

Rolling Along

Given the roll-call of people associated with bringing a Broadway show to life, it is sometimes difficult to determine who is the most influential. In truth, they act as a team and one could argue none is dispensable. But, in the case of *Merrily We Roll Along* there is one person (ironically not in the "team" in the strictest sense) without whom the show would have died long ago on the Broadway stage and we would not have had the option of bringing it to you today.

Thomas J Shepard was vice-president of RCA records at the time of *Merrily's* disastrous Broadway premier in 1981. He was a long-time fan of Sondheim's work and had personally overseen the Broadway Cast recordings of most of his shows. Thus, following one of the most hostile receptions given to any Broadway show on record, he pleaded with his bosses at RCA still to keep the faith and preserve *Merrily* for posterity. We will never know for certain, but it is probably due to this one act of loyalty that the show's long-term future has been assured.

Sondheim's long-term collaborator and producer, Harold (Hal) Prince suggested the project and quickly enlisted the support of Sondheim and librettist George Furth. This trio had previously worked very successfully on *Company* in 1970. The new show was intended to be pure musical comedy, a big dance show, immediately accessible and a far cry from the darker, esoteric shows that had consumed Sondheim for so many years. Thus, the choreographer Ron Field was added to the team.

The base material was a play by Moss Hart and George S Kaufman from 1934 that Hal Prince had remembered from his youth despite the fact that at 155 performances, it was hardly considered a success. The main elements of the story are all there. In the original, the action covered the years 1934-1916. The new show was to cover the period 1980-1955 and an early decision was to use a raw, teenaged cast. Sondheim didn't try to imitate the music of the period reasoning that, although it might be possible to differentiate musically between decades, it was not possible to differentiate between, say, 1969 and 1966.

And so it was that a group of unknowns (some of them appearing on stage for virtually the first time) were signed early in 1981 for the new Prince/Sondheim hit. As the score was still being written, there was a significant delay – 9 months in fact – until rehearsals began in September 1981...and it was at this point that Ron Field claims first to have had misgivings about what was to be one of the most troublesome shows that Broadway had ever known.

"...I couldn't understand the show. I was listening, with question marks coming out of my ears, my eyes, my heart and my brain. It didn't seem possible that this was going to work – this thing that was backwards. I just couldn't understand it. The lazy part of me kept saying, 'You'll get it...it'll come to you.' I was so perplexed. I would look at the set and it didn't seem attractive or make any sense to me. Then I would look at the people who were cast who couldn't sing, certainly couldn't dance, were clearly unattractive, and most had never been in a show before. They were amateurs."

Field initially kept his fears to himself but, as rehearsals continued, it became clear that relationships between him and the generally up-beat Hal Prince were becoming more and more strained. The cast became confused: Field would tell them to do one thing and then Prince would change it. Still, rehearsals continued as the show moved inexorably towards its previews.

The almost inviolate rule is that Broadway shows are previewed "out of town", in smaller venues. The reasons are clear: almost no show opens on Broadway unchanged from how the writers first write it. Shows are changed for all sorts of reasons; length, dialogue or songs that don't work, confusion in the plotting, staging...the list is endless. The need to change things sometimes

becomes obvious in the comparative privacy of the rehearsal hall but some things don't become obvious until you have to perform to an audience...and the worst place to find this out is in the full glare of publicity...somewhere, in fact, like Broadway. And so previews in other, less prestigious venues are de rigueur.

For economic reasons it had been decided not to test Merrily out of town. The team was encouraged in this decision as a previous production (Sweeney Todd) had done very well without the benefit of out-of-town previews. Unfortunately, lightning was not destined to strike twice and Merrily's troubles-to-come were played out on Broadway before an eager press.

At the dress rehearsal, Prince threw out all the costumes. Lonny Price, who played Charley, remembered sitting in the theatre "...and just looking at the set and thinking, 'Why is it so ugly?' It was horrifying. And they had made these really original, very strange, very witty costumes at great expense. And I had suits and wigs. I had like twelve hairpieces. ... So we were doing the dress parade and there were these fifteen-year-old girls... we all looked like we were in Bugsy Malone. And Hal stood up and said, 'Look, we've made a mistake here and want you to take everything off and we're going to put you all in jeans and sweatshirts. I'm sorry. The whole concept doesn't work. I'm sorry.'"

For his part, Prince had originally intended to produce the show with no scenery and minimal costume and stage dressing. Only Sondheim supported him. Prince remembers that everybody else cautioned "'You can't do that and charge thirty dollars. You can't do that on Broadway. If you want to do that, you've got to go off-Broadway, otherwise forget it.' So I was persuaded. So we tried to find scenery that didn't look like scenery and we got into terrible trouble on the costumes. We tried to make the set look like it wasn't there: instead it was there and it was awful."

