

Interview with Composer Maury Yeston

The road to Broadway for the original production of *Nine* was a nine year journey that began in 1973 as Maury Yeston's project in the BMI Musical Theatre Workshop.

Why did you want to make Federico Fellini's 1962 movie *8 1/2* into a musical?

Nine was the thing I really desperately wanted to write—never thinking for a minute that it would ever be produced. The movie had a phenomenal impact on me when I saw it as a teenager when it first came out. I was fascinated with Guido who was going through a second adolescence when I was going through my first! As I grew I began to realize that there was room to explore the reactions of the inner workings of the women in Guido's wake. I think that's what opened the gateways of creativity for *Nine*—to hear from these extraordinary women. The great secret of *Nine* is that it took *8 1/2* and became an essay on the power of women by answering the question, "What are women to men?" And *Nine* tells you: they are our mothers, our sisters, our teachers, our temptresses, our judges, our nurses, our wives, our mistresses, our muses.



Wasn't *Nine* optioned very early on when your songs were done in a BMI Showcase?

There were three songs done from *Nine* [in 1974] and it was an instantaneous sensation. With "Guido's Song," "In a Very Unusual Way" and "The Germans at the Spa" you could just tell what the whole show was going to be. They seemed to reflect what felt like a potentially successful show, and it was instantly optioned by two producers who had already done things on Broadway. Unfortunately, they could never get the rights to the film *8 1/2*. They tried to develop the project, but after two years they failed to get the rights so I simply continued doing the show as a labor of love.

How did you manage to finally get the rights from Fellini?

We did a reading much later on in New London, CT [at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in 1978] and a woman who lived nearby—named Katherine Hepburn—came to see it. She wrote a letter to Fellini telling him that she had seen this "marvelous" work based on his film *8 1/2*. I never knew until later that she'd actually written that letter to Fellini. I went to Rome to get the rights for *8 1/2* when we were going to do the Broadway production, and Fellini told me that he had received this letter from Katherine Hepburn and had known about it for quite awhile. I think that was one of the very helpful reasons that he gave me permission.

Did Fellini ever see the original production?

After the show was a hit, he invited me back to Rome and I spent a week with him there. It was very exciting. I ended up playing the music for him on the piano that had belonged to Nino Rota. He brought me to Cinecittà Studios, and I played the music for him there. He

liked the show very much, but he was never able to get to New York. Friends had spoken to him about it and he saw lots of photos.

When did Tommy Tune become involved as the director?

He became associated with it early in the spring of 1981 after I won the first Richard Rodgers Award (which included a \$40,000 grant to produce the show for a two-week run downtown in New York City.) Tommy—whom I'd never met—heard about the award and had somebody send him a tape of the O'Neill reading. Then he called me up and said, "I really want to direct this." About a week after we met for the first time, he called again and said, "I've gotten together with some associates and we think you should decline the Richard Rodgers Award. Instead of doing a production downtown, we should just bring it to Broadway and I'll direct." So that's how it happened.

When did you decide to make Guido the only male character in the show?

It was during the casting process, very late in the game. We were dissatisfied with all of the men we were seeing except for Raul Julia [who would play Guido.] it was Tommy's notion to do the whole play with one man and the rest women. I thought that was just a terrific idea for an interesting reason. When one sees *8 1/2*, the film, it's an authoritative autobiographical film about a great director because you know Marcello Mastroianni is a stand in for Fellini. But the question came to us, "How would Raul Julia make an audience believe that he was a great film director?" Once we decided that he would be the only man on stage, that element of casting alone gave such a focus of authority to him that it rendered him a more believable, controlling, creative character.

Who came up with the unusual look for the show?

We knew in October of 1981 that it would open [on Broadway] in the spring of 1982. Then Tommy said, "I have an idea for how I want to present this show." It was really quite radical. He said, "Look, I've been listening to it very carefully and I think that all of the scenery is in the music. It would be a waste of money to build tons of physical scenery when the music takes you there already. So I think the whole show can be done on a white tile set." He came over to my place and unrolled a piece of paper that had a drawing of twenty-four boxes with a box in the middle. He said, "All the women will sit there and Raul will stand there." And I said, "Well, it's an orchestra and he's the conductor." And he said, "Exactly!"

And then Tommy said, "I think this idea will work, but before we actually commit ourselves to putting it on a Broadway stage, I'd like to have three weeks in a workshop. I need to bring all of the people into the room and see if my concept makes sense." And so we did a workshop starting in late December of 1981—in plain clothes with boxes—and that created the show that went to Broadway. It was a brilliant notion that the essence of where we were was in the score. Magical things happen because of that.

Considering the number of years you worked on the project it got very intense at the end.

It is a rule of writing—certainly in musical theatre—that the closer you get to an actual production, the more things come into focus. So even though it was a nine year journey, the final sprint counted for 30% [of the end product.] The last six months really brought it home. It all happened very quickly after the workshop. We went right into Broadway rehearsals, opened on May 9th, were nominated for all those Tonys on May 10th and won [Best Musical and Best Score] on the 10th of June.

by Suzanne Bixby