rough

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43 Movie Movie, screenplay Larry Gelbart and Sheldon Keller, dir. Stanley Donen, 1978
44 "Audiences are the Final Judge of Movies, Stanley Donen Says," Press release, Warner Bros., Inc.,
n.d., 2.
45 "Audiences are the Final Judge," 3. Perhaps Mel Brooks' doubts about the sustainability of Oh,
God!, coupled with Brooks' own parodies of varying success prompted this concern. Cf. deLisle 22.
46 deLisle 22.
48 Casper 228.
49 Casper 228.
Merrick, although treated somewhat badly by Gelbart, Shevelove and Sondheim during the pre-production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, nevertheless approached Gelbart to do the job. That Merrick's star, Burt Reynolds, had writer approval and demanded Gelbart no doubt influenced Merrick's decision. *Rough Cut* was based on a novel by Derek Lambert, titled *Touch the Lion's Paw*. The plot involved international jewel thieves and the police search for them. Reynolds portrayed a Cary Grant-type thief who contends with David Niven over $30 million in uncut jewels. Leslie Ann Howe played Reynolds' accomplice and eventual love interest in the film.

Another name from Gelbart's past, Blake Edwards, signed on to direct the film. Edwards and Gelbart had shared the not uncommon experience of co-writing a screenplay (at least sharing the credit) without having actually met, for *The Notorious Landlady*. Gelbart read the two screenplay drafts of *Rough Cut* that had been attempted already, and wept "for the poor trees that died in vain." Merrick later decided against using Gelbart, but reinstated him on Reynolds' demand. Gelbart's subsequent formal agreement with Merrick, dated 24 October, prudently required that the writer make himself available to the director for consultations about the script. Following the tenets of the contract, Gelbart flew to Paris (where Edwards was preparing to film *The Revenge of the Pink Panther*) and met briefly with the director,

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When Merrick passed the screenplay to his director, another conference with the writer was called for, this time in London. Edwards’ first reactions pointed to some major problems he had with the material, namely that “Everything [was] too easy and everyone too easygoing . . . the whole thing needs more suspense and action, particularly character action.” Gelbart flew to London from Miami, where he had been participating in rehearsals for the national tour of Sly Fox, starring Jackie Gleason and Cleavon Little. When he arrived at the Dorchester for the conference with Edwards (Merrick was present as well), Gelbart realized from Edwards’ remarks that the director’s ideas described an entirely different film—“not the one I wrote,” Gelbart judged, “nor the one that I can.” Gelbart soon found himself out again as Rough Cut’s writer.

Within a month, Gelbart learned two bits of news about Rough Cut: first, that Blake Edwards had left the picture, and second, that Reynolds had opted to make Starting Over before Merrick’s project. Gelbart returned his attention to Movie Movie, which was by this time in the last stages of filming, soon to be in post-production. The film needed Gelbart’s services for the re-write of the last scene of the first “movie” and the writing of George Burns’ prologue for the film, since the

52 Blake Edwards, letter to Larry Gelbart, n.d., in the UCLA Larry Gelbart Collection.
studio (Warner Bros.) insisted that younger audiences would not understand the concept of a double feature.\(^5\)

A year later, in May 1979, Gelbart signed an addendum to his first contract with Merrick for *Rough Cut*.\(^6\) He had been rehired. The script had gone through at least four other writers in the meantime for new director Don Siegel, the last being Richard Tuggle’s, dated April 1979.\(^7\) Gelbart received all of the interim scripts, a written guarantee that he would not be rewritten, and a three-week deadline for his second draft. A letter, dated 17 May 1979, from attorney Alan U. Schwartz on Gelbart’s behalf, informed Merrick that his client would assume that any rewrites were fair game to be used in his rewrites. Evidently, Gelbart and his management hoped to avoid the complications and contention that characterized Avery Corman’s attempt at a co-screenwriter credit for *Oh, God!*\(^8\) Gelbart completed his second revised draft 16 June 1979.

Shortly before filming was to commence, Merrick cast British actor David Niven to be the police detective and culprit (the “detective as villain” twist), but Gelbart, Siegel and Reynolds all wanted Reynolds' character to be the thief. The producer’s interference on this subject seems to be in keeping with his general behavior throughout. Siegel, for his part, worked to retitle the picture “Jack of Diamonds,” then “Diamond Cut Diamond”—anything but “Rough Cut”—fearing that

\(^5\) Gelbart email to the author 10 Dec. 1996.
\(^6\) Howard Rothberg, letter to David Merrick, 3 May 1979, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
\(^7\) Gelbart “A Screenwriter’s Plots” 30. Don Siegel has been directing films since 1946, with a proclivity for action-adventure stories; his films directed include *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *Hell is for Heroes* (1962), and *Dirty Harry* (1971). Siegel evidently brought in Tuggle, who had written *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979) the year before for him.
\(^8\) Alan U. Schwartz, letter to David Merrick, 17 May 1979, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
critics would use the title as unfair ammunition against the film.59 "I can just see the reviews," Siegel told a Los Angeles Times columnist, "Yes, indeed, this is a rough cut."60

Filming began in London 19 July 1979, two-and-a-half months behind schedule,61 not terribly unreasonable considering the changes in script (writers) and director that had taken place. Before the summer was out, though, Siegel was out. Merrick replaced him with British director Peter Hunt, who also apparently did not fulfill Merrick's expectations. Blake Edwards returned to the scene to offer his services, stipulating that he be allowed to rewrite Gelbart's "rewrite of the various rewrites."62 Eventually Siegel came back, perhaps owing to the "no rewrite" clause in Gelbart's contract, which would have impeded Edwards' terms of return.

Despite Gelbart's "no rewrite clause," director Siegel apparently reworked much of the film's second half. He told Los Angeles Times columnist Roderick Mann that Rough Cut was

> based on a poor book, and we've had at least seven different writers on it. We've been working every day, including weekends, on the script and we're still having problems. It's not nearly as good as it should be, and a great deal of work is needed to shore it up. It's obvious now we'll be working on it until the film is in the can.63

When confronted with the "final" draft (dated 18 July 1979), Gelbart realized that pages 103-143 were someone else's work. He requested through his lawyer, Howard

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59 In film production terminology, a "rough cut" is an early attempt to assemble the largely unedited scenes into a coherent order; it is never meant for an audience's eyes.
60 Roderick Mann, "Smoothing out the 'Rough Cut,'" Los Angeles Times, 22 July 1979.
62 Gelbart "Screenwriter's Plots" 31.
63 Mann 22 July 1979.
Rothberg, that Merrick allow him to use a pseudonym on the shooting script and the final screen credit. Rothberg explained Gelbart's decision this way: "Please understand the position of a writer who is being judged on material that is not entirely his own." The producer cabled a reply that seemed to attempt to placate Gelbart by blaming the director, saying that he "presumed" the forty pages in question were written by Siegel, and that Merrick thought they were "drivel" and could understand Gelbart's consternation with them. He added that Gelbart could certainly have the pseudonymous credit.

Don Siegel's remarks to L.A. Times columnist Mann (quoted above) prompted a letter to the director from Gelbart in which he castigated Siegel for a lack of sincerity—"How many times did you tell me that this was the best script you'd ever had to work with?"—and revealed his displeasure at "the way you lumped me in with the other half dozen writers who had let you down." Moreover, Gelbart made it clear that asking Merrick "to allow me a pseudonym reflects my disappointment and frustration." Gelbart released several pieces of information to Variety in an article dated 14 August: "I've asked David Merrick to take my name off the picture because the last fifty pages aren't mine," he told the reporter. Additionally, he announced that he was prepping Two+Two (a screenplay based on a novel by Martin Boris) for Lew Grade and a Cambodian-set film [Hotel Royale] with Arthur Penn and Jules Fisher. By far

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64 Howard Rothberg, letter to David Merrick, 2 Aug. 1979, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
65 David Merrick, telegram to Howard Rothenberg, 22 Aug. 1979, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
66 Larry Gelbart, letter to Don Siegel, 3 Aug. 1979, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
67 Daily Variety, 14 Aug. 1979, clipping in UCLA Gelbart Collection. Nothing came of Two+Two, which Gelbart describes as "about an improbable suburban love affair between a gynecologist and his
United States, the television series he was in the midst of creating for NBC, consumed most of his attention and energies. Because Gelbart needed to remain in Los Angeles to oversee United States, he was unavailable to perform rewrites on demand for Siegel and Merrick. Taking advantage of a clause in Gelbart’s “no rewrite” clause—that “if Gelbart is not reasonably available for rewrites, then another writer can be assigned”—Merrick hired British playwright and screenwriter Anthony Shaffer (Sleuth) to “fix” the script in the fall of 1979.

Burt Reynolds, still in London shooting Rough Cut, added to the publicity surrounding the troubles by telling Roderick Mann that

Larry wrote a brilliant script, but unfortunately he can’t be here when we need him because he’s involved with other projects. And however good a script, once you start a movie and you’ve got different locations and some actors prove to be better than others you do need to make changes. That’s our problem. Larry isn’t here. And working without a writer around is like working in a circus without a net.

Reynolds also called Gelbart to “reassure” him that sixty percent of the film remained his. The writer told columnist Marilyn Beck that he “might end up having to use a pseudonym on the credits, at least.”

For several months, Gelbart paid little attention to the Rough Cut debacle, working closely on United States and a new film project, Hotel Royale. In late 1979, Gelbart entered into a partnership with his good friend, director Arthur Penn, and the originator of the film’s premise, Jules Fisher. Fisher’s idea involved the Vietnam War

gardener’s wife. Sort of a ‘Dr. Chatterly’s Lover,’ I guess . . . in suburbia. Eastern suburbia” (Jangocyan G6).

68 Howard Rothberg, letter to David Merrick, 3 May 1979, §IV, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.


71 Jules Fisher is one of the world’s most celebrated lighting designers. His credentials include over...
that had spilled into Cambodia, as seen through the eyes and lenses of American correspondents stationed there. *Hotel Royale*, as the film was called, also appeared in drafts and letters under the titles *The Cambodia Project*, *Film at Eleven* and *Clicks.* In January 1980, Gelbart had discussed a new project based on the French film *La Cage Aux Folles*, to be produced by Allan Carr. He withdrew from this last responsibility quickly, explaining that “It was one of those manic times in my life (started when I was born) when I had just overloaded my plate. I was heavily involved with *United States* and I had to bow out of the project. Carr was very gracious about it.”72 Perhaps the experience juggling writing obligations the previous year had taught Gelbart a lesson. He generated a draft of *Hotel Royale* in February 1980.

In mid-March, Merrick granted Anthony Shaffer co-screenplay credit on *Rough Cut* with Gelbart, and the latter quickly demanded that Shaffer’s name be removed from the proposed credits. Not only did Gelbart not want his own name in the credits, he also did not want anyone else’s beside the pseudonym. A few days later, Gelbart’s lawyer sent a letter to Paramount warning that “any publicity, preview showing or other exhibition of said motion picture prior to its general release shall in no manner refer to or contain the name of our client . . .”73

100 Broadway shows and numerous other theatrical and musical productions including *Hair, Jesus Christ Superstar, La Cage Aux Folles, Chicago,* and *American Buffalo.* His six Tony Awards for lighting design are a record in this category. In addition to receiving the American Theatre Wing’s prestigious Tony awards for the Broadway productions of *Jelly’s Last Jam* (1992), *The Will Rogers Follies* (1991), *Grand Hotel* (1990), *Dancin’* (1978), *Ulysses in Nighttown* (1973), and *Pippin*, (1972), Jules Fisher produced *Beatlemania, The Rink,* and the nationwide tour of *Elvis: An American Musical.* In 1995 he was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame.

72 Larry Gelbart, email to the author, 13 January 1997.
73 Rubin, letter to Paramount Studios, 18 March 1980, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
With the many changes to the script, the ending became the focal point of the production. No fewer than four separate endings were shot, and Gelbart proposed an insert, that would make use of previously shot footage with new, voiceover dialogue.\(^7\) Siegel, in a memo to Paramount executive Rick Eaker, alluded to Gelbart's solution and "several other dialogue changes."\(^7\) Gelbart was loath to do any more writing beyond the terms of his contract (i.e., for free), especially since, as he told Siegel, "there's no assurance that he [Merrick] would use the new pages."\(^7\) As a result of Reynolds' pleading, he wrote a fifth ending, not a simple matter, because, as Gelbart explained, "some of the film had been changed and I don't know what led up to that ending. I was writing the tail without having seen the donkey."\(^7\)

In the same article that told of the new ending, Gelbart again announced his desire to have his name removed from the film. Two days later, 27 March 1980, Merrick's attorney, Bertram Fields, wrote to Gelbart's attorney, Alan U. Schwartz, that "Mr. Merrick was, of course, distressed that Larry Gelbart chose to announce to the press that he wanted his name taken off the picture. Naturally, that sort of public statement tends to hurt a film's chance for commercial and critical success." Fields continued by alluding to Merrick's telegram several months earlier, in which he assured that Gelbart could use a pseudonym: "Although Mr. Merrick would have

\(^7\) Wayne Warga, "Gelbart, Slade: Through the Ranks to the Theater," Los Angeles Times, 10 June 1979, 60.
\(^7\) Don Siegel, memo to Rick Eaker, 24 March 1980, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
\(^7\) Larry Gelbart, letter to Don Siegel, 3 Aug. 1979.
\(^7\) Roderick Mann, "A Rough Time Was Had by All on 'Rough Cut,'" Los Angeles Times, 25 March 1980. Gelbart managed to work a plug for his television series United States into the article: "The thing is... this has come at a time when critical reaction to my new TV series 'United States' has been so good that I just can't afford to have my name on something that isn't totally mine." United States had received critical praise, but still needed more support from networks and audiences.

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preferred that Larry had not gone to the newspapers with a request that had already been privately granted, he is still willing to remove Larry's name from the picture, and there is no need for Larry to ask again."\(^7\) Fields closed by stating that he would be sending a copy of the letter to the Writers Guild, "so that they may be fully apprised of the situation."

In addition to the problems arising from the film's making, *Rough Cut* attained a new level of contention once Bantam Books sought to publish *Touch the Lion's Paw*, the original novel, as *Rough Cut*. Merrick's deal tied the re-release of the Derek Lambert novel to the film's opening, which would occur in June 1980, which meant that production of the book necessitated deadlines in April regarding the list of credits. On 16 April 1980, Bantam received the current writing credits as Paramount knew them: "Screenplay by Larry Gelbart and Anthony Shaffer."\(^7\) Bantam's unfortunately early press deadline precluded their use of corrected, arbitrated credits that would be finalized two weeks later. Also, Gelbart had not yet learned about the novel's credits page; within five days of the Bantam deadline, Gelbart advised Merrick (through Rubin) that the pseudonym to be used for the screenwriting credit for *Rough Cut* would be "Francis Burns." Fans of *M*A*S*H* should most appreciate the irony of this name, which belonged to the character Frank Burns, and which conjured images of a patsy lacking control of an absurd situation. One can only imagine that this was exactly how Gelbart felt after three years' association with the troubled

\(^7\) Bertram Fields, letter to Alan U. Schwartz, 27 March 1980, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
\(^7\) Molly Wilson, memo to File, "In Re: Larry Gelbart—Chronology of Events," 13 Aug. 1980, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 2.
project. By the end of April, the Writers Guild announced in favor of Gelbart, determining that the final writing credits for *Rough Cut* should read, "Screenplay by Francis Burns," against Merrick's desire to grant shared credit to Anthony Shaffer.80

Larry Gelbart was not the only vocal critic of the *Rough Cut* production process; by April 1980, director Siegel, who had placed blame on the script months earlier, simply reduced his criticism of the film to, "the worst experience I've ever had."81 Moreover, he filed a grievance with the Director's Guild of America to protect his rights. "I have final cut—contractually—and I'm not giving it up," Siegel told the press about his association with Merrick.82 Michael Eisner, then head of Paramount, added to the dialogue by stating, "I don't care what Merrick does—the picture will open on June 19. And that's definite."83 *Rough Cut* did open 19 June 1980, but not before being buffeted with a few more assaults by Gelbart and the Writers Guild.

On 23 May 1980, Gelbart learned that a Santa Barbara preview screening of *Rough Cut* contained older, uncorrected credits (the final, arbitrated ones had been determined three weeks earlier by the WGA); therefore, he and his attorneys threatened to file suit against Merrick and Paramount. The Writers Guild also followed suit, legally speaking, against the filmmakers. In his letter to the parties, Gelbart stated that "Francis Burns is my pseudonym and I have two separate

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82 Marilyn Beck, "How Brando Cheats with a Hearing Aid," *San Francisco Examiner* 7 May 1980. According to DGA contracts, the director has the right to one (1) public showing of a "director's cut," after which the studio or producers may call for changes before widespread release.
83 Beck.
messages from Mr. Merrick granting me the right to use one."84 Paramount's vice president for legal affairs, Ralph Kamon, countered with arguments that "Paramount opposes the use of any pseudonym except as may be expressly provided in the existing WGA Collective Bargaining Agreement."85 Kamon in the same letter cites the unusual circumstances surrounding the production of the movie in question and refers to a settlement apparently reached between the parties, that "Paramount is also confirming the use of the Larry Gelbart pseudonym with the understanding that Mr. Gelbart and the WGA will withdraw Mr. Gelbart's letter of May 23, 1980."

*Rough Cut* opened to mixed but invariably lukewarm reviews. Charles Champlin's review for the Los Angeles Times took the film's writing and backstage infighting into account: "Although the script by Francis Burns from Derek Lambert's novel, 'Touch the Lion's Paw,' does hit unrewarding stretches later on, the movie as a whole conceals its traumas."86 Champlin's appraisal seems to support Gelbart's assessment—that most of the last half of the film was not his, that it suffered in comparison with the first half (which was his), and that a pseudonym would protect his reputation because of it. A few days before *Rough Cut*'s premiere, Gelbart's next project appeared in a Variety announcement: he had been hired to adapt Thomas Berger's novel *Neighbors*.87 His association with *Rough Cut* was not over.

When he found out about the incorrect film credits in the Bantam Books release of the novel *Rough Cut*, Gelbart filed suit through the WGA, asking for new

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84 Larry Gelbart, letter to David Merrick and Ralph Kamen (sic), 23 May 1980, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
85 Ralph Kamon, letter to Fred Cooperberg, 6 June 1980. Copy in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
arbitration because Merrick used the writer’s real name in the Bantam book version.\textsuperscript{88} The suit quoted from the 1977 Theatrical and Television Basic Agreement that bound signatories Paramount Pictures, David Merrick, Larry Gelbart and the WGA:

The writing credit shall also be included in all other publicity and promotional matter. . . . Prior to final determination of credits the Company shall include those credits which it in good faith believes to be a fair and truthful statement of authorship.\textsuperscript{89}

Although the deadline for the book’s credits page was 16 April, and the final writing credit determination was not reached until 30 April, nevertheless, a 13 May memo between Paramount and Bantam allowed Paramount to correct the mistake. Gelbart’s arbitration suit claimed that “As a direct and proximate result of said violations, complainant Larry Gelbart has suffered damage to his reputation, status and prestige as a professional writer, all to his damage in an amount not less than $1,000,000.00, or according to proof.”\textsuperscript{90} In the end, the arbitrators did not uphold his claim.

Gelbart returned his attention briefly to \textit{Cambodia Project}, or \textit{Hotel Royale}, in September 1979, and signed with Columbia Pictures to write a draft for them. By the end of the next year, however, twelve companies had rejected the project for various reasons: some did not want to make war movies, there were too many killed in it, it was a “downer,” or it was too expensive.\textsuperscript{91} But Gelbart had already embarked on another writing assignment in the meantime.

\textsuperscript{89} Qtd. in Molly Wilson, “WGAw and Larry Gelbart v. Paramount Pictures Corp. and David Merrick,” 14 Aug. 1980, 2. Copy in UCLA Gelbart Collection.
\textsuperscript{90} Molly Wilson, “WGAw and Larry Gelbart,” 3.
After the troubles encountered with *Rough Cut*, Larry Gelbart must have been optimistic that his next film writing project, *Neighbors*, based on a darkly humorous novel by Thomas Berger, would fare better. Gelbart wanted the project to go well for several reasons, not least of which being his friendship with Berger. The property belonged to producers Richard D. Zanuck and David Brown, who had negotiated for it with the original rights holder, legendary producer-agent Irving Paul “Swifty” Lazar. Many people wanted the rights to *Neighbors*, it seems, and when director John G. Avildsen discovered that they had already been acquired by Lazar (who agreed to act as executive producer), Zanuck and Brown, he contacted them about the possibility of directing the film.

