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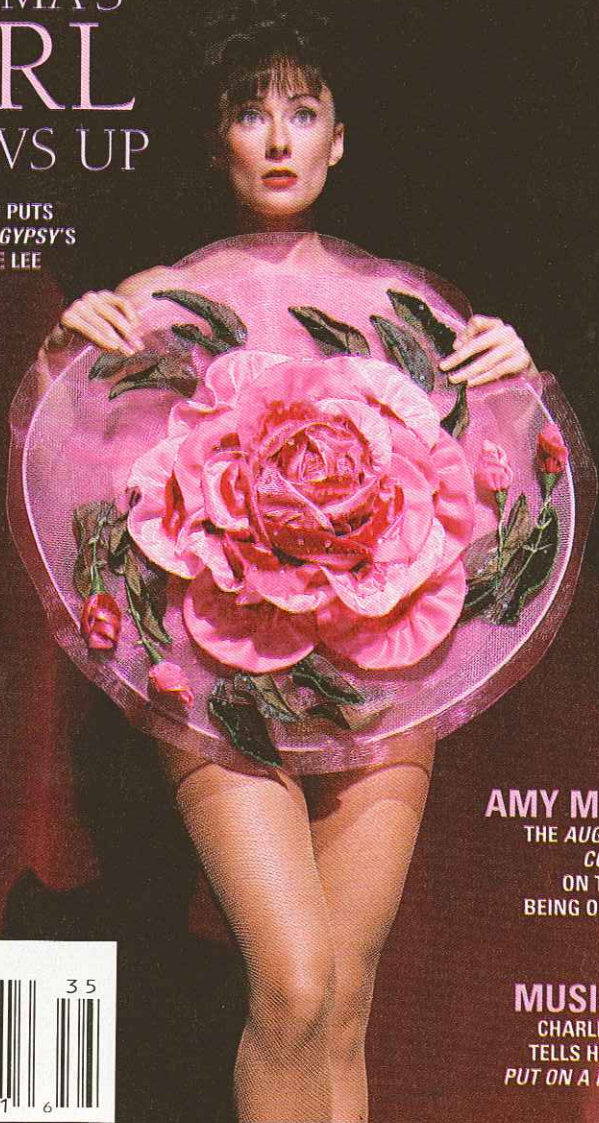
THE NATIONAL THEATRE MAGAZINE

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MOMMA'S GIRL GROWS UP

LAURA BENANTI PUTS
HER STAMP ON *GYPSY*'S
BLOOMING ROSE LEE



AMY MORTON

THE *AUGUST: OSAGE
COUNTY* STAR
ON THE JOYS OF
BEING OUTRAGEOUS

MUSIC MAN

CHARLES STROUSE
TELLS HIS STORY IN
PUT ON A HAPPY FACE

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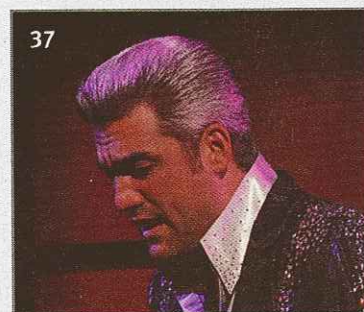
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THE UNGYPPED GYPSY

Laura Benanti's definitive performance of *Gypsy's* blooming Rose has won the actress raves—and a Tony

