

Everything Was Possible: The Birth of the Musical Follies

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(Applause Books). In 1971, college student Ted Chapin found himself front row center as a production assistant at the creation of one of the greatest Broadway musicals, Follies . Needing college credit to graduate on time, he kept a journal of everything he saw and heard and thus was able to document in unprecedented detail how a musical is actually created. Now, more than thirty years later, he has fashioned an extraordinary chronicle. Follies was created by Stephen Sondheim, Hal Prince, Michael Bennett, and James Goldman giants in the evolution of the Broadway musical and geniuses at the top of their game. Everything Was Possible takes the reader on a roller-coaster ride, from the uncertainties of casting to drama-filled rehearsals, from the care and feeding of one-time movie and television stars to the pressures of a Boston tryout to the exhilaration of opening night on Broadway. Foreword by long-time NY critic Frank Rich.

Everything Was Possible: The Birth of the Musical Follies Details

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Anika says

Brilliant!! Go out and buy this book IMMEDIATELY!! At full price!!

Brenda Clough says

This is like a dream of working on a Sondheim musical, only it was real! The ultimate wish fulfilment book for Broadway mavens.

Philip says

I saw FOLLIES on April 14, 1971 (the Wednesday matinee), during the second week of its original Broadway run: The Winter Garden Theater, Orchestra, Row C, Seat 13. *Yes, I still have my ticket-stub!* I thought then - at fourteen years old - that it was the greatest show I'd ever seen on Broadway (and I had seen quite a few by then).

Thirty-nine years later, my opinion hasn't changed.

This is actually my second reading of Ted Chapin's excellent account of the creation of FOLLIES, from rehearsals to Opening Night (and beyond), it's an up close-and-personal view: a college student at the time, he was the production's 'gofer,' who performed any number of tasks that came up for just about anyone involved in the production, and since he was 'on the scene,' we get a fascinating look at the creative collaborative process that goes into the creation of a show. And the creative collaborators here are formidable - Producer/Director Hal Prince, Choreographer/Co-Director Michael Bennett, Librettist James Goldman, and the man who literally made the show sing, Stephen Sondheim.

The 'supporting cast' is huge too, with many names familiar to contemporary theater fans: Harold Hastings, Jonathan Tunick, Florence Klotz, Tharon Musser, Bob Avian, Graciela Danielle. And of course there was that *cast*: Alexis Smith, Gene Nelson, Dorothy Collins, John McMartin, Yvonne de Carlo, Mary McCarty (who five years later was the original "Matron 'Mama' Morton" in CHICAGO), Ethel Shutta, Fifi D'Orsay (who was bright and bubbly on the several occasions that I met her, but who was a pain in the ass in rehearsals and would positively *hate me* for listing her *after* Shutta). I knew very little about FOLLIES before I bought my ticket a month or more before it came to Broadway - I saw that stunning poster, the cast list, and Sondheim's name, and simply knew I had to see it, plain and simple.

Chapin kept a journal during the production, since he was actually going to turn the experience into a paper toward his college degree, and it obviously was invaluable in chronicling the show's process, and for who said what to whom. We learn, for instance, how Yvonne de Carlo's solo, "Can That Boy Fox-Trot" was worked and re-worked but couldn't be gotten to work (many of the show's cast actually had difficulty in learning and performing their numbers), so Sondheim wrote a new song. One of Chapin's 'gofer' jobs was to type up changes to the script, and changes to lyrics or lyrics for new songs (this in the days of electric

typewriters and carbon paper - there were also many phone calls and a considerable amount of time spent schlepping around between hotels and offices to write down, pick up and deliver copies of songs and script in these pre-email days - imagine this expense at today's gasoline prices!). At one point Sondheim handed Chapin the only copy of the lyrics to the replacement song he'd just completed for "Foxtrot" - Chapin went upstairs and with a sense of amazement typed out the lyrics to "I'm Here," which, with a little bit of tweaking, became "I'm Still Here," a showstopper for de Carlo and one of Sondheim's best-known songs. And would you believe "Losing My Mind" was originally intended for Alexis Smith's character!

Chapin got his degree, by the way (and now heads the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization) and decades later we got a fascinating not-to-be-missed account of one of the American Musical Theater's greatest - and most controversial - achievements.

Chapin dedicated *Everything Was Possible* "To the men and women of *Follies*, 1971." Well, I feel like I was one of them!

