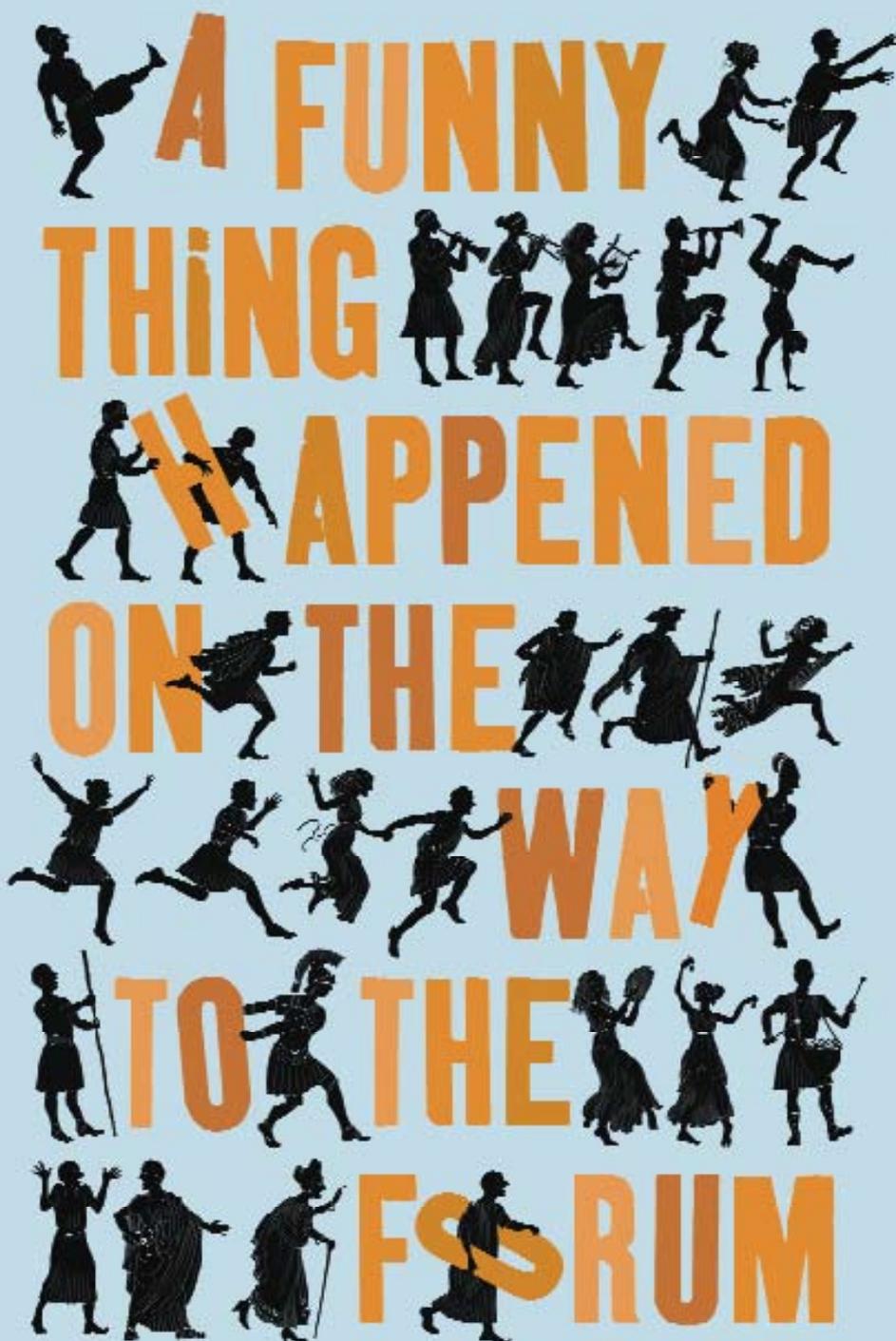


Inside **OUT**

PRODUCED BY THE MARKETING DEPARTMENT OF THE DENVER CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

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*A Funny Thing Happened on
the way to the Forum*

Book by Burt Shevelove and
Larry Gelbart

Music and Lyrics by
Stephen Sondheim

Originally produced on
Broadway by Harold S. Prince

Directed by Bruce K. Sevy

The Stage Theatre
May 17-July 8

Presented through special
arrangement with Music
Theatre International (MTI)

Producing partners:

Judi & Robert **Margot & Allan**
NEWMAN **FRANK**

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POST



SYNOPSIS

“Things which you do not hope happen more frequently than things which you do hope.”

