

# A Funny THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM

## Comedy Tonight!

By Joshua S. Ritter, Goodspeed Musicals Education Director

We can trace the roots of the musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* to the esteemed ancient Roman playwright Titus Maccius Plautus, born in Sarsina, Umbria around 254 B.C. It is difficult to determine Plautus's personal contribution, as all of his plays were adaptations of Greek productions that did not survive the ages. There is evidence, however, that he derived his works from plays belonging to the Greek New Comedy style. Plays of this genre portrayed the carefree life of the prosperous youth of Athens and their ceaseless desire for riches to purchase the company of concubines. Greeks considered plays of that style "clean" compared to those from the Old Comedy genre, which were often full of obscene gags and expressions.

Surely, Plautus could never have conceived that three of his plays (*Pseudolus*, *Miles Gloriosus*, and *Mostellaria*) would transform into one of the most hilarious and rollicking musicals ever produced. Yet Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart did a remarkable job taking Plautus's ancient works and weaving them into what some consider the best book associated with any Stephen Sondheim (Composer and Lyricist) collaboration. More than two thousand years after Plautus, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* continues to receive wide spread acclaim from critics and audiences throughout the world. Stephen Sondheim made his Broadway debut as a composer/lyricist working with Gelbart and Shevelove on the original Broadway production and commented on their work as follows:

"The book is vastly underrated. It's brilliantly constructed. We worked on the show over a period of four years. It took Larry and Burt eleven complete and distinct separate drafts, and everybody thinks that it was whipped up over a weekend because it plays so easily. The plotting is intricate, the dialogue is never anachronistic, and there are only two or three jokes—the rest is comic situation. It's almost like a senior thesis on two thousand years of comedy with an intricate, Swiss watch-like farce plot. The style of the dialogue is very elegant...the phrasing and grace of the dialogue are better than most of the writing of the musical or nonmusical theatre of the last twenty years. It's almost a foolproof piece; it can be done by any high school class or a group of vaudevillians and the play holds up."

*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* melded several traditional comedic styles. Shevelove and Gelbart predominantly combined elements of Roman comic theatre and American burlesque. The show successfully makes use of sexual innuendos, one-liners, and double takes along with many traditional slapstick situations often found in ancient texts. In the musical, we also find many examples of well-rehearsed comedic action (*lazzi*) typical to *Commedia dell'arte*, a comedic device often employed in vaudeville productions. Perhaps as an ode to that style of performance, the creators based the title of the musical on a line that vaudeville comedians commonly used to begin their routine: "A funny thing happened on the way to the theatre..."

Despite the impressive book, the show did poorly during out-of-town tryouts. Initially, Sondheim composed an opening number entitled "Invocation;" however, George Abbott (Director) did not think it was "hummable" enough and he urged Sondheim to make a second attempt. In response, Sondheim penned "Love is in the Air," but Sondheim still had reservations about the song and he did not think it properly set the stage for a low comedy. After receiving several nights of unenthusiastic audience reaction to the show while in Washington, Hal Prince (Producer) and Abbott solicited the help of well-respected director and choreographer Jerome Robbins. Robbins advised that the opening number be changed once again. In response, Sondheim composed another song entitled "Comedy Tonight." This opening number had a significant impact and according to Sondheim, "it was cheers and laughter throughout the entire evening at the same lines the audience had received in silence four days earlier."

*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* became a hit several weeks after the Broadway opening on May 8, 1962, receiving six Tony Awards, including Best Musical and Best Book. The original cast included Zero Mostel, Jack Gilford, David Burns, Ruth Kobart, and John Carradine. United Artists produced a film version in 1966 directed by Richard Lester with Zero Mostel reprising the role of *Pseudolus*. Popularity continued to grow and the show has had multiple revivals for both Broadway and London's West End audiences.

It is our pleasure to bring you a celebrated musical over two thousand years in the making. So please, leave your cares at the door because in the words of *Pseudolus*, "weighty affairs will just have to wait." A comedy tonight!