

CURTAINS

Synopsis

ACT I

It's the brassy, bright, and promising year of 1959. Boston's Colonial Theatre is host to the opening night performance of Robbin' Hood! "a new musical of the Old West." The curtains rise on the show's merciful finale. Act Two, Scene 23.

As the valiant cast proclaims their undying affection for the Wide Open Spaces of Kansas, a sour note is sounded by the voice of faded film star Jessica Cranshaw, who can't act, can't sing, and can't dance — not even a little. Jessica's name may be above the title, but her performance has been beneath contempt, both on-stage and off. She takes her mandatory bow in front of the cowboy-costumed company, gathers up her obligatory bouquets from a pair of tuxedoed ushers, and collapses in a heap, easily the most graceful move she's made all evening. The cast rushes to their fallen star behind the fallen curtain and bear the unbearable Jessica off to Boston Hospital.

A few hours later, on the now darkened Colonial stage, four tormented souls in evening dress search the night owl editions of the Boston morning papers for a single charitable review. The show's composer, Aaron Fox, and lyricist Georgia Hendricks — recently divorced but professionally reunited in an attempt to create musical magic where their marriage has otherwise gone flat — find nary a quote to pull. Equally empty-handed is the show's lone financial backer, Oscar Shapiro, garment district maven but theatre district novitiate. Slightly less daunted is Carmen Bernstein, co-producer (with her husband Sidney) of Robbin' Hood! The four speculate about What Kind of Man, woman, or beast would ever choose to be a critic.

They are joined by feverishly fey director, Christopher Belling, who announces he's just given birth to a brainchild the producers must instantly adopt. To demonstrate his plan, he asks Georgia to sing Jessica Cranshaw's first ballad in the show. It's no secret to the company that Georgia has recently rekindled a past romance with leading man Bobby Pepper. Though her ex-husband may be accompanying her at the piano, Georgia is clearly thinking of Bobby as she sings Thinking of Him.

Director Belling reveals his masterful plan: as long as Jessica Cranshaw is indisposed, her part should be filled by Georgia, a former stage performer who obviously knows the show inside and out because she is its co-creator. All approve, except ex-husband Aaron, who points out that the problem is academic if Jessica Cranshaw returns to work. But the fateful news arrives: The Woman's Dead. An impromptu funeral ceremony in Jessica's honour is interrupted by the arrival of Homicide Lieutenant, Frank Cioffi, who saw Bobbin' Hood! in previews and thinks that, with the exception of the late Miss Cranshaw, the cast are all spectacular performers in one heck of a show. The Lieutenant has done some amateur theatrical work himself, and he is as shocked as Carmen Bernstein to learn that the cast does not feel the show must go on. He and Carmen must remind the company that they are part of a special breed known as Show People.

With their faith in themselves and Robbin' Hood! renewed, the cast prepares to leave for the night when Cioffi explains that they can't. Since an autopsy has revealed that Jessica Cranshaw swallowed poison pellets in the last minutes of the show, during which time she never left the stage, it's clear she was murdered by a member of the company. Cioffi feels the surest way to solve the crime will be to keep the entire cast of suspicious characters sequestered in the theatre.

Sidney Bernstein, the show's senior producing partner (and Carmen's philandering lesser half) arrives from New York — or at least that's where he claims to have been at the time of the murder.

Cioffi is left alone with local neophyte actress Niki Harris, who understudied Jessica Cranshaw but is now covering for Georgia. The police detective is clearly smitten with Niki's winsome charm and confides in her about his investigation. They learn that they are both married ... to their respective careers, which in Cioffi's case has resulted in a life of lunch counter mornings and Coffee Shop Nights.

The next day, as Georgia struggles to regain her showbiz sea legs, Carmen and Sidney Bernstein invite Boston Globe senior drama critic Daryl Grady to pay them a visit, much to his bewilderment, since his review of the show found precious little to praise. The producers ask Grady to re-review their musical with its new lead, but the best he can offer is to appraise the next evening's re-opening. With Grady's challenge accepted, Chris Belling prepares to restage a particularly troublesome number, entitled 'In the Same Boat'. Cioffi is startled to hear himself suggest that the problem might lie in the song itself, and the director is surprised to hear himself agree. Composer Aaron Fox is urged to concoct a different number for the same slot in the show, minus the assistance of his ex-wife who, owing to her frantic rehearsal schedule, has now become his ex-writing partner as well. In private with Lieutenant Cioffi, the composer makes a most unexpected confession.

Any doubt that Georgia could hold the stage is happily dispelled by the dress rehearsal of the big saloon hall number. But as the Act One curtain descends, murder rises to the occasion, and a key member of the company is forced to face The Big Blackout.

ACT II

The second act begins with the updated medical status of the most recent victim: The Man Is Dead. Curtains rise upon a makeshift dormitory on the Colonial's stage, as things go bump in the night and the company, in varying stages of dress and undress, point fingers of suspicion at each other, puzzling over whether She or He Did It.

Cioffi arrives with a grim report from the coroner and even more grave concerns about the show's rapidly-approaching deadline. Aaron previews his best effort at In the Same Boat #2 but the zealous Cioffi sends it back to the drawing board once again, while urging that star Bobby Pepper be added to the Fort Henderson square dance. This prompts Bambi, an aspiring chorine and also Carmen's daughter, to plead for a pas de deux for herself and Bobby, as a spotlight moment in the number. Carmen reluctantly gives Bambi her chance, although she reminds her that a hard-nosed producer watches the box office, not the stage, and in commercial theatre, the bottom line is: It's a Business.

Much to Carmen's surprise, Bambi shines in the rehearsal of the restaged Kansasland. But even as Bambi gets her big shot, Bobby Pepper gets his, from a gun offstage. Or was someone else the target? Cioffi's craft as a detective takes centre stage as he traces the bullet's torturous path. He is also able to solve the mystery of why Aaron Fox and Georgia Hendricks were so anxious to work on Robbin' Hood! as the former husband and wife team discover ample reason to renew their vows.

With the spotlight suddenly on romance, Cioffi's magnifying glass focuses on the ingénue who's too-good-to-be-true. In his wildest dreams, instead of tracking footprints, he'd be trading steps with Niki up a theatrical stairway, making moves that even Fred and Ginger would find A Tough Act to Follow.

But in the realm of homicide, the blink of an eye can turn daydream into nightmare, as Cioffi realises that Niki is carrying a secret, one she has shared with stage manager Johnny

Harmon. Johnny's lips remain sealed — and the killer hopes to keep them that way forever. Cioffi's investigation takes him high above the stage and, hearing the chorus below as they rehearse *In the Same Boat #3*, he hits upon a solution to some (if not all) the production's problems, in a melodic amalgam that finally sees *In the Same Boat Completed*.

With that immense puzzle solved to the company's satisfaction, Cioffi has merely to piece together the clues he's gathered, correctly unmask the killer, save the life of the murderer's next intended victim, render the fiend harmless, make sense of a troubling, but telltale, observation and find a new finale for the show. In doing so, Carmen Bernstein gives Cioffi the highest praise he could ever hope to receive: he is truly one of those Show People who understands why the show must go on. The revamped *Wide Open Spaces* Finale may be *A Tough Act to Follow* (reprise), but for Lieutenant Frank Cioffi, the curtain is just about to rise on the greatest joy of his life.