Titus Maccius Plautus (254-184 BC).
Mostellaria Act I, sc.iii, l. 40.

Based on the comedy *Menachaemi* by Plautus, the musical is set in a make-believe Ancient Rome, where slaves were fashionable, courtesans were plentiful, virgins were celebrated and eunuchs were in abundance.

Pseudolus, a slave, is trying to buy his freedom from his master, Hero, the son of Senex (a henpecked husband) and Domina (the henpecker). Hero has fallen in love with Philia, a vacuous virgin who is waiting for Captain Miles Gloriosus to come from battle and claim her, for she has been sold to him by the notorious proprietor of the House of Pleasure, Marcus Lycus. Hero would give anything for Philia—anything including Pseudolus’s freedom. As the slave attempts to complete a permanent arrangement for the couple, he confronts numerous obstacles, including the hysterical Hysterium, the slave-in-chief; Erronius, a bumbling old man who has been abroad for twenty years searching for his children, mistaken identities, misunderstandings, malapropisms and other miscalculations. Roman comic theatre combines with the American vaudeville and burlesque of one-liners, sexual innuendos, double takes and beautiful babes to create a bawdy, batty and bountiful musical.

“Goodness and badness
Man in his madness
This time it all turns out all right!
Tragedy tomorrow! Comedy tonight!”

“Comedy Tonight” from
A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. Music and Lyrics by
Stephen Sondheim.

THE WRITERS OF THE BOOK

BURT SHEVELOVE

“One reason for putting it (*Forum*) on was an affectionate one. Low comedy and farce in America are rarely done and rarely successful.”

—Burt Shevelove¹

Burt Shevelove was born in Newark, New Jersey, graduated from Brown University and received a Master's degree in theatre from Yale. While at Yale, he wrote lyrics for a musical version of Plautus's *Mostellaria* and later became the resident director for the Yale Dramatic Association. After serving as an ambulance driver in World War II, he began a career as a writer, director and producer for radio and television, working with such stars as Judy Garland, Red Buttons, Jack Paar, Nancy Walker and Victor Borge; his work won him Emmy and Peabody Awards. His Broadway career began in 1948 with *Small Wonder*, a revue for which he wrote the material, co-

produced and directed. He also directed a revival of *Kiss Me Kate* (1956), *Hallelujah Baby* (1968), *No, No Nanette* (1971); he also collaborated with Stephen Sondheim on *The Frogs* which was performed in and around the Yale University swimming pool. In 1980 he wrote the book for *Happy New Year* and co-wrote the film *The Wrong Box* with Larry Gelbart. Burt Shevelove died in 1982. Stephen Sondheim said of Shevelove, “He had a way of becoming a part of your life. He lingers in everybody's memory....He was extremely literary, extremely kind and generous, avuncular in the best sense.”²

1. Zadan, p. 67.

2. Secret, p. 148.

Secret, Meryle. *Stephen Sondheim: a Life*. New York: Random House, 1998.

Zadan, Craig. *Sondheim and Co*. New York: Harper and Row, 1989.

<http://www.mtishows.com/bio.asp>

LARRY GELBART

“The Roman playwright Plautus has been the greatest influence on my work. I’m in good company. He also influenced Shakespeare, Jonson, Moliere and anyone else who has written comedy for the last 2000 years.”
—Larry Gelbart¹

Larry Gelbart was born in Chicago on February 25, 1928 to Latvian immigrant parents, Harry and Frieda. Harry was a barber with a bundle of funny stories while his mother was smart and perceptive with a sharp tongue. Gelbart credits them with being an influence on his career as a writer.

