

A Reader's Guide to the New York Musical Comedies of Betty Comden and Adolph Green

On the Town, Wonderful Town, and Bells are Ringing

by Terry Dunford (April 2015)

Come on down to the Village Vortex,

Home of the new jazz age – Swing!

Rock and roll to the beat beat beat.

Wonderful Town (1953), music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green [\[1\]](#)

“One day in 1938, Max was sitting in his little basement, his Village Vanguard, when these three kids came down the stairs.”

Lorraine Gordon, *Alive at the Village Vanguard* (2006) [\[2\]](#)

Preface

During the final days of 1949, Hollywood released the movie version of the Leonard Bernstein, Betty Comden, Adolph Green, and Jerome Robbins 1944 Broadway musical comedy, [On the Town](#), a

momentous gesture.^[3] With Leonard Bernstein, the first American-born and American-trained (Curtis Institute) world-class conductor in the vanguard, the movie helped to confirm that post-World War II America, and more specifically New York City, was the new cultural center of the world. The 'Fifties had arrived.

Leonard Bernstein had achieved overnight fame in the now legendary performance on November 13, 1943, that forced Bernstein, newly appointed assistant director of the New York Philharmonic, and all of 25 years old, to substitute at the last minute for the highly anticipated guest conductor, Bruno Walter, who had fallen ill. Without a rehearsal, Leonard Bernstein led the orchestra on a Carnegie Hall program broadcast live on CBS radio. The story has a fairy tale ending, and Bernstein was more than praised by his peers; he was famous. The dominance of American culture was demonstrated when Leonard Bernstein toured Europe in 1947 – 48 as guest conductor, occasionally performing his own orchestral compositions, including a trip to the yet-to-be-born state of Israel to conduct the Palestine Philharmonic (as it was then called). Leonard Bernstein was now a world figure.

On the Town is the first of a trilogy of New York comical musicals by Betty Comden and Adolph Green that included *Wonderful Town* (1953) with music by Leonard Bernstein and *Bells are Ringing* (1956) with music by Jule Styne. *On the Town* demonstrated the innovative spirit of New York, part of a remarkable era of innovative American theater (*Oklahoma!* to *South Pacific*). At the same time, the Great White Way still paid its electrical bills with the European traditions of the costumed operetta: Broadway in the 1940s staged Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, *Trial by Jury*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, and *The Gondoliers*