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A Most Talented Fella Who Embodied That Broadway Spirit

It won't win any awards for avant-garde documentary-making, but "Heart & Soul: The Life and Music of Frank Loesser" does its job well.

After watching these 90 minutes (Sunday on many PBS stations), sentient viewers will know a lot about Loesser's career and just enough about his life. Even if that weren't true, the

show would be worth watching just to see and hear star performances of Loesser's trove of unforgettable Broadway and Hollywood songs.

In the beginning, the film insults musical theater fans a bit by suggesting that Loesser is unknown. He may not have the posthumous presence of Cole Porter or the Gershwins, but Loesser (rhymes with dresser, as his fans know), 37 years after his death, is hardly forgotten.

Some of his admirers, however, may not know just how much he contributed to 20th-century popular music. First and foremost, there is "Guys and Dolls," which opened on Broadway in 1950 and was made into a 1955 film with Frank Sinatra and Marlon Brando. The composer's daughter Emily says on camera that "Guys and Dolls" is "known as the perfect musical."



Paramount Pictures

The Prolific composer and lyricist Frank Loesser in 1949.

The documentary makes a convincing argument for that claim. There are generous and thoroughly enjoyable excerpts from screen performances of the show's best-known songs, including "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat," "I'll Know," "Fugue for Tinhorns" ("I've got the horse right here") and "Adelaide's Lament" ("A person can develop a cold"). The notables who comment on Loesser's work include Betty Comden,

Heart & Soul

The Life and Music of Frank Loesser

On most PBS stations Sunday
(check local listings).

Produced by Walter Gottlieb and
Final Cut Productions

who died last month, Stephen Schwartz, Cy Feuer, Margaret Whiting, Robert Morse, Matthew Broderick and Samuel Goldwyn Jr.

Loesser's second-best-known Broadway show is "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" (1961), whose musical numbers include "I Believe in You" (sung affectionately by Mr. Morse to his own reflection in the original), "Brotherhood of Man" and "Coffee Break." (Loesser had a knack for writing about the details of everyday life. Betty Hutton is seen singing "The Sewing Machine" in a 1947 movie, "The Perils of Pauline.")

Loesser reportedly wrote "Baby, It's Cold Outside" as a little something that he and his first wife, Lynn, could sing for friends at parties.

And there were a few others. Take "Heart and Soul" itself, the quintessential amateur piano duet, or the wartime hit "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition," made popular by Kate Smith. Consider "Once in Love With Amy," from "Where's Charley?" (the first musical

for which Loesser wrote both lyrics and music). Not to mention "On a Slow Boat to China," "Spring Will Be a Little Late This Year," "Wonderful Copenhagen" (from the movie "Hans Christian Andersen"), "Two Sleepy People" and "Standing on the Corner," from his ambitious stage comedy "The Most Happy Fella" (1956).

Loesser had hoped that the operatic style of "The Most Happy Fella" would impress his mother, but, according to this documentary, no such luck. Born in New York, Loesser grew up in a family of German immigrant musicians who considered classical music the only respectable form. His mother never considered him a success.

Aside from that family strain, a divorce (he fell in love with his "Most Happy Fella" leading lady, Jo Sullivan) and an occasional temper tantrum seem to have been the only personal demons that Loesser fought. Near the beginning of "Heart & Soul," the narrator ominously says, "He had a darker side." But that turns out to mean that when he was frustrated in his songwriting, he would swear and "jump up and down."

Loesser was a chain smoker and died of lung cancer in 1969. He was 59.