

FOLLIES

Once upon a time there was a Broadway that was not run by the film business, by corporations, and there were Broadway musicals that didn't have twenty-three producers above the title. And in that long-ago Broadway world there were some truly adventuresome people who were not content to sit and do what was currently popular – they wanted to push the form, to hammer through conventional walls, to push the boundaries of what musical theater could be. And while every decade had at least some adventuresome shows (*Love Life* in the 1940s, *West Side Story* in the 1950s, to name two), the hammering down of walls was truly palpable in the mid-1960s, starting with *Anyone Can Whistle* (a truly radical show that unfortunately didn't click with audiences) and *Cabaret* (which did). Yes, like most of today's musicals, it was based on a book (*Goodbye to Berlin* by Christopher Isherwood), and the John Van Druten play and film version, *I Am a Camera*. Lots of the classic musicals were based on plays and books and films but unlike today, here's the difference – they didn't call it *I Am a Camera*, *The Musical*, they didn't call it *Green Grow the Liacs*, *The Musical*, they didn't call it, *Liliom*, *The Musical*, or *Anna and the King of Siam*, *The Musical* – they went out of their way to make their creations their creations. It wasn't about "branding" then.

But by the late 1960s, even musicals that were considered conventional, like *Promises, Promises* (especially from today's perspective), were not – *Promises* had a sound that Broadway had never heard before, and the show itself had a leading man who pimps out his apartment to married men so they have a nice place in which to have their affairs and so he can hopefully get ahead in the company, and a leading lady who is having an affair with a married man who is the head of the company and who then tries to commit suicide. Then, in 1970, the phone rang, the door chimed, and in came *Company*, a completely unique and original musical, and it changed everything. It broke all the rules and broke them brilliantly. The score was, of course, by Stephen Sondheim, who'd written lyrics for *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*, and then music and lyrics for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and *Anyone Can Whistle*, and then back to lyrics only for *Do I Hear a Waltz?* and then back to music and lyrics for the TV musical, *Evening Primrose*. He was already considered by many to be one of the finest lyricists working in the theater, but he also had many fans who loved his music just as much as his words. But nothing he'd written had prepared anyone for *Company*. The score was thrilling, brittle, caustic, moving, filled with undercurrents of longing, and loaded with the thing that, back then, Sondheim was most accused of not having – melody. Let me say that one more time: MELODY. And George Furth's book was unlike anything anyone had ever seen – acerbic, witty, and very much au courant.

And then came *Follies*. And if people hadn't been prepared for *Company*, they really weren't prepared for *Follies*. *Follies* began life as something very different; a mystery musical called *The Girls Upstairs*. But, over some years, it morphed and evolved into something wholly other – a very complex rumination on the past and the present, the dreams of youth and what they turned into, optimism turned sour, and the need for people to look at the past through rose-colored glasses. The book by James Goldman, which in the intervening years has come in for much criticism, was, at the time, for me at least, absolute perfection. It was about what it was about and it told its story perfectly. No, it didn't make the audience comfortable (how could it, with lines like "I came home with my panties wringing wet") – but it presented the story and its four leading characters with brutal honesty and a candor that was shocking. You can argue whether those characters are pleasant, fun, or worth caring about, and people hav-

ing been doing so for forty years. Sondheim's score was brilliant and breathtaking – it worked its wonders on so many levels, from pastiche that was much more than pastiche, to some of the greatest character-driven musical theater songs ever written.

The title of the show is perfect and problematic at the same time – at least it was for audiences who bought their tickets thinking they'd be seeing an old-fashioned Follies show. But that's the brilliance of it – nothing is what it seems on the surface. There are cracks everywhere, including the amazing Byrd logo of the *Follies* girl's face. So much has been written about *Follies* that there's no need to reiterate it all here. If you want to know everything there is to know about the show, look no further than Ted Chapin's wonderful book, *Everything Was Possible* (and it was), and Sondheim's own *Finishing the Hat*.

I saw *Follies* in 1972 at the then brand new Shubert Theater in Los Angeles, which was ironic because *Follies* takes place in a theater about to be torn down. And with further irony, thirty years later the Shubert was torn down to make way for an office building – life imitates art. The show had recently closed on Broadway, and most of the original cast came west. My parents bought the tickets and yes I have no doubt they thought they'd be seeing an old-fashioned Follies show. They hated it with every fiber of their being, probably because it hit way too close to home for them. I, on the other hand, thought it was the greatest thing I'd ever seen and that hasn't changed all these years later. Everyone involved in *Follies* was at the top of their game. Harold Prince and Michael Bennett's staging actually did take my breath away, and Bennett's choreography (I was already his most ardent fan from *Promises and Company*) was unique and exciting and perfect. You'll note the words that keep recurring here – "brilliant" "perfect" "breathtaking" – because those words really do describe everything about *Follies*, and while I suppose you could find other words, why bother?

