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A GENTLEMAN'S GUIDE TO LOVE & MURDER

MUSICAL

PRODUCTION NUMBER 245

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I was in college. It was 1978 or '79 and I wasn't sleeping, so I turned on my black and white television and two or three channels in, there was this movie and I went, "Oh yeah, that's Kind Hearts and Coronets; that's one of my dad's favorite films." And I literally bolted upright in bed, smacked my forehead and said, "Oh my god, it's a musical." Now, I know that sounds incredibly ridiculous and hyperbolic and over-the-top dramatic, but it's really what happened.

—Steven Lutvak, composer of *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*

That smack on the head would lead, over three decades, to a 1907 novel, one lawsuit, four Tony Awards, and eight roles played by a single actor. While Lutvak attended graduate school with Robert Freedman in 1981, they hadn't worked together until 2001 when Lutvak shared the idea of a musical based on the 1949 film *Kind Hearts and Coronets* and asked Freedman (who was working in television at the time) to work on the book and lyrics. "We just thought, 'One day, we're going to write a musical together. By hook or by crook,'" Freedman said. "We like each other's work, and we were friends. It just seemed logical."

Freedman fell in love with a number of aspects of the movie that he felt would help it work as a musical: a dark sense of humor, a setting in Edwardian London that took the audience away to a world where they could suspend their disbelief, and a very modern notion of a hero who is also a serial killer. But it was the titular gentleman's status as an underdog, a victim of class and society which allowed him a way in: "I identified with that guy and had a similar experience of feeling dismissed and underestimated growing up as a young adult. What that created in me was the drive and the determination to make something of myself."

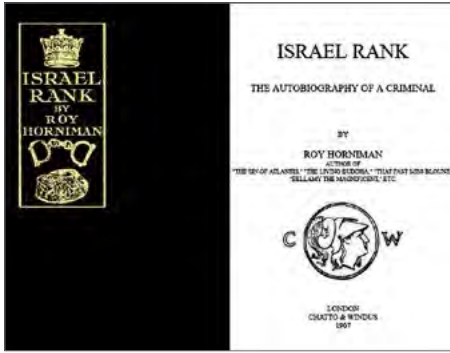
After securing the rights to the film, the musical went into development with multiple successful workshops, staged readings, and awards. It was all heading towards a 2009 premiere at La Jolla Playhouse and a promising path to Broadway when legal disaster threatened to murder the show in a most ungentlemanly fashion. Canal+, who held the rights to the film *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, were unhappy with the shape the script was taking and

revoked the rights to the film and sent a Cease-and-Desist letter to the team and a furious phone call: "We pulled the rights on you people, why are you continuing to show this?"

This was news to Lutvak and Freedman, who were in shock that their efforts might all be in vain. It was Lutvak's lawyer who saved the show by pointing out that *Kind Hearts and Coronets* was itself an adaptation of the 1907 novel *Israel Rank: The Autobiography of a Criminal* by Roy Horniman, a contemporary of Oscar Wilde's who shared his love of satirizing society. (If you've never heard of *Israel Rank*, you are not alone: at the time the novel had never been published in the United States. The success of this musical, however, means the novel has now been published in the States and available easily.)



Playwright Robert L. Freedman, left, and composer Steven Lutvak in 2015. (AP Photo/Mark Kennedy) (The Associated Press)



1907 Edition of *Israel Rank, the Autobiography of a Criminal* by Roy Horniman

Since the musical had already departed from the movie in many ways, including names, locations, character traits, and methods of murder, it was a relatively easy process to remove any final ties to *Kind Hearts and Coronets* and argue their musical was an adaptation of the original Israel Rank (which was in the public domain), and not its film adaptation.

However, there remained one central idea which was common to both the movie and the musical which was not in the original novel: one actor playing all eight members of the doomed D'Ysquith family. When offered the movie, Sir Alec Guinness had been asked to play four characters but quickly convinced them otherwise: "I read [the screenplay] on a beach in France, collapsed with laughter on the first page, and didn't even bother to get to the end of the script. I went straight back to the hotel and sent a telegram saying, 'Why four parts? Why not eight!?'"

This similarity between the musical and the film forced the matter before a judge, with the film owners claiming that the idea of one actor playing multiple roles belonged to them. "It came down to one issue, which is: could we have one actor play all the people in one family who get murdered? That wasn't in the novel, because it wasn't a theatrical performance, but it was in the film," said Freedman. "Our attorney basically argued that, since theater began, that kind of thing's been happening. And the judge dismissed the case, outright, in March of 2011."



Lobby card for *Kind Hearts and Coronets* featuring Alec Guinness as eight different characters.

The judge said in his decision that while the idea of one actor playing the same role was a similarity, it was not exclusive to the film, and that no discerning viewer could confuse the two: "In short, the Film is at most tongue-in-cheek. The Musical, however, sticks its tongue out. It is a bawdy, slapstick comedy. Where the Film is subtle, the Musical is campy. [...] the total concept and feel of the Film is a dark comedy/drama about a disinherited heir who murders his relatives to obtain the baronetcy, while that of the Musical is a bawdy, over-the-top send-up of the same (unprotectible) plot. That both works employ the convention of using a single actor to play all the victims may add to the amusement, but it is hardly the 'heart and soul' of each work. At their core, each rendition presents a radically different aesthetic placing one outside the copyright protection of the other."

With that ruling, the show then went on to premiere at Hartford Stage in 2012 before moving to Broadway and dominating that year's Tony Awards with nine nominations, winning awards for Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical, Best Direction of a Musical, and Best Costume Design.

—HCTO Guest Dramaturg Mark Fossen, MFA