Previews began at the Alvin on 8th October, 1981. The evening was 40 minutes too long; the audience didn't understand the "backward" structure of the story; the dances didn't work and the leading man was strong enough. (hardly surprising – and certainly not his fault – considering that he had applied simply to be Prince's assistant and was an inexperienced on-stage performer.) The gossip had started. Ten days into the previews, the Daily News reported "The walkouts from the new Hal Prince-Steve Sondheim musical are almost epidemic. There were about 140 people who left after the intermission at a recent performance."

Three days later, on 21st October, the New York Times announced: "Merrily We Roll Along, a musical in preview at the Alvin Theatre has changed its leading man and postponed its opening from November 1 to November 8. On Monday night on a trial basis, Jim Walton [who was playing a smaller role in the show] replaced James Weissenbach as the composer who becomes a movie producer. The change became permanent yesterday. A spokesman for the production said that as changes occurred during rehearsals and previews, Mr Walton seemed to be better for the role."

The situation with Ron Field got worse and, as he was being put under pressure, so his relationship with the young cast became more brutal. Finally, on 24th October, the Times reported: "Ron Field has been replaced by Larry Fuller as the choreographer of the new musical currently in previews at the Alvin. Mr Field ... left the production because of artistic differences." And then on 27th October: "Merrily Is Postponed Second Time to November 16 ...to give Larry Fuller additional time to work on the dances."

Finally, 16th November arrived and Merrily opened. The reviews were devastating. ...a "dud"; "looks like it cost all of \$28"; "a severe letdown"; "a blunder"; "short on character, short on motivation, long only on bitchiness"; "Sondheim's thinnest score"; "the show ... is a shambles". Only one reviewer, Clive Barnes in the New York Post wrote positively: "Whatever you may have heard about it – go and see it for yourselves. It is far too good a musical to be judged by those twin kangaroo courts of word of mouth and critical consensus."

Prince tells of the amount of work that went on during the previews; not only to improve the show but also to keep the spirits up of those involved in it. "And by the time we were through, not only were they not walking out in droves, but many were sitting there and cheering. But it was too goddamned late. ... It was the gossip columns that told us we had committed a major crime against society. And, of course, if you had tickets for a show and you walked in having read that, the show didn't get much of a chance." And he also ruefully admitted, "The time out on the road, away from New York, is crucial."

16 performances later, the show closed. The following day the cast went into the studio to sing the score for the last time and to lay down the tracks that would ultimately ensure its longevity.

George Furth sent the script and recording to director-playwright James Lapine hopeful that he might be able to initiate a new production on the West Coast. Lapine had never seen the Broadway production and was excited by the material. Sondheim however was so crushed by the experience that he even considered taking up a new career and leaving the theatre world that he felt "hated me and Hal". Instead, Lapine and Sondheim worked together on the successful *Sunday in the Park with George* and it was not until after this that the opportunity came again to look at *Merrily*.

The 1985 California production had a greatly revised book and was performed by a considerably older cast than the Broadway original. Songs were added and deleted. The single biggest change came at the beginning and end of the show. (In the original, Frank addresses a graduation at his old university, the students turning into the actors of the main story. The show ends where it begins, at the graduation. These scenes were entirely deleted.) With encouraging (but still variable) reviews, the show was obviously in much better shape. Since then, the show has received two more major revivals each of which has given its creators the chance to work on it further; 1990 in Washington and 1992 at our own Leicester Haymarket. It is this Leicester version of 1992 that is now considered the definitive one and is met with rave reviews whenever it is staged.

At that time, John Porter of the *Sunday Times* commented that the show had never been seen in the West End saying "If London producers have any sense of enterprise left, they ought to be queuing up outside to lay their hands on *Merrily We Roll Along*." Sheridan Morley wrote: "If the West End cannot get this one into town, then it no longer deserves to be called the theatre capital of the world." It was briefly staged at the Donmar Warehouse where it won the 2001 Olivier Award for Best Musical.

Merrily We Roll Along, the show whose initial failure marked the end of the Sondheim/Prince partnership, no longer needs apologetic excuses. It stands shoulder to shoulder with the best of them. ...and the full-scale West End production? Despite Sheridan Morley's entreaty, other than the stint at the Donmar Warehouse, London still waits.

Terry Foster
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Merrily We Roll Along – the story

The major musical and dramatic themes of the show (the nature of hopes and dreams and how these can so often be lost or compromised) are emphasized in the Prologue which features the entire Company.

Merrily proceeds in reverse chronological order. Short interludes ("Transitions") act as bridges between the scenes to move the action backwards in time. Each scene presents the audience with a situation, the critical elements of which are developed in later scenes (but, of course, earlier in time)...so we know what has happened before we find out why it has happened.

ACT I

1979

We are in the middle of a party at the Hollywood home of Franklin Shepherd. The party is to celebrate the success of Frank's latest film. Frank's old friend, Mary Flynn, is alone and slowly drinking herself to oblivion. She presents not-so-quiet cynical observations on the shallow "Hollywood set" that now seem to surround Frank.

Frank's wife, Gussie Carnegie (a Broadway musical star...but, we learn, too old to star in the movie) is also at the party as is the movie's star, (and Frank's mistress), Meg.

