

42nd Street

42nd STREET is one of America's most successful musicals. It is the 8th most successful Broadway show ever (based on the number of performances in an original run) and the 2nd longest running ever, behind A Chorus Line. It opened in 1980, won the 1981 Tony Award for Best Musical, and ran until January 1989, managing 3486 performances under the watchful eye of legendary producer David Merrick. (The original London cast opened at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane on August 8, 1984.)

42nd Street is from the well-used tradition of a show-within-a-show, (like, for instance, Kiss Me, Kate, Phantom of the Opera) but it is ultimately Peggy Sawyer's story, beginning as she comes to audition for the new, Julian Marsh-directed musical, Pretty Lady, which is about to open on Broadway. Despite appalling nerves, (but buoyed by a lucky scarf), she is quickly noticed by "the greatest director on Broadway" with the fatuous personality and, (as always seems to happen), the chorus is in need of just one more hooper. Marsh is not short of a leading lady however, as ageing star Dorothy Brock has wrapped sugar daddy Abner Dillon, around her little finger and landed herself the plumb role...despite having a real lover of her own, Pat Denning. Peggy meanwhile has managed to impress all and sundry, including the writers Maggie and Bert. She has also caught the eye of juvenile lead, Billy Lawlor, but Brock becomes jealous of her innocent friendship with Pat and a deep bitterness develops, despite Peggy's efforts to avoid it. Marsh sees that Pat's continued presence will cause major upset if he is discovered by Dillon, so he 'arranges' for him to be bullied out of town.

Luckily, Armageddon is averted when, on the opening night, Brock suffers a slight mishap (mistakenly blamed on Peggy). Although Peggy is fired forthwith, Fate plays a part and, led by Billy and her friend Annie, a Peggy-hunt ensues. Fairly soon our brave and blameless ankle-saboteur is on her way towards stardom herself, Dorothy is free to marry and Julian Marsh's reputation as the King of Broadway remains intact.

The show is based largely on the 1933 Busby Berkeley movie of the same name, directed by Lloyd Bacon, which featured Warner Baxter as the dubious director Marsh, Bebe Daniels as arrogant star Brock, Ruby Keeler as star-struck hopeful Peggy, and even included an early role for Ginger Rogers, playing Ann Lowell.

The stage musical itself was adapted from Bradford Rope's book by Michael Stewart and Mark Bramble (a Merrick office apprentice, who also wrote the Tony-nominated Barnum). They were already working together on The Grand Tour but, watching the film one day, they found it instantly preferable. In assembling this project they were sensibly advised to retain the five songs from the film, including "Shuffle off to Buffalo", "You're Getting to be a Habit with Me" and the title song. They then looked at other material from the 30s by Harry Warren and Al Dubin (songwriters of the above) to complete the show; classic show-stoppers including "Dames", "We're in the Money" and "Lullaby of Broadway". The songs are niftily incorporated into 42nd Street, often as performance pieces of the show within the show.

The quality of the songs is obvious. Harry Warren (1893-1981) and Al Dubin (1891-1945) had careers spanning six decades, writing Broadway shows, revues, and were pioneer songwriters for sound pictures. Warren had his first hit in 1922 and he scored his last movie (of 75) in 1962. Lyricist Dubin's other work for the New York stage includes lyrics for White Lights, Streets of Paris and Star and Garter.

David Merrick is regarded by many as the finest, most prolific American theatrical producer of the Twentieth Century, and lesser men might have crumbled. Initially informed that this project was doomed, he decided personally to cover \$2.4 million worth of costs, buying out existing backers, and hiring the services of choreographer Gower Champion, who would win a Tony Award for Best Choreography as a result. Champion is synonymous with some Broadway epics, being director

and choreographer for Lend an Ear, Bye Bye Birdie, Carnival, Hello, Dolly!, I Do! I Do!, The Happy Time, Sugar, Irene and Mack & Mabel.

When initial previews drew lukewarm responses Merrick, who suspected Champion wasn't up to making stunning changes without provocation, bought in Joe Layton and Ron Field (directors and choreographers themselves) and accidentally ensured Champion noticed them in the audience. Things might have been different had the scheming reprobate known Champion was actually so ill that he was regularly receiving blood transfusions in his hotel room.

The show went to Broadway but immediately returned to rehearsal, with previews and opening dates postponed. When a reporter from The Times bought a ticket for the opening preview in New York, Merrick cancelled the show, but still had the cast run through a full performance anyway, filling the front row with stuffed animals. The media reported that Merrick's marbles were well and truly lost, when he was genuinely making vital improvements to a ponderous set.

Merrick had a lot riding on it, having now coughed up more than \$3 million on the production, making it at the time, the most expensive musical in Broadway history. The budget for the costumes alone was said to be \$500000. Word-of-mouth was scornful, and the first-night audience expected a disaster. What they got was a smash, with Merrick having no need of incontinence wear as the audience cheered the overture and gasped like people gasping when the curtain rose a few inches to reveal a stage-wide line of tap-dancing feet. (This original cast saw Jerry Orbach playing Marsh, Tammy Grimes as Dorothy and Peggy played by Wanda Richert.)

It wasn't all euphoric. Merrick had earlier requested that all journalists remain behind for an important announcement. Amid a wild standing ovation, where the cast took 10 curtain calls, the curtain rose for number 11 with Merrick standing there to reveal that Champion had died earlier that day from Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia, a rare and virulent blood disease. The audience was shocked. Some people collapsed, and journalists dashed away to strain literary muscles as Merrick's somewhat cynical ploy worked, providing the show with a blaze of publicity and critical acclaim. The public lapped it up, and Merrick made millions.

With great songs, memorable music, heated hoofing, and a heart-warming resolution against all the odds, 42nd Street always makes a mark. Just watch the way you say "break a leg" in future.

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