Laura says

The WSJ book review had a column on "Songs of the American Century" (Sat/Sun April 7-8, 2018) and I decided to give several of the recommendations a try. My first, Ted Chapin's "Everything Was Possible," is a detailed (and I mean that very literally) account of the evolution and staging of the Sondheim/Prince 1971 musical, "Follies." The show, to me, is a hit and miss affair, so it's really interesting to read about how much was revised, tweaked, changed, scrapped, reinserted and altered as the show moved from conception through rehearsals, to out of town try out and then, finally, on to Broadway, to decidedly mixed reviews. What an incredibly laborious process! It's kind of a testament to how much one must be devoted to the theater to even make it through this grueling trial. I felt like the minute, incremental details of the book were quite mundane, but somehow, I couldn't put the book down and stayed up late several nights to finish it. It's a perfect parallel to the show, which is a mess, but simultaneously, you can't look away because it's so honest and moving. There's a Youtube video "reconstruction" with the original cast members that, for me, was an essential accompaniment to the book. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTD9H...>

Abeck01 says

Comprehensive telling of the development of the musical Follies, from the minds of Stephen Sondheim and James Goldman, through its reinterpretation by the creative genius of director Hal Prince, into one of the most remarkable, landmark musicals in American theater. Chapin explains all the ins and outs of its production history and how it became one of the most underrated, yet most beloved musicals of all time. Prince's production is recalled in vivid detail, and the performances of the original cast are explored in tender detail.

Kasa Cotugno says

Follies holds a special place in my heart because it was the one that got away. I never saw the original, but listened to the (imperfect) cast album obsessively and did see a full production in the 1990's in San Jose. It fell between my two favorite musicals of all time (sorry, Hamilton): Company and Sweeney Todd. All

Prince/Sondheim productions. I devoured this book. It could prove daunting to anyone not at least marginally familiar with the forces behind this work of art, and thanks to Ted Chapin for holding onto his notebook in which he detailed his experience as a behind-the-scenes gofer, and for providing this personal, in-depth view of the creative process, the pitfalls that went into this most complicated, challenging musical. He credits Prince and Sondheim as being supportive and agreeable to interviews for this book.

I remember one occasion when I had a chance to see *Follies*, but \$25 was too steep a price at that time. Ironically, I think of current, far lesser musicals that are demanding and receiving ten times that amount today (not you, *Hamilton*), and wish I could return much as the ghostly Loveland figures to that time 40 years ago when it would have been possible to see *Follies*, the original.

Sarah Toppins says

I skimmed this book while I was rehearsing *Follies*. I particularly liked reading about the development of the numbers I sang. This book probably isn't for everyone, but I recommend it for Sondheim fans.

B Rardin says

Just like being there!

The book is filled with so much detail it's like really being there. If anyone wants to know what it takes to put together a Broadway show - read this! I've worked on Broadway and this captures every detail. Loved it!

Russell Sanders says

Ted Chapin's *Everything Was Possible: The Birth of the Musical Follies* is a must-read book. It would appeal to anyone who loves musical theater or theater in general; to Stephen Sondheim aficionados; to those who are awed by the careers and talents of Hal Prince and Michael Bennett; to those who have fond memories of the original stars of the show, Alexis Smith, Dorothy Collins, Gene Nelson, and Yvonne de Carlo; to anyone who wants a primer on creating a show from inception to performance and on to cast album; and, indeed, to anyone who wants to see the creation of a landmark musical through the eyes of someone who was intimately involved, the author Ted Chapin—now head of the Rodgers and Hammerstein organization—who was a college student at the time and a production assistant on this show. Using his personal memories, his diaries, and interviews, Chapin recounts the creative process from beginning to Broadway opening, and, in an afterword, beyond. It is fascinating to see how *Follies* was put together from a show that was not even completely written when it went into rehearsals to a show that got some glowing reviews, some mixed reviews, and some pans—but entered theater history as a monumental achievement and a valuable member of the pantheon of Broadway shows that made a difference in the theater. We see the ups and downs, the songs that were cut, the writing of new ones, the bickering among the performers, the love among the performers, the insecurities of the performers, and we realize that a Broadway show is like a family, a family with warts that, in the end, don't really matter because each member of the family, warts and all, has contributed to something special, flawed or otherwise.

