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Everything Was Possible: The Birth Of The Musical Follies (Applause Books)



Synopsis

(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.

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Customer Reviews

Chapin tells how the 1971 Hal Prince/ Stephen Sondheim/Michael Bennett musical about old theater performers created no strapping young stars, went through multiple revisions, lost money and yet established a place in theater memory for emotional and artistic complexity. The author, son of arts impresario Schuyler Chapin, was one of *Follies*'s few youngsters, a Connecticut College student observing the production as independent study but becoming the crew's gofer. Chapin's chronology spans the practical to the exceptional, from how tap sounds are created to the

last-minute writing of Yvonne De Carlo's now-standard I'm Still Here. He also charts Boris Aronson's multileveled sets, the dress that transformed Alexis Smith into the show's star, the inestimable uses of previews in Boston, the Broadway opening and the surrounding national interest in the play. Chapin doesn't dwell on the negative audience reaction to Follies's ambiguities, leaving the play's year-long run to tell the tale. Despite much praise and many Tony Awards, Follies closed after 522 performances. It lost almost \$800,000 and was considered a "financial failure." Still, nearly all the players considered it a high point of their careers. Prince called it his "favorite show

Starred Review It's a pity, but most of the planning and preparation of a play or musical becomes lost. Sure, some artifacts survive: costume sketches, set models, props, programs, fawning features, and caustic reviews. But most of the behind-the-scenes work--rehearsals, rewrites, meetings of the creative minds--goes undocumented. Chapin's chronicle of the making of Stephen Sondheim's Follies constitutes a rare exception. In 1971 Chapin worked as a gofer for the producing team, including directors Hal Prince and Michael Bennett, book writer William Goldman, and Sondheim, involved in the premiere production of the soon-to-be landmark musical; and he kept a detailed, daily journal of the show's progress. Three decades later, he has assembled the journal entries and his memories, augmented by extensive interviews, into a fascinating narrative. Through young Chapin's eyes we see Prince, Sondheim, and company putting together the show that made Sondheim a cult hero. Here is Sondheim obsessing over lyrics, Prince fretting over his nervous stomach, and the cast of older actors struggling to learn difficult parts. Chapin traces Follies from first rehearsals in January 1971, through out-of-town tryouts, to opening night, April 4, 1971, and beyond. A book to please Sondheim aficionados, it should also engross anyone wanting to know the details of mounting a big-budget Broadway show. Jack Helbig Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

...or if you love musicals, or if you love theater, or if you love good writing, or if you just "like" any of the above -- then get this book. Chapin had a director's-side seat at the creation and launch of, um, my favorite show, and he was taking notes all the while. There's nothing like this: instructive and illuminating and enjoyable all at once. Makes you wish we had a similar circumstance/book for someone who was there while "Oedipus Rex" was being rehearsed.

In 1971 Ted Chapin was a 20-year old college student who found a way to wangle a job as a production assistant (gofer) on FOLLIES and get college credit for it. No doubt, Chapin's family

connections helped him a great deal (which he readily admits) and I'm sure that because of it he was treated with far more respect than the average gofer. But connections or not, he was still a kid in love with the theatre. Chapin's youthful enthusiasm and hero worship shine through the book. The part that really melted my heart was when he realizes he's the first person to type the lyrics for a new Sondheim song, "I'm Still Here." And you realize that even though today Chapin is powerful and successful, he still takes great pride in having been the first person to type the lyrics for "I'm Still Here." At the time of FOLLIES it was not unusual for shows to go into rehearsal with large sections of the script (the ending, for example) marked, "To Be Written." (Things are not like that today.) There are changes that happen in rehearsals, such as taking away "Losing My Mind" from Alexis Smith and giving it to Dorothy Collins. (It finally worked!) We see the changes that the show makes in its Boston tryout and the differences they make. There are great photos of the stars in the wigs and costumes that didn't work and were discarded. We read about the dramatic changes that happen when "Can That Boy Foxtrot" gets replaced by "I'm Still Here" and "Uptown and Downtown" gets replaced by "Lucy and Jessie." Then there were the trials of Alexis Smith losing her voice and Gene Nelson's son becoming involved in a life-threatening situation on the West Coast. Could the understudies go on? They've had no rehearsal at all! The cast was composed mostly of older people who had difficulty remembering lines and learning dance routines, in addition to being terrified to move on Boris Aronson's severely raked stage. I liked all the detail that Chapin includes in the book, like what the show was like from the orchestra pit, how the lyric sheets were punctuated, visits to the scene and costume workshops, etc. Chapin vividly presents a large cast of characters. I got a kick out of old Ethel Shutta getting off a few zingers at Fifi D'Orsay's expense. Early in rehearsals Yvonne DeCarlo appears to take a shine to young Chapin and he becomes her frequent escort, much to the horror of Hal Prince and Stephen Sondheim. Dorothy Collins supposedly told her to "Keep your hands off that nice young man." We see Alexis Smith working with everything she's got to make the show her own, all the while denying that she's put very much effort into her career. There's a cameo by Angela Lansbury (who was trying out PRETTYBELLE in Boston while FOLLIES was there for its tryout). Lansbury asks DeCarlo after seeing a matinee if this was her first time on stage. DeCarlo later explains it by saying that Angie must have been in a state of shock over her own show's premature closing. FOLLIES went on to become a landmark in the American theatre, running nearly two years, despite losing its entire investment. FOLLIES still sparks arguments today. Was it brilliant? Or a pretentious mess? This book is a great addition to the FOLLIES legend. Chapin obviously took great joy in simply being there and that joy shines through the pages of this book. Whether you're a FOLLIES fan or not (and I'm not), this book is a must-read

for theatre buffs.

The immense immediacy of Ted Chapin's "Follies" memoir puts you right in the middle of a chaotic rehearsal period. Alas, the era Chapin remembers is as far gone to us as the era "Follies" intended to evoke. He rarely pauses for breath as he takes us through the thrilling rehearsal period of a musical with cast that mixed young and old and a range of temperaments. The parts where he talks about Yvonne DeCarlo are both fascinating and a little weird. Unintentionally, Chapin puts his finger on what exactly was wrong with "Follies" 33 years ago -- the creators never seemed to have a clear, hit-your-head-with-a-hammer conception of what it all meant. The musical seemed to create itself, and the result baffled as many people as it pleased. The creators even sought out a Harvard undergrad who had written an essay on the show during its Boston tryout. (Read the book to find out who the undergrad was, but rest assured it wasn't Ted Kaczynski.) I was too young to see it, but I really, really wish I was there. The characters of the actors and creative team come through, with the possible exception of Jim Goldman, who seemed to have distanced himself from the cast. Some surprises: Hal Prince gave line readings to the actors, and even stars making a lot of money for the time could routinely make mistakes. Nevertheless, Chapin has a profound sense of decency and understanding, and he never paints any of these people in an overly negative way. Another thing that comes through in Chapin's memoir is his audacious efficiency. Based on this account, Chapin was a dream gofer, coordinating the demands of a script that just kept spinning out of control. I could never have done it. Hats off. While reading the book, I often found myself singing the "Follies" score aloud; it is brilliant, and I'll never understand why critics of the time dismissed Stephen Sondheim's music. Neither, I suspect, did Chapin. For theater buffs, this book will make you yearn to head to your local little theater group and jump right in.

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