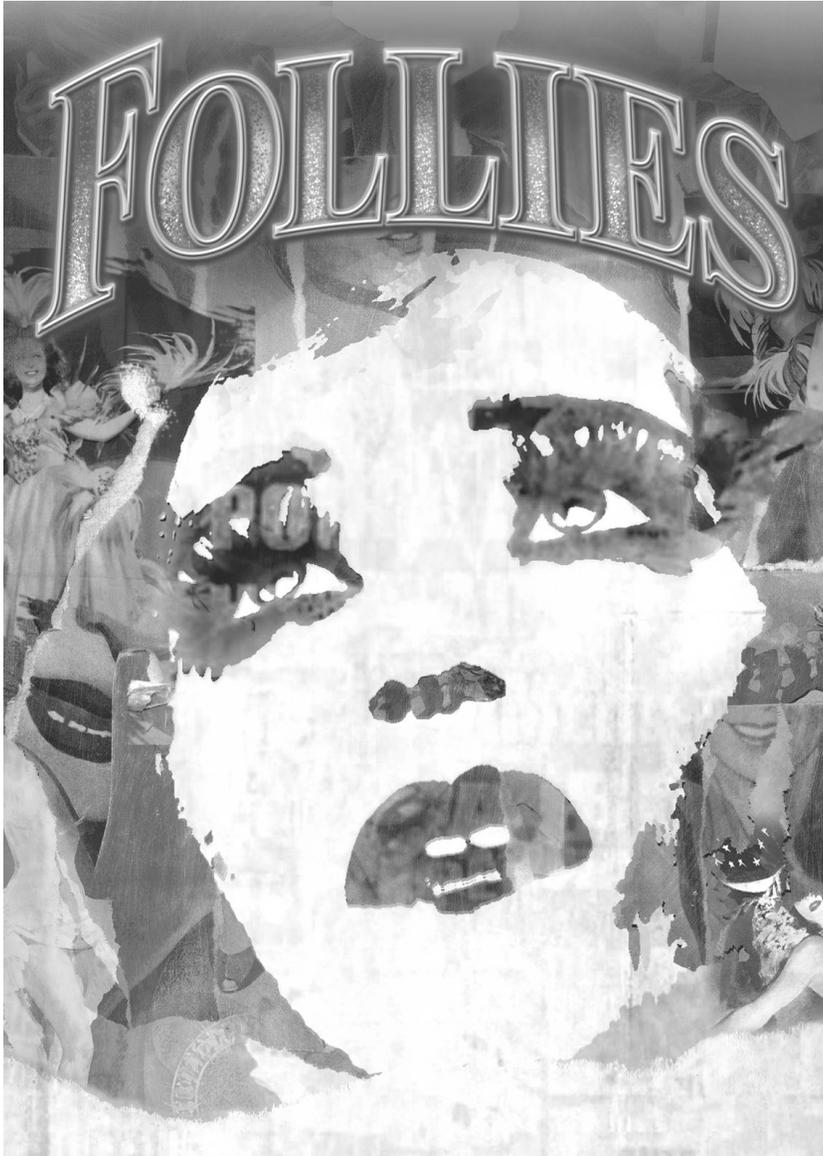


The Birth of Broadway



12. He Wrote the Music Too

May 6, 2025

12. He Wrote the Music Too

BY 1959, WITH WEST SIDE STORY AND GYPSY TO HIS CREDIT, **Stephen Sondheim** was well on the way to becoming a lyricist of the quality of Hart or Hammerstein. But what he really wanted to do was write music. For the final class, we look at his first ventures as a composer: the upbeat farce *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962); the less successful *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964), which nudged the Broadway musical towards a new genre; and the remarkable pair of *Company* (1970) and *Follies* (1971), two shows that proclaimed the triumph of the Concept Musical.

An intertwined theme of the class, related to the overall theme of the course, **from European Fantasy to American Realism**, is how in all these shows Sondheim juggles theatrical artifice with real life. Nothing shows this more clearly than the Ziegfeld extravaganza world of *Follies*, which is our featured work. *rb.*

A. Those Beautiful Girls

A brief glimpse of the opening of *Follies*, to set the scene.

Sondheim: *Follies*, “Those Beautiful Girls” (Bruce Graham, with ensemble as below; National Theatre 2017)

B. Funny Things Happen

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum (1962), Sondheim’s Broadway debut as a composer, is unlike anything he wrote later. A spoof of Ancient Roman farce by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, it contains nothing remotely realistic, though it did play up the composer’s taste for traditional theatre gags.

Sondheim: *Forum*, “Comedy tonight” (Nathan Lane, B’way 1996)

Sondheim: *Forum*, “Comedy tonight” and “Bring me my Bride” (1966 film; Zero Mostel, Leon Greene; d. Richard Lester)

C. Letting Go

Anyone Can Whistle (1964), written and directed by Sondheim's old collaborator Arthur Laurents, was a flop. Yet it contains at least one song that shows Steve's uncanny ability to touch an emotional nerve.

Sondheim: *Anyone Can Whistle*, title song (Patti LuPone)

D. Zeitgeist and Change

Company (1970), the first show that Sondheim described as entirely his own, is a spot-on dissection of yuppie *mores* in contemporary New York. Yet it has proved remarkably adaptable in subsequent revivals.

Sondheim: *Company*, excerpts as listed below (NYPO concert, 2011;

Neil Patrick Harris, *Robert*; c. Paul Gemignani; d. Lonny Price)

- first vignette (Martha Plimpton, Stephen Colbert)
- “You could drive a person crazy” (Anika Noni Rose, Christina Hendricks, Chrissy Whitehead)
- “Have I got a girl for you” and “Someone is waiting”
- “Getting married today” (Katie Finneran, Aaron Lazar)

Documentary: *Keeping Company with Sondheim* (2022, director Marianne Elliott, with Matt Doyle as Jamie)

D. Fantasy Meets Reality

Back to *Follies*. We watch a cross-section of scenes from the 2017 production at the National Theatre in London, seeing how the memories of showbiz days evoked in the minds of ex-performers Sally Plummer and Ben Stone (plus their spouses Buddy and Phyllis) stir unexpected emotions in their middle-aged selves.

Sondheim: *Follies*, excerpts as listed below (National Theatre 2017;

Imelda Staunton, *Sally*; Philip Quast, *Ben*; Janie Dee, *Phyllis*;

Peter Forbes, *Buddy*; Alex Young, *young Sally*; Adam Rhys-

Charles, *young Ben*; Zizi Strallen, *young Phyllis*; Fred Haig, *young*

Buddy; d. Dominic Cooke)

- “Waiting for the girls upstairs” (old and young quartets)
- “In Buddy’s Eyes” (Sally)
- “Too many mornings” (Ben)
- “The right girl,” opening (Buddy)
- “Could I leave you?” (Phyllis)
- “Loveland” (ensemble)
- “You’re gonna love tomorrow” (young Ben, young Phyllis)
- “Losing my mind” (Sally)
- “Live, laugh, love,” ending (Ben)
- closing scene (both quartets)

George **Furth** (1932–2008, *American actor and playwright*), Larry **Gelbart** (1928–2009, *American playwright*), James **Goldman** (1927–98, *American playwright*), Arthur **Laurents** (1917–2011, *American playwright and director*), Richard **Lester** (1932–, *American film director*), Burt **Shevelove** (1915–82, *American playwright*), Stephen **Sondheim** (1930–2021, *American composer and lyricist*)

Thank you all for a wonderful course. I’ll be back!

The course website is www.brunyate.com/BirthBroadway
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