When Gelbart learned that Avildsen had been chosen by the producers, he questioned the wisdom of the decision to Brown. He based his cautiousness on the fact that Avildsen did not have a track record directing comedies. Avildsen’s most important films to date were the boxing film *Rocky* (1977) and the desperation drama *Save the Tiger* (1973). In addition, the director had been relieved of command on

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92 An extended discussion about the making of *Neighbors*, especially from the acting and directing points of view, may be found in Bob Woodward, *Wired: The Short Life and Fast Times of John Belushi* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), 200 ff.
93 Gelbart London interview.
94 Zanuck is the son of Darryl F. Zanuck, a formidable producer and studio head at Twentieth Century-Fox. Together with his partner Brown, Richard Zanuck produced *The Sting* (1973) and *Jaws* (1975) for Universal.
95 Woodward 200. Army Archerd’s *Variety* column announced the death of Lazar 1 Jan. 1994, which included a comment from Gelbart. “Good things come in small packages,” Gelbart was reported to have said about the diminutive Lazar. Unfortunately, that is not what he said. The use of a clichéd sentiment like the one published runs counter to Gelbart’s style, which twists the cliché at every opportunity. His actual statement should have read, “Good things come in small packagers,” the mot juste for a producer-agent of Lazar’s stature. (Gelbart London interview).
96 Woodward 201.
some films during the previous decade.\textsuperscript{97} Still, the producers held firm to their decision. The seemingly blithe optimism on the part of the producers contributed to Gelbart's referring to the pair as the "sunshine boys."\textsuperscript{98}

By the middle of August 1980, Gelbart had completed the first draft of his adaptation. He would generate two more drafts for Zanuck/Brown while \textit{Neighbors} resided at Twentieth Century-Fox.\textsuperscript{99} The producers liked what Gelbart had done with the book, and so the news from Sherry Lansing at Fox that her people did not "think it was funny" shocked the producers.\textsuperscript{100} Gelbart delivered his third revised script to Zanuck-Brown on 3 February 1981, the day after Fox dropped the project.\textsuperscript{101}

\textit{Neighbors} was in "turnaround" for a week and a half, until Columbia picked up the film. Frank Price, then head of Columbia, wanted to bring the successful producers to his studio, and the opportunity to do so came with \textit{Neighbors}.\textsuperscript{102} Price also questioned whether Avildsen possessed the savvy to direct comedy, especially a dark, quirky comedy such as this one.\textsuperscript{103}

For the lead roles, Earl Keese and his obnoxious new neighbor, Vic, Columbia settled on John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd, two alumni of the Second City improvisation group and the biggest stars of NBC's \textit{Saturday Night Live}. Michael Ovitz, president of Creative Artists Agency (CAA), had brought the casting idea to the

\textsuperscript{97} Avildsen had had a run in with star Burt Reynolds during the filming of \textit{W. W. and the Dixie Dancekings} (1975), had been fired from \textit{Saturday Night Fever} (1976), and had been replaced during the final editing of \textit{The Formula} (1980), \textsuperscript{98} Woodward 202.


\textsuperscript{100} Woodward 203.

\textsuperscript{101} Gelbart "Neighbors' Chronology," 1.

\textsuperscript{102} Woodward 203-4.

\textsuperscript{103} Woodward 204.
producers and Avildsen. Once Belushi and Aykroyd were cast, Bernie Brillstein (Belushi and Aykroyd’s manager) joined the team as another executive producer. The stars met with Gelbart for an initial reading 17 March 1981, in New York.

In his 1984 biography of the star, Wired: The Short Life and Fast Times of John Belushi, Bob Woodward recounts that the meeting did not instill a sense of security in the screenwriter:

As [the read-through] proceeded, Gelbart could see that neither Aykroyd nor John stuck to what was on the page. They were just itching to improvise, impose their own ideas, change the dialogue; they even made suggestions about scene and structure.

Throughout Gelbart’s long career—approaching forty years—he had enjoyed respect for his work by producers, directors and performers, with only a few exceptions: Fair Game, The Conquering Hero and the recent Rough Cut. Because he co-produced the film The Wrong Box, he had some weight behind him to request changes, but with Neighbors, he had no such advantage.

After the read-throughs in New York, where Gelbart had witnessed first-hand Belushi and Aykroyd’s lack of respect for his script, and Avildsen’s lack of desire to hold them to it, Gelbart called the producers to warn them again about the potential for failure with such a combination. He also pointed to Belushi’s overt drug use as another red flag for the production. Woodward concluded that “The last thing they [Zanuck and Brown] wanted to hear was that they were heading for calamity with a

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104 Woodward 208.
105 Gelbart “‘Neighbors’ Chronology,” 2.
106 Woodward 209.
dope addict." The hostility that Gelbart felt from all concerned again put him into an uncomfortable position. He considered taking his name off the film, "but," as he recalled years later, "having just taken it off the previous movie [Rough Cut], I thought it might start a trend where people would take their names off all movies, making it look the way it does now: that the director did it, anyway." 

According to Woodward's account, "Zanuck and Brown knew that the screenwriter was no longer that important. Fuck him, they figured; they had been warned that he was a prima donna." Prima donna or not, Gelbart began to look out for opportunities to protect his work and his reputation. He started a detailed chronology listing dates, actions and comments by the parties involved. The threat of a Writers Guild strike would, in the coming weeks, provide Gelbart with another avenue for venting his frustrations.

John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd, because they gained early experience and training at Second City (in Chicago and Toronto, respectively), depended a great deal upon improvisation as an outlet for their creativity. Also, their time with the National Lampoon comedy shows and Saturday Night Live allowed them to write material as well as perform it. Because of their TV work—and Aykroyd's writing credit on the film The Blues Brothers (1980)—the actors were members of the Writers Guild. The director of Neighbors, John G. Avildsen, was also a member. Thus, in the event of a

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108 Woodward 211.
110 Woodward 211.
strike, Gelbart realized, Belushi, Aykroyd and Avildsen would be restrained from making changes to his script.

Based on the meetings in New York in mid-March, Gelbart generated a fourth revised script and delivered it to Zanuck and Brown on 23 March 1981.111 Rehearsals for Neighbors began two weeks later, and on 6 April 1981, Gelbart received a call from Brown acknowledging that "Avildsen, Belushi and Aykroyd [were] making 'minor' changes in the script" during the rehearsal period.112 Gelbart in turn called George Manasse, the Unit Production Manager for Neighbors, and warned him that the lead actors and director “should be aware of the A-thru-H rules in the event of a Writers Guild Strike.”113 On 11 April 1981, the Writers Guild of America called a film and TV strike against producers and networks, which lasted until 14 July 1981. The strike, therefore, covered the entire filming period on Neighbors.114

Once the Guild struck, Gelbart had to register the most recent version of the script, as a means of “freezing” the material. On the same day he registered the fourth revised draft, April 13, he found out that another version had been registered in the East, and that the writers listed now included John G. Avildsen and Dan Aykroyd.115 Brown told Gelbart that, “[I was] so incensed that I just ripped the title page out before registering the script, so it was registered without any writer’s

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111 Gelbart “Neighbors’ Chronology,” 2.
112 Gelbart “Neighbors’ Chronology,” 2.
113 Gelbart “Neighbors’ Chronology,” 2. "A-thru-H rules," as they are called, are the guidelines about precisely what producers and directors can do to the material during a WGA strike.
114 One scene was re-shot 6 November, but it was largely wordless: Belushi’s climactic trashing of his living room (Woodward 270).
115 Gelbart “Neighbors’ Chronology,” 3.
The new version, Gelbart was told, contained all of the changes that the actors and director had made during the rehearsal period. Gelbart requested a copy of this “new and improved” version. His record of this draft is brief and to the point:

April 15, 1981:
I received the Avildsen/Aykroyd script. There is no title page.
There has been a good deal of rewriting.

Shooting began 20 April 1981, and Belushi, who “considered it his movie,” soon lost patience with Avildsen’s directing technique. He met with Brown, who was supervising the production, and told the producer that “Avildsen was not responding to their kind of humor. He didn’t get it . . . . Avildsen has no sense of humor. He’s no comedy director,” and so forth. Gelbart’s initial fears about Avildsen—that he had no record as a comedy director—which Frank Price echoed when his studio bought the picture, seem to have been taken up by Belushi as ammunition against Avildsen. Belushi, however, did not speak up to defend the script, nor to vindicate Gelbart’s assessment; on the contrary, his complaints stemmed from Avildsen’s attempts to rein in the actors: “He was fucking rigid, ‘a little Hitler,’” said Belushi.

On 28 June 1981, the day before the shooting wrapped, an article in the Los Angeles Times’ Calendar section, titled, “Belushi and Aykroyd Are at It Again,” confirmed what Gelbart already knew, that “The actors seemed to be earning their money. They were credited by both Brown and Avildsen for having ‘embellished’ Gelbart’s screenplay during two weeks of rehearsal in New York before the current

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116 Woodward 213, based on Gelbart “Neighbors’ Chronology,” 3.
117 Gelbart “Neighbors’ Chronology,” 3.
118 Woodward 212.
119 Woodward 213-4.
120 Qtd. in Woodward 213.
strike by the Writers Guild.” The fact that such an article appeared, and that the director and a producer made such comments, leads one to suspect that the studio was making some attempt to market even the writing of the film to a younger audience. This suspicion is borne out in comments made by Aykroyd that he didn’t consider the script hip enough: “We had been handed a thin story that needed a lot of repair work. It was like a script for an Alan Arkin-George Segal movie ten years ago. For John and me, audiences want a more antic type of production.”

The plot of *Neighbors* concerns the escalation of tensions between two couples who inhabit a cul-de-sac in the suburbs of an unnamed American city. Middle-aged Earl and Enid Keese live a dull, uneventful existence for some time, until Vic and Ramona move in. Mysterious events, misunderstood motives and an infectious lack of trust contribute to the dissolution of the normality, not to mention the marriage, of the Keeses.

Gelbart made notes after two separate viewings of *Neighbors*, October 8 and 20 November 1981. Gelbart characterized the first group of notes in his cover letter as “unfortunately, mere band-aids.” In these, he offered suggestions (since he held no sway to make demands) to the producers that he hoped might improve an otherwise failed effort. He described the music under the titles as “so counter-comedy, it sinks us almost before we start.” The opening scenes telegraphed the mood, thereby removing

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the audience's fun of discovery: "The feeling here is sinister, when it is meant to be merely ordinary . . . Earl and Enid seem like a pair of recluses living in a house full of menacing shadows rather than simply just a bored couple." 126

When the strange couple moves into the house next to his, Earl answers the door to find a beautiful woman standing before him. The sequence's final line was changed during filming:

EARL. Hello! What can I do for you?
RAMONA. Anything you like. The question is, what do you want in return?
EARL. [uncomfortably clears his throat] Hhmmm.
RAMONA. Hi, I'm Ramona. I just moved in next door.
EARL. Really?
RAMONA. Have I ever lied to you before?
[changed to:]
RAMONA. Really. 126

According to Gelbart, "The change of line has flattened the moment. It's a mystery to me why the line was changed from a reasonably clever one to what it is now." 127

Some of Gelbart's suggestions seem to have influenced the final cut; he suggests trimming scenes that appear long: "Can't we just see Ramona and Enid drinking and talking MOS? The 'dialogue' is dreadful and goes on far too long" 128 and "It takes forever before Earl starts speaking in this scene." 129 Overall, these first notes

126 John G. Avildsen (Dir.), Neighbors, screenplay by Larry Gelbart, Columbia Pictures, 1981.
128 Gelbart letter to Zanuck and Brown, 12 Oct. 1981, 2. MOS means "mitout sound" for shots that do not use sync sound; according to Hollywood legend, the "mitout" was a blunder made by a German immigrant in the early days of talkies.

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reiterate Gelbart’s claims that many of the changes are examples “of people ‘improving’ the script and the film right into the ground.”¹³⁰

The second set of notes, which Gelbart made less than three weeks before the opening of the film, apparently served no other purpose than to support his contention that Aykroyd and Avildsen performed more than “casual” rewrites during the 1981 strike (Belushi’s name did not appear on the ripped credits page registered at the WGA, East). He addressed these new notes not to the producers or director (for it was too late to make substantive changes), but to Jeff Freilich, chair of the Disciplinary Committee of the WGA, West. Gelbart’s cover letter prefaces the notes with an indication that he believes the “casual” changes that Aykroyd and Avildsen claim to have made “occur, however, with such regularity and rapidity that I think they must be taken into consideration” by Freilich’s committee.¹³¹

Gelbart produced eighteen pages of notes to corroborate his position. He refers scene-by-scene to changes of all sorts—cuts to all or parts of lines, additions to beginnings or ends of lines, changes in wording, and the insertion of new dialogue or new business. He also questioned whether using a script with no title page (and thus no credited screenwriter) during the filming violated Guild rules.¹³² His experience with *Oh, God!* a few years before, when Carl Reiner added his name to that film’s shooting script, might have prompted this last concern.

¹³¹ Larry Gelbart, letter to Jeff Freilich, 30 Nov. 1981.
¹³² Larry Gelbart, letter to Jeff Freilich, 30 Nov. 1981.
The WGA Disciplinary Committee dealt harshly with those who wrote during the strike. They fined one Guild member, Bernard Wolfe, the full amount he was paid ($5,450) for writing performed during the strike, and several non-Guild members were denied membership once the Guild discovered that they had engaged in “scab” writing for struck companies. The committee also investigated whether Belushi and Aykroyd scabbed throughout the filming of Neighbors. During an appearance on NBC-TV’s The Today Show, Aykroyd told critic Gene Shalit, “Well, let’s say we contributed something. . . . There’s an issue here, whether we wrote after the writers strike. No, we did not, but we did some embellishing.”

Part of Aykroyd and Belushi’s defense lay in the fact that they were performers on the set as well, and their “embbellishments” arose from their duties as performers. “We did not sit at typewriters,” Aykroyd stated in an interview. The policy toward “hyphenates,” the term for those who regularly perform two or more functions (writer-director or actor-producer), had not been clearly spelled out in the Guild’s A-thru-H rules, and writer-performers Belushi and Aykroyd thus became a test case for the Disciplinary Committee. Ironically, despite the heartache Gelbart felt at the changes in his script, the strike may have saved his credit on Neighbors. Otherwise, Aykroyd and Belushi (not to mention Avildsen) might have improvised the script out from under him.

134 Qtd. in Loynd “Writers Trial.”
135 Loynd “Aykroyd ‘Neighbors.’”

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Before Gelbart had sorted through the Neighbors tangles, he became involved in a project that had been drifting around for several years. It concerned a female impersonator who lands a job on a soap opera pretending to be an actress, and was written by Don McGuire in 1975. George Hamilton had expressed interest in playing the role, and several other directors, actors and producers took up the property in an attempt to make the film. Would I Lie to You?, as the script was called, moved from McGuire’s typewriter to Robert Kaufman’s in 1977; he did not alter the material substantially. The script finally emerged in a new form years later as a collaboration between actor Dustin Hoffman (1937-) and his playwright friend, Murray Schisgal (1936-). Hoffman had been looking for a role that would allow him to experience life “from the other side,” chromosomally speaking, ever since his film Kramer vs. Kramer (1979). At first, they tried to create an original script that drew from the recent headlines about Dr. Renée Richards, who had been surgically transformed into a woman in a celebrated sex change and who had begun playing in tennis tournaments as a female competitor. Schisgal’s story followed a man’s attempt to impersonate a woman in order to win a tennis championship. Schisgal and Hoffman discarded that plotline when director Dick Richards brought them Would I Lie to You? whose actor-lead suited Hoffman more. Dick Richards soon bowed out as director on the project, but remained as a producer until the end.

138 Schisgal is most famous for his play Luv (1967).
139 Hoffman vs. Hoffman 132.
Schisgal and Hoffman decided against the leading character being a female impersonator, but he remained an actor. Michael Harrison, as Schisgal named him, surfaced as an actor who needs $2,800 to keep from being prosecuted on unemployment insurance fraud charges. Harrison's acting partner (he takes lessons in this version) suggests that he audition as a woman for the soap opera role she did not get. He asks his make-up artist from a production of *Charley's Aunt* to transform him again into a woman, Dorothy. Moreover, Michael tells many people his charade, and he engages in many sexual encounters, including one that sends his co-star and himself to the hospital—conjoined genitally to her birth control device.

Michael continues as Dorothy even after the network (somehow) finds out her/his true identity: his ratings have saved the show. Finally, on *The Merv Griffin Show*, Dorothy reveals her/himself to be Michael.

By the time Gelbart joined the project, in late 1980, the script had been changed considerably from McGuire's original premise, but it still did not work. Schisgal wrote two versions, in May and June 1980, and changed the name of the movie to *Tootsie*, which was what Dustin Hoffman's mother called her son. Gelbart received the four earlier drafts, and generated his first of five drafts in February 1981. He accepted the job because the social content appealed to him and "With Dustin interested, I knew it would get on and I had good gut feelings." He viewed the story

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141 Larry Gelbart, "Tootsie—Murray Schisgal Version," ts. in UCLA Gelbart Collection, 1.
142 *Charley's Aunt*, written in 1892 by Brandon Thomas, is Broadway's most famous example of a farce in which one character has to save another by pretending to be his aunt. It was later made into a 1948 musical by George Abbott and Frank Loesser starring Ray Bolger, titled, *Where's Charley?*
143 Montgomery 116.
144 Montgomery 115.
as a kind of feminist *Gentleman's Agreement*,\(^\text{145}\) in that "through living the other person's life we come to understand what the other person is feeling."\(^\text{146}\) Hal Ashby (1929-1988), one of the most celebrated American directors of the 1970s, was signed to direct in March 1981, but did not last the year as director.\(^\text{147}\)

Writing for men in women's clothing was nothing new to Gelbart, after Hysterium in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, and Max Klinger in *M*A*S*H*. He had learned that in order to engage an audience and make the idea to cross-dress believable, the character's motivation had to be powerful. In *Forum*, it was a matter of life or death for Hysterium and Pseudolus; on *M*A*S*H*, Klinger reasoned that any measure was justified in an attempt to escape the war. The question of a man "debasing" himself as the only option points to a deeply imbedded chauvinism, implicitly arguing that wearing a dress signifies an almost irretrievable loss of power and respect. Without such hard-and-fast societal boundaries, comedy from the time of the Greeks and Shakespeare, and classic films such as Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* (1959),\(^\text{148}\) could not exist. Because Gelbart realized that "you can't

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\(^\text{145}\) The film *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) starred Gregory Peck as a writer who pretends to be Jewish in order to write a series of articles about anti-Semitism in the United States. His relationships with his fiancée, friends and co-workers become strained until the final lesson is learned by the fiancée: although she has claimed all along to be free of anti-Semitic feelings herself, when she is at a dinner party and someone tells an anti-Semitic joke, she sits silently by.

\(^\text{146}\) Montgomery 115. Gelbart noted the connection in another interview: "The same thing happened to Gregory Peck when he pretended to be a Jew in *Gentlemen's Agreement*. Except Peck turned out to be one of the best-looking Jews we've ever had. Dustin was not one of the best-looking women in the world" (Gefen 35).

\(^\text{147}\) Ashby's films include *Harold and Maude* (1971), *Shampoo* (1975), and *Being There* (1979).

\(^\text{148}\) *Some Like It Hot* dealt with a pair of musicians who witness the St. Valentine's Day Massacre and impersonate women to escape the gangsters that will surely kill them if found. The threat of death motivated the desperate characters.
do a better men-in-drag movie than *Some Like It Hot,* Tootsie, therefore had to explore new territory.\textsuperscript{149}

In the early 1980s, the Equal Rights Amendment became an increasingly visible part of the American social agenda. Men and women worked for equality between the sexes, and a different climate emerged in the business world.\textsuperscript{150} Schisgal included passing references to the ERA in his drafts: for example, Michael ignores an ERA rally early in the screenplay, only to take part in one later. Gelbart's versions treated the problem more internally, and so he has fewer "trappings" of the war between the sexes than Schisgal's.

In fact, Hoffman, Gelbart and the eventual director of the film, Sydney Pollack (1934- ),\textsuperscript{151} all take credit for the thematic epiphany that Michael receives as a result of his venture across gender boundaries. As the final film expresses the idea, "I was a better man with you, as a woman, than I ever was with a woman, as a man."\textsuperscript{152} That Michael Dorsey learned this lesson from the situations of *Tootsie* is not difficult to imagine. Perhaps all three collaborators learned this each in his own way, and perhaps all three justly take the credit. Hoffman, it seems, emphatically told Schisgal early on that he wanted to work on a project that asked the questions, "What if I were a woman? What would my life be like and how would I be different?"\textsuperscript{153} Pollack, when

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[150] To cite a coincidental piece of evidence related to *Tootsie:* a letter from Ann Migden, WGA Screen Credits Administrator, to Schisgal, Gelbart and McGuire greeted the three as "gentlepersons," despite the fact that all were male.
\item[151] Among Pollack's better known films are *The Way We Were* (1973), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), *Out of Africa* (1985) and *The Firm* (1993). He has also produced a number of films, especially those he has directed.
\item[153] Hoffman qtd. in Dworkin 81.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
he came aboard to direct, knew that he could not make just another man-in-a-dress sex farce, that there had to be some growth in the character.\textsuperscript{154} Gelbart, appropriately enough for a writer, put the idea into words: "I was riding in a car with Dustin and we were discussing the script and I said, 'I am a better man for having been a woman,' and he drove—I remember this—he drove up on the curb he was so knocked out by it."\textsuperscript{155}

Larry Gelbart noted that from first draft to final script, \textit{Sly Fox} had rewrites of all but one page (see Chapter 6); \textit{Tootsie}, in its evolution from McGuire's original, had rewrites of all but one \textit{speech}. The line in question occurs during a screen test of Michael in drag: when the producer asks whether the camera operator could move into a position to make Dorothy appear more attractive, he responds, "How do you feel about Cleveland?"\textsuperscript{156} The changes in dialogue were necessitated because of the changes in structure Gelbart brought to the film.