Gelbart’s career began as a writer for the Danny Thomas radio show in the 1940s, but he also wrote for Eddie Cantor, Bob Hope and Jack Paar. In 1952 he got his start on the *Red Buttons Show*, then went on to work with some of America’s greatest comedy writers, including Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Neil Simon and Woody Allen on Sid Caesar’s *Your Show of Shows*. In 1962 Gelbart penned his first screenplay, *The Notorious Landlady*, but his best-known work from that era is *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, on which he collaborated with Burt Shevelove.

The working title of the show was *A Roman Comedy*, but the collaborators wanted to suggest that the play was a comedy without using the word. So they chose the phrase “A funny thing happened on the way to...”, the stock opening line of comics for ages, hoping audiences would associate the word Forum with Rome. He also wrote the screenplay for *Oh, God* (1977) and *Tootsie* (1982), but is probably best known as the producer and frequent writer for the long-running and highly distinguished comedy-drama *M*A*S*H*.

In 1989 Gelbart collaborated on *City of Angels*, a witty musical take-off on Hollywood detective films of the 1940s. This play won numerous awards, including the Tony for best musical, but according to Gelbart, “Over thirty years after its (*Forum*) first performance, having written enough words in the interim to paper the globe dozens of times, it remains for me the best piece of work I’ve been lucky enough to see my name on.”²

1. Gelbart, p. xviii.
2. Gelbart, p. 206.

Gelbart, Larry. *Laughing Matters*. New York: Random House, 1998.

http://www.answers.com/topic/larry_gelbart

THE COMPOSER AND LYRICIST

STEPHEN SONDHEIM

“Art, in itself, is an attempt to bring order out of chaos.”

—Stephen Sondheim

Sondheim was born into a prosperous business family on March 22, 1930. He studied piano for two years as a young boy and continued musical studies through college. Sondheim’s parents divorced in 1942 and he went to live with his mother in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. Her residence was close to the summer home of Oscar Hammerstein II, the lyricist/partner of composer Richard Rodgers. As a friend of Hammerstein’s son, James, Stephen became close to Oscar and asked him for an evaluation of his first stage work, a high school production written at age fifteen. Oscar’s critical review of *By George* initiated a life-long relationship that was decisive in formulating the young artist’s education and style. As Hammerstein’s personal assistant, Sondheim gained entry into the world of professional theatre.

While Stephen attended Williams College, he performed duties in the preparation and rehearsals of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s productions of *South Pacific* and *The King and I*. When Sondheim graduated from Williams he won the Hutchinson Prize which enabled him to study composition at Princeton University with avant garde composer, Milton Babbitt.

Sondheim’s professional career began in television when he wrote scripts for the series *Topper* and *The Last Word*. He also wrote incidental music for the Broadway musical *Girls of Summer* where he met writer and director Arthur Laurents who became a life-long friend. Laurents introduced him to director Jerome Robbins and composer/conductor Leonard Bernstein who considered him as a possible lyricist for *West Side Story*. Produced

in 1957, the young songwriter found himself involved in one of the most successful shows ever produced on Broadway. Sondheim followed this success by collaborating on *Gypsy* with Jule Styne in 1959 and was toasted as a great young talent in American musical theatre.

But Sondheim wanted to write the music as well as the lyrics, so in 1962 he teamed with writers Larry Gelbart and Burt Shevelove to produce *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, a bawdy farce based on the plays of Plautus. The show ran for almost 1000 performances, won the Tony Award for Best Musical, and was made into a successful film in 1966.

After *Forum*, Sondheim collaborated with producer/director Harold Prince on six distinctive musicals between 1970 and 1981. *Company* (1970) was a concept musical featuring a series of scenes about a young man who can’t commit to a relationship. *Follies* (1971) was a production filled with pastiche songs echoing styles of composers from earlier decades in a plot which revolved around a reunion of aging Broadway chorines. *A Little Night Music* (1973) was one of Sondheim’s greatest successes with each song composed in a variation of waltz time. *Pacific Overtures* (1976), the most non-traditional of the Sondheim/Prince partnership, was an intellectual exploration of the westernization of Japan. *Sweeney Todd* (1979), arguably Sondheim’s greatest score, explored the unlikely topics of revenge, murder and cannibalism.

