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THEATER

THEATER; 'Follies' Shows It, Too, Is Still Here

By BARRY SINGER

THE Broadway musical has always been a haunted art form. Every Broadway musical performer or creator is shadowed by the spirits of those who have preceded them; every Broadway musical performance is instantly a phantom performance, never to be precisely repeated. The same may be said, of course, about straight drama on Broadway, but there is a difference. Distant music and echoing footsteps make for a better ghost story.

When it first opened in 1971, "Follies" seemed to evoke the entirety of Broadway musical history, with an all-encompassing spectral embrace. The dances choreographed by Michael Bennett encapsulated a full century of Broadway in motion; the music by Stephen Sondheim delineated the evolution of American popular song in that same century; and the production devised by the two directors, Harold Prince and Bennett, was large enough to contain the collective memory of Broadway itself.

Set in a crumbling Broadway theater on the night before it is torn down, "Follies" invited audiences to a farewell reunion held by the theater's owner, a Ziegfeld-like impresario named Dimitri Weismann. As aged alumni of Weismann's "Follies" reminisced and mourned their lost youth, ghostly apparitions of their youthful selves (played by younger actors) haunted the stage. What plot there was centered on two ex-Weismann showgirls and their former-stage-door-Johnny husbands -- Phyllis and Ben Stone, Sally and Buddy Plummer -- whose dysfunctional marriages and generally desperate lives were stripped bare in a series of brilliant musical numbers that expose the brutal self-deception of nostalgia.

"Follies," however, captured the glories of Broadway's musical past so well that for many it became, in spite of itself, the embodiment of such longing. As a result, the current Roundabout Theater Company revival, which formally opens on April 5 at the Belasco Theater, is as much haunted by the lingering ghost of the 1971 production as it is by the lore and legends that inspired the show's creation. This is perversely appropriate. "Follies" is about growing old. Having now grown old itself, the musical must forever contend with its own ghostly younger self.

"Follies" is also a musical about death. And members of the original version have seen more than their share. Michael Bennett died of AIDS, age 44, in 1987. The librettist, James Goldman, died of a heart attack less than three years ago at 71. Of the original cast's four leads -- Alexis Smith (Phyllis), John McMartin (Ben), Dorothy Collins (Sally) and Gene Nelson (Buddy) -- only Mr. McMartin is still living.

Revisiting the principal survivors of "Follies" today is very much a reaffirmation of the show's tenacious hymn to longevity, "I'm Still Here." These survivors include Mr. Sondheim and Mr. Prince, of course, and Mr. McMartin, along with Florence Klotz and Jonathan Tunick, the original costume designer and orchestrator, respectively; Graciela Daniele, who served as one of Bennett's dance captains; Bob Avian, Bennett's right-hand man; the conductor Paul Gemignani, whose first Broadway job was to conduct "Follies"; and finally Yvonne De Carlo, who, in the supporting role of Carlotta Campion, stopped the show nightly by singing "I'm Still Here," a song Mr. Sondheim wrote for her.

"Old age is old age and I'm not going to go in a corner and pout about it," Ms. De Carlo said recently by telephone from her home in California. "Back then, all I thought about was, 'How long am I going to be able to go on like this?' Now, I've lived through a stroke. I can't tap dance anymore. But then again, I never really could. I am, however, definitely still here."

Writing in 1971 for The Harvard Crimson, the future New York Times chief theater critic Frank Rich described the pre-Broadway Boston tryout of "Follies" as "a musical about the death of the musical."

"There is no getting around the fact," Mr. Rich concluded, "that a large part of the chilling fascination of 'Follies' is that its creators are in essence presenting their own funeral."

Reading this assessment at the time inspired Mr. Sondheim to telephone the young student critic and take him to lunch. "It was a stunning review," Mr. Sondheim recalled recently. "Ultimately, we were pretty universally slammed by the New York critics, so it was just nice to read someone who got what we were trying to do. I can't imagine that he really meant we were a funeral, though. 'Follies' was a retrospective of all the different streams that had made up the American musical, so in that sense it was the end of a certain era. But 'Follies' also was enormously experimental and therefore was not really the end of something but in fact a beginning."

For Mr. Prince, the sheer scope of the original undertaking, both physically and aesthetically, still inspires awe. "It was like flying blind," he said. "The style and technique of it was, in my own experience, unprecedented. It was a nonlinear story. There wasn't any dramatic tension, so you had to depend on somehow fascinating audiences exclusively with character and interpersonal relationships, memories and space."