Overall, the story of an actor pretending to be a woman in order to land a role remained the central plot element of the movie, and for this, Don McGuire received a shared story credit with Gelbart, whose involvement in the creation and deletion of scenes, the attribution of motivations and consequences, and the layering of realities and perceived realities, made the script viable. For example, he added the character of Les, the father of Dorothy's soap co-star, Julie, as another obstacle to Michael's ability to sustain the impersonation.\textsuperscript{157} Les also provides a chance for the film to leave the

\textsuperscript{154} Sydney Pollack, commentary on \textit{Tootsie}, laserdisc, Criterion Collection, 1990.

\textsuperscript{155} Gelbart London interview.

\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Tootsie}, Columbia Pictures, 1982. Actually, in McGuire's version, the city in the punchline is Detroit.

soap opera for some time, for a weekend visit by Dorothy and Julie to his farm; there he takes part in a pivotal scene where the camera watches Dorothy (Michael) falling in love with Julie, while correspondingly watching Les fall in love with Dorothy.

As with *Rough Cut* and *Neighbors*, *Tootsie*’s director did not have experience directing comedy. "I am not a farceur . . . I am not Blake Edwards," Pollack told a reporter at the time of *Tootsie*’s release.\(^{158}\) Pollack, though, understood that the best comedy has to be grounded in reality, and that the characters cannot let the audience know that they know they are in a comedy and remain real.\(^{159}\) In this way, he moved in the opposite direction from that Avildsen took *Neighbors*: all of the surprises of the script lay ready for the audience to discover in *Tootsie*, and the consistency of tone allowed more humanity to reveal itself, which, in a movie about self-discovery, has to be the touchstone for all decisions.

Pollack, Hoffman and Gelbart discussed the script repeatedly, trying to bind every moment of the film to the reality of the situation. The *New York Times* critic, Vincent Canby, pointed out that *Tootsie* “returns the original meaning to the term ‘situation comedy.’”\(^{160}\) Over the span of his career, Gelbart has eschewed writing “jokes”—loose gags—and prides himself that he has produced comedy grounded in character and situation, however verbal.\(^{161}\) *Tootsie*’s humor depends on the interplay of the characters and not the dazzling verbal sleights-of-hand, as *Movie Movie* had,


\(^{159}\) Pollack, commentary on *Tootsie*, Criterion laserdisc.


although there are a few hints: for example, at one point Michael Dorsey's agent (played by Pollack in the film) calls him a "cult failure."

Gelbart's changes in drafts five through nine (after McGuire, Kaufman, and two Schisgals) cemented the structure and character relationships: Michael Dorsey in auditions; his relationship with the "nebbish" Sandy (played by Teri Garr, who also appeared in *Oh, God!*); his treatment of the soap's director, Ron; the way Rita, the soap's producer, gives Dorothy the job; the last minute script changes that require Dorothy to kiss the leading man; Julie's dinner invitation to Dorothy, and the accompanying troubles; Les and Dorothy; Michael complaining to George (his agent) that Sandy thinks he is gay, Julie thinks he is a lesbian, and that Les wants to marry him; Dorothy revealing her true identity during an episode of *Southwest General*, the soap opera; Michael and Les in the bar; and finally, the reconciliation between Michael and Julie.  

The filming of *Tootsie* is famous (or infamous) for the frequent arguments between Hoffman and Pollack. Gelbart called his relationship with Pollack a good one: "We got along well. I just didn't know he was getting along with twenty other writers at the same time." The actual number of hands and mouths that contributed to the final script is hard to establish with certitude. Between draft nine, Gelbart's last solo effort with *Tootsie*, and the final version, numbered fifteen, several writers worked on the screenplay. Elaine May contributed dialogue for the Sandy and

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162 Larry Gelbart, letter to Anne Migden, 21 Oct. 1982, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 2-5.
163 See Farber for a good synopsis of the clashes between director and star.
164 Rebello 102.
Julie characters; introduced Michael’s roommate character, a playwright named Murray (based on Schisgal’s relationship with Hoffman?), which largely reduced the agent’s role as confidante; and developed a structure for the party scene early in the film. The actor who played the roommate in the film, Bill Murray, ad-libbed a great deal of his dialogue; ad-libbing also took place among some of the other actors, but to a much lesser degree.\textsuperscript{165} Director Pollack even attempted a re-write in the form of an outline, in February 1982, before Gelbart’s last version. As Pollack remarked about his methodology, “I don’t feel it’s my film until I’ve run it through the typewriter once.”\textsuperscript{166} Drafts ten through twelve belonged to other writers, including Valerie Curtain and Barry Levinson, a team brought in one week into filming by Pollack to “smooth out” the script.\textsuperscript{167} Pollack credits Curtain and Levinson with the device by which Sandy catches the half-naked Michael about to try on her dress and assumes his amorous advances. Robert Kaufman signed his name to the thirteenth draft and Schisgal likewise signed the fourteenth, although their contributions at this point were questioned by Gelbart. The fifteenth draft represents the finished film, and that is the one that Gelbart used to generate his claim for solo screenplay credit with the Writers Guild.

The Guild’s credits arbitration board determined that Gelbart and Schisgal should share screenwriting credit. Elaine May probably gained more publicity for her uncredited writing than had she been officially listed. Pollack, it seems, sided with

\textsuperscript{165} Pollack laserdisc commentary.
\textsuperscript{166} Pollack laserdisc commentary.
\textsuperscript{167} Sragow 66. Levinson, who has become a director of some regard since (\textit{Diner, Rain Man, Good Morning Vietnam}), wrote for Gelbart’s television program \textit{The Marty Feldman Comedy Machine} in the early ’70s.
Gelbart: in a letter to the writer, he remarked, “It's quite clear that the credit belongs to you in this case and I would be very disturbed if the arbitration proved otherwise.”\textsuperscript{168} Pollack wanted the determination to take place quickly, since advertising and previews needed final credits. Michael Sragow, in an article about ghostwriting in the film industry, called \textit{Tootsie} “a triumph of Hollywood collaboration.”\textsuperscript{169} The film bears the truth of that assertion, since Hoffman, Pollack and Gelbart all worked over the material until it submitted to being, as critic Richard Schickel called it, “the best comedy of the year . . . popular art on the way to becoming cultural artifact.”\textsuperscript{170} Still, Gelbart’s experience writing the picture—not to mention having to share credit for it—remains an essentially unhappy one. He summarizes it in this way: “I guess I’m saying that the way to avoid another \textit{Tootsie} is not to write any more movies.”\textsuperscript{171}

For his work on \textit{Tootsie}, Gelbart would receive an Academy Award nomination for best screenplay, the Writers Guild of America Award (which he had previously won for both \textit{Oh, God!} and \textit{Movie Movie}), a Golden Globe Award and others. He shared them, of course, with the credited co-screenwriter, Murray Schisgal. As a public exhibition of the craziness of the motion picture writing business, Gelbart introduced himself to Murray Schisgal when they accepted the New York Film Critics Award, since in the entire process they had never met face to face.\textsuperscript{172}

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\textsuperscript{168} Sydney Pollack, letter to Larry Gelbart, 12 Oct. 1982, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.  
\textsuperscript{169} Sragow 64. Even the casting was a collaborative affair. Hoffman brought in Bill Murray, Hal Ashby, while he was the director, cast Charles Durning as the father, Elaine May picked Teri Garr, and Pollack selected Jessica Lange for Julie. Hoffman also begged Pollack to play the agent (Ansen 81).  
\textsuperscript{171} Rebello 102.  
\end{flushright}
If scripts are like children, as the saying goes, then *Tootsie* suffered through a paternity suit, and *Film at 11, or Hotel Royale* as it was also called, became a stillborn project in 1984. In that year, another film about the press coverage of the political turmoil in Cambodia was released. As the final draft states in Gelbart's hand, "Project finally abandoned because of the film *The Killing Fields.*" He and Arthur Penn had been discussing *Hotel Royale* for more than a decade with Jules Fisher; they had engaged in research and interviews; they had approached studios and been told for various reasons that the project was not right, only to be told otherwise by the very successful release of *The Killing Fields.* Gelbart had already been involved in his next adaptation, though—a return to a film idea he had inadvertently given his *Movie Movie* director Stanley Donen.

In 1981, while Gelbart was busy with *Neighbors, Hotel Royale* and *Tootsie,* he went to see a 1977 French farce called *Un Moment d'égarement (One Wild Moment),* written and directed by Claude Berri. In a conversation with Stanley Donen, he suggested Donen see the film, simply as entertainment. Gelbart quipped in an interview that "I know that Stanley likes romance and pretty girls, unlike the rest of us." Donen explained that after seeing the film, "it seemed to me that it could be done considerably better and I rang Claude Berri and asked him if he were interested in selling the rights to remake it." Once he secured an agreement to the rights, Donen attempted to adapt the film, but quickly called Gelbart back and invited him to

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176 Molday E8.
write it.\textsuperscript{177} Gelbart, whose plate was already overflowing, declined, and Donen went elsewhere for a screenwriter. He found Charlie Peters, the writer of a recent film comedy, \textit{Paternity}, and began collaborating on an outline. Peters and Donen added a "third act" to the original, because, as Donen pointed out, the original "ended with a freeze frame when the Michael Caine-character confesses the affair to his friend."\textsuperscript{178} \textit{Blame It on Rio}, as the film ultimately came to be called, runs perhaps another fifteen minutes (and several twists) after that point.

The story involves two best friends, Matthew and Victor—played by Michael Caine and Joseph Bologna, respectively—who travel to Rio de Janeiro for a vacation, each with his own teenage daughter and marital problems. Matthew falls in love with Victor's daughter, Jennifer (played by Michelle Johnson), amid a great deal of his protestation. \textit{One Wild Moment} ended with the admission to Jennifer's father, while \textit{Blame It on Rio} pursued the repercussions of the admission once Matthew's wife arrives on the scene. It seems that Victor had been secretly having an affair with his friend's wife, raising this "middle-aged male sex fantasy," as critics called it, into a fable about hypocrisy.

Donen and Peters had been having trouble selling the idea to other studios once Warner Bros., who had originally developed it, backed out. Peters had toiled for a year on several drafts, alternately titled, \textit{Love Rio}, \textit{One Little Mistake} and \textit{Carnival}. In December 1982, with the release of \textit{Tootsie}, Gelbart suddenly became available. He agreed to polish the dialogue, adding an almost non-stop wit to the speeches, making

\textsuperscript{177} Gelbart personal interview 10 Oct. 1996.
\textsuperscript{178} Molday E8.
the participants seem incredibly glib at times. In contrast to Tootsie, where Gelbart’s real contribution lay in the “wit” of his structure, Blame It on Rio retained Peters and Donen’s structure. Gelbart only had words to worry about.

In an early argument between Matthew and his wife, played by Valerie Harper, Gelbart’s ear for the language of marriage becomes evident:

MATTHEW. Am I boring when we’re together?
KAREN. Close. I’m boring when we’re together.
MATTHEW. Who said?
KAREN. You.
MATTHEW. Never.
KAREN. Haven’t you said that there were times you would rather be without me?
MATTHEW. Ah, that was only when I’m with you. Most of the time we’re too together. Sometimes we’re so us, I forget what it’s like just to be me. But when we’re apart, I miss you terribly.179

His style once again makes use of antithesis to create salient but humorous points in arguments, as he demonstrated earlier in Oh, God! and in United States.

The wit in other lines grows out of the twisted cliché, as when Victor sarcastically asks Matthew: “What the hell are you doing? Asking for her hand? ‘With this teething ring, I thee wed?’” or when Victor speaks of his soon-to-be ex-wife, “She wants a June divorce. She’s very sentimental.” Although this technique usually creates a lighter mood, in Blame It on Rio, Matthew’s daughter, Niki, uses it for poignant closure when she tells her father that “She’ll get over you. Just be yourself,” exposing in the subtext the years of pain she has suffered as her father’s daughter.

In one of the film’s central moments, Gelbart managed to combine several favorite figures of speech, the title of the original film, and a few twists:

MATTHEW. Last night never happened.
JENNIFER. I know. I was there when it didn’t.
MATTHEW. Now, I mean it. It was just one wild moment, that’s all it was. You’ve got to forget it. We’ve both got to forget it.
JENNIFER. I was just a one night stand?
MATTHEW. No, no, you’re more than that.
JENNIFER. Am I? [she moves closer]
MATTHEW. Jennifer, don’t.
JENNIFER. What’s the matter?
MATTHEW. You’re... you’re too next to me.

The last line quoted above recalls the title of a song Gelbart wrote in the late ‘50s with Sheldon Keller, “Baby, You’re too Next to Me.” It also follows Gelbart’s established diction for Matthew earlier in the film (“sometimes we’re so us...”).

Another remembrance he made to past writing occurs in a favorite expression, “—and a half,” which he picked up from his mother. He tries to work it into scripts as a kind of simple signature. In Blame It on Rio, it occurs in the following exchange:

MATTHEW. When you’re my age, do you know what I’ll be?
JENNIFER. Dead, I suppose.

180 The lyrics for the song bear repeating:
Don’t hold me tight, don’t sit so near
Don’t whisper nothin’, you’re tickling my ear,
Don’t make me fight what I don’t wanna fight,
Baby, you’re too next to me.

Don’t stroke my hair with your soft fingertips,
Don’t start a fire with the touch of your lips,
Don’t make me want what I don’t wanna want,
Baby, you’re too next to me.

I’m weak, my knees are givin’
I wanna die, but—Oh!—This is livin’

Don’t come any closer, not even a speck,
Don’t do that thing you do to my neck,
I wanna be what you want me to be,
So, Baby, you’re too next to me!

MATTHEW. Dead and a half.\textsuperscript{182}

Gelbart’s experience on the other side of the rewrite for \textit{Blame It on Rio} coincided with an executive producer credit on the movie, and his ability to make the film more than a farcical sex comedy stands as testimony to his sensibilities. Not since \textit{The Wrong Box} (1965) had Gelbart shared a part of the production credits, and that was the last time he had made notes that actually carried some weight behind them; that is, besides the weight of his arguments. During the filming of \textit{Rio}, Gelbart visited the set and noticed that Demi Moore, the actress playing Niki, was not sticking to the script. Evidently she had little idea of Gelbart’s tenacious defense of his words, and since this was her first film, she still had much to learn. Without giving away the lesson he had in store for her, Gelbart invited her to lunch and over a salad, asked, “Why aren’t you saying the lines as written?” She replied that she was making them her own, that she was paraphrasing them but still maintaining their sense . . . she approximated them. At this, Gelbart confronted her saying, “How would you like it if we started approximating your lighting or your make-up?”\textsuperscript{183}

Over the years, Gelbart has reduced a lesson learned on his very first screenwriting assignment, \textit{Fair Game}, into a compact formula: “You sign up, you become an employee, you have to take orders and swallow a lot of bitter pills.”\textsuperscript{184}

Gelbart had barely washed down his experiences writing films in the ‘70s and ‘80s when the next chapter opened in his career, the chance to write the book for a

\textsuperscript{182} Among other instances in his \textit{oeuvre}, in \textit{Movie Movie}, it appears as KITTY. He’s some guy.
TRIXIE. Yeh, a guy and a half.

\textsuperscript{183} Larry Gelbart personal interview 24 Sept. 1996.
\textsuperscript{184} Rebello 102.
musical comedy about the treatment writers receive in Hollywood called City of Angels. This next chapter proved, as novelist Philip Roth once observed, "Nothing bad can happen to a writer. Everything is material."185

CHAPTER 8: THE ONLY SAFE PLACE FOR WRITERS

Stage III: 1983-1991

• *City of Angels* (1989)
• *One, Two, Three, Four, Five* (1986)
• *Mastergate: A Play on Words* (1989)
• *Power Failure* (1991)

Music became a part of Larry Gelbart’s life in his earliest days. At one point, before his writing career had become an inevitability, he dreamed of being Benny Goodman, the famed clarinetist and big band leader. Gelbart soon realized, however, that “the job was already taken by Benny Goodman,”¹ and that he would have to dream elsewhere for a profession. Still, he never completely distanced himself from the clarinet or saxophone, and his ability with the instruments remains part of his “legend.”² It is not surprising, therefore, that the Broadway (and film) composer and jazz pianist, Cy Coleman (1929- ),³ would choose him as librettist-collaborator on a jazzy stage musical. Coleman wanted to utilize jazz themes not as they had been heard in theatres theretofore, but as real jazz—the way it is played in clubs. Coleman wanted to write a private-eye musical set in the ’40s, because that type of story evoked

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² David Zippel, telephone interview with the author, 23 March 1997.
³ Coleman began his career as a prodigy on the piano, making his formal debut in New York City’s Steinway Hall at age six. He planned to become a concert pianist, but soon began writing songs and scores. His Broadway scores include *Wildcat* (1960), *Little Me* (1962), *Sweet Charity* (1966), *On the Twentieth Century* (1978), *Barnum* (1980), and *The Will Rogers Follies* (1991). Coleman composed the scores for the films *Spartacus* (1960) and *Father Goose* (1965), among many others. His connection to Gelbart may be found in the casts and collaborators throughout his career: *Little Me* starred Sid Caesar with a book by Neil Simon; *Barnum’s* librettist was Michael Stewart, and *Sweet Charity’s* director and choreographer, Bob Fosse.

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and reinforced the jazz he heard in his head.\footnote{Broadway musicals that have adopted a “jazz” idiom include George Gershwin’s \textit{Porgy and Bess} (1935), Duke Ellington’s \textit{Beggar’s Holiday} (1946), and the Kander/Ebb/Fosse musical \textit{Chicago} (1976), but all subjugated the needs of the music to the classic formula of the popular show tune.} Since Gelbart also had the movies of that period playing constantly in his head,\footnote{Larry Gelbart email with the author 10 Oct. 1996.} the choice to make the musical into a \textit{film noir} seemed even more evocative and appropriate. When Coleman solicited Gelbart’s help, in 1981, Gelbart was in the process of ending a decade-long period of screenplay writing and heartbreaks (\textit{Neighbors}, \textit{Rough Cut}, \textit{Tootsie}, et al.—see Chapter 7). The opportunity to write a “film” for a venue besides the Hollywood machine allowed him to return—as with \textit{Movie Movie} and the send-ups on \textit{Caesar’s Hour}—to the favored 1940s, a period when he paid to attend screenings, and enjoyed the short subjects, newsreels and double features along with other teenagers.

Coleman and Gelbart decided that a Philip Marlowe/Raymond Chandler-type detective story best suited the style of music they envisioned. Modeled after such Humphrey Bogart movies as \textit{The Big Sleep} (1946) and \textit{The Maltese Falcon} (1941), Gelbart called his “film” \textit{Death Is for Suckers}, a title that balanced the hard-boiled jargon familiar to the genre with a clear indication of comic intent. His use of the subject was not isolated: the private eye parody became cinematic fodder for his colleagues Carl Reiner, with \textit{Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid} (1982), and Neil Simon, with \textit{The Cheap Detective} (1979).\footnote{The most interesting component of \textit{Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid} was its use of actual film clips from the period integrated through clever editing into a new story.} Thus Gelbart drew once again from his own affection for the films he watched in his youth and his days writing genre parodies for Sid Caesar. With \textit{Death Is for Suckers}, however, the satire resisted the outrageous in

\footnote{Larry Gelbart email with the author 10 Oct. 1996.}
favor of a compilation of clichés in word and situation, and sought to match the script’s finesse to Coleman’s sultry jazz melodies.

In *Death Is for Suckers*, detective Stone investigated the disappearance of a missing woman through several complications and missteps, just as in the films and novels Gelbart was mimicking. The first scene, with a “Mr. Cuckold,” involved Stone showing surveillance photographs of Cuckold’s wife “in seven delicious flagrantes” to the unhappy husband. According to Gelbart’s notes for the scene, Cuckold, “appalled,” says in a telling immigrant accent, “I’ll give you check,” reaches into his desk drawer, takes something out, swivels in his chair, and “blows his brains out.” The event allowed Gelbart to make a point through Stone, who turns to the audience and notes after the client killed himself that he won’t ever get that check, and that he’s “come to expect the worst of everyone,” an echo of the title character’s observation in *Sly Fox*: “Never think too little of people. There’s always a little less to be thought.”

Stone’s adventures with women also complicate the plot of *Death Is for Suckers*. He has affairs with the woman who hired him and her daughter, the object of his investigation. Furthermore, Gelbart makes use of several flashback scenes to Stone’s experience as a soldier in Germany during World War II, in which his involvement with a woman named Bobbie leads to Stone’s killing an unsavory rival.

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9 Gelbart “Stone” 1ff.
Gelbart and Coleman worked separately and intermittently in the initial stages, and as was Gelbart's wont throughout his career, he worked on several other projects during the same period. Besides the television spin-off AfterM*A*S*H (1983), the film Blame It on Rio (1984) and the Gulliver recording (1985), he produced two and wrote one of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences awards (the Oscars) television specials, in 1985 and '86. Coleman composed another musical in the mid-'80s, Welcome to the Club (1987), about a group of men handling divorce and alimony.

With all of these other projects before, or just behind him, Gelbart himself set out to write the book for another musical in late 1985 at the instigation of composer Maury Yeston (1935- ), who had written the music for Nine, based on the Federico Fellini film 8½. The composer had approached Gelbart years earlier, in 1981, but Gelbart, who was preparing the M*A*S*H spin-off AfterM*A*S*H, declined. Yeston at the time had Herman Levin as a producer, but did not have a librettist. Years later, Yeston again contacted Gelbart about his idea for a musical comedy that used the first five books of the Bible as source material and a starting point for the story of average people in the otherwise star-packed Old Testament. This time, Gelbart agreed to the project, whose concept he described as a "John Q. Bible" story.