But the collaboration ran into difficulty with the failure of *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), the composer’s most traditional score. Sondheim found a new partner in James Lapine who had a taste for visually oriented theatre, in particular. The result was *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), a musical about the impressionist artist Georges Seurat.

Sondheim's music took on the style of the painting and rose to another level. Its theme of the importance of art in life won Sondheim and Lapine the Pulitzer prize for 1984. Their collaboration continued with the fairy tale show *Into the Woods* (1987) and the rhapsodic *Passion* (1994).

Although he has not written a successful musical for Broadway since 1995, revivals of Sondheim's work gain new audiences each year. Often he is portrayed as brainy, prickly, nervous, cynical and unfeeling, but Sondheim is defended by his friend of 25 years, Mia Farrow, who says, "He has retained the sense

of wonder that grownups lose. He doesn't get over how amazed he is. Sometimes I wonder how he gets through the week, his feelings run so deep."¹

1. Secrest, p. 229.

Secrest, Meryle. *Stephen Sondheim: a Life*. New York: Random House, 1998.

Zadan, Craig. *Sondheim and Co.*, New York: Harper and Row, 1989.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Sondheim

PLAUTUS AND HIS COMEDIES

"Plautus was the first person to domesticate comedy. All comedy, Aristophanic for instance, was about gods and goddesses. Nobody had written about husbands and wives, daughters and maids. Plautus is responsible for the situation comedy."

—Stephen Sondheim¹

Titus Maccius Plautus was a native of Sarsina in Umbria, born in the earlier half of the third century BC and died at an advanced age in 184 BC. His first occupation was connected with the Roman stage, probably as a scene shifter; from this he saved enough money to engage in an unsuccessful foreign trade operation. Returning to Rome in extreme poverty, he was glad to earn his livelihood as a mill hand and it was then he began to write comedy. Most of his surviving plays belong to the last ten years of his life; they were not published during his lifetime, but were left in possession of the actors, to whom are due most of the prologues. He wrote about 130 comedies but was more concerned with

the immediate success of his works than with their literary merits.

Plautus knew much about the trading and middle classes, but there is about his plays a flavor of the sea and a spirit of adventure. He frequently used Greek phrases and his plays exhibit an acquaintance with the sights and pleasures of the Greek cities on the Mediterranean. There are also allusions to works of art, to the subjects of Greek tragedy and Greek mythology. However, his works show no traces of familiarity with the manners, tastes or ideas of the aristocracy.

Like all the Roman comedians, he borrowed his plots, incidents, scenes, characters and much of his dialogue from the authors of Athenian comedy, but he treated his borrowed materials with much more freedom and originality than other dramatists. Though all his characters originated as Greek, they speak and act as if they were Romans living in the heart of Rome. Frequent mention is made of Italian towns, markets and streets in Rome, Roman magistrates and the business of the law courts and the Senate. While avoiding

politics, he often alludes to events in Roman history; for example, he comments on the growing separation between rich and poor as a danger to the State. Still, his purpose in writing was “to represent the passing humors of the day and amuse the people in their holiday mood.”²

In Plautine comedy we have a valuable picture of Roman life and thought in the age in which he lived. The characters of his plays are the stock characters of Athenian comedy, but there is a wonderful life and vigor in them. His chief characters include the ever resourceful, crafty slave; the braggart warrior, the henpecked husband, his battle-axe wife, the moonstruck young man, the virginal vacuous lass, the dirty old man and the old, senile geezer. There is considerable sameness in the plots which concentrate on family life, but attack “the very foundation of Roman morality.”³ He did not favor plots that channeled love into marriage for that was not the goal of the playwright’s action.