The set by Boris Aronson was beyond brilliant. At the end of the show, when past and present collide and suddenly the show is vomiting up everything we've seen during the evening in a horrifying cacophony, and Aronson's set begins to morph into Loveland, it was one of the most brilliant, perfect, and breathtaking bits of theatrical magic in the history of musical theater. The costumes of Florence Klotz were also brilliant, perfect, and breathtaking, as was the lighting of Tharon Musser.

While the original production of *Follies* lost its entire investment despite running 522 performances (it was, at the time, the most expensive production ever mounted on Broadway), it was beyond successful artistically and even before it closed *Follies* had already become the stuff that dreams are made of. Through the years those who saw it regaled anyone who would listen with tales of its brilliance. And time and the occasional revival of *Follies* have not only not dimmed the memories of that original production, it's made them even stronger. Simply put, it was a life-changer in terms of what musical theater could accomplish.

The cast album for *Follies* has always been a love/hate relationship for fans of the show, thanks to the decision not to make it a two LP set, which caused certain songs to be truncated and others not to be recorded at all. But what it did have made it something that, despite the frustrations, meant it would never be bettered – the original cast. No, it didn't sound all that good (it was, like most cast albums back then, recorded in one day and mixed in one day and in the stores a week later), but those performances, especially from Alexis Smith, Dorothy Collins, Gene Nelson, and John McMartin were, for many, definitive. Since then, there have been several other recordings, all of them quite different, and all much more complete than the original – the London version (with some new songs, and some songs gone), *Follies in Concert*, the Pa-

permill Playhouse version, and the most recent revival – all have their strengths and joys, all have lots more music, and none are the original.

The mix on the original album was odd, with vocals being occasionally overpowered by a suddenly blaring orchestra, or vocals hard-panned left and right (that's okay for one line, but to hear an entire solo hard-panned to the left or right is just really strange). Having had great luck remixing two problematic cast albums, *Promises, Promises* and *Sugar*, I began to think about *Follies*, wondering if that original hastily-mixed album could be remixed, smoothed out, and made to sound better. Over the last few years, I'd been licensing soundtracks from Capitol Records for reissue on CD. About six months ago, I went to Capitol and began talking about *Follies*. It's basically always been available on CD (since 1992) and I didn't know if they'd even be able to license it to me for a limited edition CD. Nor did I know what tapes they had in their vaults. It took about three months to hear back and the first news I got was that they were indeed willing to license it. Next, I asked them to get me an inventory of all the tapes. That took another three months, but when I finally got the log of what they had, I saw that not only did they have the original two-track album masters and several digital versions of those, they also had the two reels of the original eight-track edited session masters, and that was all I needed to know. I had them transferred into Pro Tools and got them to my wonderful engineer, John Adams. He ascertained how it was recorded (a little oddly, but he felt we'd be able to work with it), and I had him do a test mix on "Prologue / Beautiful Girls." When I heard the result, I was bowled over. Gone was the raggedness, and the clarity was astounding. So, we proceeded and I couldn't be more pleased with the result, which I hope will also be pleasing to *Follies* fans everywhere.

When I finally let news of this out, I was immediately inundated with questions about extra material and additional takes or whatever. Sadly, the answer was no. The songs were shortened or edited prior to recording. Back then, some producers didn't save takes that weren't keepers. So, for example, if take one of the "Prologue / Beautiful Girls" wasn't good, they'd rewind and record over that take – it saved tape costs and meant that they only kept the keepers. If a take was great but fell apart in the middle, they'd stop and do a pick-up and then that would all be edited together. If there were five bars that were a problem in the middle, they'd go back and do a pick-up of those five bars (and usually a few bars on either side of the five bars) and then edit the tape. So, the eight-track session masters are the final edited takes. From that, they mixed down to two-track, just as we did for this CD.

This has been a dream come true – *Follies* is my favorite musical theater score ever – to be able to go back and do a brand new mix, take the time necessary, and give the sound more clarity and depth, to smooth out the vocal and orchestra blends, well, it was a little bit of heaven. Will it be to everyone's taste? Who knows? There are always people who will prefer the original mix of anything simply because it's what they know. And that original mix is easy to get, so doing a new mix was basically just a new way of looking at a favorite score and I truly hope that everyone is happy with what we've been able to do. It was done out of love and care, to give a new sheen and sparkle to one of the greatest theater scores ever written.

— Bruce Kimmel