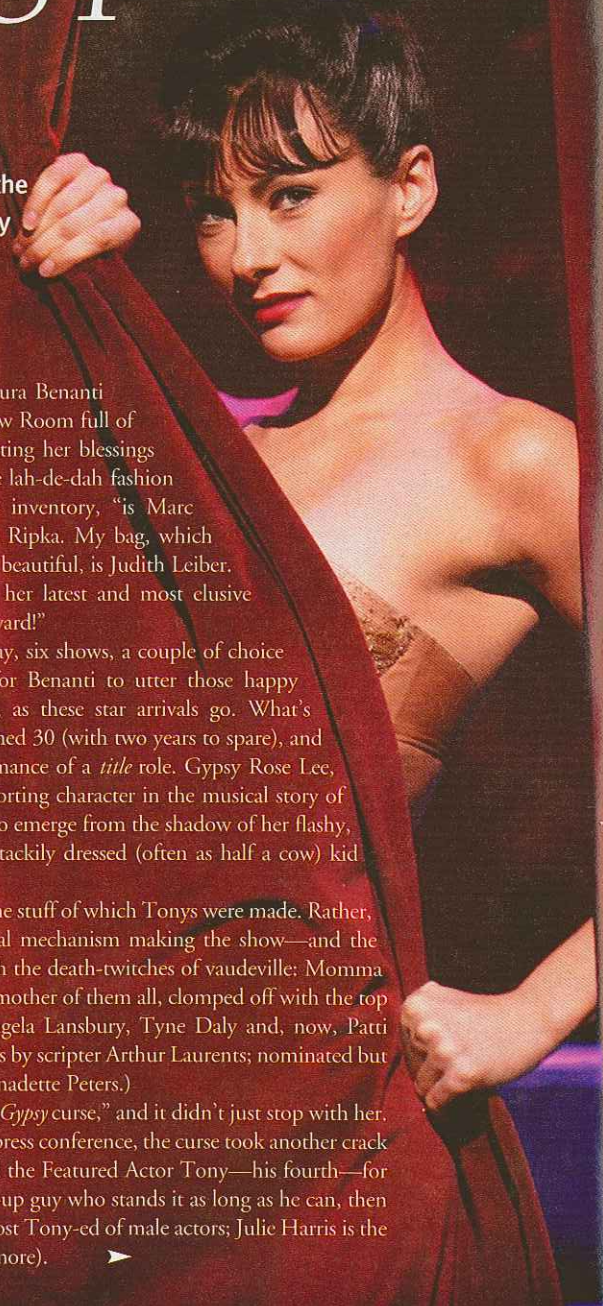
by Doug Sturdivant

a few Sundays back, Laura Benanti stood before a Rainbow Room full of clamoring press, counting her blessings and accessories for the lah-de-dah fashion faction. "My dress," began the inventory, "is Marc Bouwer. My earrings are Judith Ripka. My bag, which I'm currently not carrying but is beautiful, is Judith Leiber. And *this*"—she beamed, saving her latest and most elusive trinket for last—"is the Tony Award!"

It took ten years on Broadway, six shows, a couple of choice *Encores!* and sads of benefits for Benanti to utter those happy words—relatively good mileage, as these star arrivals go. What's more, she made it before she turned 30 (with two years to spare), and she did it in the featured performance of a *title* role. *Gypsy* Rose Lee, stripper extraordinaire, is a supporting character in the musical story of her life, the iconic *Gypsy*—slow to emerge from the shadow of her flashy, star-powered sister, June, just a tackily dressed (often as half a cow) kid from the chorus called Louise.

Until now, the role was not the stuff of which Tonys were made. Rather, Tonys have gone to the maternal mechanism making the show—and the girls—go on all cylinders through the death-twitches of vaudeville: Momma Rose Hovick, the monster stage-mother of them all, clomped off with the top Tony more often than not. (Angela Lansbury, Tyne Daly and, now, Patti LuPone were all directed to Tonys by scripter Arthur Laurents; nominated but no cigar: Ethel Merman and Bernadette Peters.)