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10 One of the telecasts involved a controversy about Phil Collins singing his own nominated song, "Against All Odds." First, the letter rejecting his bid to sing was addressed to "Mr. Phil Cooper;" next, Gelbart's committee selected Ann Reinking (who sang and danced in Movie Movie), a stage performer, to sing it; finally, after Collins told a Rolling Stone interviewer that Stevie Wonder's victory came about as the result of his blindness, race, humanitarianism, and L.A. connections, Larry Gelbart responded in a letter to Rolling Stone that Collins was simply a sore loser (Collins 1986).

11 In addition to the Tony for Nine, Yeston has most recently been awarded a Tony for Titanic: The Musical (1997).


Gelbart completed the first draft of *One Two Three Four Five*, as the musical
came to be called, in January 1986. It follows the development of humanity from the
Garden of Eden, and in the first scene, the garden dwellers have trouble finding the
right words at the moment of the fall from grace. Note the absence of the leading
characters, Adam and Eve:

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TARADEE. Oh, no!
MAYLIS. What is it?
CYNIA. What's wrong?
TARADEE. What's wrong? We're ray-ked!
MAYLIS (puzzled). Ray-ked?
KOL. Somebody here is ray-ked?
ROMER. That doesn't seem to ring a nerve.
KOL. Maybe what we are is pay-ked!
MAYLIS (frowning). Pay-ked?
CYNIA. That's not it either.
KOL. Maybe we're way-ked. Could that be it? Way-ked?
CYNIA. Isn't way-ked the time when we're not sleep-ed?
TARADEE. I know sleep-ed. That's what we are when we have all our breams.
KOL. Breams?
CYNIA. No one has breams. (Concentrates hard) Dreams is what we are (Corrects herself) What we have! Dreams!
DACK. Dreams! That's it! You unmembered!
MAYLIS. Dis-membered!
TARADEE. Sept-embered!
KOL. Remembered!
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As he has many times throughout his career, Gelbart found a way to bring
language into the comedy, and to write characters whose difficulties with idioms and
clichés ("ring a nerve") supplied a ready foundation for much of the humor. Gelbart
called his film *Oh, God!* "practically a 2000-year-old man routine," but *One Two*

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14 One rejected title (however facetious) was *Torah! Torah! Torah!* (Martin 5).
15 Maury Yeston and Larry Gelbart, *One Two Three Four Five*, ts., 20 October 1987, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 5-6.
16 In *Mastergate*, Chief Counsel Hunter also uses the mixed metaphor "ring a nerve," which shows how little progress mankind has made in 4,000 years, based on Gelbart's assessment.
Three Four Five seems an even more likely sibling to the Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner skits than Oh, God!, or perhaps it is more firmly drawn from the same source that inspired the 2,000-year-old Man: the Jewish experience.17

Larry Gelbart is a first-generation American, unsettled in his own life by a family move from Chicago to Los Angeles in his teens, a professional move to New York in his early twenties, and a near decade-long expatriation in England with his own family of seven. His religion provided him ample lessons about the wanderings of the Israelites and their treatment at the hands of foreigners; it anchored his identity also, as he told Pearl Shefiy Gefen in an interview: “Everything I am and say and do and feel and see is through a Jewish prescription.”18 His characters, however, are not necessarily Jewish in the way that Mel Brooks’ or Woody Allen’s are. Instead, Gelbart’s characters find other ways to “be Jewish.” Hawkeye Pierce, for example (although a creation of another) came across as pure WASP, except when he delivered lines like Groucho Marx; Pseudolus, a Roman slave, attains a fully realized existence in Forum only so far as he can also embody an American Jewish vaudeville clown. These examples are easy to distinguish from the hundreds of other characters Gelbart has developed. In the other cases, however, the incongruity of the situation and the language reveal the world view that marks Gelbart’s humor as Jewish.

17 In the Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner sequel, The Two Thousand and Thirteen Year Old Man, the ancient commentator recalls the origins of many everyday words, claiming an onomatopoetic basis for all words:
REINER. What about ‘shower’?
BROOKS. Look in there and what do you hear? ‘Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.’
REINER. Yes, but that’s not ‘shower.’
BROOKS. Add the hot water: ‘Shihhhhhhh OW!’ ‘ShihOWer’
“All that is not Torah is levity,” the Talmud counsels Jewish scholars. The very premise of creating *One Two Three Four Five* from the Torah’s periphery seems both a challenge and a validation of this pronouncement. Perhaps the biggest laugh of the first act, one that echoes not only the biblical tradition of the time just after the fall, but also the style of humor prevalent in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, occurs when the starving, wandering band of people decides to seek out the town they’ve just heard about:

TARADEE. They have light? At night?
ROMER. That’s right!
TARADEE. Maylis, pack the gods—we’re leaving!

The overall humor derives from context and condition in *One Two Three Four Five*, a hallmark of Gelbart’s style. Maury Yeston, the composer of the score, lauded Gelbart’s ability “to create with great deftness a comic surface in story, dialogue and character—and at the same time surprise us with moments of deep and genuine feeling without being sentimental.” While there are puns and other word plays, Gelbart has also maintained in the script a style of dialogue that weaves through each situation with clarity, rhythm and the poignancy of the human condition. For example, with Avi’s son about to be born, the other “hugely pregnant” women beholding the event offer their reflection on childbirth, a scene that parallels the “begetting” portions of the Bible:

CYNIA (Re [the pregnant woman in the] tent). How is she?
TARADEE. The first is always the hardest.
CYNIA. I didn’t find five and six such a picnic either.

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19 Qtd. in Cohen, *Jewish Wry*, 2.
20 Yeston and Gelbart *One Two Three Four Five*, I 2A.
TARADEE. It gets easier after ten.
CYNIA. Do me a favor. Never say that to Romer. Every time he stops praying, I'm in trouble.
TARADEE. He said there'd be a harvest.
CYNIA. There're harvests and there're harvests. Even wheat gets a few months off.\(^2\)

Major events in the Bible appear obliquely at times, in order to avoid showing the named players of the original stories. For example, during the Great Flood, Noah is nowhere to be seen. When "The Group" (as they are often called in the script) realize the impending disaster of the rising water, they get into barrels and fasten themselves to the back of the Ark, which, unseen, drags them off stage and to safety. The first act ends with the trek into Egypt begun by Joseph and his brothers. Thus, The Group become part of the mass of nameless, faceless Hebrew slaves in the Land of the Pharaohs. In the opening of the second act, Gelbart speculates about the types of jobs the slaves might have been forced to do. For instance, in a "vast Egyptian royal tomb," we discover The Group painting hieroglyphs:

KOL. This design goes over there.
DACK (Wiping brow). It's hard to breathe in here.
KOL. That's probably the whole idea.
TARADEE. I think this is a dirty word I'm writing.
CYNIA. This whole place is a dirty word.
(The SOLDIER, to discourage further chatter, cracks his whip in their direction. They continue their work in silence, until:)
KOL (Consulting his parchment). Another cat goes over there. (He indicates a space on the wall)
DACK (Dismayed). Another one? Do you know how many cats we've painted?
KOL. I think each litter must stand for a letter.
MAYLIS. These people just love cats.

\(^2\) Yeston and Gelbart \textit{One Two Three Four Five}, I 59. The women's dialogue might contain the germ of Pat Marshall's style of humor, which Gelbart would of course be mindful of in writing wives and mothers. Marshall's "I didn't have them through my face" quip that found its way into \textit{Jump!} (above, p. 194) seems to be allied with the tone of this dialogue.
CYNIA. They've got a lot left over from not loving people. (Which brings another crack of the whip from the SOLDIER.)

MAYLIS (To KOL). Let me do the cat. I'll go crazy if I paint one more person standing sideways.\(^2\)

Later in the second act, after a scene and song decrying the absence of gender balance in their history ("No Women in the Bible") and before crossing the Jordan River into the finale, The Group discovers the fragments of The Ten Commandments in pieces on the ground. They attempt to recreate the tablets as if working a jigsaw puzzle:

KOL (Moving pieces). 'Thou shalt,' something 'steal.' There's an empty space.
ARIELLE (Offering a piece). Does 'father' fit?
BMMHE. I've got a 'mother.'
KOL. Only room for three letters.
AVI'S SON. Here's a 'God.'
NOMA. Here's a 'thy.'
ROMER. Try a 'not.'
DACK. I've got four more of those.\(^4\)

The task of reconstituting the laws leads to a discussion of the many shortcuts, "borrowings," and indiscretions that have allowed The Group to survive. Each has sinned upon reflection, and Gelbart's point seems clear—besides the humor in noting the abundance of "nots" and the rather poetic image of The Ten Commandments in disarray: history often relates humanity's flaws, not just because the flaws are more interesting than normalcy, but because the shortcomings often occur at dramatic moments of choice, like the Flood.

While writing about the Israelites' problems, Gelbart encountered a contemporary story of human failings while he read the daily newspapers and

\(^2\) Yeston and Gelbart One Two Three Four Five, II 1-2.
watched the current television news and public affairs programming on networks such as CNN or C-SPAN. His outrage at the state of politics in America provoked him to write another piece for the stage at the same time as *One Two Three Four Five* and *Death Is for Suckers*. The ideas for *Mastergate: A Play on Words*, as the comedy came to be called, developed and simmered in Gelbart’s mind as he worked on the two musicals.

*One Two Three Four Five* reached its first audience at New York’s Manhattan Theatre Club in November 1987 as a “work-in-progress,” directed by Jack Viertel. A more elaborate six-week run, begun in December 1988, also appeared billed as a “work-in-progress,” this time directed by Gerald Gutierrez. Many of the troubles inherent in *One Two Three Four Five* seem to stem from the disparity in tone between the book and the score. Both directors pointed to this shortcoming in their notes to the authors. Viertel said that it may be the biggest and, and most unsolvable problem of all, because if the show never declares its one and consistent tone, then it can never be satisfyingly one thing. Certainly *A Funny Thing [Happened on the Way to the Forum]* could never have borne the emotional burden of either of the above mentioned songs [“I Won’t Cross Over” and “New Words”], yet most of the book to this show has that same light, wry tone. Either the songs need to lighten up, or the book needs to have a couple of more *Fiddler [on the Roof]*-like scenes of sentiment and take its characters more open-heartedly. I’m not sure what I’m suggesting here, except that something hasn’t been resolved, some fundamental decision hasn’t quite been made or adhered to.

Gutierrez wrote his notes halfway through the second run as suggestions for an eventual Broadway re-write. He aims his criticism early at the “increasing lack of harmony, in tone and in point of view, between score and book.” He adds that

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34 Yeston and Gelbart *One Two Three Four Five*, II 29a-30.

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although witty and sweet by themselves, the songs in the context of the play turn “soft—the imagery doesn’t flow naturally from the scenes—and they seem sentimental and, at times, banal.”

Gutierrez also alludes in his notes to a problem from the inception of One Two Three Four Five: “most of the songs were written in a vacuum, before there were any specific characters at all.” The sentimentality of the score calls into question Yeston’s statement about his admiration of Gelbart’s lack of sentimentality quoted above, and points up most clearly the incompatibility between Gelbart and Yeston. Evidently, to call theirs a collaboration in more than the most basic meaning of the word would disregard the end product. As with his work with The Conquering Hero thirty years earlier, Gelbart’s time and energies dedicated to One Two Three Four Five added up to an overall embittering undertaking, since, as Gelbart observed, “The only bad experience I’ve had in the musical comedy field was a result of bad collaboration.”

Little critical appraisal of the productions exist, because reviewers were not invited to either mounting. Ken Mandelbaum, a theatre writer, observed that not only were they never invited, “critics actually stayed away, in spite of the notable writers involved.” The Manhattan Theatre Club did provide a comment box for its patrons to provide feedback. The messages ranged from the wildly enthusiastic “Outstanding!! 5 stars. Keep up the good work!” to the merciless “ABANDON SHIP—Everyone should

25 Gerald Gutierrez, Memorandum to Maury Yeston and Larry Gelbart, 11 Jan. 1989, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 1.
26 Stone 17.
shake hands and go on to something else—the MTC audience should never be forced to pay through the nostrils to listen to flat, inane music, or as silly, absurd, dumb and undeveloped a piece of work as this is." Most of the comments offered up favorite/worst moments or songs to cut/lengthen. In the end, the authors did shake hands and go on to something else.

One Two Three Four Five never reached a full Broadway production, and Gelbart has long considered it a dead venture; Maury Yeston, however, tried to resurrect what he could of the piece: in September 1991, a production in Chicago dubbed History Loves Company opened with Yeston as sole credited author of music and book. Although perhaps offering a better (still by Gelbart) title, History Loves Company reportedly offered a highly revised, though not an improved, book. Sid Smith, in his Chicago Tribune review, dubbed the show "trite," saying it cried out for "some sort of authorial point of view." Gelbart asked that his name not be associated with the Chicago production at the Marriott Lincolnshire Theater, and no suggestion of Gelbart's former connection appears in the review. From the information in his story's lead, one could allow that Smith had never seen or heard mention of One Two Three Four Five.

When Gelbart and Cy Coleman returned full time to Death Is for Suckers, in early 1986, they found it necessary to bring in a lyricist to complete the writing team. Al DaSilva, lawyer for both Gelbart and Coleman, had recommended a classmate of his son's at Harvard Law School to Coleman, who has effectively worked with a number

\[28\] Manhattan Theatre Club audience responses, in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, n.d.

of lyricists throughout his career. David Zippel, the friend of Russell DaSilva, arrived at Coleman’s office and began discussing projects for musicals. According to Zippel, he told Coleman that he “remembered reading in what was then called the ‘News of the Rialto’ column in the Times that he and Gelbart were collaborating on a detective story.” Zippel asked if they had a lyricist yet, and Coleman told him he would consider him.

The resemblance between his own entrance into the business—when Harry Gelbart told Danny Thomas that the comedian should take a look at his son—and Zippel’s referral from Al DaSilva had to have occurred to Gelbart. The similarity continued when Gelbart and Coleman asked Zippel to write a couple of songs with them, as Gelbart remembered, “to see if we’re talking the same language.” Evidently, Gelbart’s sensitivity to the “fit” of his collaborators to his writing style, sense of humor, and the subject matter (not to mention the untried nature of Zippel, a Harvard Law School graduate) led him to ask for the tryout. Like Gelbart’s work for Thomas more than forty years earlier, Zippel’s “audition” material won him a spot on the team, although Gelbart was nearly half of Zippel’s twenty-eight years when his break came; the writer maintains that “We didn’t think we were giving him a wonderful opportunity, we thought we were getting a wonderful partner.”

In the fall of 1986, Zippel and Coleman worked on some songs to take with them to an initial meeting at Gelbart’s Beverly Hills home. Since the plot of Death Is

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32 Stone 19.
for Suckers had been charted by Gelbart, the first meeting had to demarcate which characters would sing, the subject of each song, and where the songs would go in the script. It seems that Gelbart sensed a comfort level and success in this collaboration that he had not felt since A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, or perhaps his penchant for complexity in plot had taken over, but Gelbart admitted to Coleman and Zippel that he wanted the story to be more than a “pastiche of a detective story” and that he needed to find “a literary equivalent” to the innovative use of jazz in the piece. He asked for some time to come up with a concept. The team members then parted to their respective coasts—Gelbart in California to write the dialogue, Coleman and Zippel to New York to fashion the songs and compose the score. Months of bicoastal faxing and “FedExing” ensued. Zippel admitted that he “really looked forward to getting those pages because [Gelbart] made everything we talked about so funny.”

In the meantime, Gelbart completed a One Two Three Four Five draft at the end of February 1987. By the spring, he had seized on that “literary equivalent” for Death Is for Suckers, what critic Edwin Wilson calls “a great moment at the end of act one . . . that brings the modern American musical slam-bang against Pirandello.” Gelbart’s concept involved dual plotlines for the musical: the detective story would occupy half of the stage time, while the process of writing the film noir would occupy the other. Stone the detective became the alter ego of Stine, the creator of Stone the

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33 Bell 4.
34 Bell 7.
detective. In this way, Gelbart would be able to satirize not the private-eye genre (which he loved), but the Hollywood movie business (which he did not).

*Death Is for Suckers* already had a completed plot for the “film within the play,” which not only made the transition to the dual plotline easier, but also helped to maintain the logic and believability of the movie Stine would be writing. Because of the necessity of adding what amounted to fifty percent to a full musical book, some parts of the detective story had to be eliminated, most notably the World War II flashbacks. With a backlog of Hollywood memories to flesh out the characters (including a genial barber named Gilbert), Gelbart set about writing the experiences of a young writer trying to balance his own authorial integrity with tremendous opportunity.

One of Gelbart’s most important early experiences in Hollywood came with the musical revue *My L.A.*, which he acknowledged as a source for this realization about Los Angeles:

> just how theatrically marvelous that marvelously theatrical city was, given the golden, orangey look of the Nathaniel West coast, the flamboyant flora, the exotic folk, each tinged by some degree of sunstroke; qualities that made the town that made the movies seem like a movie itself.36

He even reached back unconsciously to a moment in *My L.A.*, an introduction to the city made by a police officer speaking to recruits:

> HIGGINS. My name is Higgins, men. Sergeant Higgins. I'm your instructor and you're going to see a lot of me in the next few weeks. Being a motorcycle officer in L.A. is one of the toughest

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36 Larry Gelbart, *Introduction to City of Angels*, 3.
jobs in the country. There are two million people living in Los Angeles. A million and a half of them are driving automobiles and they're trying to kill the half million that are walking. So that will give you a rough idea of what you're up against. Now if any man here feels that he hasn't got the guts to face these Hell drivers, let him speak now. I'll see that you get transferred to the vice squad where you'll meet a nicer class of people [italics mine].

This population breakdown mirrors structurally Stone's own introduction of Los Angeles in the musical forty years later (but set forty years earlier):

STONE'S VOICE (over). "Three million people in the City of Angels according to the last census, easily half of them up to something they don't want the other half to know. We all get sucked in by the lobby. Palm trees finger the sky and there's enough sunshine to lay some off on Pittsburgh. But that's all on top. L.A., truth to tell's, not much different than a pretty girl with the clap" [italics mine].

Many of the most troubling experiences from Gelbart's screenwriting career emerge in one form or another in Stine's, creating another layer of complexity to the already involved story. For example, during Gelbart's battle with rewrites of Rough Cut, he told columnist Roderick Mann, "I'd be happy to have a card inserted there reading: 'The last five minutes was brought to you by Larry Gelbart.'" Compare this with Stine's rhetorical plea:

STINE. Am I supposed to run up and down the aisles in every movie house in the country and say I didn't write that?

Likewise, his earliest lesson in the pains associated with screenwriting came in writing Fair Game in the late '50s, when producer Charles K. Feldman informed Gelbart that

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37 My L.A., ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 1.
38 Larry Gelbart, City of Angels, 24. Note also the discrepancy between the two population counts.
39 Roderick Mann, "A Rough Time Was Had by All on 'Rough Cut','" Los Angeles Times, in the UCLA Gelbart collection, n.d.
40 Gelbart City of Angels 180.
Jeanne Moreau would be taking William Holden's role. This twist appeared in the musical thus:

STINE. What's left? Any other surprises? Any more little changes? Stone going to be played by Betty Hutton?41

The painful and confusing interchange with his friend, director Carl Reiner, on Oh, God! also found its way into Stine's world. He used elements of the screenplay arbitration—Reiner had added his name as a co-author to the shooting script on the set—intact to the musical, including Reiner's name in a more prominent position than the writer's, and the director's reason for the situation ("It was studio policy"):42

STINE (Showing the cover page): Screenplay by the two of us? BUDDY. Take it easy. STINE. We wrote this? With your name on top? BUDDY. It's studio policy. They automatically put my name on everything. We'll fix it. STINE. Why don't I believe you?43

The "Pirandello moment" alluded to by critic Wilson points to another level of complexity in the plot, and another area of conflict for the Stine character. Just as Stine has to deal with the directives of director Buddy Fidler, so too must he address the concerns of the private eye, Stone, who steps from the cinematic frame and confronts his creator:

STONE (To Stine). You really going to do this? . . . You're going to cave in? Just like that? (Beat) I wouldn't have believed it. STINE. You wouldn't've believed it? You??

41 Gelbart City of Angels 181.
42 Larry Gelbart, email with the author, 2 Dec. 1996.
43 Gelbart City of Angels 184-5.
This exchange leads into the first act finale, the song, "You're Nothing Without Me," and in the confrontation between writer and character one might imagine a similar struggle between Gelbart and his own creations. Perhaps the basis may be found in the long history Gelbart had writing for talented performers, like Sid Caesar or Red Buttons, who talked back when something did not agree with their conception of their own comic personae. Consequently, it is conceivable that Gelbart has figuratively heard from Michael Dorsey (in the voice of Dustin Hoffman), Richard Chapin (from United States), or M*A*S*H's Hawkeye Pierce. This last possibility recalls an actual, published (yet imagined) conversation between Gelbart and a character he created for the M*A*S*H series, the psychiatrist, Dr. Freedman.

