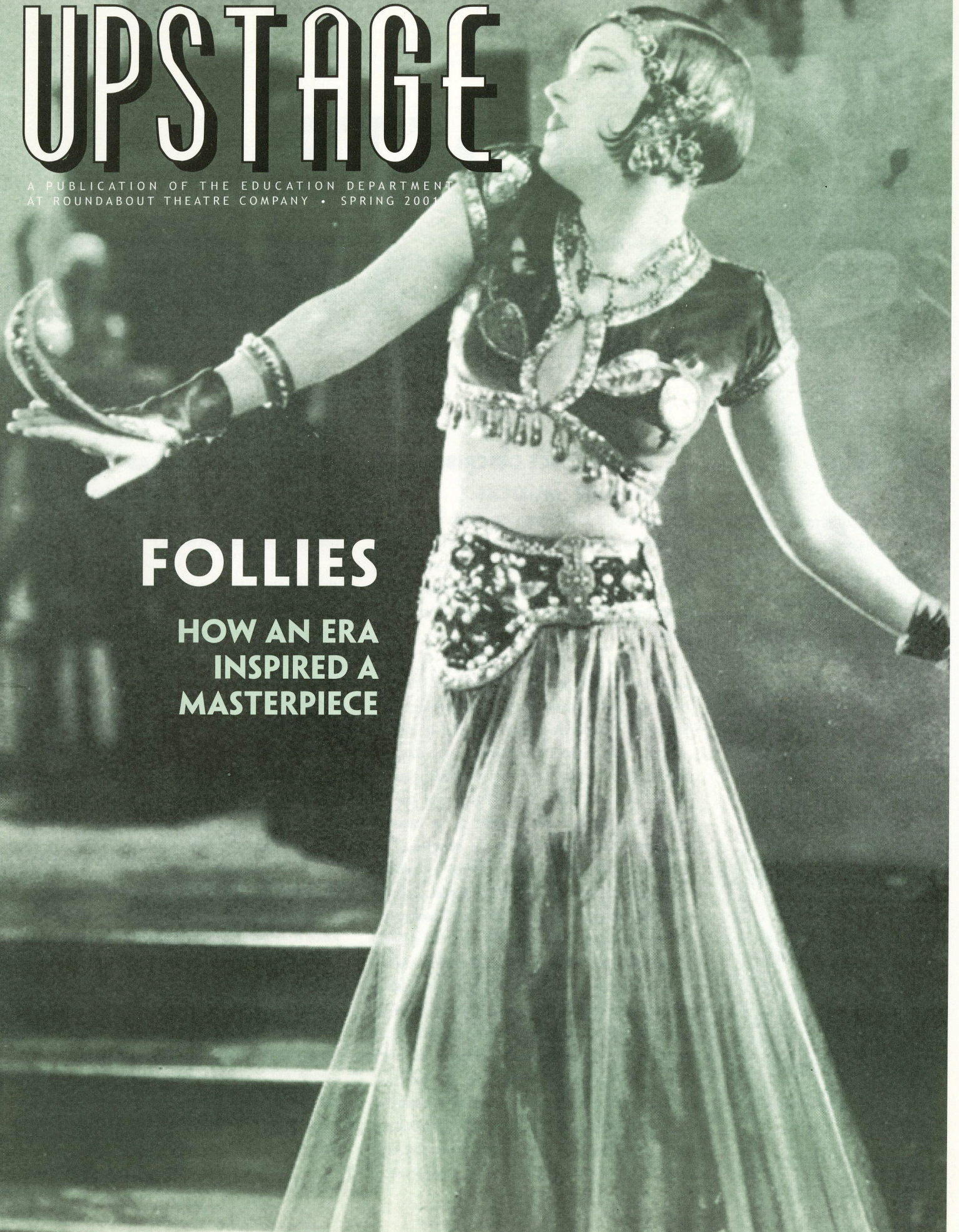


UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
AT ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY • SPRING 2001

FOLLIES

HOW AN ERA
INSPIRED A
MASTERPIECE





ON THE COVER:
Gloria Swanson

UPSTAGE

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THE GHOSTS OF 42ND STREET

BY TOM SELLAR

T.E. KALEM ONCE DESCRIBED FOLLIES IN TIME MAGAZINE AS "THE FIRST PROUSTIAN MUSICAL."

