

Mame's Boys: Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee

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Americans love quotes, and some of our most celebrated quotes have been spoken by Ohioans, most notably “War is hell,” by General William T. Sherman and “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind,” by Neil Armstrong. Then there is my personal favorite: “Life is a banquet, and most poor sons-of-bitches are starving to death,” by Mame Dennis.

Well, actually it WASN'T the fictional Mame who said that—it was the Ohio-born playwrights Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, who first coined that memorable phrase in their hit Broadway play, *Auntie Mame*. This fall marks the show's fiftieth anniversary, a perfect time to celebrate this beloved American classic and the two Ohio writers who brought it to life on stage.

In this age of *The Da Vinci Code* and John Grisham thrillers, of people standing in line for hours to buy their kids the latest installment of the *Harry Potter* series, the thought of a collection of stories about a madcap Depression-era socialite and her adorable orphaned nephew as a must-read bestseller probably seems incongruous. Yet in 1955, the Great Depression really wasn't all that long ago, Sunday magazines were filled with society news, and stories about New York City's upper crust still seemed to hold a fascination for many.

Author Patrick Dennis' manuscript was rejected by eleven publishers before Vanguard Press picked it up. *Auntie Mame: An Irreverent Escapade* was published in the spring of 1955 and was an immediate success. Vanguard and Dennis hit the jackpot: the book spent 112 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list and sold more than two million copies, becoming one of the publishing sensations of the post-war era.

From the beginning, the character of Mame seemed a natural for the theatre. Broadway producers Bob Fryer and Larry Carr bought the stage rights. Patrick Dennis decided to try his hand at a script because, after all, it was his book. Dennis went to work and produced a first draft that was 320 pages long. And that was just Act *One*.

It was pretty clear that, if the script was left to Patrick Dennis, audiences would be sitting through *Auntie Mame* for about as long as they sat through Wagner's *Ring Cycle* at the Met.

Enter Jerry Lawrence and Bob Lee.

Fortunately for Dennis, his agent also happened to be the agent for Lawrence and Lee. In the spring of 1955, the two Ohioans were the toast of Broadway, thanks to the resounding success of



Jerome Lawrence is at the typewriter, Bob Lee is standing. The photo was taken when they were working on the script for *INHERIT THE WIND* in 1955

their drama, *Inherit the Wind*. Lawrence and Lee had read a galley copy of Dennis' book and enjoyed it immensely. Also at this time, Lawrence and Lee were working on their next show, *Shangri-La*, a musical based on James Hilton's book, *Lost Horizon*. That show's producers were Bob Fryer and Larry Carr, coincidentally the same people who held the stage rights to *Auntie Mame*.

It was suggested that Jerry Lawrence and Bob Lee come in to the *Mame* project and take over the script from Patrick Dennis. Dennis breathed a sigh of relief, all too happy to hand the reins to the experienced duo. Playwriting was most definitely not his forté.

Jerry Lawrence would later remark that many friends and colleagues warned that adapting the Dennis book for the stage was an impossible task. It wasn't even really a novel, just a series of stories. But the episodic nature of the book didn't bother Lawrence and Lee at all. For more than a decade before their recent Broadway success, Lawrence and Lee had been top writers in network radio and then had moved over to the medium of television when it was still in its infancy. Over the years, they'd done hundreds of scripts, writing for the biggest stars in show business. Once you've worked with Frank Sinatra or Orson Welles and written 299 episodes of *The Railroad Hour* with Gordon MacRae, scriptwriting holds no fear.

It helped that Lawrence and Lee knew they would be writing for Rosalind Russell in the lead. Fryer and Carr had bought the rights specifically for the actress. Two seasons before, Fryer had presented Russell in *Wonderful Town*, a play based on "My Sister Eileen," a collection of short stories written by Ohioan Ruth McKenny. The show brought Russell a Tony as Best Actress and rejuvenated her career. Now Fryer hoped the magic could work again. The role of Mame suited Russell's talents to a tee, since Mame was a bigger-than-life-over-the-top-outrageous character. And in the 1950s, when you wanted a bigger-than-life-over-the-top-outrageous actress, you called Roz Russell (unless it was a musical, in which case you called Ethel Merman).

Lawrence and Lee began to take Dennis' Auntie Mame stories and mold them into a play. Their ability to craft and shape gave the play a structure that was lacking in the book. They were also able to accentuate some of the book's rare moments of warmth and tug at the heartstrings in a way that Patrick Dennis said he himself was unable to do.

When Jerry and Bob had finished, the show was still basically one episode after another—a "revue without music"—but it worked. In Jerry's and Bob's capable hands, the play's two acts had evolved into a story—how a small boy saves his lovable but eccentric aunt from a life of dissipation, and how she later saves him from the clutches of upper-class society, cloistered in a world of small-minded and bigoted people.

