

## **A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum @ New Line Theatre**

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart

Based on the comedies of Plautus

Ran June 1 - 24, 2023 @ The Marcelle Theatre

**Published June 17, 2023**

Outside of remounting and paying tribute to his greatest works (some productions better than others), the passing of Stephen Sondheim has caused another interesting musical theatre trend to pop up out of the woodwork: an all-encompassing reexamination of Sondheim musicals that may not be as highly regarded as his masterpieces. One such show is *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, the first Broadway musical for which Stephen Sondheim wrote the entire score after cutting his teeth as the lyricist for both *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*. Don't get me wrong, *Forum* is a very popular show – a staple of community theatre – but there are those who view it purely as a piece of silly fluff simply because it's a farce. Even Sondheim himself admitted *Forum* may have needed one or two rewrites to make it fully work. Let me tell you, folks, after seeing New Line Theatre's production of the show, Sondheim was clearly not giving himself enough credit.

As imagined by Stephen Sondheim and his book writers, Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is a musical adaptation of the farces of the ancient Roman playwright Plautus, told using the conventions of modern storytelling mediums such as vaudeville, burlesque, stand-up comedy, sitcoms, and contemporary romantic comedies. Even the title is a play on the classic stand-up comedy intro "a funny thing happened on the way to the theater." And *Forum* does all this while retaining the play's original ancient Roman setting. It's an experimental show, to be sure, filled to the brim with very goofy, very silly, very chaotic comedy; but at the same time, it's very deftly made.

The story is framed as a performance by a small acting troupe who have decided to put on a "Comedy Tonight," chock full of stock characters and wacky shenanigans. On a street in ancient Rome, we meet Pseudolus, a slave belonging to Hero, the innocent son of the sardonic Roman senator Senex and the shrewish Domina. The show starts with Senex and Domina heading out of town, leaving Hero under the care of Pseudolus and fellow slave Hysterium. (Imagine if Abbott and Costello made a skit set in ancient Rome; you would have a pretty good idea of the dynamic between Pseudolus and Hysterium.) Both of them find out that Hero has fallen in love with Philia, a fellow ingenue who works as a courtesan in a brothel run by the hypertensive pimp Marcus Lycus. Hysterium, worried for the reputation of his masters, is determined to keep the lovebirds apart. Pseudolus, on the other hand, is a schemer; he bargains with Hero that if he can arrange for Hero and Philia to run away together, Hero will buy Pseudolus's freedom. There's just one problem: Philia has already been sold as the bride of the braggart general Miles Gloriosus. From there, Pseudolus's plans begin to unravel and spiral out of control, causing all

kinds of farcical complications that build up to one of the tightest chase sequences I've ever seen.

*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is a musical caught between two worlds, and not at all in a bad way. Sondheim's score achieves an ingenious balance of satirizing these classic stock characters and giving them a life that only the audience can see. The songs give us a glimpse into every character's mind, no matter how insane they are; that is one of the central goals of musical theatre, and Sondheim does it great here. If you really think about it, and directors Scott Miller and Chris Kernan have certainly thought about it extensively, *Forum* is both a look back on the very earliest days of theatre and a look forward into what theatre in the era of Sondheim could be. *Forum* is light, comedic, and cartoonish, but it's also honest, introspective, and deeply felt. Much like many great musicals that came after *Forum*. Scott Miller's ability to effectively communicate this vision to his collaborators – to the point that they feel the exact same level of passion, drive, and enthusiasm as he does – is the reason why he is in the Hall of Fame.

Everyone on stage looks like they are having the time of their lives playing these uber-hammy characters – but never to the point that it feels like they're mugging, which is a really tricky acting tightrope to walk. I commend this cast for nailing the madcap timing and pacing while also giving honest performances. The excellent New Line Players are Kent Coffel as Pseudolus; Chris Moore as Hysterium; Ian McCreary as Hero; Sarah Wilkinson as Philia; Robert Doyle as Senex; husband-and-wife duo Ann Heir Brown and Danny Brown as Domina and Miles Gloriosus, respectively; Jason Blackburn as Marcus Lycus; Gary Cox as Erronius, a senile man constantly searching for his two children that were kidnapped as infants; finally, there's Nathan Hakenewerth, Brittany Kohl Hester, and Aarin Kamphoefner as the Proteans, named for the shape-shifting Greek god Proteus – they're three performers who do the work of thirty, playing literally all of the show's ensemble parts (soldiers, courtesans, eunuchs, etc.).

The movement of the cast is finely coordinated by choreographer Chris Kernan, and the cast all have great voices shaped by musical director Joe Simpson. The New Line Band is also wonderful as always, featuring Matthew Kauzlarich on piano, Kelly Austermann on the reeds, Tyler Davis on cello, Ron Foster on trumpet, Adam Levin on trombone, John Gerdes on bass, and Clancy Newell on percussion. The cast performs in front of brightly colored, cartoon cutouts designed by Dr. Rob Lippert, and dressed in fabulous period costumes designed by Hall of Fame member Eileen Engel. Contributing to the comic strip aesthetic are Matt Stuckel's lights, Ryan Day's sound, and Erin Goodenough's props.

*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, despite its reputation as fluff, is a musical that works like crazy. It's a hilarious satire of theatre tropes and how much they haven't really changed since the beginning of the medium. At New Line Theatre, the production's emphasis on great acting and great directing, combined with its intimate venue, bring that satire to the forefront in a highly entertaining fashion. If you've read my review schedule, you'll know how appropriate (and serendipitous) my sendoff is: until next time, *Tragedy Tomorrow, Comedy Tonight!*