

THE GRASS HARP

The Grass Harp began life in 1951 as a novel by Truman Capote. Broadway producer Saint Subber was taken with the novel and asked Capote to do a stage adaptation. Capote, who was still struggling as a young author, agreed. Directed by Robert Lewis, Capote's play version of *The Grass Harp* opened at the Martin Beck Theatre on March 27, 1952, where it had a brief run of only thirty-six performances. In the cast were Mildred Natwick, Ruth Nelson, Jonathan Harris, Sterling Holloway, and Alice Pearce. The sets and costumes were by Cecil Beaton, and the incidental music was by Virgil Thomson.

Flash forward to 1967. The novel and play were adapted into a new musical by Kenward Elmslie (book and lyrics) and Claibe Richardson (music). The musical had a production that year at the Trinity Square Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island. The cast included Barbara Baxley, Carol Brice, Carol Bruce, and Elaine Stritch. The show was optioned in 1971 by producers Richard Barr, Charles Woodward, and Michael Harvey, who arranged a production at the Michigan University Professional Theatre Program, using a mix of students and professionals including Celeste Holm who, as a favor to her friend Claibe Richardson, played Babylove. On the basis of that production, the decision was made to move the show to Broadway.

The Grass Harp opened on November 2, 1971 at the very same Martin Beck Theatre where the play had played its unsuccessful run. Sadly, the musical met the same fate, but even worse, playing only seven performances. The cast was superb and included Barbara Cook, Carol Brice, Karen Morrow, Ruth Ford, Russ Thacker, and Max Showalter. The director was Ellis Rabb, choreography was by Rhoda Levine, sets and lighting were by James Tilton, costumes were by Nancy Potts, and the wonderful orchestrations were by Jonathan Tunick (very hot after *Promises, Promises* and *Company*) and Robert Russell Bennett. It didn't help that the show opened during a newspaper strike and had almost no advance sales. The cast was given the option of playing three more weeks or recording a cast album. They chose the latter, and happily so, as the recording kept the show alive and helped the musical develop a huge cult following.

The score is a constant delight, with one tuneful number after another. Claibe Richardson was a wonderful and mostly unsung composer who should have been a major name on Broadway. Kenward Elmslie's lyrics are enchanting and the whole thing retains the Capote flavor. The original LP had to drop a song due to time constraints, but it was restored for the original CD release on Painted Smiles. Then I reissued it on Varese Sarabande at the request of Claibe, who had become a good friend of mine, about which more in a minute. We put some bonus tracks on that release, and we hugely improved the sound at that time. We've done further work on this new mastering and it sounds even better.

Okay, some personal stuff: One day I got a call from Claibe Richardson, asking me if I'd be interested in recording a concept album of the musical he was working on at that time, *Night of the Hunter*, which had a book and lyrics by Stephen Cole. Claibe sent me the material including a demo tape, as well as a tape of a workshop they'd done at the Vineyard. I loved the demo tape and all the songs. I didn't love the tape of the workshop because its director could not have been a more wrong choice for the show – one knew that because he'd convinced the authors to cut one of the show's best songs, a key number for its lead character. I asked them to remove the director from the equation and asked if he and Stephen would be willing to let me guide them (I was a huge fan of both the Davis Grubb novel and the Charles Laughton film). I told them if we got it to where I felt it should go, then we could do the recording. They agreed, and the first thing we did was reinstate the great song that had been cut. The rest of the process took three years and Claibe and Stephen were willing and wonderful collaborators and the work just kept getting better and better and the numbers they added were terrific. We made the recording and it came out great and even better Claibe became a dear friend (as did Stephen Cole, whose musical *After the Fair* I'd record a few years later).

Claibe had the most amazing gift for melody but the kind of success he should have had and deserved didn't happen – he just wasn't dealt those cards. Every song I heard by him was never less than wonderful. I did a private recording of a

concert version of his musical *Grossinger's* (also written with Stephen Cole). When he brought me *The Grass Harp* I jumped at it – it was important to him to have it in print and sounding as it always should have sounded. But it's now been out of print for almost two decades so it was time to bring it back and I know that would make him happy. Claibe passed in early 2003. His final song was written with me – I wanted to do a revue of my "What If" parodies and I couldn't think of anyone better to write the music to my lyric because Claibe had done a lot of work for the kinds of revues I grew up loving. And it was everything I could have hoped for. We did the revue the following year, but because the concept changed slightly the song didn't work. But we finally premiered it at one of our monthly Kritzerland cabaret shows and it went over great. And people were humming it after the show – that was Claibe, a born tunesmith, a musical theatre composer with the best of them. So, revel in the kind of Broadway score they simply don't know how to write anymore – *The Grass Harp*.

— Bruce Kimmel

A NOTE ON THE BONUS TRACKS

"I Trust the Wrong People" was sung by Carol Bruce in the premiere production of *The Grass Harp* by the Trinity Square Repertory in Providence, Rhode Island, in which Elaine Stritch starred as Babylove. A prestigious Broadway producer, Kermit Bloomgarten, subsequently optioned *The Grass Harp*, and strenuously urged Claibe and me to come up with a new song for Verena. Replaced by "What Do I Do Now," years later "I Trust the Wrong People" surfaced on a Painted Smiles LP of my theatre lyrics and poem songs, *Kenward Elmslie Visited*, from which Elaine Stritch's rendition is culled.

"Brazil" was beyond the vocal resources of our Trinity Square Dr. Morris Ritz, Verena's conman betrayer, and was excised, forgotten until George Rose tackled it for the same LP, part of Ben Bagley's series of *Revisited* albums. Recently, I revised *The Grass Harp* for a production in San Francisco, and I happily reinstated "Brazil," which Dr. Ritz sings as he cracks and robs Verena's safe.

— Kenward Elmslie
June 15, 1999