Published in 1983 as Gelbart's introduction to Suzy Kalter's The Complete Book of M*A*S*H, the seeds of the Stone-Stine conversations present themselves fully four years before he hit upon the idea's use in Death Is for Suckers:

FREEDMAN. Please lie down on the couch.
GELBART. I don't usually do this on a first date.

(complying, looking up) There's a mirror on the ceiling.
FREEDMAN. I treat a lot of actors.
GELBART. I'm a writer.
FREEDMAN. Of comedy?
GELBART. Drama. I can't help it if people laugh at it.
FREEDMAN. And that's your problem?
GELBART. M*A*S*H is my problem.
FREEDMAN. How'd you do that?
GELBART. What?
FREEDMAN. Speak in asterisks.
GELBART. Comes from doing the series too long.
FREEDMAN. "Doing" it?
GELBART. Writing it, mostly. Stories, scripts, creating characters. I invented you.
FREEDMAN. (suppressing a smile) Oh, really?
GELBART. Sidney Freeman, the psychiatrist. You're a Sigmund of my imagination.
FREEDMAN. You actually believe that?

GELBART. All I have to do is backspace and you're out of this scene.⁴⁴

The duality of the creator-created as writer-character stands as but one example of the built-in binary form of Death Is for Suckers. Actors on stage double roles as people in Stine's life and as analogous characters in his screenplay. For example, the director of the film, Buddy Fidler, becomes Irwin S. Irving, “a movie mogul” (and Buddy's favorite character); Bobbi, Stone's ex-fiancée, parallels Stine's own wife Gabby. As Gelbart explains this last example, “Stine, accused of becoming a literary prostitute by his wife, Gabby, immediately bangs out a movie scene in which Stone discovers that the love of his life, Bobbi, has in fact become a literal prostitute.”⁴⁵ In this way, the writer lashes out at those who hurt him in the only way he is able to—with the written word.

Another level of duality lies in “Double Talk,” an oft-reprised song—sung by Stone, Stine, Buddy, Alaura, and even the ensemble at a party. The song exposes the duplicitous nature of these characters’ dialogue: each says one thing to the other character, and sings what's really on his or her mind (the truth) as an aside to the audience. This exchange between the director, Buddy Fidler, and his composer, Del DaCosta, demonstrates the effect, as well as the excellent interrelationship between dialogue and lyric:

BUDDY. Del! Del, baby! Everybody know Del DaCosta, Composer to the stars?

DEL. Know me? I owe alimony to half these people! And some of the women, too!

(As DEL and GUESTS mime chat:)

⁴⁵ Gelbart Introduction to City of Angels, 5.
BUDDY (Sings, re DEL). This tin pan putz is not the pick of the litter; There's not a clever note in his head. But what's invaluable Is he's so malleable, And Steiner's at Warner's And Mozart and Gershwin are dead. DEL (Spoken). What does anybody want to hear? (Replacing the pianist) Just name it and I can play it—just as long as I wrote it! BUDDY. And he probably wrote it right after somebody played it! There's food over here, there's food over there. There's enough food to make you sick!⁴⁶ (BUDDY continues soundlessly as:) GUESTS (Sing, re BUDDY). This pompous schmuck is making me nauseous, Somebody ought to set him on fire. I know where he can go, And I would tell him so, Except that the day that I do is the day I retire.⁴⁷

The flirtatious double entendre resembles the type of duplicity in “Double Talk,” and appears most prominently in a song between the detective and the femme fatale . . . ostensibly about tennis:

STONE. Well, don't let me keep you. (Reminding her) Your tennis game. (Sings) You seem at home on the court. ALAURA. Let's say that I've played around. STONE. Well, you don't look like the sort. ALAURA. My hidden talents abound. A competitor hasn't been found to defeat me. STONE. I bet you're a real good sport. ALAURA. Shall we say the ball is in your court? STONE. I bet you like to play rough. ALAURA. I like to work up a sweat. STONE. And you just can't get enough. ALAURA. I'm good for more than one set.⁴⁸

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⁴⁶ This line is a variation on one in *Sly Fox*: “There’s enough medicine there to make you sick” (10).
⁴⁷ Gelbart *City of Angels* 143-4.
Cy Coleman’s music here, as elsewhere, supports the binary nature of the musical by using a parallel phrasing (Fig. 2) that complements the back-and-forth nature both of a tennis match and a flirtation:

Fig. 2: “The Tennis Song,” by Cy Coleman; lyrics by David Zippel.

Zippel’s lyrics equal Gelbart’s witty and stylized libretto throughout, and the creators of the musical modeled this number on one of the most famous film noir scenes, from *The Big Sleep* (1946), between Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) and Vivian Rutledge (Lauren Bacall):

VIVIAN. Well, speaking of horses, I like to play them myself. But I like to see them work out a little first. See if they’re front-runners or come from behind. Find out what their whole card is. What makes them run.
MARLOWE. Find out mine?
VIVIAN. I think so.
MARLOWE. Go ahead.
VIVIAN. I’d say you don’t like to be rated. You like to get out in front. Open up a lead, take a little breather in the backstretch. And then come home free.
MARLOWE. You don’t like to be rated yourself.
VIVIAN. I haven’t met anyone yet that could do it. Any suggestions?
MARLOWE. Well, I can’t tell till I’ve seen you over a distance of ground. You’ve got a touch of class, but, uh, I don’t know how far you can go.
VIVIAN. A lot depends on who’s in the saddle.49

Gelbart, Coleman and Zippel realized that this kind of dialogue is for all practical purposes a spoken duet, and simply created a sung homage. Interestingly enough, this scene does not appear in the Raymond Chandler novel. Instead, it is the

invention of director Howard Hawks, and points to Gelbart’s experience with the
filmversions of the stories, and not the original novels. Lest anyone accuse Gelbart of
reflecting the odious Buddy Fidler, who told the writer Stine, “Sweetheart, I’m your
biggest fan. I’ve read a synopsis of every book you’ve written,” by not reading the
original works, Gelbart engaged in serious research—reading the novels, along with
other materials such as letters and biographies of Chandler. He admits, however, that
the film versions anchor his experience with the genre.

His research steeped him in Chandler’s style and diction enough to generate
seemingly classic lines, such as

STONE. She had the kind of face a man could hang a dream on, a
body that made the Venus De Milo look all thumbs, and only the
floor kept her legs from going on forever.

On the other side of the stage, his experience with and understanding of studio bosses
in the Samuel Goldwyn and Jack Warner tradition allowed him to mimick their value
system and the idiosyncrasies of their speech (the numerous “Sweethearts!”),
especially in the non-sequiturs and malapropisms, based, for example, on such
Goldwyn treasures as “Anybody who goes to a psychiatrist ought to have his head
examined” and “Oral contracts aren’t worth the paper they’re written on.” Buddy
Fidler’s observations in City of Angels that “flashbacks are a thing of the past,” or that
“It’s an unwritten law—in letters twenty feet high!” reproduce perfectly the legendary
“Goldwynisms” that have flavored Hollywood anecdotes since the ‘30s. True to his

50 Gelbart City of Angels 31.
52 Gelbart City of Angels 25.
53 Qtd. in Twentieth Century Quotes by Kevin Harris.
comic form, Gelbart again chose a subject and characters that allowed him to play
with language.

The film community and the fictional detective story overlap the same
location, Los Angeles, and on stage, the separation is elucidated by the
monochromatic design for costumes and sets of the film, and the full color
counterparts for the "real" world of Stine's Hollywood. Scenic designer Robin
Wagner, who won a Tony Award for his work, admitted that the only real requirement
of the piece was the separation of the two worlds and that he could have painted a
yellow stripe down the center of the stage to demarcate them.\textsuperscript{54} The show found
backers quickly, and the original production boasted not only Wagner's sets, but also
the indispensable work of director Michael Blakemore (1928-), who pleaded with the
authors to rename the musical, citing \textit{Death Is for Suckers} as a terrible title, one that
potentially cheapened the elements into just another private-eye parody, which he
found a "very tired, old idea."\textsuperscript{55}

After the authors settled briefly on \textit{Double Exposure}— a title that echoed the
\textit{film noir} classic \textit{Double Indemnity} (1944)—Coleman suggested \textit{City of Angels}, the
name by which the musical is known to audiences.\textsuperscript{56} It plays against the literal
meaning of the Spanish name for the city and also ironically pointed out the serious
lack of good souls there. The change in the musical's name was not the only one
Blakemore lobbied for. "I saw the challenge of the piece as involving the audience in

\textsuperscript{54} Qtd. By Gelbart in an email with the author, 10 Oct. 1996.
\textsuperscript{55} Hap Erstein, "'Angels' director worked miracles by sharp cutting," \textit{The Washington Times},
\textsuperscript{56} Larry Gelbart email interview 17 June 1997.
the story, almost in spite of itself," Blakemore told a reporter covering the national tour. Without ever having directed a musical before, he approached the material almost as if it were a straight play, and therefore did not buy into conventional musical comedy adornments such as chorus lines and elaborate dances. The decision to eliminate or modify the three big production numbers may have grown from an inexperience with the “syntax” of dance in musicals, but the change returned the piece to its central tone and mood: "I couldn’t see how you could punch somebody out for five minutes with a pirouette and make somebody believe in the story," Blakemore acknowledged.58

Blakemore’s greatest directorial success up until City of Angels was Noises Off (1984), a backstage farce that seems to have prepared Blakemore well for this complex musical. The stage manager for City of Angels called a cue (i.e., called for some change in lighting, stage scenery, readying actors, etc.) an average of every eight seconds, a breathtaking pace by any standard. Furthermore, preview performances of the show were canceled in order to accommodate additional technical rehearsals. Gelbart credits Blakemore with making the technically elaborate musical work to support the complexities of the plot: “[W]e never felt that one suggestion he made, not one of his rare demands was based on ego. Whatever glory he sought was for the show, not for himself. He put his hand to everything without leaving a single fingerprint.”59

57 Erstein.
58 Erstein.
59 Gelbart City of Angels Introduction 7.
Before *City of Angels* opened, however, Gelbart found time to set down the idea he had while watching the evening news. Although he had ample opportunity in the *M*A*S*H* years to voice political opinions, he credits the availability of political news on CNN and C-Span with making him even more of a political person: "I woke up one day and I knew too much," he said.\(^6\) He wrote notes for only a few weeks before completing a short draft in February 1988, and a full "first draft" by May of that year. He initially thought to write a film about a movie studio serving as a cover for illegal government activities. Gelbart's experience had shown him, however, "how long it takes to make a movie," so he "thought of a faster and perhaps better way to tell the story, by turning the focus onto the investigation of the events without dramatizing the events."\(^6\) In this way, he would not have the problem of convincing movie producers to make the film, as he had with, for example, *Hotel Royale*. The idea soon blossomed, however (just as *City of Angels'* detective story developed into a double narrative), into a theatre piece satirizing not only scandalous activity, but also the public hearings attempting to uncover it. The proximate inducement to write it as a stage play came from the American Repertory Theatre (ART), whose artistic director, Robert Brustein, had enjoyed Gelbart's re-working of classic comedy—in *Sly Fox* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*—and wondered if he might like to adapt Aristophanes' political satire *Peace* for his company. Brustein regards Gelbart as "someone with the rare capacity to combine high culture and low burlesque,\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Stone 14.
\(^6\) Larry Gelbart interview by Arthur Holmberg, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 1.
precisely the qualities I love in the theatre." Gelbart responded with the idea for *Mastergate: A Play on Words*, which Brustein accepted.

Pat Marshall came up with the name for the piece, which echoed the many "-gates" in American politics. The subtitle, "A Play on Words," not only invites the public to surmise the pun of "Mastergate" (which the play's Sen. Bowman explains further as "governmental self-abuse"), but also points to Gelbart's chief aim in his satire: "It's a little late to discover, 'Oh! Politicians are crooked!' *Mastergate* is about words, not politics." Several times in his career, Gelbart has confronted the concept of "double talk." During *Caesar's Hour*, the writers generally referred to Sid Caesar's mock-foreign accents as "double talk" or "double speak." In *City of Angels*, as noted above, several songs went by the name "Double Talk," a reference there to the characters' attempts to hold and narrate simultaneously their own conversations. A third use of the term "double talk" emerged in some critics' assessments of *Mastergate*. When asked in an interview about politicians' double talk that is satirized in his play, Gelbart quipped, "I'd settle for double talk. I think we're up to quadruple talk now." Thus Gelbart took to task the politicians' penchant for obfuscation. In another interview at the time of *Mastergate*’s Broadway opening, Gelbart connected the role of language further to his anger:

> I know that I can't get the response I want in an audience unless it's very, very clear. I know that if I want to get a laugh, I have to be precise in what I'm saying. I would expect that same sort of attention to be paid to matters equally as important as laughter, such as life and

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death, when it comes to the men and women who control our destinies.65

In an interview with Dick Cavett in 1989, the talk show host asked Gelbart whether he had ever read George Orwell’s essay, “Politics and the English Language” (1946), in preparation for his work on Mastergate. Gelbart responded that, no, he hadn’t read it—astonishing in light of the many parallels to be found between Gelbart’s play and Orwell’s essay.66

Orwell begins “Politics and the English Language” by stating that, although English is in a state of decline, “the process is reversible.” The decline, he feels, intensifies over time, as effect becomes cause, reinforcing badly used language: “It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.”67 Mastergate is rife with examples of badly used language so skillfully rendered in Gelbart’s dialogue that some critics have commented on the documentary quality of the production.68 Brustein acknowledged during rehearsals that Gelbart was having “a hard time trying to invent things that haven’t already been articulated in congressional hearings.”69

Orwell lists several faults of usage that mar language’s ability to communicate clearly and thoughtfully. He first addresses the subject of dying metaphors, phrases

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65 Larry Gelbart, Spotlight, television interview by Edwin Wilson, The Graduate School of the City University of New York, 1 Nov. 1989.
66 The Dick Cavett Show, CNBC, 8 Nov. 1989.
67 George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” 1. Gelbart echoed these sentiments with regard to the lowest common denominator requirement of TV in a Newsweek article in 1983: “We don’t use language to the extent we should, and television has made it even worse. It’s forever showing us the shortcut in communication. So language, a very powerful tool, has been blunted” (Gelbart TV, Movie Bosses 54).
68 Kroll and Watt, among others.
that lack so much of their original vividness that they are in danger of actually
portraying a meaning opposite to the one intended. To cite an example from
Mastergate, as Maj. Manley Battle testifies:

BATTLE. Self-interest begins at home, sir. The US Air Force has
thousands of personnel in Ambigua, learning the ABC's of our
IBM's, manning our most highly secret missile silos positioned
here—[Pointing at map] and here—which place us logistically
just a nuclear hop, skip and jump away from one of a thousand
Communist countries.70

The use of "hop, skip and jump" with regard to a nuclear missile trajectory is
frightening in real life, the subject of satire in comedy. The passage above contains
other obvious faults, such as the exaggerated and/or vague use of "thousand" in the
figures presented, but Orwell's essay next censures the use of operators or verbal
false limbs. These fall into two categories; first, the addition of unnecessary words to
verb phrases:

HUNTER. I'm most curious now as to the substance of what was
actually said, that in preliminary testimony you've stated you
recall remembering, Mr. Lamb. (40)

"Politicians always find an extra syllable or two," Gelbart explained to the ART's
dramaturg, Arthur Holmberg. Orwell's second subset of false limbs includes the
overuse of suffixes arbitrarily or spontaneously added to words, as when one puts
"-ize" at the end of a word to form a verb in hopes of sounding profound. One of the
eye monologues from the play provides the finest example:

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70 Larry Gelbart, Mastergate: A Play on Words in Mastergate and Power Failure: Two Political Satires
for the Stage (New York: Applause, 1994), 66. All of the quotations illustrating Orwell's points will be
taken from this play.
BOWMAN. Let me emphaticize one thing at the outset. This is not a trial. We are not looking for hides to skin, nor goats to scape. (13)

Next on Orwell's list is *pretentious diction*, wherein he pays particular attention to bad writers, "especially scientific, political and sociological" ones, who use Latin and Greek roots to "give an air of culture and elegance." *Mastergate*’s most pretentious speaker in this area, Sen. Oral Proctor, provides the following illustration:

PROCTOR. Mr. Butler, please elucidate us in your inferral regarding Mr. Slaughter's involvement, if you will. (27)

Furthermore, this speech provides an example of Orwell's related observation that "it is often easier to make up words of this kind than to think up the English words that will cover one's meaning"—as "inferral" readily shows.

Orwell's final category, *meaningless words*, applies not to words that lack any meaning, but to words whose meanings are so many and so abused as to render the various denotations contradictory and thus meaningless. The essayist offers words associated with art criticism—"romantic, plastic...sentimental...natural"—and political words—"democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotic..."—as examples of words that "not only do not point to any discoverable objects, but are hardly ever expected to by the reader." The playwright offers many examples of these words throughout *Mastergate*, as for example:

BATTLE. San Elvador lies just right of center here in Central America. It has a democratic form of government that has been run by its Army for the past forty years. Passionately anti-communist, with a vigorous opposition press, a strong, vocal church and free elections that are promised regularly. (65)
Apart from these specific categories, Orwell makes many other important points about words and their relationship to political health: "In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible." Regarding *lost metaphors*, and the related *euphemism*, once again, he sees the value to politicians who do not want to fill the audience or reader with ideas: "Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things [like the destruction of whole villages] without calling up mental pictures of them." Based on a reading of *Mastergate*, and his other political works, Gelbart would agree wholeheartedly with the essay's assessments, especially Orwell's contention that "If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought."

Another technique that Gelbart has used throughout his career—as in Movie Movie's stilted dialogue or Buddy Fidler's non-sequiturs—appears in *Mastergate* in many forms. The non-sequitur and the tautology are related in a perverse sort of way, and this relationship provides characters with humorous, empty, but altogether realistic-sounding lines. For example, when confronted by a news reporter about his major role in the illegal activities, Secretary of State Bishop declares

**BISHOP.** That is a gross exaggeration. My involvement was strictly limited to the extent of my participation. (50)

or in this breathtaking "opening statement" monologue spoken by a mid-level IRS official:

**LAMB.** Yes, sir. Thank you. *[Reads from a prepared text]* 'I wish, first of all, to extend my extreme gratitude to the Committee for the privilege of being subpoenaed, so that I might clarify the version I have given of the events under investigation. I secondly thank the Committee for granting me limited immunity, in that it gives me leeway to tell everything I know without having to tell everything"
I know. It has been most difficult remaining silent during all I’ve said up to now, but in lieu of the fact that certain prior actions by others, which could conceivably include myself, have been labeled as possible criminal behavior in high places, I have felt it my duty to remain steadfastly evasive and selectively honest so as to protect the national interest and, above all, to protect the President’s security. Looking back in hindsight, there are many things I would have done differently in the past, but that I did whatever I have been told it’s possible for me to say I did because I felt I was doing my best acting in the interests of our government. I also ask the Committee to remember that, ethics and morality aside, I felt I had a higher obligation to do as I was ordered to. I’m aware that that’s not an alibi, but I know you’ll agree that it is an excuse.’ Thank you, Mr. Chairman. (31)

Some might argue—and Gelbart clearly does in Mastergate—that lawyers devise such language in order to detract from the understanding of the text and therefore the accountability of their clients. Orwell observed that “A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself.” Jack Kroll, in his review of the play for Newsweek magazine, succinctly condenses the parallel examples above to a simple, “If George Orwell had been a gag writer, he could have written Mastergate.”

The political side of Mastergate cannot be ignored, coming as it did on the heels of the Iran-Contra investigations. In a Newsweek interview from 1983, Gelbart summarized his feelings about why politicians have earned a special place in the tradition of satire:

Comedians sense when a politician is ripe. Some little act betrays pomposity, stupidity or arrogance, and it’s time to go after them. It’s the idealist in you saying to the politician: ‘I wish you were better. I

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wish you were Abraham Lincoln. And if you are going to be such a fool, I’m going to have to show you how disappointed I am in you.\textsuperscript{72}

Gelbart admitted the source of his frustration reached back into the ‘50s, when the Army-McCarthy hearings took place as the earliest televised national scandal.\textsuperscript{73} For the first time, citizens were able to hear what politicians sounded like in the moment, without scripts or speeches. As comedian-author Steve Allen described an example of language dysfunction from that hearing,

Senator McCarthy stalked out of a congressional committee room in a rage, to be met by a bevy of reporters who asked him to comment upon a shocking allegation that had just been made. ‘Why, it’s the most unheard-of thing I’ve ever heard of,’ McCarthy exploded.\textsuperscript{74}

Gelbart himself recalls a particular comment that Sen. Strom Thurmond made to prospective Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, “I just have one question here that I would like to prepare.”\textsuperscript{75} Gelbart moved the language only a bit farther afield in \textit{Mastergate}, with cognates such as

PROCTOR. I just have one or two questions which I don’t quite understand.\textsuperscript{76}

Often in his career, Gelbart has termed theatre, “the only safe place for writers.”\textsuperscript{77} The ability to fine tune the material up to and beyond opening night, with protection for the script from meddling hands, allows a playwright a very large

\textsuperscript{73} The McCarthy-era hearings and blacklisting also provided a social sidebar to Neil Simon’s \textit{Laughter on the 23rd Floor} (1991).
\textsuperscript{75} Stone 15.
\textsuperscript{76} Gelbart \textit{Mastergate} 25.
comfort zone in stage work. The playwright also receives immediate feedback from a live audience, almost a necessity with comedy, where changing a syllable can mean the difference in getting a laugh. As David Ogden Stiers observed about Gelbart’s dialogue, “If you miss an ‘and’ or a ‘but’ or a ‘which’ or a ‘who’ it throws it off just a little bit. Then pretty soon it wobbles like a top. and you get all off and you have to start all over again.”