Taylor says

This is arguably the best book about musical theater. Ted Chapin worked as a gopher on *Follies* and wrote this book based on his experiences of the production. The book really captures the collaborative nature of theater and all of the struggles a production must go through to make it to Broadway. And of course, this production involved Stephen Sondheim, Hal Prince and Michael Bennett. If you like theater this book is a must read.

On a side note, Chapin, now the president of the Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization, came to one of my classes in college to talk about *South Pacific*. He's a great speaker - so if you ever get the chance to hear him talk it will definitely be worthwhile.

Jay says

If you have any interest in how a Broadway musical is born or how the collaborative process works this is a solid read by someone who was able to observe the creation of just such a thing first hand.

Ian McNair says

When Stephen Sondheim opened his copy of *Life* and saw a picture of Gloria Swanson standing in the rubble of a theatre in ruins, little did we know that this sowed the seed of inspiration for his monumental musical, *Follies*. This journal of events records the highs and lows of getting the production to Broadway and not everything went to plan. Yvonne de Carlo was particularly infuriating because she couldn't remember the lyrics for "I'm Still Here". Of course, the show lost money but, thankfully, it has gone from strength to strength and the latest National Theatre season was a sellout. A must read for anyone interested in theatre.

Caleb Hoyer says

This has been a favorite among theater people, my tribe, for years and years, but I was never really tempted to read it because (shocker!) I don't actually know the show *Follies* that well. Well, something finally pushed me over the edge, and I'm so glad. Even though my knowledge of the show isn't that thorough, this book is a delight, compelling and entertaining from start to finish. It is a thrilling depiction of the creation of a new musical, capturing much of the drama, the fear, the trial-and-error experimenting, the fun, and the heart. If you're a theater lover, I daresay it's a must-read.

Paul says

Okay, this made me super jealous that my high school classmate Bob Higgins saw this show. Chapin kept a diary of his three months working as a production assistant on *Follies* - 30 years later, he turned it into a

book. Great details about the number of changes and rewrites. Fascinating.

Rolls says

It's time to come clean. I know this will come as a shock to all of you out there in "Goodreadsland" who look to me, Rolls Andre, as a paragon of virility and male potency; but, I must step out of the shadows of my secret shame and say unequivocally that I am absolutely mad about the musical theater. I'll scream my undying devotion from every rooftop in this dirty old town 'til my voice is as shredded and worn out as Elaine Stritch's. I am a sucker for show tunes. There I've said it. Now the healing can begin. (For the record I also enjoy a warm bubble bath, a chilled bottle of presecco and novels by guys named Evelyn. Scoff if you must philistines!)

Any fans of the Broadway musical out there know that Stephen Sondheim is one of the greatest composers and lyricists who ever lived. His groundbreaking (and seat filling) shows include: "Company," "Into the Woods," "Sweeney Todd (my favorite musical of all time)," "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," "Pacific Overtures," "A Little Night Music," and "Assassins." Add to this illustrious roster the titles of two shows he "only" wrote lyrics for: "Gypsy" and "West Side Story" and the man's claim to greatness is all but indisputable.

"Follies" stands apart from the other shows previously mentioned by being an artistic triumph but a commercial failure. Though it ran on Broadway for a year it lost every cent invested in it and then some. It was also the victim of an extraordinarily mixed reception by the critics. Some saw it as a harbinger of a new era in musical theater and applauded its many innovations. Others found it an elephantine bore and criticized its chilly book and (to their tin ears) pedestrian score and lyrics. Oddly, time has shown both camps to be in the right.

Mr. Chapin's book is a loving backstage memoir depicting the many birth pangs associated with the creation of this "embarrassment of riches." At the time he was an undergraduate theater student thrown into the arena with a bevy of battle scarred Broadway veterans clawing their way to a New York opening night for the intoxicating thrill of savoring one more hit. Remarkably his detailed account of the proceedings comes across as incredibly level headed and even handed for so young a writer. He handles the task of chronicling the "who, what, where, why and how" of all the chaos swirling around him like a dyed in the wool newsman and gives you the impression that you are there.

To be honest as much as I enjoyed this book I would have appreciated a little more dish on all the backstage bitchiness I know must have gone on. I can't believe that in a cast of fifty-four (most of them women) there wasn't even one decent cat fight. All in all though this is recommended to anyone who cares about where the musical theater has been and where it can still go.