"Will we ever see a musical with that many people -- a company of 56 -- that many costumes, that much lavish spending?" Mr. Prince asked rhetorically. "No. That musical era is dead. You do see comparable expenditures today, but it doesn't ever seem to add up. By today's standards we didn't actually spend that much, nearly $800,000. But 'Follies' was the most expensive musical done until that time. And, by God, every penny was in the product."

For Mr. Tunick, who went on to orchestrate nearly all of Mr. Sondheim's ensuing work, "Follies" was a transcendent experience. "In my more nihilistic moments," Mr. Tunick acknowledged, "I think of 'Follies' as the 'Götterdämmerung' of musicals. No other show was more awash in theatrical magic and mystery, and anyone who doubts the warmth and heartfelt emotion of Stephen Sondheim's music need only hear a few notes from 'Follies' to put that misapprehension to rest. Steve actually wrote two

simultaneous scores -- the pastiche evocation of old songs and then the book score. It was my responsibility as orchestrator to differentiate between the two."

"To go back and re-experience a piece that is so generational," Mr. Tunick added, "characters who look back on themselves when they were younger -- boy, that is quite a catharsis. Now it's us looking not just at the characters but at ourselves, considering who we were then and who we have become."

Ms. Daniele, for one, has become a well-known choreographer and director. "Facing your own past and memories is universal," she said. "I still dream that I'm young and dancing. Michael and Hal constantly directed us to watch ourselves onstage -- our older selves, our younger selves. While still in pre-production, I remember, we all went to a true 'Ziegfeld Follies' reunion at the Pierre Hotel. And we just watched these women come in, gorgeous women in their 80's, 90's. It was extraordinary. One of them was in a wheelchair, and they later tried to incorporate that into the show. But Boris Aronson's set was built on such a steep rake to make everyone from the past look taller, eerier, that the poor actress, Justine Johnson, made her entrance and just started rolling downhill."

"Once, over a bottle of wine," Ms. Daniele continued, "years later, just after 'A Chorus Line,' I asked Michael what he thought had been his best work so far. He truly surprised me. ' "Chorus Line," ' he said, 'was sort of a beast. My best work was "Follies." ' "

Ms. Klotz, whose costume designs would be one of the show's Tony Award winners, was very much daunted by "Follies" initially. "I read the script," she remembered, "and it was so confusing. I just thought, 'This is one big headache.' "

"Michael Bennett came up with the brilliant costuming solution of black and white for the past and color for the present. I tried to introduce characters wordlessly, through their clothes; each costume said exactly what a character's background was. The dresses were all hand-beaded. If you tried to reproduce my stuff now, the dress that was $1,000 then would be $20,000 today.

"Opening night, I remember standing in the back of the Winter Garden with Steve and I couldn't believe it was me -- couldn't believe that was my work up there. And Steve just said: 'That's how I felt for a long time and you'll feel that way, too, for a while. Enjoy it.' "

For Mr. McMartin, the whole enterprise remains astonishingly vivid. "It stops in time for me," he said. "In my mind it's still perfectly fresh -- the artistry and the skill. It started in rehearsals. I don't know if the rehearsal hall is even there anymore, but there was a central green room we'd stop in, heading to our various work rooms; you'd hear everyone rehearsing far away through the doors. Until finally it was decided we'd have a rough run-through. And suddenly all of these people you'd been getting to know, just clowning around in that green room, they began performing in front of you. Such magic! It was an incredible metamorphosis. And I remember thinking: 'Oh, Lord. What do we have here?' "

The Roundabout revival of "Follies" is a scaled-down creation, with a 39-member cast that has been trimmed from the original by two showgirls, six subsidiary partygoers and an onstage jazz quartet. Its budget of $4.5 million is relatively low by today's standards (by comparison, "The Full Monty" cost $7

million and Disney's "Aida" at least $15 million). For Mr. Tunick, the only original participant involved, other than Mr. Sondheim, the financial constraints are nothing short of heartbreaking. "My original orchestration was for 26 pieces. At Roundabout we're getting 14. All I seem to do these days is write reductions of my originals."

Mr. Sondheim, however, is mordantly philosophical. "Anybody who expects a ghost to look the way it did when it was alive is in for a rude awakening," he said. "This is not going to be a spectacular. The director, Matthew Warchus, has a different point of view and we couldn't recreate the original even if we wanted to -- there have to be certain practicalities, which is a great shame. The grandeur of 'Follies' was central in 1971. But it isn't now."

Mr. Gemignani is blunter: "Broadway, of late, has done what Mercedes-Benz has done. They're building $25,000 cars and trying to make them look like $90,000 cars. It took great courage for Hal to produce 'Follies' the first time the way he did. There is no courageousness among producers today. Where are the producers to give great new composers like Adam Guettel the productions they deserve? I'd rather have young people see 'Follies' on any scale than the stuff Broadway is pumping out now. Until somebody, either the government or a gutsy producer, antes up for new work and not just with two chairs and a piano, well, revivals of 'Follies' are the best we can hope for."