Set on the demolition day of an old show palace, *Follies* tells the story of its former stars and friends as they arrive for a reunion party. Like Marcel Proust's novels, it explores themes of youth, aging, decay, and memory. It travels through time, remembering things past. It is a musical of and about ghosts.

James Goldman, the great Broadway bard who wrote the book, came across a newspaper clipping describing a real-life reunion of Ziegfeld Follies showgirls - and the idea was planted. From the beginning Goldman and composer Stephen Sondheim wanted to make time-travelling central to the musical. Later Harold Prince, the original production's director, was inspired by a haunting photograph, which he brought to the attention of his collaborators. When the Roxy Theatre, a legendary Broadway venue since its 1928 opening, was demolished in 1960, *Life* magazine photographer Eliot Elisofon had captured the nostalgia and loss of the event with a shot of former star Gloria Swanson poised in the rubble. Dressed in sleek and striking 1930s eveningwear, Swanson balances delicately on a girder. Her arms extend upwards to the sky in a graceful arc. Her face shines with a smile; she is radiant with memories. Behind her stands a collapsed wall, which the wrecking ball has already struck down. Daylight glares, harsh and dull. It is as if a glorious evening of dreams has come to an end, replaced and destroyed by the arrival of a new day. Sondheim, Goldman and Prince were fascinated with the ghosts of this bygone era and wanted *Follies* to

capture Swanson's theatrical gesture and that same feeling of "rubble in the daylight." (The play even begins in the evening and ends as dawn breaks.)

About that time, I read a tiny paragraph in the New York Times that had to do with the Ziegfeld Girls Club, which I didn't know even existed. I thought that it was enormously evocative and Steve and I proceeded to work on an idea I came up with. I was very interested in the past and in secrets. It seemed to me that the whole notion of a reunion, particularly involving people who haven't seen each other in a long time, was a situation that was fraught with emotional possibilities ... the whole subject of unfinished business in our lives.

- James Goldman (quoted by Zadan, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Follies," *After Dark*, June 1971, p. 113.)

The reason that Jim [Goldman] chose that place for the reunion was that the Ziegfeld Follies were a state of mind which represented America between the two world wars. Up until 1945, America was the good guy and everything was hopeful and idealistic. Now [in 1971] the country is a riot of national guilt. The dream has collapsed. Everything has turned to rubble and that's what Follies is about - the collapse of the dream. How all your hopes tarnish, but if you live in despair you might as well pack up.

- Stephen Sondheim (quoted by Zadan, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Follies," *After Dark*, June 1971, p. 26.)

(Continued on page 2)

FOR
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With their creation of the Weismann Follies, Goldman and Sondheim resurrect the lost world of the Ziegfeld Follies, the legendary New York revue inspired by the Folies-Bergère in Paris. Impresario Florenz Ziegfeld billed his follies as "something new under the sun" at their 1907 debut, and audiences agreed; until his death in 1931 Ziegfeld made sure the material was constantly updated to reflect current events and popular themes. New Yorkers adored his celebrated chorus line, the famous and alluring star performers, the spectacular sets and costumes, and the satirical brand of humor. Among the great performers who emerged from these productions were Fanny Brice, W.C. Fields, Lillian Lorraine, and Will Rogers. Each year Ziegfeld outdid himself, spending more and more money on increasingly lavish spectacles: girls dancing in an enormous cloud of soap bubbles; flying machines over the audience; 14 pianos and multiple orchestras playing along giant circular staircases - you name it.

This glittering world disappeared more than half a century ago, but many of the theatres remain. The New Amsterdam Theatre, home to the Ziegfeld Follies from 1913 until 1927, has been leased and renovated by Disney. (It now houses *The Lion King*.) And the neo-Renaissance Selwyn Theatre, which originally opened in 1918, has been transformed into the American Airlines Theatre, the Roundabout's grand new home. The Belasco Theatre, built by theatrical genius David Belasco in 1907, is scheduled for renovation in the near future, but it is precisely because the Belasco has not yet been restored that director Matthew Warchus chose it as the perfect place to stage the first Broadway revival of *Follies*. For years, people who have worked at the Belasco have claimed to see the ghost of Mr. Belasco, sitting in an unoccupied box at opening nights. Whether this is true or not, Warchus believe the Belasco is the right place to stage *Follies* because he said, "it feels as though it's haunted."