Proceedings are brought to a standstill when someone unwisely mentions the new Pulitzer prize-winning play by Charles Kringas. Mary, in alcohol-induced abandon, explains that Charlie's name is never mentioned in Frank's house since he (Charley) publicly embarrassed Frank on national TV. Completely unaware, she now makes the same mistake with a tirade that signals the end of their friendship.

As if things couldn't get worse, Gussie chooses this moment to confront Frank and Meg about their affair. In a fit of rage, she throws a bottle of iodine in Meg's face. As Meg is rushed to hospital, Frank is left alone, his life in tatters.

1973

We are in a TV studio and Charley is getting prepared to go on a live chat show to discuss his and Frank's Broadway and movie collaboration, Musical Husbands. It is evident that the relationship between the two old friends is rather strained. Frank has yet to arrive and Charley complains to Mary that he is always off signing some deal or other rather than working on the show Take a Left that they have been putting off for so long. He is quite obviously nearing the end of his tether with Frank. Mary tries to persuade him to give Frank one more chance. Finally, Frank arrives – with his new wife, Gussie.

Seconds before they go on air, Charley finds out by accident that Frank has signed another big deal. He is enraged and lays into Frank on-air. Realising, too late, that he has gone too far, Charley tries to apologise but this is met by Frank's hitting him, sending him sprawling to the floor.

1968

Frank is in his new, luxury Bel Air home unpacking upon his return from a cruise. Mary and Charley arrive to welcome him bringing his young son, Frank Jnr. We learn that Frank Jnr. now lives with his mother, Beth.

Frank announces that he has secured a valuable option to do the movie version of his and Charley's Broadway hit, Musical Husbands. A row ensues, partly because Frank has gone behind Charley's back but also because Charley's ideals are for "higher art". Frank counters that, since his divorce, he needs the money. Mary, as usual, tries to act as peacemaker.

The star and producer of their show arrive; Gussie Carnegie and her husband, Joe Josephson. It becomes clear that Gussie's feelings for Frank go much further than that of a professional relationship. She plans to leave her husband for Frank and forces him to choose between her and meeting his friends, Charley and Mary later that evening.

1966

We are presented with the media circus on the steps of the Manhattan Court House inside which Beth is filing for divorce. Frank is anxious that he will lose his son, Frank Jnr.

Charley and Mary and other friends and associates come to offer support. Mary tells him that he has just learnt a tough lesson and together they all persuade him to take a long cruise to give himself some time to get over things.

ACT II

1964

Gussie is performing her big number on the Broadway stage. This is the first night of Frank and Charley's show Musical Husbands and, through the stage door, they and their family and friends (except Charley's wife, Evelyn, who went into labour in the middle of the performance) hear first-hand that they have a sure fire hit. Life is going to change for them all.

The group splinters as they have to deal variously with the show's backers, Evelyn's labour and the after-show party. Mary senses that Gussie's attentions towards Frank go much deeper and, as it appears that they will be left alone together, she warns Beth of the danger but Beth dismisses it.

1962

Gussie and Joe are throwing a party where the "in" crowd are boasting everything they've done and gossiping...mostly about each other. Frank, Beth, Mary and Charley turn up quite unprepared to see all these celebrities in one place together. We learn that Joe has optioned a play for Gussie to star and they want Frank and Charley to write the score. Initially they are disappointed as they thought that Joe wanted to produce the show they've been working on for three years – but they finally agree. Gussie outrageously and pointedly flirts with Frank and we discover that she will stop at nothing to get what she wants.

1960

Before a sparse audience, Frank, Charley and Beth are performing at a cabaret-bar quite obviously off, off-Broadway. Frank and Beth are about to get married much to the disappointment of Mary (who is very much in love with Frank herself), the bemusement of Joe (who, with his fiancée, Gussie is also in the audience) and the fury of Beth's parents.

1959-57

In one scene, an extended song, we are taken through the years 1957-1959 when Frank, Charley and Mary are all struggling to become established in their chosen fields; Charley and Frank collaborating on writing shows whilst supporting themselves with other, paid work and Mary, at home by herself, taking many short-lived writing assignments whilst avoiding writing her novel.

Frank arranges an audition with producer Joe Josephson who offers encouraging (if boringly conservative) advice. As a result, Frank decides that he and Charley should stage a revue of their own. Realizing they don't have a singing "girl", they hold auditions and Beth Spencer gets the part.

1957

In the early morning Frank and Charley are on the rooftop of their apartment block awaiting the arrival of Sputnik overhead. Frank is evidently recently demobbed from the forces and has been reading Charley's plays. He is full of praise for his friend's work...as is Charley for Frank's music. Frank suggests that they work together on musical shows. At this moment they are surprised by a young woman, also in nightclothes, also wanting to see Sputnik. They introduce themselves and Mary exclaims how much she has enjoyed overhearing Frank play piano in the apartment.

All three share binoculars to see the satellite go overhead. It is a defining moment in their lives. "What a time to be alive!" Frank exclaims and they link fingers in a triumphant bond of friendship.