



THEY'RE STILL HERE: The cast of the must-see revival of Sondheim's *Follies* at the Marquis.
Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

Follies:

Why this reverent revival is, without question, closest to Stephen Sondheim's 1971 original



FOLLIES

Book by James Goldman

Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Directed by Eric Schaeffer

Through January 1, 2012

The Marquis Theatre at the Marriot Marquis Hotel

1535 Broadway, (212-239-6200)

www.folliesbroadway.com

By David NouNou

Anyone who saw the original 1971 version of *Follies* either considered it the greatest and grandest musical of all time (not necessarily the best), or they just did not get it. As a musical with a formidable book and score, it has the dauntless task of bringing in an assortment of former showgirls to one last reunion before the decaying theater they once performed in will be torn down to make way for a parking garage. At this reunion they get a chance to talk about where they are now, and reminisce about their former selves (their ghosts) and the glory days they once inhabited. The melding of the past and present is one of the most outstanding features about this musical. The enormity and grandeur is formidable. Having seen the original eight times, the *Follies* of 1971 is my ghost now. It has haunted and taunted me all these years for the reason that it can never be replicated, if for no other reason than the prohibitive cost and the brilliant talent that went into it. Each cast member was selected for his or her own

unique talent and what they brought to the part, and the songs seemed like they were written especially for that person. However, let us forget about "that ghost" and of the dreadful revivals that followed and instead concentrate and rejoice for this current one. This version will be as close to perfection as one will ever hope to see and for a new generation to appreciate.

Follies is not just about the girls themselves; the title, like the show, is a jigsaw for every imaginable folly: Starting with the folly of youth, innocence, love, marriage, success and ultimately to missed opportunities, disappointment, failure and old age. It brings every folly to sharp perspective, and the brilliant score by Stephen Sondheim, arguably his best, brings every character into sharp focus. Although the first act may seem static to some due to the introduction of so many characters, the book is always moving, and the action never stops. One just has to keep his or her eyes and ears open to absorb every moment of this magnificent piece of art.

What a glorious premise to be in: onstage of a theater with some of the most beautiful showgirls of yesteryear. Unfortunately for this theater (the Weissman), it is scheduled for demolition by the wrecking ball the next day. We are here for one last time to mingle with these wonderful people and their ghosts. Some are here to rejoice, some to remember, and some to unravel. The four main participants are Sally Durant Plummer (Bernadette Peters) and Phyllis Rogers Stone (Jan Maxwell), and their respective husbands, Buddy Plummer (Danny Burstein) and Benjamin Stone (Ron Raines). Sally and Phyllis were once the best of friends when they were young; they married their stage door Johnnies and life has taken different twists for each of them. As the evening progresses, we meet all the wonderful characters/showgirls that have overlapped the lives of Sally and Phyllis in their younger days. This is the crux of the story and the magnificent interweaving of the past and the present.

Unlike the original handpicked cast, this one, for the most part, is good; some are even great but not perfect. For sure they can all sing and they do Sondheim justice, but not all can dance as required. Hence, there is a lack of structured choreography. Part of the razzle-dazzle that should be inherent in any *Follies* is the choreography. I was thrilled to see "The Story of Lucy and Jessie," a very complicated number, reinstated for this production. However, due to Warren Carlyle's pedestrian and lackluster choreography, both this number and "Who's That Woman" are flat. The salvation of the second number is the charm and the personality the women bring to it.

Jan Maxwell, Danny Burstein, Jayne Houdyshell, Rosalind Elias, and Bernadette Peters, for the most part, are top-notch in their parts. Ms. Peters, who always has a strong presence on any stage, seems to be at odds with her part; she hasn't found the handle to it. Elaine Paige, Terri

White, Mary Beth Peil are all quiet good. What a pleasure to see Susan Watson, the original Kim McAfee of *Bye Bye Birdie*, back on Broadway again along with Don Correia. It is a pity they didn't have more to do than their one number.

As far as the production as a whole is concerned, I am so happy to announce that it is top-notch. Gregg Barnes does a spectacular job with the costumes, as does Natasha Katz with the lighting. Derek McLane's sets evoke the right mood for the decaying crumbling theater. Director Eric Schaeffer manages to keep his cast moving at a brisk pace.

If you are a *Follies* aficionado or a newbie who has wondered what all the ballyhoo about this show was—well, this is the version to go see. I mentioned earlier that this show has always taunted me that I would never see a decent revival of this beloved show. I am thrilled to report that my demons have been exorcised and *Follies* is back in resplendent fashion and, hopefully, for much longer than its scheduled closing date of January 1, 2012.

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