_Mastergate_ opened 13 February 1989 at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, under the direction of Michael Engler. Brustein recommended Engler, and Gelbart found the young director was “talking about the same piece of work.” Frank Rich’s Cambridge review called _Mastergate_ “what may be the most penetrating, and . . . surely the funniest, exegesis on the Iran-Contra fiasco to date.” Gelbart has called Rich’s piece “a valentine” from the critic, published as it was on 14 February, and containing passages of high praise. Part of the decision to bring the play to Broadway rested with the rave from Rich’s ART review. When the play did open on Broadway, Rich’s assessment was decidedly more negative. He states in the 13 October 1989, review that “What Mr. Engler cannot do is disguise the fact that _Mastergate_, however smart, is not the Broadway show its venue suggests but a sketch—and one that feels stretched to fill 90 minutes.” Other reviewers saw the merits as well, and all who praised, praised the fun with the language, the serious

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message under the humor, and the cleverness of the premise. For the most part, those who did not like Mastergate split on their reasons: Howard Kissel, writing for the Daily News, called its title “adolescent,” and didn’t find a great deal of power in the scenes; Doug Watt, in “Second Thoughts on First Nights,” thought it long by an hour; and in the New York Post review, Clive Barnes said he felt a “fizzle at the end.”

In the end, Gelbart wanted two things out of Mastergate: to tell America, “I heard this and watched this along with you and those of you who were really angered by this, you’re not alone” and for the audience to “walk out of the theater . . . a little less susceptible to political snow jobs and a little more sensitized to gibberish.” He eschews the label “satire” for Mastergate, explaining bluntly, “The real hearings were satire. This is ridicule.” Most critics did label it satire, however, and reminded their readers of George S. Kaufman’s legendary quip that “Satire is what closes on Saturday night,” and in a very real sense, Mastergate: A Play on Words is Gelbart’s Of Thee I Sing (Kaufman’s own satire of politicians and their foibles). Like a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts, Mastergate’s Broadway run fell short of expectations, closing 10 December 1989—the very day before City of Angels opened.

After almost eight years of planning and three years of intense writing, “faxing and FedExing,” as well as long, involved technical rehearsals, City of Angels opened at the Virginia Theatre in New York—the same (though renamed) venue that housed Gelbart’s The Conquering Hero nearly thirty years earlier. Critics and audiences noted

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82 All reviews may be found in the New York Critics Reviews, 1989, 194-199.
83 Caro.
85 Kroll.
that *City of Angels* represented a clear departure from the run of British imports and even the "traditional" American musical. Blakemore cut the majority of the dance, the score featured jazz riffs, and the book became an equal partner with the score (all unusual for Broadway musicals). Gelbart commented on the authors' conscious decisions in these areas:

> Very often the book serves the score. In this show, there was tremendous emphasis on the book as well. Perhaps that upset people's expectations of what songs should do for them in the show. We didn't go for the big buttons. We didn't go for the big payoff. We wanted this kind of forward motion all the time. Not that we mind applause or that we wanted to discourage anybody, but the numbers were built to be, perhaps, less prominent than they might be in a more conventional musical.\(^8\)\(^6\)

This time, his collaboration was enjoyable, as were the results: most of the critics celebrated the return of American-style musicals; they appreciated the jazz and the wit;\(^8\)\(^7\) they split on the quality or sustainability of Zippel's lyrics, and occasionally picked an actor out for praise or censure. In all, *City of Angels* proved to be a solid hit, winner of the Best Musical Tony in 1990. Individual Tony awards were won by Cy Coleman and David Zippel (music & lyrics), and by Larry Gelbart (book); acting Tonies went to James Naughton (for Stone) and Randy Graff (for Oolie, the secretary); Robin Wagner also won for scenic design, a recognition of the visual and technical side of the show.

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\(^8\)\(^6\) Clifford Gallo, "The Entertainer: This Country's Best Comic Dramatist Explains It All to You," Clipping in American Film Institute Biographical File. n.d.

\(^8\)\(^7\) Frank Rich even pointed out that Gelbart had mischievously slipped in the name of Mastergate's Master Studios as Buddy Fidler's production company in *City of Angels*. 

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Within six months of winning the Tony again, Gelbart had another idea and another first draft for a stage play. Like Mastergate, it would be written quickly and would comment on power politics, but in a much darker and more society-wide vein. Moreover, the new play would also receive its world premiere at the American Repertory Theatre under the direction of Michael Engler. Mastergate was a three-ring circus; his new play would borrow the structure of Arthur Schnitzler's La Ronde—one large ring—to explore an American society so corrupt that it no longer bothers to hide its skeletons in closets. The working title, Feats of Clay, sardonically commented upon the gap between what people present of themselves to the world, and what actually lives inside them. Not simply the double-talk of City of Angels' Hollywood types, or Mastergate's Washington insiders, this new play pointed a satirical finger at the hypocrisy of many of those to whom we entrust power. Thus, Gelbart adopted a new, more targeted title for the piece; he called it Power Failure.

As Schnitzler did with La Ronde, Gelbart established duet scenes where one character from each scene may be found in the next scene; the new character in that scene remains for the following scene, and so forth, until the first character of the first scene returns to cap the piece, or more precisely, to close the circle. Gelbart wrote ten scenes for Power Failure, although the structure allows for an unlimited number (as long as character “A” returns for closure). The scenes follow this synopsis: in the first scene, Will, a convict, is being pressured by an author, Coyne, to tell his own version of his story to save his life; scene two involves Coyne telling her doctor-husband, Billings, that she can’t wait for Will to die so she can release a scathing book about his crime; the third scene finds Billings and a new patient, the rich Mr. Worth, who wants...
a disease planted in him to avoid government prosecution; fourth, we discover that Worth was wearing a listening device at the behest of Snow, a federal agent-prosecutor, who has been out to get Billings for years; in five, we watch as Snow avails himself of sex and drugs with a high-class call girl, Myra; Myra, the picture of domesticity in scene six, tries to raise the spirits of her husband, the arms dealer, Armor; the seventh scene brings Armor together with General Graves, a presidential hopeful; the eighth scene finds Graves being out-maneuvered by a congresswoman, Keene; Keene in scene nine serves tea and blackmail to a distinguished clergyman, Rev. Little, whom she knows has been making obscene phone calls; the final scene has Little giving final absolution to Will, who will be executed shortly for killing his family ... Will did not know his wife's indiscreet phone conversations were one-sided calls from Little.

Perhaps Gelbart was promoting John Donne's meditation, that "No man is an island," to cement the message of Power Failure. All of the characters interweave their lives for the most part in ignorance of the others and the effects. The scenes and characters therefore graphically arrange themselves in this way—each side of the star in Fig. 3 represents a scene between the two characters at either end of the segment.

Except for the Schnitzler structure, Power Failure may be Gelbart's most thoroughly original work: not based on the work of a classic author, like Plautus or Ben Jonson; not adapted from a novel, as The Wrong Box or Oh, God!; not based on classic films or film genres, as M*A*S*H, The Conquering Hero, Movie Movie, or City of Angels; finally, it was not written in collaboration with others. Power Failure represents the mature reactions of an artist who feels compelled to place on the stage
the kinds of acts that lead to his own disillusionment. Gelbart found himself “writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper that doesn’t exist.”\(^8\) His next ventures would be even more op-ed. In the first half of his career, Gelbart learned how to write and polish comedy; from \textit{M*A*S*H} to the present, he has been turning his abilities

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
    
    \node (1) at (0,0) {Will};
    \node (2) at (1,1) {Little};
    \node (3) at (2,0) {Goyne};
    \node (4) at (1,-1) {Billings};
    \node (5) at (-1,1) {Keene};
    \node (6) at (-2,0) {Graves};
    \node (7) at (-1,-1) {Worth};
    \node (8) at (-0.5,-1.5) {Armor};
    \node (9) at (0.5,-1.5) {Myra};
    \node (10) at (0,-3) {Snow};

    \draw[thick] (1) -- (2);
    \draw[thick] (1) -- (3);
    \draw[thick] (1) -- (4);
    \draw[thick] (1) -- (5);
    \draw[thick] (1) -- (6);
    \draw[thick] (1) -- (7);
    \draw[thick] (1) -- (8);
    \draw[thick] (1) -- (9);
    \draw[thick] (1) -- (10);

\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

\textit{Fig. 3: Power Failure’s Circuitry}

writing comedy to a more and more social purpose. “I’m not quite the pussycat you think I am,” he points out with regard to \textit{Power Failure}.\(^9\) An interviewer at the time asked Gelbart whether his latest play represented “an evolution of his ‘Mastergate’ preoccupation with \textit{la condition humaine}.” He replied with a quick “\textit{Je can only pense so.”}\(^9\)

Except for the Harvard (ART) production in 1991 and a workshop at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge in 1994, \textit{Power Failure} has remained totally in Gelbart’s possession—no Broadway or Off-Broadway productions; he considers it (and his career) a “work in progress.” From 1991 until today, Gelbart has become more involved in the intersected medium of the made-for-cable television movie, the

\begin{flushright}
\textit{88 Stone 15.}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{89 Larry Gelbart, interview by Alan King, \textit{Inside the Comedy Mind}, HBO, 23 July 1991.}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
subject of the next and final chapter. Thus, *Power Failure* may surface later, and as Gelbart recently admitted: “I would like to bring it to the screen. I think the small screen. Although if enough tall actors wanted to do it . . .”

All through his career, Gelbart has never stopped learning from the medium or his collaborators. In the 1980s, with *Mastergate* and *Power Failure*, he demonstrates that he also learned from C-Span, CNN and the evening news, and turned his understanding into social commentary for the stage. More than original works, the period reveals Gelbart’s conscious placement of his material into a genre or medium, and his work with plotting in *Power Failure*, for example, shows that Gelbart has never shirked from a weakness, but instead has tried to craft the right work for his themes—language use and abuse, the position of the writer, and the interconnectedness of humanity.

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CHAPTER 9: STRAIGHT REPORTAGE

Film III: The Cable Television
Years—1991-1997

- Mastergate /Showtime (1991)
- Barbarians at the Gate /HBO (1993)

One of Gelbart’s favorite jokes made at the expense of the entire process of writing comedy—"[I write] drama; can I help it if people laugh at it?"—appeared in a wry variation during a discussion of City of Angels’ director character, Buddy Fidler, in a 1990 interview with John McLaughlin:

McLAUGHLIN. You burlesque him, do you not?  
GELBART. I thought it was straight reportage ...

Within the last ten years, three of Gelbart’s most prominent projects arguably fell under the category of “reportage,” since he held three separate yet connected areas of society up to a stronger social scrutiny than he had given audiences even in M*A*S*H. As Linda Bloodworth-Thomason likened Gelbart’s M*A*S*H writing to a weekly soapbox or op-ed opportunity, so too have critics treated these latest works as a sampling of his vigorous defense of what he considers decent human behavior. Linda Winer, in her review of Mastergate (1989), called that play a “Mash note to Washington.” In his first written-for-cable film, Barbarians at the Gate (1993), he displayed—via farce—the inner workings of corporate America for all to see. Finally,

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1 Larry Gelbart. Introduction to The Complete Book of M*A*S*H by Suzy Kalter.
2 John McLaughlin, McLaughlin, CNBC, 29 June 1990.
Gelbart's latest satirical swipe at the ominous social phenomenon of media power, 
*Weapons of Mass Distraction* (1997), offered him a third opportunity to write (a là 
*Power Failure*) “basically an elaborate letter to the editor, saying this is what I think is 
going on, this is what I think are the dangers.”

*Mastergate* underwent several revisions in its trek from the American 
Repertory Theatre to Broadway and to cable television. An inveterate and 
unapologetic re-writer, Gelbart concluded long ago that “It’s all just writing . . . all 
part of the process.” In the case of *Mastergate*, between the Harvard and the 
Broadway runs, Gelbart added mentions of other scandals—especially HUD—as a 
way of showing more assuredly that the satire need not be limited to the Iran-Contra 
fiasco. Gelbart also inserted more references to the “Hollywoodization of 
Washington,” such as the recent network practice of using movie clips as part of 
news packages. He told an interviewer: “I was watching TV news last night. They 
were describing the downing of the two Libyan jets by American pilots over the

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2 Robert J. Elisberg, ed., “An E-mail Interview with Larry Gelbart,” Writers Guild of America, West, 
website at http://www.wga.org/craft/interviews/gelbart.html
3 The scandal involving the Department of Housing and Urban Development concerned New York 
Senator Alphonse D'Amato’s lobbying at HUD on behalf of his Puerto Rican “constituents,” which was 
so intense that officials there dubbed him “the senator from Puerto Rico.” The Alameda Towers 
project and other Alameda Associates ventures eventually received more than $60 million in HUD 
building subsidies. Between 1984 and 1988 the small US territory received considerably more HUD 
subsidies than the senator’s home state of New York, the second most populous state in the nation.
4 Winer. As an illustration of Gelbart’s almost obsessive need to rewrite: for a Writers Guild salute to 
his career held in January 1997, he rewrote excerpts from his work. This speech from *Mastergate* 
updated the scenario through the Clinton administration’s scandals: 
   BOWMAN (Reads). ‘If we, as a nation, have learned anything from Water, Whitewater, Travel 
   and Iran-Contra-gates, it is that those who forget the past are certain to be subpoenaed.’ 
   (Gelbart WGAw Script)
5 Simi Horwitz, “Mastergate Potshots: Gelbart and Engler Take Aim at Congressional Hearings,” 
Mediterranean Sea. In lieu of actual footage, the network broadcast clips from *Top Gun* with Tom Cruise."9

When he adapted *Mastergate* for an all-star cable television version in fall 1992, he changed several topical allusions: "I cut out a lot of jokes about the president napping . . . and an appearance by the vice president is much less Bush-y," Gelbart said.10 He also added more direct lampooning of the media's coverage of news and "pseudo events." This latest object of satire appealed greatly to the play's original director, Michael Engler, who also directed it for Broadway and for the televised Showtime version.

Engler realized early in his association with *Mastergate* that "Politicians are keenly aware of how pivotal television is to their careers. And the content of what they say is influenced by the medium."11 He consulted a memoir by two senators as an aid to understanding what elected officials do to bolster their presentational skills for the cameras, and summarized his findings thus:

> Everybody, but especially the prosecutors . . . were deeply concerned with maintaining inoffensive images on television. And so they deliberately tempered their style to appeal to an American audience. There wasn't a day that went by when they didn't get hundreds of letters from around the country addressing issues of their appearance and voices. Arthur Lyman, Committee Counsel, got numerous letters criticizing him for looking and sounding too much like a New York Jew. And he very consciously changed his style.12

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11 Horwitz 18.
Showtime's *Mastergate* seems a carbon copy (or, if you will, a "video dub") of CNN or C-Span coverage of hearings. The fidelity to the clichés and quirks of television journalism follows Gelbart's traditional technique, and more elaborately parallels in television pictures what he had done with political language in the stage *Mastergate*. Thus, the Showtime version more directly satirizes the media. It followed *Power Failure*'s media exploitation (Coyne trying to use a death row inmate to bolster her publishing clout) and foreshadowed *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, which not only attacked the media and their business practices, but also the politicians who cower to them. With *M*A*S*H*, the raging war in Vietnam steered much of the political satire; without a war, Gelbart has recently turned his satirical scrutiny toward domestic issues like politics, big business, and the media.

Business practices became the chief object of satire in Gelbart's adaptation of the Bryan Burrough and John Helyar 1990 bestseller, *Barbarians at the Gate*. The book chronicles F. Ross Johnson's 1988 bid to buy the company he was running, RJR Nabisco, in a leveraged buyout (LBO). His ultimately unsuccessful attempt amid competition from other groups and the comedy of errors from his own side provided the dramatic pulse of the book. Ray Stark, a film producer of some experience as president of Rastar Pictures, bought the film rights for a planned Columbia Pictures feature release. When Michael Fuchs, the chairman and CEO of Home Box Office (HBO), inquired about the rights to the book in June 1990, he discovered that Stark

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13 Stark and his company have produced more than a score of films, including several Neil Simon scripts (*Biloxi Blues* [1988], *Brighton Beach Memoirs* [1986], *Chapter Two* [1979]), the first two *Smokey and the Bandit* films (1977, 1980), and both *Funny Girl* (1968) and its sequel, *Funny Lady* (1975) (IMDb).
and Columbia had already acquired them, and that Larry Gelbart was already at work on the script.\textsuperscript{14}

Gelbart’s TV version, first of all, had to peel away the layers of names and complexity to get to the central story; next, he had to make the entire concept of LBOs understandable to the uninitiated; finally, he had to make a rather dry financial story entertaining. Gelbart divided the editing portion of the above thus: he began his script \textit{in medias res}, eliminating most of the first two hundred pages of the book—the history of Nabisco’s founding and growth in the industry, the merger with tobacco giant R. J. Reynolds, and the ascension of Johnson to president and CEO of the company. From the opening chapters, he retained, “material that gave me some specific insights into F. Ross Johnson, the central figure in the story.”\textsuperscript{15} To condense and illuminate the material simultaneously, Gelbart opened his version with a title sequence depicting Johnson as the consummate salesman from his earliest days (selling newspaper and magazine subscriptions as a youngster in his native Canada). He then jumped close to the moment when the idea of a takeover is being planted into the CEO’s imagination by Don Kelly, who offers to introduce Johnson to Henry Kravis, perhaps the most experienced person in the world concerning LBOs, and when Johnson vetoed his help and connections, Kravis became the antagonist.

The sheer number of characters in the book presented another challenge to Gelbart, and he met it by deleting many people present in the original. The major

\textsuperscript{15} Elisberg.
players appear on screen, with much of the middle layer removed. Johnson and Kravis each possess an entourage and a wife. The latter allows Johnson and Kravis to explain to their significant others the meaning of some terms, the plan at the moment, or the state of affairs. The wives, in effect, often function as traditional confidantes—receivers of information necessary for the audience to follow the complex story. To cite one example, Johnson’s wife simplifies the whole concept of leveraged buyouts to “like mortgaging a house.” Besides the many executive and professional types populating the plot, Gelbart also made sure to include the lowest levels of society, lest the audience forget the many hourly workers and jobless that a decade of Reaganomics affected. For example, homeless are seen on the streets as limos drive quickly by; cleaning women and service personnel sometimes appear to depict the “trickle down” effects of 1980s deal making. More overtly political perhaps are the 1988 presidential campaign glimpses the audience sees in passing—for instance, the infamous “senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy” remark by Lloyd Benson to Dan Quayle in the vice-presidential debate pops on a monitor as Johnson tries to change channels.

Gelbart finished his first draft of Barbarians in December 1990, the same week as the opening of Brian DePalma film Bonfire of the Vanities, based on Tom Wolfe’s novel. A satire of the corruptive nature of Wall Street business practices, Bonfire of the Vanities fared so badly with critics and audiences that Columbia decided to drop the Barbarians at the Gate project.16 Evidently the studio, frightened by the other

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film's lack of success, wanted to bolster its appeal to a wider audience, but Stark "wanted to be accurate to the book," as he explained, and called back Fuchs of HBO to see if he was still interested in the property. The two men struck a deal that would bring *Barbarians* to the small screen for $7 million, nearly a quarter of what its full feature cost would have been. Columbia retained limited production duties, and Gelbart retained his original fee; the project again became a going concern.

In his second draft, Gelbart tightened scenes and reviewed places where expansive explanations of the process could be further reduced. Another duty in editing the story and developing dialogue came as a very new one to Gelbart:

"For the first time ever I was dealing with nonfictional characters—real, and still live, people. There was great concern at Columbia Studios and at HBO that I did not expose them to any legal problems in the way anyone was depicted. (I had been able to negotiate my own personal immunity.) By using actual dialogue and situations from the book (which had prompted no litigation from the principals) and by using extensive research prepared for me—a wonderful job done by a woman named Bobette Buster—I managed to keep out of any legal problems by making any new material consistent with the published and public record of the Johnsons, the Kravitzes [sic], et al."

The original book added length to the narrative because of the elaborate descriptions the authors included of apartments, meeting rooms, estates, etc. Rarely do participants in the story pass a wall without some authorial comment about the particular piece of art hanging there. All of this description allows readers to imagine the lifestyles and it in turn becomes the visual half of a film, so that Gelbart's job

18 The several drafts of *Barbarians at the Gate* are located in the UCLA Gelbart Collection.
19 Elisberg.
became narrower still—to construct scenes and write dialogue for a smaller cast than
the authors of the book, Burrough and Helyar, had assembled.

The subtleties of Gelbart's additions to the characters' means of expression
sometimes emerge from deep in his memory. In Barbarians, George Roberts (Kravis'
partner) refuses a cigar by remarking, "I'm trying to stay alive until my kids
graduate." Pat Marshall related that Gelbart decided to quit smoking during the
London years when he saw a British public service announcement in which a man
says, "I really love my kids. Too bad I won't be around to see them grow up."

