



The Works of Arthur Laurents: Politics, Love, and Betrayal

John M. Clum

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Arthur Laurents's career as a playwright, screenwriter, book writer for musicals and director spanned over half a century. His first Broadway play, *Home of the Brave*, was produced in 1945; his last play, *Come Back, Come Back, Wherever You Are*, was produced in 2009 when he was ninety-one. Although he is best known for his work on the classic musicals *Gypsy* and *West Side Story* and for his screenplays for *Rope*, *The Way We Were*, and *The Turning Point*, Laurents is the author of seventeen full-length plays, numerous screenplays and three volumes of memoirs. Despite the length and distinction of Laurents's career, until now no one has written a full-length critical study of his work. Laurents's name was associated with a few hit musicals and films, but his best work, the plays he wrote since 1975, are not as well known. One reason is that the economics of the American theatre have changed during the writer's lifetime and Laurents's serious plays were performed Off-Broadway or at regional theatres. Few were published, except in acting editions, until a volume of *Selected Plays* was assembled in 2005. Moreover, Laurents's highly controversial volumes of memoirs, filled with attacks on people who he felt betrayed him over the years, overshadowed his later work. Ignoring most of his own plays in the memoirs did not help to maintain his reputation as a serious playwright. This book rectifies the absence of a serious examination of all of Laurents's major work. This first comprehensive study of Laurents's work focuses on the subjects and themes that recur in his work, particularly the interrelated topics of gender politics, homosexuality and the dynamics of marriage. The position of women and gay men changed greatly over the sixty-plus years of Laurents's career and we see those changes reflected in his work, particularly in the shifting power dynamics within a marriage. Laurents was fascinated by the dynamics of marriage. In his plays there is always a tension between love and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of monogamy. In works like *The Enclave*, we also see a variety of ways in which gay men try to live proud lives in a heteronormative society. In that play and in *Two Lives*, Laurents examines how gay men negotiate something like a marriage before gay marriages were legally sanctioned. The book also covers the ways in which Laurents's plays reflect his interest in leftist politics from the 1940s through the various liberations of the late 1960s and 1970s. Above all, the study argues that if there is any common theme running through the plays, films and memoirs, it is betrayal—betrayal of marriage partner, friend, artistic collaborator and, most important, betrayal of one's own ideals. *The Works of Arthur Laurents* will be of particular interest to students and scholars of American drama, musical theatre, American film, gender studies, gay studies, and Jewish studies.

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