



Larry Kert and Carol Lawrence performing on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1958. Film still from a YouTube video.

Kert, Larry (1930-1991)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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The gay actor and singer Larry Kert originated the lead romantic role of Tony in the landmark 1957 Broadway musical *West Side Story*. With his expressive, vibrant tenor, he introduced some of the most memorable songs in the Leonard Bernstein-Stephen Sondheim score, including "Maria," "Tonight," and "Something's Coming."

In 1970, Kert triumphed again on Broadway in another Sondheim musical, *Company*, as Robert, a New York bachelor observing the strains and tensions in the marriages of his best friends, as well as struggling to commit emotionally to each of his three girlfriends.

Other Broadway shows involving Kert were unfortunately short-lived, and his later career was devoted mainly to cabaret, television, and regional theater.

He was born Frederick Lawrence Kert in Los Angeles, California on December 5, 1930 into a comfortably middle-class family. His father was a jeweler and his mother an actress. He had a brother, Morton, and two sisters, Evelyn and the singer later known as Anita Ellis.

He initially attended Hollywood High School but transferred to the Hollywood Professional School in Los Angeles. While still in school, Kert performed as an extra and stunt double in several movies, including *Lassie Come Home* (1943), where he was a stand-in for the film's star Roddy McDowell.

After graduation, Kert took some classes at Los Angeles City College but soon dropped out and moved to New York City where he studied with the celebrated acting teacher Sanford Meisner.

Kert eventually returned to Los Angeles and joined a song and dance group known as "Bill Norvas and the Upstarts." He toured with the group nationally and ultimately played on Broadway when the group was featured in the 1950 musical revue *Tickets, Please!*

He later landed roles in the chorus of the musicals *John Murray Anderson's Almanac* (1953) and *Mr. Wonderful* (1956), which starred Sammy Davis, Jr.

While in *Mr. Wonderful*, a dancer friend, Chita Rivera, who had a featured role in the show, told Kert about a new musical she had recently auditioned for and encouraged him to try out as a dancer in the chorus.

That show ultimately became *West Side Story* (1957), a retelling of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which innovatively merged drama, music, lyrics, and dance. Set in the tenements of New York City, the show explored the rivalries between the Jets, a white working-class street gang, and the Puerto Rican Sharks.

It is of particular note that, in addition to Kert, all the members of the show's core creative team were gay or bisexual, including the director-choreographer Jerome Robbins, composer Leonard Bernstein, lyricist

Stephen Sondheim, and librettist Arthur Laurents. In addition, set designer Oliver Smith, lighting designer Jean Rosenthal, and costume designer Irene Sharaff were also gay or lesbian.

Kert initially auditioned for the role of Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks, and then again for Riff, the leader of the Jets, but was turned down for both. Several months later, he ran into Stephen Sondheim who encouraged Kert to audition again, this time for the Romeo-like role of Tony.

Kert had heard that the musical's creative team was looking for a blond Polish-looking tenor to play Tony, and being dark and Jewish, he thought he was wrong for the role. But he took Sondheim's advice and auditioned anyway, and was eventually cast as the lead, opposite Carol Lawrence in the Juliet-like role of Maria. Chita Rivera, who had told Kert about the show to begin with, played Anita, Bernardo's girlfriend.

The show's rehearsal process was strenuous and demanding. The immensely talented but fiery-tempered Jerome Robbins was a harsh taskmaster who often clashed with Kert and castigated him, in front of the cast and crew, for being a "faggot," although Robbins himself was bisexual. Kert recalled Robbins as a "perfectionist who . . . destroys you."

The show opened to mainly rapturous reviews, and promptly entered Broadway musical history.

Kert remained with the production for three years. He later felt that he may have stayed in the show too long, and became too closely identified with the role of Tony. As he recollected in an interview, "*West Side Story* was my security blanket. I was afraid to fail in something else."

Even when he did eventually leave the show, Kert was pursued by it. For example, he was often invited as a guest on television variety shows, but always to sing "Maria."

He was, however, disappointed when he was not asked to reprise his role in the 1961 movie version of *West Side Story*. Kert hoped it would launch a successful film career. But the film's producers thought Kert, who was 30 years old by then, looked too mature to be believable as a teenager.

Kert next starred in the musical comedy *A Family Affair* (1962), the first musical by the celebrated composer John Kander, with lyrics by Kander and James Goldman. The show ran only 65 performances.

He was then cast in a co-starring role in the much anticipated, but ultimately disastrous, musical version of Truman Capote's novella, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, adapted for the stage by the playwright Edward Albee, with music and lyrics by Bob Merrill.

The production starred two actors who had achieved success in television, but with limited musical theater experience: Mary Tyler Moore played Holly Golightly and the then deeply closeted gay actor Richard Chamberlain played a fledgling novelist named Jeff Claypool.

Breakfast at Tiffany's never officially opened on Broadway, but instead was closed during previews in December 1966 by its producer David Merrick, who announced in a public statement, which has since become legendary, that he would rather close the show than "subject the drama critics and the public to an excruciatingly boring evening."

Following the disappointment of that show, Kert found work in several theater workshops and taught dance classes. Then, in December 1968, he took over the role of Cliff in John Kander and Fred Ebb's award-winning and long-running musical *Cabaret* (1966), adapted from stories by Christopher Isherwood. Kert stayed with the show for about a year.

Unfortunately, the next show in which Kert originated a role was, like *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, ill-fated. *La Strada* (1969), a musical based on the film by Federico Fellini, and starring Bernadette Peters, closed on opening night.