Marshall says that Gelbart, who had smoked his entire adulthood, was so affected by
the prospect dramatized in the ad that he stopped smoking immediately and has not
smoked since.20

The humor that Gelbart introduced into the script stands as perhaps the most
commented-on aspect of the piece,21 although the author of the original account,
Bryan Burrough, observed that Gelbart was lucky

in that the central character here in the book and in the movie, Ross
Johnson, the president of RJR Nabisco, is a very unusual chief
executive. He is not at all the starched-white-shirt, Harvard-educated
type that we see in so many large companies. Ross was a hard-
partying, good-time, sharp fellow, but he was a fellow who really lived
by the wisecrack.22

Still, Gelbart's humor abounds; for example, Teddy Forstmann, a deal maker
competing to arrange financing for Johnson's LBO, has a running routine of railing
against Kravis' use of junk bonds at every opportunity—loudly and passionately—in

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22 "RJR Nabisco Takeover Subject of Cable TV Movie," All Things Considered, NPR, 19 March 1993.
keeping with Forstmann's characterization in the book: "At the drop of a name—*that* name—he would launch into an impassioned, ten-minute denunciation." Gelbart concocted a western-themed political fund-raising party scene to mix the main characters in awkward situations, to relate LBOs metaphorically to wild west land grabs and poaching feuds, and to show that all of the players shared a love of Republican Party values. In a room full of cowboys, Forstmann arrives dressed as an American Indian, appropriate enough given his wildness and desire to disrupt the "circled wagons" of the RJR Nabisco deal.

In other episodes, executives and advisers add farcical moments to the plot by moving themselves and others from boardroom to office, to waiting room, and back again, in order not to cross paths with competing deal makers. Further, a perhaps unnecessarily repeated bit of business involves Johnson speaking from his corporate jet to the chief of the tobacco division, whose own corporate jet flies alongside Johnson's only a hundred yards away; later, Johnson speaks on his car phone to Linda Robinson, who turns out to have been in the limo next to his own. Such moments underscore the lavish and overindulgent lifestyles lived by the participants.

The most celebrated scene in the film, where the "movie's stock hits a high point," involves Johnson sampling the company's newest product—the smokeless Premier cigarette—and the marketing research it has generated. The paragraph in the book tells the following:

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23 Burrough and Helyar 232.
Horrigan’s people, in fact, hadn’t wanted to introduce the product so soon—it was far from market-ready—but their hand had been forced. For one thing, Premier was flunking its taste tests. In its U.S. research laboratories, Reynolds scientists found that fewer than 5 percent of smokers liked its taste. In Japan, another team of researchers quickly learned to translate at least one sentence of Japanese: ‘This tastes like shit.’ It had a very basic problem for a cigarette: It tasted awful if lit by a match instead of a lighter. The sulfur in a match reacted badly with Premier’s carbon tip. It also smelled awful—‘like a fart,’ as Johnson delicately put it. If all that weren’t bad enough, the cigarette was hard to draw on—darned hard. Inside the company, they called it ‘the hernia effect.’

Gelbart framed the scene thus:

(Before a huge cross-section mock-up of a Premier cigarette, ROSS’ group listens to RJR executive, DAVID GAINES.)

GAINES. Of those interviewed, eighty-six percent approved of the idea of a smokeless cigarette. Forty-one percent said they would try at least two packs before deciding whether to switch brands. Of those who had given up cigarettes one or more times, seventy-three percent responded favorably to the idea, saying they’d consider smoking again, if they could be positive that the cigarette they were smoking was absolutely smokeless.

(ROSS loves those numbers.)

GAINES. Eight percent of that group did sample at least one Premier so they could give us an opinion of the product. Which means that, of all those we interviewed, seventy-nine percent sampled anywhere from one or two to an entire pack. Their reaction to Premier was almost uniform.

(Silence a moment: GAINES seems reluctant to go on.)

HORRIGAN. They all said they tasted like shit.

ROSS. Like shit?!

HORRIGAN. Like shit.

ROSS. They all said that? Nobody liked them?

GAINES. Fewer than five percent.

ROSS (to HORRIGAN). You said you heard the results were terrific.

HORRIGAN. Nothing wrong with five percent. I’ll take five percent of the smoking market any God damn day.

ROSS. How much are we in for up to now?

HORRIGAN. To date?

ROSS. To date. To here. To now.

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HORRIGAN. Upwards of seven-fifty.
ROSS. We’ve spent seven hundred and fifty million dollars and we’ve come up with a turd with a tip? A cigarette that tastes like shit?
HORRIGAN. You want to talk about the smell?
ROSS. What does that mean? A fart? Is that what you’re saying? They smell like a fart?
1ST SCIENTIST. We’ve got an awful lot of fart figures, sir.
ROSS. Tastes like shit and smells like a fart. Looks like we got ourselves a real winner here. It’s one God damn unique advertising slogan, I’ll give you that. I don’t fucking believe this! (using his lighter on one) What the hell’s wrong with that? I don’t smell anything.
1ST SCIENTIST. That’s not the way to find out. If you light a Premier with a match instead of a lighter—(pointing to the model)—the sulfur in the match reacts badly with the carbon in the tip.
ROSS. Do we have to have the carbon?
1ST SCIENTIST. That’s what makes it smokeless.
ROSS. Well, how do we get it shitless?
1ST SCIENTIST. Hard to say. Given enough time—
ROSS. We haven’t got any bloody time! We’ve announced it’s coming out this year. (to HORRIGAN) You insisted on it!
HORRIGAN. Because you did!
ROSS. Because you said they’d be ready!
HORRIGAN. They are ready! We just need some adjustments.
ROSS. Jesus, Ed, I don’t have to tell you what’s riding on this—(taking an anxious drag) And what the hell’s wrong with the draw? You need an extra set of lungs just to take a drag on one of these bastards.
1ST SCIENTIST. It is a little difficult.
ROSS. A little difficult?
1ST SCIENTIST. It’s what we call the ‘hernia effect.’
ROSS. Oh, is that what we call it? There’s another great billboard. What do we do? Give away a truss with every pack? (visualizing it) ‘Warning! This cigarette can tear your balls off!’ Stop jerking off, Ed. Who the hell would sneak into a john to smoke one of these? Wherever you light one up, you’re in the shithouse. And so’s the whole company. God damn it!

The scene extrapolates the basic information in the book’s single-paragraph description of the facts at hand into a scene showcasing Gelbart’s deft comic touch.

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26 Larry Gelbart, Barbarians at the Gate, first draft, 15 Dec. 1990, on the WGAw website at www.wga.org/craft/interviews/barbarians1.html

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The uncharacteristic use of strong language—"I have to force myself to write four letter words," he told Tom Snyder once\textsuperscript{27}—became necessary in light of the personalities profiled in the book: "We see men in $2,000 Armani suits surrounded by millions of dollars' worth of art, talking like men from 'Wiseguys,' from 'Goodfellas.'"\textsuperscript{28}

Despite the unusually high number of swear words in his script, the film still contains many classic Gelbart constructions, such as the alliterative "turd with a tip," or the \textit{M*A*S*H}-style incongruity of Kravis' wife suggesting to her hunter husband that, in order to feel better, he could "go out and shoot something." In another scene, public relations supervisor Linda Robinson notes that "This town worships success. What it roots for is failure—everybody else's of course," practically the same sentiment as Stine's in \textit{City of Angels}: "Everyone thrilled with everyone's success; positively orgasmic at anyone's failure."\textsuperscript{29}

Premiering 20 March 1993, \textit{Barbarians at the Gate} became one of the most honored made-for-cable-television movies of all time, winning the Emmy Award, two Golden Globe Awards, a Writers Guild Award, two CableACE Awards, an American Television Award, and the Television Critics Association Program of the Year Award. On the whole, critics compared the production favorably to the book, sometimes referring to other Gelbart hits such as \textit{M*A*S*H} to explain how witty it was, but

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Tom Snyder, \textit{The Late Late Show}, CBS, 11 June 1996.
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Larry Gelbart, \textit{City of Angels}, (New York: Applause, 1990), 145. In \textit{Weapons of Mass Distraction}, the idea mutates into "You know this town. People kiss your ass till it's raw, so it stings a little more when you fall on it."
\end{itemize}
relatively few mentioned the satire, or the excesses and audacity of the characters involved—more surprising considering these were based on real events and real people. Some reviewers dismissed the social significance with comments implying that the excesses of the '80s were a thing of the past.30

In the following brief exchange between Laurie and Ross Johnson—understandably overlooked by the reviewers, coming as it does while she is changing clothes—Gelbart’s strong social sensibilities about the LBO era surface and foreshadow his next made-for-cable satire:

LAURIE. Do you know what happened after he [Kravis] bought out the Safeway chain? Thousands of employees got laid off. Thousands. People who’d had their jobs forever. Adelle, my leg waxer? One of her cousins was one of the guys who got fired. Eighteen years he drove a truck for them, Ross. Eighteen years.
ROSS. It happens, babe, it happens.
LAURIE. He parked the truck one last time, he went home and shot himself.

Laurie Johnson’s story becomes the pattern for the main subplot of Weapons of Mass Distraction, which premiered five years after Barbarians at the Gate, in May 1997; in Weapons, a middle-class family, the Pascos (read: sacrificial lambs) suffer the effects of the business dealings of competing media moguls, Lionel Powers (played by Gabriel Byrne) and Julian Messenger (Ben Kingsley). The two corporate giants’ increasingly antagonistic and personal competition provides the central plot to the made-for-cable-about-cable movie. The head of HBO’s movie division, Bob Cooper, had told Gelbart soon after Barbarians at the Gate received its widespread praise that

30 Weinraub C13.
he was interested in the “tabloidization of America.”\textsuperscript{31} Once Gelbart examined the nature of tabloid news, he concluded that its main function is to distract, “to keep us titillated and interested in things that don’t really have a great deal to do with our lives.”\textsuperscript{32}

Another trigger to the writing of \textit{Weapons} might be found in Gelbart’s attempt in late ’92 and ’93 to adapt the Ben Hecht screenplay \textit{Nothing Sacred} for actress Michelle Pfeiffer. The original 1937 screwball comedy, which starred Carole Lombard, involved a young woman who becomes a media darling because of a strange disease; the comedy erupts full-flame when she continues to covet, pursue and enjoy the spotlight even after she is discovered not to be ill at all. The connection to \textit{Weapons of Mass Distraction} lies not in the plot of \textit{Nothing Sacred}, but in Gelbart’s frustrated inability to make the story work in a contemporary setting, given today’s daily regimen of shocking (sometimes even true) stories paraded on the nation’s talk and “news magazine” shows.

In a piece celebrating Gelbart’s social comedy, \textit{New York Times} columnist Frank Rich pointed out that “When he first started writing ‘Weapons of Mass Distraction’ over two years ago, he had been struck by stories about the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, who controlled the state TV system even though he also owned three commercial TV stations.”\textsuperscript{33} Other events seemed to corroborate Gelbart’s vision. Gelbart began work on the script in February 1995, before Disney bought

\textsuperscript{31} Larry Gelbart, email with the author, 27 June 1997.
Capital Cities and the ABC television network, and before Rupert Murdoch and Ted Turner's recent highly publicized squabbles: "It just seemed to me inevitable that men of that position and power were going to clash with one another," he admitted.34 The new, wholly original script may trace its heritage to three of Gelbart's darkest efforts written solo (i.e., not adaptations or collaborations), thus providing a glimpse into his mind and his anger. *Weapons of Mass Distraction* features the complexity and interconnectedness of his play *Power Failure* (1991), a more unblinking look at the corrupt intersection of Hollywood and Washington than *Mastergate* (1989), and the anguished black comedy of his very early original play, *Jump!* (1971). Gelbart's *Weapons of Mass Distraction* depicts the savagery in high-stakes media wars.

At the heart of the story lies Gelbart's concern for the supporting players in the drama—the henchman, Alan Blanchard; a plastic surgeon, Dr. Cummings; television personality Cricket Paige, and Powers' first wife, among others. Theirs are the collateral lives damaged in the machinations of Messenger and Powers. Gelbart argues in *Weapons of Mass Distraction* that the executives' real-life counterparts possess too much power: "Power, as always, corrupts—but now absolute power seems nowhere near enough," he quipped.35 He explained also that he is "afraid of all these guys," and thus this film represents "how a writer deals with his fears and concerns."36

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34 "Gabriel Byrne and Larry Gelbart (M*A*S*H) Talk about Their Latest 'Distraction,'" Ultimate TV (Internet) at www.ultimatetime.com/news/l/a/97/05/05weapons.html
36 Bowles.
Gelbart cleverly uses the purchase of a professional football team as the “football” over which Messenger and Powers fight. The millionaire owner of the team, Billy Paxton, is courted by Powers and is hoping to sell for a great deal of money. Congress intervenes because Powers already owns a different team in the same league; so, to assure the deal, Powers has to bribe members of the congressional committee overseeing the matter. Messenger wants the team as well, since both men lecture their subordinates that “Who controls sports controls it all,” reiterating the philosophy of Atlanta businessman Ted Turner. Messenger continues:

Pay TV is a river of money. A raging torrent of dollars and pounds; of Swiss francs and French francs, of lira and Deutsche marks and currencies beyond counting. Sports and only sports lets the couch-people forget their dried-up marriages, their dead-end jobs, the dusty dreams that all the six-packs in the world cannot wash away. And while they’re rooting for the winners that they themselves can never be, you [add merchandising to franchising by throwing everything else you own at them:] promote all your series, your movies, you name it, to bombard what’s left of the poor buggers’ senses."37

Gelbart used the purchase of the football team as an easily understandable part of the involved dealings of media conglomerates who must intersect cable, satellite, telephone, internet, advertising, newspapers, magazines—all manner of information dissemination. Gelbart explained that “A lot of their feud is so esoteric that there’s no way the average person can absorb what the battle is about or all the details.”38 The football team becomes, therefore, a “maguffin,” a term coined by film director Alfred Hitchcock to describe an element in a film about which the audience is supposed to

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38 Bowles.
care greatly, but which in the whole scheme of the picture becomes almost meaningless. Some critics misunderstood this use of the sports team and one, for example, stated that "The specific struggle the movie focuses on isn't even about media. It concerns a professional football team." Gelbart says his aim was to "show an example of people who provide this kind of gossip, celebrity-hunting, distracting material," and his methodology would be to "turn the process upside down and have them the victims of their own creation."

In *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, Powers and Messenger do not mirror one another so much as present two archetypes of the driven executive. Gelbart delineated each character with a specific set of qualities, mostly flaws. For example, Lionel Powers is portrayed as a kind of Roman emperor—from the decadent, late Empire to be sure—who manipulates his businesses from a marble shrine to himself and his family, a family as twisted as any seen in Tacitus. Gelbart makes the connection explicit when Powers' second wife, actually a Russian-born transsexual, begs him to stay with a sarcastic reminder:

ARIEL. Oh, there's lots more to try, I promise you. The Emperor Tiberius didn't start nibbling on little boys until he was well into his seventies. If it would make you happy, I'd gladly provide you with a playpen full of toddlers.

Powers' ignorance about the true identities of his wife, Ariel, and his paramour, Laetitia, encourages comparisons to Greek tragedy—especially the Oedipus myth—for

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40 "Gabriel Byrne and Larry Gelbart (M*A*S*H) Talk about Their Latest 'Distraction,'" Ultimate TV (Internet) at www.ultimatetv.com/news/f/a/97/05/05weapons.html
41 Gelbart *Weapons* 89. The model for this reference is a passage in *The Lives of the Caesars* by the Roman historian Suetonius Tranquillus (c. A.D. 69-c. 140),
ignorance's ability to cripple and paralyze a powerful person. Powers is physically diminished throughout the film, and seeks a solution to his long-term impotence. Gelbart mocks the level of Powers' greed and insecurity in a single stroke: Powers opts for two penile enhancements, "The Big Boy" and "The Pump." Moreover, the suicide of Powers' henchman, Alan Blanchard, displays the stoicism of a Brutus falling on his sword or of a persona non grata in Nero's court opening a vein in a warm tub.

Powers' personal rise to power echoes many rags-to-riches stories of famous executives, especially those whose careers began in completely other fields. Powers' father began a septic tank cleaning service, which he diversified with news holdings:

POWERS. Understanding this synergy between the papers—news and toilet—he bought his first of the former, the Utica Chronicle, and set about filling it with what he intuited as the public's chief and insatiable interest—that is to say, who was sticking it to who.42

Powers therefore inherited a business with an unappetizing start not unlike Florida billionaire Wayne Huizenga's single garbage truck.43 Finally, with the approval for the purchase of the football team seemingly in hand, Powers remarks that "We'll just keep it a nice, simple coronation."44

In contrast, Julian Messenger propagates a story of concentration camp survival:

42 Gelbart Weapons 1-2.
43 Gelbart pointed out the connection between Huizenga's garbage removal company and Powers' septic tank beginnings (email 27 June 1997). Huizenga is best known as the architect of Blockbuster Video's incredible expansion in the '80s (sold to Viacom in 1994 for $8.4 billion) and for his subsequent control of the Dolphins (football), Marlins (baseball) and Panthers (hockey) in his home state.
44 Gelbart Weapons 65.
MESSENGER. Before I was ten years old I had walked half way across Europe. First, on my father’s back, when he was hardly strong enough to take a step on his own, and then in the shoes I took from his body. Those shoes—those shriveled ghosts of my father—they took me on. And on and on—and on. Walking always toward the flame. The flame in my head—the one that lit the way out of that unspeakable damnation. Do what you will, Lionel. Let’s see if it’s worse than anything that Mr. Hitler thought to put me through.

POWERS. I can only try, Julian. I can only try.45

With the echo of life-and-death concentration camp struggles in his ears (mainly from repeating his “official” life story to others), Messenger becomes linked in Gelbart’s script with God, a form of megalomania comparable to Powers’ emperor complex. As his competitor makes the point: “Stop running for God, Julian. It only makes atheism all the more attractive.”46 Messenger’s most sinister and embarrassing secret, which Powers learns from a traitor in Messenger’s camp, becomes one of many blackmail opportunities traded between men: Messenger’s father cooperated with the Nazis and was actually responsible for many Jewish deaths in the war.

Through Ben Kingsley’s portrayal of Messenger, a sense of humor (or at least of the ridiculous) stands in full contrast to Byrne’s Powers’ grim visage. Messenger giggles at cleverness around him (as when a senator on his side warns millionaire Paxton not to be “kittenish”), and fires off wisecracks himself. A late addition to the script shows Messenger getting into a limousine, and responding to a reporter’s query as to whether he and Powers were speaking: “We are, just not to each other.” Gelbart

45 Gelbart Weapons 54-5.
46 Gelbart Weapons 54.
“recycled” this line from his own past, a *bon mot* he tossed to a reporter who asked about his speaking terms with Dustin Hoffman during the aftermath of *Tootsie.*

The humor present in *Weapons of Mass Distraction* varies in degree from the one-liner to the apocalyptic. It is hardly ever “hilarious” in the sense of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* or *Movie Movie*; as the actor playing Powers, Gabriel Byrne, noted, “One of the things about Larry’s work, I think, that’s really great is that it works on two levels. While you’re laughing, he’s also, you know, making some incredibly potent point.” Many of these points stick into institutions of business and government. The senators in *Weapons* are not generally the ridiculous ones of *Mastergate,* although Gelbart cannot resist a *Mastergate*-style non-statement and wifely support:

SAYLES. I think the fact that Jamie is standing here by my side is proof that that is where she has always been, and where she will always be.

JAMIE. Of course, I support him. One hundred percent. Three hundred percent, if you count our two girls.

For the most part, the politicians play tough with their committee questioning and their deals, and only acquiesce when someone with more power blackmails them, or when the deals for their causes, their families, or themselves prove too good to pass up. For example, Powers brushes aside a ludicrously generous book deal that Senator Barrish’s wife received from one of his publishing companies with the ruse that she

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48 Bowles.
49 Gelbart *Weapons* 48. Sayles’ line is a late addition to the script.
wrote what Powers considered “a masterwork on the subject of place settings.” In a later scene between Senate committee members, public servants disdain the People and the Office with ease:

CONDON. It’s a farce! We’re just going through the motions!
BARRISH. Going through the motions is what democracy’s all about.
CONDON. Don’t lecture me, Norman. I don’t need any stone throwing from people with glass book deals.
BARRISH. My wife’s contract with Powers is strictly an arm’s length deal.
RAMIREZ. The press are going to yell preferential treatment.
BARRISH. And what’ll they yell about the five million dollars he gave your alma mater?
RAMIREZ. That was a loan!
SAYLES. Oh, yeah? Just try paying him back.
CONDON. There is no way some of us are not going to be perceived as being snuggled in tight, tucked inside Lionel Powers’ wallet.
BARRISH. My integrity—the integrity of the United States Senate—is not, nor will it ever be—for sale.
CONDON. Nobody buys Senators any more, Norman—everybody knows that. We’re much cheaper to lease.50

Gelbart juxtaposes all of the dealing, double-crossing and blackmail in the film with the downfall of the Pasco family. One of the workers laid off as a result of Lionel Powers’ acquisition of a regional telephone company, Jerry Pasco begins a slide into personal doubt, frustration and desperation that ultimately destroys his family. While the new football stadium is being built practically on top of their modest home, offering work only to teenagers who do not need living wages, Jerry seeks many avenues for new jobs, all dead ends. While the family suffers, the television remains a constant companion. Television advertising has long been looked upon as insidious, and Gelbart insidiously includes, and therefore indicts, advertising on television as a

50 Gelbart Weapons 32-3.
contributing factor to Jerry's breakdown. His wife, Rita, seems simply numb from the endless tabloid and talk shows, and fails to recognize fully (or to confront) her husband's disintegration. The unemployed Jerry tells his family, while a Beef Council ad brainwashes in the background, that steak is the only real dinner.

