



On the Town

Bernstein | text Comden & Green

Three sailors have fun

This is a show about three sailors on shore leave. Not any old shore leave, just 24 hours of freedom before they sail back to war. However, it's 1944, it's New York and the lads are determined to cram a lifetime's experience into one day. They're going to find girls, adventure, romance – and possibly even do a spot of sight seeing.

Three youngsters write a musical

This is a young show. Bernstein, Comden and Green were all in their twenties when they wrote it, and the book reads as if they did so round the kitchen table. You can almost see how some of the dafter ideas got on to stage. "How are we going to get the sailors round New York?" said one collaborator, "we can't set a musical on a tube train." "Oh, they take taxis," said another. "They *can't* take taxis, they're too poor!" "Yeah, right, well they meet a friendly taxi driver... I've got it! A *girl* taxi driver!" And so Hildy was born, complete with her New York cab.

New York, New York

On the Town came hot on the heels of Rodger and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* That was a war time show as well and full of the things Americans felt they were fighting for – small towns, decent people, hoe-downs and the girl next door. *On the Town* is the big city version. Our three sailors are fighting for dance bands, New York cops, feisty ladies and yellow taxi cabs. The city takes over at once, the lyric 'New York! New York!' is the hit number of the show and the musical takes in a great whack of the town's major sights: Times Square, Carnegie Hall, Coney Island, even the Natural History Museum. But, more than that, Bernstein describes the buzz of New York; you can hear it in the hit song with its rising melody, in "Subway Ride" and the riotous 'Times Square'.

Wartime

On the Town was an instant success. It broke all the rules: a mish mash of musical styles (see below), a hectic story, a slapstick cop chase and a bitter sweet ending, but its youth and high spirits swept the critics away. Even so, it is clearly a wartime show. The three sailors try to cram their whole life into that precious 24 hours – just as young people were doing everywhere else in Europe and America. Wartime romances (and marriages) were famous for their apprehensive happiness; the next bomb could destroy everything. There is a touch of melancholy in the show which gives the piece an extra dimension - realistic, young and very vulnerable.

Musicals

On the Town is being put on by English National Opera but of course it isn't an opera at all. The composer, Leonard Bernstein, was famous for being a classical conductor and composer. Even so he liked to break out into popular music every now and then – and so does ENO. The orchestra has a few dance band features, there's a drum kit in the pit and the woodwinds double up, that is they play two instruments: one plays clarinet and bass clarinet, another plays clarinet and alto saxophone. The music ranges from pop to ballad to boogie woogie to Latin, with a spot of classical music (in "Some Other Time") just to remind us that Bernstein was a serious composer as well.

The Characters

The three sailors are **Ozzie**, **Gabey** and **Chip**. Of these Gabey is the hero; the ordinary guy who falls in love with the heroine (**Ivy**) and gets all the big tunes. Ozzie and Chip are lighter characters: Ozzie is in town to land a date, and Chip wants to see the sights. They bump into **Claire**, a student of anthropology (and amateur man-hunter) and **Hildy**, who drives a cab. Hildy has a friend, **Lucy**, who spends the show with a cold in her head. There are loads of small parts who come and go, and whose names you needn't remember, though you might notice **Flossie**. We come across her three times in the musical, always in the middle of a one sided conversation with a friend about her boss ("Furthermore, Mr Gadolphin, nylon stockings are not as important as a girl's self respect...")

The Story

The show starts with a sleepy dock labourer clocking in for work, he sings "I feel like I'm not out of bed yet" and time seems to stand still as his solitary voice fills the stage. The next minute the orchestra wakes up as three sailors run down the gang plank to plan their day in New York. Chip has got an ancient tour guide and the other two follow him to the Subway.

Miss Turnstiles

There they see a poster of the Subway Girl of the Month "Miss Turnstiles". Gabey falls in love immediately and rips the poster down. This is spotted by an old lady; she calls the cops who chase the sailors for the rest of the show, not that they ever seem to notice. Following the clues on the poster (Miss Turnstiles studies singing at Carnegie Hall and loves Modern Art) the sailors decide to track her down.

A Taxi Cab

They dash out of the subway station and split to find Gabey's girl. Chip hails a cab and finds himself in the clutches of the cab driver, Hildy, who takes an instant liking to him, rubbishes his guide book and lures him back to her flat.

The Stone Age

Meanwhile Ozzie has muddled up his museums and gone to the Natural History Museum. There his uncanny resemblance to Neanderthal man attracts a student of anthropology, Claire. Between them they manage to knock over an enormous dinosaur skeleton and for the rest of the show Claire and Ozzie are chased by the museum staff and another set of police.

Gabey's quest

Meanwhile Gabey isn't having much success. He finds himself unexpectedly lonely in New York, all the girls are being scooped up by other sailors, and he can't find the girl he loves. Eventually however he blunders into Carnegie Hall. 'Miss Turnstiles', or rather Ivy, is being taught by a dipsomaniac singing teacher, Madam Dilly. Ivy is clearly from the same small town background as Gabey, but she puts on big city airs as she conceals the fact that she earns her living as a night club dancer on Coney Island.

Two New York Apartments

The other two are doing slightly better. Ozzie gets back to Claire's flat – and is a bit dashed to find she has a fiancé, Judge Pitkin. Fortunately Pitkin is so pleased that he's engaged at all that he hardly notices his rival. At Hildy's place, Chip bumps into her flatmate, Lucy, who's off work with a streaming cold.

Times Square

All three sailors rendezvous in Times Square, Ozzie and Chip with their respective dates and Gabey all alone. (Ivy has gone to work without telling him). In the circumstances the appearance of Lucy, with a box of Kleenex, is not much of a consolation... However the men and girls join forces for the finale to Act One.

Act Two is a round of night clubs. Operas have parties, musicals have night clubs – it's a way of getting song and dance routines, naturally, on to the stage. In this show the clubs have interesting names, Diamond Eddie's and the Slam Bang Club, but they are depressingly similar and the two hangers-on, Lucy and Pitkin, find they are usually left behind to amuse each other and (in Pitkin's case) pay the bill. In the last club the sailors bump into Madam Dilly, who tells them where Ivy is working. Gabey rushes ahead and lands himself in a dream sequence.

Ballet

This is the moment when dance takes over. Broadway shows were (and are) famous for their dancers and you'll have already spotted that Claire is a neat tap dancer. In this sequence Gabey explores his feelings for Ivy in an expressive ballet. *Oklahoma!* had started a fashion for dream ballets but this one is no idle fantasy, there is no *time* in this plot for Gabey and Ivy to get to know each other; Gabey's leave is nearly up, so he has to work out his feelings in a dance.

Time runs out

Meanwhile the others are feeling that time is slipping away. They sing a wistful number together and are thrown out of the train at Coney Island just as they get to the last chorus. As the conductor yells, "Coney Island! All out!" they realise that this really is the last stop and that their leave is almost over. Gabey has at last discovered Ivy in the night club dancer and they are just sorting themselves out when the others arrive, hotly pursued by cops, museum staff and more cops. The inevitable chase comes to an abrupt halt at dawn when the boys' leave expires. They're hauled back to their ship, followed by the girls and, as they wave goodbye, three new sailors run down the gang plank – looking forward to 24 hours in New York.

Sarah Lenton 2005 ©

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