William S. Anderson writes that “heroic badness” is a favorite form of Plautine comedy. In his book, *Barbarian Play: Plautus Roman Comedy*, he opines that the cunning, deceptive slave is “indifferent to strict ethical tenets and to such ordinary things as property rights, duty, responsibility, truth or authority.”⁴ Badness represents the personal response of every member of the audience, the desire to experience and enjoy what our parents and authority figures deny us. Pseudolus is the quintessence of this comic invention for his success leaves him heroically in power at the end of the play.

Judged by his epitaph, which Plautus purportedly wrote, he still abounded in good humor, vigor and exuberance in old age. “After Plautus died comedy mourns, the stage is deserted; then laughter, mirth and jest all wept in company.”⁵

1. Secrest, p. 149.
2. [theatrehistory.com](http://www.theatrehistory.com), p. 2.
3. Segal, p. 31.
4. Anderson, p. 90.
5. [theatrehistory.com](http://www.theatrehistory.com), p. 3.

Anderson, William S. *Barbarian Play: Plautus Roman Comedy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993.

<http://www.theatrehistory.com/ancient/plautus001>

Secrest, Meryle. *Stephen Sondheim: a Life*. New York: Random House, 1998.

Segal, Erich. *Roman Laughter: the Comedy of Plautus*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968.

DERIVATION *and Meaning of Names*

Proteans: taking on different forms. From the Greek sea god Proteus who could change his shape at will.

Pseudolus: from the Greek *pseudo* meaning false.

Domina: from the Latin *dominus*, to be lord and master.

Erronius: from the Latin *erroneus* meaning wandering.

Geminae: named for the constellation twins in the Northern Hemisphere.

Gymnasia: from the Greek *gumnasion* meaning to train naked.

Hero: principal main character.

Marcus Lycus: from the Latin *licentia* meaning dissoluteness; lacking moral discipline.

Hysterium: from Greek *hustera* (womb); a nervous disease of the womb.

Panacea: from Greek *panakeia* (all healing); remedy for all diseases.

Philia: from Greek *philos*, loving.

Senex: from the Latin *senectus* meaning old.

Tintinabula: from the Latin *tinnire*, to ring.

Vibrata: from the Latin *vibraire*, to vibrate.

Miles: from Latin *milia* for the number 1000.

Gloriosius: from Latin *gloria*; glory.

ROMAN LIFE IN 200 BC

“In Rome you long for the country; in the country —oh inconstant!— you praise the distant city to the stars.”

—Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus) 65-8 BC. *Satires*. Book II, vii, l. 28.

As Rome was the center of the Empire, so the Forum Romanum was the center of Rome. Oldest of the city’s public squares, the Forum gradually grew into a complex of open spaces and government buildings, temples and shops. Its main concourse was closed to chariot traffic; senators, priests, businessmen, shoppers and hawkers passed through the area on foot. Here was the Senate, the Colosseum, the Circus Maximus and temples to the Roman gods Jupiter, Mars and Venus. The monumental architecture was copied wherever Rome ruled, so similar structures are seen from England to Egypt.

As the Forum was the center of Rome, so the family was the center or basic unit in Rome. The head of the house, or *pater familias*, possessed legal control amounting to virtual ownership over his household. A wife was considered legal chattel of her spouse, but, like *Domina*, they exercised a profound influence over husbands.

Though all Roman citizens were equal before the law, there were distinct social stratifications among them. By the First Century three distinct divisions of society had developed: the upper class or nobles were comprised of old patricians, hereditary office holders and a few influential plebians. Next were the equestrians or knights who were mainly businessmen. The plebians or common people—along with freedmen and liberated slaves—made up the largest part of the population.

Every household with any pretensions to comfort had at least two or three slaves. The burden of slavery was a matter of degree.

Those who worked on construction or in mines led the most miserable of lives, but the urban slaves fared better. Some had special skills such as craftsmen, entertainers, or skilled Eastern chefs. A few household slaves became beloved friends with their owners and often accumulated a fund called a *peculium* with which they might buy their freedom.