However, in 1970, Kert finally found Broadway success again in the Stephen Sondheim musical *Company*, playing the central role of Robert, a perennial New York bachelor surrounded by his best friends, a group of married couples.

Kert took over the role from the original lead actor, Dean Jones, shortly after the musical opened on Broadway.

Structured as a series of vignettes (the production originated as a collection of one-act plays by the show's librettist, George Furth, who, like Sondheim, is gay), *Company* explores the difficulties of sustaining a meaningful relationship in an increasingly cynical, self-absorbed society.

Some New York critics found the show acutely anti-marriage. But, defending the musical, Sondheim called it "the most pro-marriage show in the world." He went on to clarify that *Company* "says very clearly that to be emotionally committed to somebody is very difficult, but to be alone is impossible: to commit is to live, and not to commit is to be dead."

Other critics were confused about the sexuality of the central character. They wondered if Robert's apprehension about marriage was due to his (homo)sexuality. For example, Martin Gottfried, drama critic at the time for *Women's Wear Daily*, wrote that "a subtle element of homosexuality must be considered a distracting aspect of *Company*."

Gottfried also noted that "Dean Jones as Robert can seem sexless and must watch it or the show's theme (and honesty) will be confused by hints of homosexuality."

There is no suggestion, however, in either the score or the text of the show that Robert is gay (or even confused about his sexuality). As the theater professor and essayist Joanne Lesley Gordon notes, "Critics who dwell on Robert's possible homosexuality are clearly uncomfortable with the show's anti-romantic, unsentimental depiction of marriage."

Just two-and-a-half weeks after the show opened, Jones left the production. Officially, Jones left for health reasons. However, Broadway insiders speculated that Jones was uncomfortable with his character's perceived homosexuality and how that perception might affect his future film career (Jones was well-known at the time for a series of popular, lighthearted Disney comedies he made in the late 1960s).

Kert immediately stepped in to fill the role. Critics were invited back to review the show and were enthusiastic about his performance. Consequently, Kert became the first, and only, replacement actor to be nominated for a Tony Award.

Few critics noted any "hints" of homosexuality in Kert's portrayal of Robert.

Paradoxically, Kert was regarded by most critics as deemphasizing Robert's potential homosexuality, while Jones, who is heterosexual, was perceived as bringing a gay subtext to the character. (It might be interesting to note that the bisexual actor Raúl Esparza earned accolades as Robert in the 2006 New York revival of *Company*.)

While performing in *Company* in New York, Kert lived across the street from the writer Edmund White. In his 2009 memoir, *City Boy*, White recounted that "Larry would call me up on a rainy day whenever he was

horny, and I'd hurry across the street."

Living with Kert at the time was the actor Keith McDermott. White describes McDermott as Kert's "part-time pillow boy and houseboy."

White went on to report that "Larry had a curious way of treating us both like cheap sex toys, completely interchangeable and disposable." But, White continued, "when he engaged with us as people (as artists or just conscious suffering beings), he treated us with an unexpected seriousness and respect."

Following his triumph with *Company*, Broadway success again eluded Kert. He starred, opposite the opera singer Teresa Stratas, in the musical *Rags* (1986), which was set in the Lower East Side of New York City in 1910. The production closed after only four performances.

His final role on Broadway was as standby for Peter Allen in the short-lived and roundly panned musical *Legs Diamond* (music and lyrics by Allen, book by Harvey Fierstein and Charles Suppon, 1988).

In addition to his theater work, Kert had always sought, unsuccessfully, to establish a film career. Although he performed in the male chorus, uncredited, in the movie version of the musical *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), it was not until 1977 that he was offered another film role. Kert was paired with Liza Minnelli in the extravagant, eleven-minute production number "Happy Endings" in director Martin Scorsese's unconventional musical *New York, New York*.

At the time of its release, the film's distributors were concerned about the picture's excessive length and insisted that Scorsese delete the production number from the final version. However, movie industry insiders began showing the excised section privately and it soon achieved cult status as a virtuoso movie musical sequence.

As a result, in 1981, Scorsese restored the production number in its entirety and the film was re-released to critical acclaim. In an interview, Kert stated, "I was upset and disappointed at the time my movie debut was scratched. But I guess this was worth waiting for."

Kert's later career was devoted mainly to his cabaret act, which featured a tribute to Al Jolson, as well as appearances on television and in regional theater. He toured in a 1987 concert version of George and Ira Gershwin's twin musicals, *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake*. Among his last performances in musical theater were in 1988 in a touring company of Jerry Herman's *La Cage aux Folles*, where he missed performances as a result of illness.

In his last public appearance, in 1990, Kert was joined by his *West Side Story* co-star, Carol Lawrence, for a cabaret show in the famed Manhattan nightclub Rainbow and Stars. Kert and Lawrence traded memories and reprised their signature songs from the show that had first made them famous.

In his review of the show for the *New York Times*, Mel Gussow observed, "When an audience hears those imperishable Leonard Bernstein-Stephen Sondheim songs, sung by those who first brought them to stage life, three decades become a blink in time."

Kert died of complications from AIDS at his home in Manhattan on June 5, 1991. He was survived by his longtime partner Ron Pullen.

"I never met anyone in my life in the theater who loved it as much as Larry did," Elaine Stritch, Kert's *Company* co-star, said to the press at the time of his death. "Larry's enthusiasm and humor permeated a whole company. He even made me want to do matinees."

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.

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