More than that, Lawrence and Lee also wanted to convey a message—don't live in a narrow, limited, one-track life. Live fully each day, every day—or, as they expressed so magnificently in Mame's admonition to the mousy Gooch: "Life is a banquet and most poor sons-of-bitches are starving to death. *Live!*"



Original poster from the 1956 Broadway production of MAME

Auntie Mame opened at the Broadhurst Theatre in New York on October 31, 1956, and was an immediate hit. Lawrence and Lee became those rarest of Broadway writers who have not one but TWO smash hits playing at the same time.

“We used to watch the curtain calls for *Inherit the Wind* at the National Theatre,” recalls Bob Lee’s widow, Janet Waldo Lee, “then we’d jump into a cab and dash over to the Broadhurst to see the final curtain and bows for *Auntie Mame*. It was incredibly exciting.”

At first it was mostly Russell’s performance that drew bravos, while many critics were lukewarm towards the play itself. But over time, as one actress after another followed Russell in the role, not only on Broadway but on national tours and overseas, it became evident that there was much more to the play itself than critics had first seen. Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee were at last given the credit they deserved for having written a great play.

In 1958, Warner Brothers filmed *Auntie Mame*, with Russell recreating her stage role. Adolph Green and Betty Comden were hired to do the screenplay. They called Lawrence and Lee to tell them they were basically leaving their work intact, because, as Janet Waldo Lee recalls, “Adolph and Betty said they couldn’t improve upon perfection.”

One important change had to be made in the film script, however. In the late 1950s, movies still came under the old production code that controlled what could be said and done on screen. *Mame*’s immortal line had to be modified from “poor sons-of-bitches” to the ostensibly less offensive “poor suckers.”

Jerry Lawrence and Bob Lee both had earned a very good living as writers in their radio days, but the stage and film versions of *Mame* and their earlier hit, *Inherit the Wind*, made them independently wealthy. Jerry Lawrence bought a beautiful villa overlooking the ocean on Malibu Beach. In honor of his idol, Henry David Thoreau, he named it “Walden West.” Jerry’s friends teased him by giving it another name: “The House That Mame Built.”

But *Mame* Dennis wasn’t finished yet. Jerry Lawrence and Bob Lee had optioned their play for musical rights for a ten-year period. On vacation in Egypt, Jerry got a call from Bob back in the states that their rights were about to expire. Renew them or not? They decided not only to renew the rights, but to plunge ahead and bring *Mame* back to life again— this time as a musical. They called composer/lyricist Jerry Herman, who had just scored a smash two years earlier with *Hello Dolly!* Herman enthusiastically joined Jerry and Bob on the new musical version.

Dozens of actresses eagerly auditioned for the coveted role of the singing *Mame*. Lawrence and Lee, along with Jerry Herman, lobbied for Angela Lansbury, who was Lawrence’s neighbor in

Malibu. Up to this point, except for her appearance in Stephen Sondheim's flop musical, *Anyone Can Whistle*, Lansbury was strictly known as a supporting actor, usually playing somebody's mother. Friends in the business and the director, Joshua Logan, all urged that Lansbury be passed over. Fortunately, Lawrence, Lee, and Herman ignored their friends, got rid of Josh Logan, and hired Angela Lansbury.

From the moment the Winter Garden Theatre curtain went up for the first time on May 24, 1966, Angela Lansbury was never again thought of as anyone's mother. After twenty-plus years in films, on television, and on stage, Lansbury became a bona fide name-above-the-title-star, and she has remained one ever since, thanks to Jerome Lawrence, Robert E. Lee, and Jerry Herman, to whom she remains forever grateful.

Mame ran nearly four years and more than 1,500 performances on Broadway, more than double the run of the original play. Just as there had been a screen version of *Auntie Mame* starring Rosalind Russell, so everyone assumed there would be one of *Mame* starring Angela Lansbury. Well, it turned out half that way. In 1973, Warner Brothers announced that *Mame* would indeed be a major motion picture in 1974 starring—Lucille Ball.

To be honest, even with Angela in the title role, the film would have been a risky proposition. By 1974, the movie musical was long past its heyday—but Lucille Ball? Like the trouper she was, the redheaded comedienne poured out every ounce of her still considerable charm and charisma into the role. But nothing could disguise the fact that Ball, at sixty-three, was twenty years older than the part called for. Not even a cameo appearance by Ricky Ricardo, playing "Babalu" on his conga drum could have saved poor Lucy. *Mame* was an enormous flop and, sadly, was the last film ever made by Lucille Ball.

Mame may have been down, but she has never been out—not once in the last fifty years. The original novel by Patrick Dennis doesn't sell too many copies these days. But *Mame* herself lives on. In the play and the musical brilliantly realized by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, she continues to dazzle and delight, reminding us still that life, after all, really is a banquet.