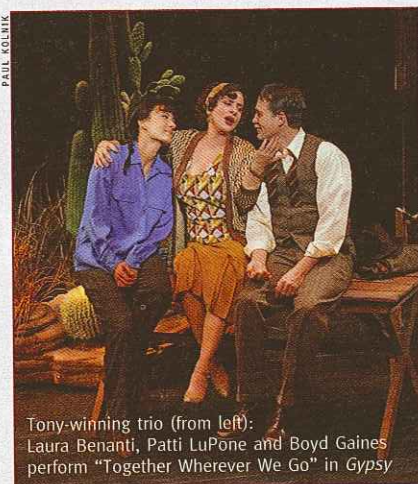
It took Benanti to break "the *Gypsy* curse," and it didn't just stop with her. Right in the middle of her Tony press conference, the curse took another crack when co-star Boyd Gaines nailed the Featured Actor Tony—his fourth—for Herbie, Rose's booker and stand-up guy who stands it as long as he can, then leaves. His win makes him the most Tony-ed of male actors; Julie Harris is the only performer with more (one more). ▶



The Ungypped Gypsy

After the last man standing has vanished, mother and daughter have the stage to themselves—and have it out, in one of the most emotionally draining donnybrooks in theatre history. What's interesting about this round is that Benanti arrives for battle a Star of stainless steel, full of flint, ready to do battle with the cyclonic LuPone.

"I'm not a yeller, by nature," she admits, "so that's where I struggled in rehearsal. I'd start to cry, instantly. My initial instinct is 'go inward.' 'Hurt' is more a place I go to."



Tony-winning trio (from left): Laura Benanti, Patti LuPone and Boyd Gaines perform "Together Wherever We Go" in *Gypsy*

Having Patti LuPone for a sparring partner was a definite plus. "She's so playful and giving. You cannot get stuck. Some actors can get frozen in a way of doing things. She never is. It's like playing a new play every single night. You have the same goals, but the way you come at them may be a bit different. All three of us—Patti, Boyd and I—don't like to be robots. We continue to grow and change as we discover new things.

"In every role, I've tried to channel who that person is. Most of the arcs are from A to C—if you're real lucky, from A to F or G, but never A to Z—and, as an actress, to get to do that is truly extraordinary. Who knows when I'll ever get a chance to do it again?"

She gets to do it at 78 rpm nightly when that kiddie ditty, "Let Me Entertain You," steams up to stripper speed. "She goes from A

to Z in that, but you gotta see all the letters in between in five minutes. It's like a time-lapse shot where flowers suddenly bloom. That's the image I had, but it must be believable. You have to see the gradual arc, but you don't see the true breaking-open of Louise into Gypsy until the strip."

Benanti feels melancholy about the Louise lost along the way. "Gypsy triumphed, but what was lost in that metamorphosis was some of her empathy and softness, so I mourn for Louise. There are times when it feels like taking off a beautiful sweater you love and putting on a corset. Other times, it feels like absolute freedom. It varies. She was thrust into a spotlight she didn't want and finally found—from strangers—the love she'd always wanted from her mother. There's a real tragedy in that story.

"Often when I got off stage, I found myself needing to cry, going home full of emotion instead of spent. My husband [Steven Pasquale of TV's "Rescue Me"] pointed it out to me, so I have to focus on releasing it or I can't come from Point A again."

Biologically, Benanti is an authentic Broadway baby (her parents performed the 1980 *Brigadoon* here: Martin Vidnovic was the lead, Tommy, and Linda Wonneberger understudied his love interest and was in the ensemble), but she counts herself a child of New Jersey, where she was raised "every single day" by her stepfather, Sal Benanti, a psychiatrist. Her mother, in fact, was something of The Anti-Rose, nixing all childhood auditions until her daughter was formed and grounded as a person.

"And, in all of that, she trained me vocally because she always knew I'd end up doing this. She's the epitome of selflessness, happy for everyone else and what they do. There's not an ounce of woulda-coulda-shoulda in her. If anyone feels that way, it's me—and she just says, 'But I love my life. I love your life. And I wouldn't change it.'"

Momma Rose Hovick, wherever she is, probably just grabbed her heart at those words, took pause, then quaked with a massive internal shudder. Sing out, Laura! ♦