The eunuchs were castrated men who were deemed safer servants and lived in a royal court. From the Greek word *eune* (bed) and *ekheim* (to keep), they performed such functions as making the ruler’s bed, bathing him and cutting his hair. They supposedly did not have loyalties to the military, aristocracy or any family of their own, so were considered more trustworthy in relaying private messages.

http://salempress.com/encyclopedia_ancient_world_dailylife

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/eunuch>

Hadas, Moses, ed. *Imperial Rome*. New York: Time-Life Books, 1965.

VAUDEVILLE AND BORSCHT-BELT HUMOR

“This is a scenario for vaudevillians. There are many details omitted from the script. They are part of any comedian’s bag of tricks: the double take, the mad walk, the sighs, the smirks, the stammerings. All these and more are intended to be supplied by the actor.”

— Authors’ Note,
*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way
to the Forum*

By the turn of the 19th century vaudeville had replaced the minstrel show as the chief form of American entertainment. This change resulted from a demographic shift: the growth of industry had brought more and more people into the cities who were trying to adjust to urban life. Vaudeville, with its quick succession of images and sounds, “mimicked urban life and therefore gave audiences an increasing sense of laughing at themselves and their new urban culture.”¹

Vaudeville comedy acts were dependent, for the most part, on stock materials for inspiration. These materials included jokes and song parodies; monologues (strings of jokes or comic lectures); bits (two or three person joke routines); and sketches (short comic scenes with a story). To these the comedians added the physical comedy; the poke in the eye and the knockabout or slapstick business. This comedic violence, whether verbal insult or physical action, was valued by some audience members as an expression of their own emotions. Some entertainers took their persona from stock vaudeville characters. For example, Eddie Cantor took on the guise of the clown with nervous energy and nonstop action while Jack Benny borrowed the cheapskate with a small dollop of sensibility.

The content of the vaudeville show reflected the ethnic make-up of its audience in complex ways. Vaudeville performers were often from the same working class and immigrant backgrounds as their spectators. Yet the laughter they provided their patrons was sometimes achieved at the expense of other working class American groups. Humor based on ethnic characterizations was a major component of many routines as it had been in folk-culture based entertainment and other popular culture.

For example, “blackface” imitations carried over from minstrelsy. “Dialect acts” featured comic cari-

atures of many other ethnic groups including Irish, Italians, Germans and Jews. By the end of vaudeville’s heyday, the early 1930s, most ethnic acts had been eliminated from the bill.

Some of *Forum*’s humor also came from the Borscht Belt. This informal term was applied to the hotels and summer resorts frequented by Jewish New Yorkers, particularly in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Borscht is a kind of beet soup popular with people of Eastern European origin.

Many Jewish comedians began their careers in Catskill Mountain resorts as “tumblers” or social directors/entertainers. Tumbler comes from the German word *tummel*, someone who makes a lot of noise in trying to have a lot of fun. And that was the tumblers’s job—to provide non-stop entertainment for the resort’s guests “by being a comic, singer, master of ceremonies, producers and directors of shows and leader of games.”² Tumblers also performed and had to be prepared to handle the time-honored tradition of hecklers. To do this they had to develop a series of responses, such as: “The floor is yours. Wash it.”³ Many comedians got their start or regularly performed in the Borscht Belt circuit; they include Woody Allen, Milton Berle, Mel Brooks, Red Buttons, Phyllis Diller, Danny Kaye, Jerry Lewis, Joan Rivers among others.

Vaudeville never really died for it resurrected itself to appear in the situation comedies of the 1950s. “I Love Lucy”, “Bewitched”, “My Little Margie”. “The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet”, “Bilko”, “Green Acres” and “The Honeymooners” are a few representatives of the era. As Larry Gelbart wrote for a Bob Hope monologue, “When vaudeville died, television is the box they put it in.”⁴

1. Epstein, p. 31.

2. Epstein, p. 112.

3. Epstein, p. 115.

4. Gelbart, p. 73.

Epstein, Lawrence J. *The Haunted Smile: the Story of Jewish Comedians in America*. New York: Perseus Books Group, 2001.

Gelbart, Larry. *Laughing Matters*. New York: Random House, 1998.

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/bobhope/vaude>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borscht_Belt