It is worth noting that the Belasco Theater, often dark these days because of its relatively small capacity (roughly 1,000 seats), has long been home to a ghost all its own, the legendary theatrical director and producer David Belasco, who built the place in 1907 and lived in sumptuous private apartments above the auditorium until his death in 1931. Belasco's ghost was a regular on the premises for many years before the nudity in "Oh! Calcutta!" supposedly drove it away during the early 1970's. Of late, though, it has again been sighted around the theater, wearing the clerical collar that was Belasco's habitual attire.

The original production of "Follies" remains the current revival's guiding blueprint. A well-received, moderately revised 1998 version at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, N.J., mimicked the original's grandness of scale with some success and appeared headed for Broadway. In the end, however, according to Robert Johanson, the artistic director of the Paper Mill, Bobby Goldman, representing her husband, James, "would not give us the permission to bring our production into New York." It was believed at the time that a future Roundabout version was already being discussed.

A representative for the Roundabout said Mrs. Goldman would not comment.

According to Mr. Sondheim, the current revival has "basically gone back to the original script with lots of subtle subtractions and additions."

He continued: " 'I'm Still Here,' which I wrote for Yvonne but based more on Joan Crawford's life, originally was a stand-alone, sung to the audience. We've created a scene that sets things up so it becomes a book song delivered to characters onstage. Which can really make a difference."

Where the original "Follies" had many performers from the past like Ms. De Carlo, the Roundabout

revival includes: Blythe Danner (Phyllis), Gregory Harrison (Ben), Judith Ivey (Sally), Treat Williams (Buddy) and their respective younger ghosts: Erin Dilly, Richard Roland, Lauren Ward and Joey Sorge; Polly Bergen, in the De Carlo role of Carlotta; Marge Champion and Donald Saddler as the dancing Whitmans; Louis Zorich as Weismann; Carol Woods, Betty Garrett and Jane White as other Weismann stars; and, most particularly, Joan Roberts.

Forget about survivors of the original production of "Follies" for a moment. Ms. Roberts was Rodgers and Hammerstein's Laurey in "Oklahoma!" The original production. The original lead. As a teenager, she toured in more than 20 musicals, mostly operettas for the Shubert Brothers. It was Oscar Hammerstein 2nd who called in the 21-year-old Ms. Roberts to audition for "Oklahoma!" (then still titled "Away We Go!"), and it was Oscar Hammerstein who later brought his 13-year-old protégé, Stephen Sondheim, backstage to meet the "Oklahoma!" cast. The young Sondheim shook Joan Roberts's hand.

Now, past 80, Ms. Roberts is returning to Broadway after 50 years in the role of Heidi Schiller, a venerable queen of operetta. "I don't feel like I've been away," Ms. Roberts said recently at the Belasco. "I'm right back where I belong. I'll probably die someday in a dressing room."

She and Mr. Sondheim reunited at the first day of rehearsals for the current revival. "It came time for Joan to sing her song, 'One More Kiss,' " Mr. Sondheim said. "And as she began, well, people started to tear up right away. Soon, there were audible little sobs. By the time the whole thing was over, there truly wasn't a dry eye in the house. The whole room was bawling. Except for Joan, who just looked up and said, 'Boy, I really messed that one up, didn't I?' "

Ms. Roberts shrugged at the recollection. "What are they going to hire me for, wakes? I couldn't figure out why everybody was crying."

The question remains: Will the survivors of the original production of "Follies" revisit this production, with Ms. Roberts and company at the Belasco?

Mr. Sondheim: "Obviously."

Mr. Tunick: "Same for me."

Ms. Daniele: "You bet."

Ms. De Carlo: "If I can."

Mr. Prince: "If they'll have me."

Mr. Gemignani: "Probably."

Ms. Klotz: "If someone takes me. I've grown rather old, you know."

Mr. Avian: "I don't think so. It's very hard to go back."

Mr. McMartin: "I want to and I don't. I don't know what I'm going to do. I've never looked at the show again. The memory is too perfect. And painful. I mean, do they really need one more ghost of Benjamin Stone out there, watching them, in the dark?"

Photos: Joan Roberts in the revival of "Follies" at the Belasco Theater. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)(pg. 8); Former showgirls arrive in the current revival of "Follies." Inset, Harold Prince, left, and Stephen Sondheim before the original show opened in 1971. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times) (pg. 1)