In a 1994 interview for a program called *Saturday Night at the Movies*, Gelbart was asked to relate his most vivid movie memory. Instantly an image impressed itself—a moment from Vittorio De Sica's 1948 classic, *The Bicycle Thief* (*Ladri di Biciclette*). It is the story of a man who, in order to save his family from starvation, steals a bicycle to use for work after he cannot locate his own stolen bicycle. His unsuccessful and inept attempt to make off with someone else's property is witnessed by his son, who also sees his father caught and humiliated by a mob of people. The final shot appeared in Gelbart's mind's eye: the son reaches up to take his father's hand as they return home poorer than ever.

As unconsciously as anything a writer mines for material, the scene from *The Bicycle Thief* almost certainly formed a foundation for Jerry Pasco's failed attempt to steal a couple of boxes of meat for himself and his family. Moments before, his sons witnessed a dalliance their father was having in the family car, as their school bus stopped yards away. Jerry's desperation in *Weapons of Mass Distraction* throws him into terrible and tragic choices: fleeing capture with the stolen meat, he inadvertently causes his sons' school bus to be destroyed by an errant cement truck. He races aimlessly as the television news breaks into Rita's afternoon programming to present the latest from that channel's "On the Lam Cam." That the television station would
even name the camera attests to the frequency of televised car chases, bank robberies and shootouts.

It might be easy to dismiss Gelbart’s satire as outrageous—and the scenes with Powers and Messenger do become that at times—but the Pasco family saga must be accounted as realistic as De Sica’s celebrated Italian masterpiece. Gelbart confesses that he has “lost a lot of life hiding behind comedy. I wanted to do something truer here.” This is not to say that the media feud reflects any less the reality of the situation today; Frank Rich noted in a column about Gelbart’s satire:

In the period over which Mr. Gelbart wrote his script, much of what he anticipated came true, from the Disney-ABC merger to the Murdoch-Ted Turner feud. So did the merger of Mr. Turner’s empire with Time Warner—owner of HBO, which produced Mr. Gelbart’s movie.51

The Bicycle Thief did not represent the only film informing Gelbart’s satire. The angriest denunciation of media ethics—until Weapons of Mass Distraction—is, arguably, Paddy Chayevsky’s classic 1977 film Network, about the dissolution of television news into manipulative tabloidism and utter show business; about the inability of audience members to act effectively in their society, or even to voice their disgust about their situation; about the ravenous appetite for more and new television fare, blurring the distinction between news and entertainment, frequently at the expense of its own creations. Weapons of Mass Distraction was correctly labeled by critics to be a Network for the ‘90s; the same warnings apply, only larger. Whereas

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the competition in 1977 involved the big three networks, today the players represent satellite and cable, and syndication. The stakes are higher and more lucrative.

Gelbart's latest film does not boast a catch phrase that has entered the popular mind, as has Network's "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it any more!" Instead of following a central character through a maze of corporate communication as Network does, Weapons in effect "channel surfs" around the lives of the several parties involved, even when the involvement has not yet become clear. The double ending adds closure to the many story lines: the audience sees Powers and Messenger standing shoulder-to-shoulder, as the politicians they have recently bribed and blackmailed praise the new joint owners of the football team; the Pascos appear on Cricket Paige's new talk show. In fact, Cricket's introduction of the unfortunate Jerry and Rita reproduces many of the medium's most grievous errors:

CRICKET. Hi, hi. Thank you. Thank you so much. Boy, have we got some super guests for you today. I'm talking about honest-to-God, actual, real walking-around heroes; people whose courage in the face of the kind of tremendous personal tragedy we just can't get enough of. My first guests are a couple whose heartbreaking story can be seen in tonight's Power Playhouse Movie of the Week. It's called 'School Bus of Horror: The Jerry and Rita [Pasco] story" starring [Jane Seymour and Scott Bakula]. But we're not going to bring out any actors here today. No, sir. I want you to meet the really tragic—Jerry and Rita [Pasco]!  

Besides the talentless host of the show, Gelbart satirizes in a twenty-second speech the terrible writing ("honest-to-God, actual, real walking-around"), the dearth of

53 Paddy Chayevsky, Network, dir. by Sidney Lumet, Columbia Pictures, 1977. The connection and significance of the phrase deepened when "Mad as Hell" became the title for Frank Rich's piece about Gelbart (see p. 316 above, note 33).
54 Gelbart Weapons 94-5. The bracketed names were changed for the final film.
imagination ("School Bus of Horror"), the shameless corporate tie-ins ("Power Playhouse Movie of the Week"), the devaluation of language ("tragic," "hero"), and perhaps most painfully of all, the canard that the show is actually presenting something special ("we're not going to bring out any actors . . .") or of benefit to the public.

Director Steve Surjik has kept Gelbart's brief scenes necessarily brisk—in this age of MTV-style editing, the script seems very much a '90s satire of its own time and mores. The fact that HBO, a Time-Warner company, commissioned the piece reveals perhaps that for the sake of ratings and bragging rights, they have allowed themselves and their industry to take seltzer water in the face from Gelbart. Why should they worry? As Powers muses in the midst of the attacks on his interests: "One picture is worth a thousand truths."\(^5\)

The media engage in practices that soon promise to become even more outrageous than the events depicted in this film; thus, the "straight reportage" that Gelbart claims for some of his satire may surely be applied to Weapons of Mass Distraction. As Frank Rich pointed out in his latest Gelbart review: "If anything, these corporations' excesses are escalating so quickly that 'Mass Distraction' could be the first Gelbart script to be dated before its TV premiere."\(^6\)

Other critics varied in the degree to which they appreciated Gelbart's attempt with Weapons; almost all agreed that the targets merited satire, but argued the extent

\(^{55}\) Gelbart Weapons 48. Reagan's administration became infamous for splendid photo opportunities—with the president on horseback or in front of an array of flags—that contained detrimental news for the White House, but the public, evidently, only recalled the pictures.

\(^{56}\) Rich.
to which Gelbart succeeded. Ed Bark, writing for the *Dallas Morning News*, represented the wildly favorable reviews with observations that Gelbart's writing is "succinct, clever and sometimes fabulously venomous," and that although it "turns dark down the stretch, looking as though it might be losing its way," Gelbart "bails himself out with a deft denouement intertwining the Pascoes, former children's show host Cricket Page and a TV movie of the week."

What Bark deems "an instant classic commentary on media megalomania," other reviewers have found to be "an example of a genre that has grown increasingly rare, the genuine black comedy, in which the man on the ledge will always leap."58

Since late 1996, Gelbart has been overseeing (as executive producer) a potential new series based on Chayevsky's *Network* for CBS. With little chance of being as daring as *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, the series nevertheless will provide audiences an opportunity to understand the games the entertainment industry plays with people's lives. What the audience does with that new understanding remains to be seen. He is not, however, reverting to writing for just a single medium again; his current projects also include two more that cross media boundaries. Both involve film and stage work: first, for *A Star is Born*, Gelbart will revise the movie script for a planned Broadway musical; second, he will adapt the current hit Broadway musical, *Chicago*, into a film.

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58 Sterngold.
CONCLUSION: COMEDY TO MANY LENGTHS

The Introduction to this study asked questions about lessons and adjustments a writer might make in moving from medium to medium, and from decade to decade. Larry Gelbart developed his career through choices based on an innate sense of humor, acute observation of the human condition, and an inner compass that pointed either to the right medium for a particular project or to the right project for a particular medium. Although Gelbart has directed a few times in his life and produced some of his works, he remains essentially a writer's writer, and not one of the hyphenates so prevalent in the industry today. Furthermore, his wide range of experience has provided him with an understanding of the inner workings of the various media: his experience in radio, television, film and theatre has honed his ability to tailor his subject precisely to the demands of a performer or a medium, even within the context of an adaptation or collaboration.

The "tickets to his head" of the title refer to each chapter's new mindset. Gelbart often shifted his medium with a new project, but the lessons he learned throughout his career allowed him to enter each phase with a greater understanding of the type of writing required, the sacrifices necessary (giving up control, for example), and the people he would encounter there who would be handling his words. His understanding of the process manages the three rings inside his head.
Gelbart first shaped his sense of language as a social skill and a means of communication: a child of immigrants, he spoke Yiddish for the first five years of his life. When he entered the writing profession in 1944, he began to learn about the complexities of making people laugh. Through the discipline of radio, especially *Duffy's Tavern*, he learned the power of the word, and also learned how to give a word weight and multiple meanings, as when Miss Duffy called an acquaintance "not one of the well-known famous poets." His work with that prestigious writing staff led to positions on *The Jack Paar Show* and *The Joan Davis Show*, and eventually a position in Bob Hope's stable of writers (partnered with Larry Marks). Working with one-liners for Hope, Gelbart learned to craft and polish a single sentence into a sure stimulus for laughter, as in this example from a Hope monologue: when then General Dwight Eisenhower announced he would seek the nomination for president of the United States, the comic quipped, "What some guys won't do to get out of the army." With Hope, Gelbart also made the significant transition from radio to television, learned to work under a strict deadline, and became more widely known as a first-rate "gag" writer.

Gelbart's work with Hope attracted the attention of comedian Red Buttons, who brought the young writer (only twenty-four in 1952) to television, and to the young medium's most prominent genre, the variety show. A veteran of vaudeville

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1 *Duffy's Tavern*, 21 Sept. 1945, ts. in the UCLA Gelbart Collection, 7.
and burlesque, Buttons augmented Gelbart's tools as a comedy writer to include the "paragraph" of comedy, the sketch. With Buttons and his staff of writers (many of whom had theatrical backgrounds), Gelbart learned to write visual humor appropriate to television; he gained a greater understanding of structure, in constructing scenes with beginnings, middles and ends. A major event for Gelbart on the Buttons show was meeting Burt Shevelove, who became a close friend and collaborator until the latter's death in 1984.

Aware of Gelbart's work for Buttons, Sid Caesar brought Gelbart into his legendary writing room that included Carl Reiner, Neil Simon, Mel Brooks and Michael Tolkin. Gelbart knew he was a part of a formidable staff, likening the experience to "playing for the Yankees," or being part of the Duke Ellington Orchestra. He contributed among the chaos of lines being thrown, floated, and squeezed into the flow of team writing; he learned to let passable ideas pass, and to defend his great ideas until they found their way into the script. His breakthrough lesson on Caesar's Hour was Caesar himself, and Caesar's ability to play an everyman character in a variety of verbal (the suburbanite, Victor) and nonverbal (pantomime) situations exposed Gelbart to the human comedy, an almost indispensable foundation for satire. Thus, with Caesar's Hour in the mid-'50s, Gelbart began to write satire consciously; the public, however, could not appreciate the change in Gelbart's consciousness until his work on television's M*A*S*H more than a decade later.

By the late '50s, Gelbart's mastery of verbal humor had established him in the industry as someone capable of producing material with style, wit, sophistication,
wryness and humanity. Gelbart also embarked on a new phase in his writing: adaptation. Although Gelbart had unknowingly joined a comic tradition with Duffy's Tavern, Red Buttons, and Sid Caesar that could trace its roots to the classical comedies of Greece and Rome, it was not until he began to adapt the plays of Plautus with his friend Burt Shevelove in 1957 that Gelbart began to appreciate the rich source material to be mined from the classics. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, adapted as it was from the works of Plautus, provided Shevelove, Gelbart and Sondheim with an erector set of characters, situations, and devices that became, in Sondheim's words, "a Swiss watch" of a farce. Gelbart became familiar with Plautus in adapting the surviving comedies of the Roman playwright, and Gelbart himself replicated more of Plautus than he might have realized: Plautus adapted his plays from Greek New Comedy by Menander, Philemon, and Diphilus.

After completing *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* in 1962, Gelbart realized for the first time in his career a fully formed creation of enough length to prove that his writing could sustain itself beyond the wisecrack and the comic who delivers it. *Forum*'s Tony awards and near thousand-performance run further broadened his audience and enhanced his reputation in the film, television, and theatre industries. Gelbart had, by the early '60s, been successful in almost every kind of comedy writing but the screenplay, the next medium he would engage. He left for England in 1963 an independent force in the world of comedy.

Gelbart's success with adaptation encouraged him to adapt into a movie (with Shevelove again) Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne's novel *The Wrong Box* (1965). Since many films are the results of rewriting by a series of screenwriters,
Gelbart’s education in the 1960s provided him a taste of the process from both sides: for example, with *Fair Game* (1961), and the film adaptation of *Forum* (1965), his work was re-written; on *The Notorious Landlady* (1962) and *Not with My Wife, You Don’t* (1966), he re-wrote the work of others. The movie industry quickly became a bittersweet experience for Gelbart. Films pay well; they also reach a much larger audience than a stage play, but films often snatch the creative force from the screenwriter and dismiss him or her as unnecessary to the final process. A production like *Neighbors* (1981) illustrates perfectly the failure possible when tone and emphasis—two elements Gelbart is careful to craft into his scripts—become blurred through meddlesome producers, directors, or stars. Although *Blame It on Rio* (1984) did not achieve critical success, it proved the wisdom for a writer to sometimes shepherd a screenplay through filming by acting as producer, and making sure the director accepts the work on its terms. Such lessons have never been gladly learned by Gelbart, but he always entered a new project a bit more savvy than the one before.

Gelbart continues to excel in adaptation to this day, with current projects transforming the play and musical *Chicago* into a film, and *A Star is Born*, a film, into a musical. He regrets not having had more original ideas in his more than fifty-year career, but the positive reception of his major adaptations—*Forum, M*A*S*H, Sly Fox, The Wrong Box, Barbarians at the Gate, Oh, God!*—testifies to his success in the genre. Gelbart’s greatest adaptation has been himself, adapting his style and content across time and media.

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In the course of adaptation, Gelbart “studied with” two of the English language’s greatest comic geniuses, Jonathan Swift and Ben Jonson, while working on *Gulliver* and *Sly Fox*. In doing so, he developed a new posture for his career: that of master satirist. Gelbart’s observation of the human condition, coupled with the arsenal of comedy weapons he acquired during the first phase of his career, allowed him to satirize the society of his time: *M*A*S*H* lampooned not only the Vietnam War, but also hypocrisy, in every episode; *Mastergate* viciously attacked the language, logic and leaders during government scandals; *Barbarians at the Gate* faulted greedy corporate barons; *Tootsie* satirized the war between the sexes, especially those who think they can win it; *City of Angels* ridiculed the writer’s treatment in Hollywood by ridiculing the decision makers who “improve” the work into the ground.

Satire has increasingly absorbed Gelbart’s energies, and has allowed him to escape the label “gag” writer that he might have carried with him from the ‘40s and early ‘50s. Two works from this decade, *Power Failure* and *Weapons of Mass Distraction* have colored the comedy of his satire black, proving to an audience eager to laugh that he is not the “pussycat” one might think he is.⁴

In his most successful (or at least characteristic) works, Gelbart’s tools—language, satire, and adaptation—cannot be deemed separate entities. For example, word play carried him from the gentle non-sequiturs and malapropisms of *Duffy’s Tavern* to the all-out assault on political language in *Mastergate: A Play on Words*, a

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work of unblinking satirical force. Even a line as ordinary as the following (from *Weapons of Mass Distraction*) demonstrates a grace and ease with language that have allowed him to use comedy techniques such as alliteration and antithetical balance to craft rich, powerful dialogue:

POWERS. Your efforts to become my equal are as offensive as they are pathetic. We inhabit two different worlds. You invade where I innovate. Where I pioneer, you plunder.⁵

Gelbart once said he prefers writing to reading, and so claims to be not very well read. He made the statement not because he does not enjoy the work of others, but because his own words are so intrusive.⁶ In his mind, he constantly edits everything in his purview, creating text and polishing that text until some new, next impression forces the old work out. Gelbart puts these intrusive words through their paces in his three-ring circus of a mind. His wife would like him to stop working and retire,⁷ but the work allows him to attend the words in his head, to play with them, and ultimately to produce a new observation about his life that somehow reflects our lives.

Many of his successes—*Caesar’s Hour*, *Forum*, *M*A*S*H* and *City of Angels*—represent happy, rewarding experiences for Gelbart. *M*A*S*H* continues to bring Gelbart’s name into millions of households daily—from 1972 to the present day—when the “created for television by” credit flashes on the screen. Gelbart’s second Tony Award, for *City of Angels*, further established Gelbart’s primacy (shared

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perhaps with Peter Stone) as the most literate book writer of the musical theatre today.\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Tootsie}, his most successful film comedy, did not provide him a similar enjoyment, and \textit{Oh, God!}, another success with audiences, suffered from an unpolished script and Writers Guild arbitration. Many other projects might be termed successes if only for the fact that they reached an audience at all. Critics enjoyed the TV series \textit{United States}, a prideful experience for Gelbart, but the network did not allow it to find an audience in a reasonable time slot.

His most recent works, especially the full-length screenplays for cable television, allowed Gelbart larger canvases than a half hour of television time. \textit{Mastergate, Barbarians at the Gate} and \textit{Weapons of Mass Distraction} all share Gelbart’s central distrust of the powerful and his warning to audiences for more vigilance. Again, as with \textit{United States}, critics and reviewers, whose job it is to observe popular culture, noted Gelbart’s mastery of the difficult subjects involved in his satire. Press releases for his cable television works reminded audiences that it was Gelbart who created \textit{M*A*S*H} for television, since he is not the household name that many of his colleagues are. Nevertheless, Gelbart remains the consummate professional comedy writer, whose characters live in the spotlight through the brilliant, fitting dialogue he crafts for them. His unique experience with comedy from the ancient Roman stage to the present day has given him an insight into the deepest meaning of comedy and the choices a writer can actually make bringing comedy to an audience:

\textsuperscript{8} See the \textit{Dramatists Guild Quarterly}, Spring 1977, and The Royal National Theatre’s \textit{Platform Papers} No. 5, “Musicals... and Sondheim” (1995) for more discussion of book writers in general and Gelbart
The future of the entertainment industry has already been written in its past. The only thing that changes is the medium. We're moving into 'superhighways'—that's just another way of saying we've figured out a new way to bring you The Three Stooges. Whatever the hardware, the software is always going to be the human condition—how we relate to one another, how we love, how we hate, how we live and how we die. Mostly it will continue to be material to distract us from that which is unpleasant. That's good, except to forget completely what is unpleasant is to stop trying to find more constructive ways to improve our lives rather than run away from the ugly reality.9

The future means a great deal to Gelbart, and writing will continue to be a part of his life and thus ours. He has recently been honored as one of ten playwrights chosen to script teleplays for The Millennium Project series on ABC television scheduled to air in the fall of 1999.10 Judging from his latest works, the new piece promises to be dark, funny, passionate, and very human. It will also be written under a very stiff deadline: one found at the end of a decade, a century, a millennium, and a monumental career.

9 Linda T. Dennison, "In the Beginning," Writers Digest 75 no. 4 (April 1995), 38.
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VITA

Jules A. "Jay" Malarcher, III, attended Loyola University in his native New Orleans, double majoring in Communications and Russian, with minors in Drama/Speech and German. After his graduation in 1983, he spent several years as a radio announcer and production director at WRNO-FM and Worldwide in New Orleans. He continued his theatrical interests acting, directing and serving as a dramaturg for productions in and around New Orleans.

Jay began his teaching career at Archbishop Chapelle High School in Metairie, Louisiana, in 1984. A member of the English department and head of the drama program, he taught courses in American and English literatures, Latin, and Communications Skills. This last course became the core of a new state elective, Dynamics of Effective Study, whose writing committee Jay chaired in 1987. During his seven years at Chapelle, he produced and directed almost two dozen plays and musicals, many of them original, and founded Chapelle's student radio station and videography club.

In 1991, Jay left Chapelle to pursue his master's degree in Liberal Education at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. Within the "Great Books" curriculum, he studied Thucydides, Thomas Mann, Homer, Giambattista Vico, Aristotle, and others, and directed Love's Labor's Lost for the King William Players, setting it at St. John's in 1947, the year before the college became co-educational. Jay decided to
pursue his doctorate in theatre, a discipline that combined his love of drama, communications, language, and the ideas of the liberal tradition.

Jay returned to Louisiana in 1992 for his doctor of philosophy degree in theatre history, literature and criticism as a fellowship student at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. He published several articles and presented papers at several conferences during his five years at LSU. Among the topics of his research are Aristotle's theory of acting, the Algonquin "Round Table," and Georg Büchner's Woyzeck. His examination of the relationship between the plays of Plautus and the musical comedy A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum led directly to his adoption of the career of writer Larry Gelbart as his dissertation topic.

In 1997, Jay accepted an appointment as Assistant Professor of Theatre at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania. He continues to work as an author, dramaturg and playwright. His email address is jaydrama@aol.com
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Major Field:  Theatre

Title of Dissertation: Tickets to His Head: Larry Gelbart (1928–) as Writer and Adapter

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Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

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