"I think I do believe in ghosts," said Warchus, "so I hope Mr. Belasco is having a good time with our show. Mainly, though, I believe in the tangibility of history and it is precisely that tangibility which makes *Follies* such a rewarding show to watch."



The Great Ziegfeld (1936). Hollywood's version of a Ziegfeld costume.



THE SOUND OF SONDHEIM

MUSICAL DIRECTOR, ERIC STERN FINDS DRAMA IN FOLLIES' NUMBERS

Music is very rich, in my opinion the richest form of art. It's also abstract and does very strange things to your emotions.

- Stephen Sondheim (from "Theater Lyrics," in *Playwrights, Lyricists, Composers on Theater*, ed. Otis Guernsey (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1974) p. 64.)

As a musical director, my job is to pay attention to how the style of the music tells us something about the character that is singing it. Not only do I look at what the words of the songs reveal, but also what the style of the music reveals about the characters and their situation.

Sondheim wrote in essence two scores for *Follies* that live together in the same show. One of them is what we call the book songs which are songs that evolve out of situations where people who in ordinary everyday life would be talking, suddenly find themselves singing - where emotions reach beyond the point where they can be talked anymore and must be sung. On top of that there is another entire set of songs, which are the "Follies" songs - remembrances of songs various characters performed throughout their years as members of the Weismann Follies. One aspect of this score's brilliance is that either of these strands is as strong as the other. Each song has a trajectory to it that leaves the character in a different place emotionally than where they were when they started singing. Not only the book songs but also the show numbers are as dramatic as the scenes surrounding them.

Stylistically, the book songs run the gamut from easy show-biz feel to very interesting chamber music pieces to operetta, and the "Follies" numbers themselves are all pastiche. Pastiche is basically the use of another musical style to make a point. The danger of this kind of writing is that pastiche can seem somehow false or tongue-in-cheek, but the genius of Sondheim's composition is that none of the pastiche numbers are irreverent or cheap. They are all earnest

and delightful. That's not to say they aren't funny, but they are not parodies. They are all honest, heartfelt versions of old style "Follies" songs combined with Sondheim's own intelligence and personality.

[The intent was] to imitate the styles of great songwriters of the times, and affectionately comment on them as well: "One More Kiss" (written in the tradition of Friml-Romberg), "The Story of Lucy and Jessie" (Cole Porter), the verses of "You're Gonna Love Tomorrow" and "Love Will See Us Through" (Jerome Kern with an Ira Gershwain-E.Y. Harburg lyric), "Beautiful Girls" (Irving Berlin), "Broadway Baby" (DeSylva, Brown and Henderson), "Loveland" (Jerome Kern) and "Losing My Mind" (George Gershwain with a Dorothy Field lyric).

- Stephen Sondheim, (quoted by Zadan. *Sondheim and Co.* NY: Avon Books, 1976. p. 166)

It is very clear in the sound of the music itself what each of these songs is meant to represent. As the audience hears each one of these numbers, they will be introduced to the period that they come from and even though they are based on styles from the past, the songs won't sound foreign because they are styles that are intrinsic to our cultural personality. Even if you are too young to remember Fred Astaire, all you need to do is see him sing and dance to recognize what he represents historically. Similarly, we don't need to know where the torch song style came from to appreciate what it stands for. There is something about the song and dance tradition of this country that we all instinctively respond to. So, in a sense, Sondheim has given us a guide to the deeper meaning of the story by choosing the musical style for each song that represents its subtext in the most universal way.

What is ultimately brilliant about this work, is how well the book and music come together to satisfy the essential controlling metaphor of the show. The metaphor for *Follies* is in its title. It is about how our memories fool us; how we can look back over the choices we made in our past and reinvent them to justify our present. It is about how we can make a folly of our lives if we fail to see the truth of it. To support the telling of that story, Sondheim used the two musical styles - the book songs and the "Follies" numbers - to play out the conflict between the



The set for David Belasco's production of *Zaza*, 1900.

truth and folly Goldman set up in the past and present lives of the four main characters. When the story gets to a point where there seems to be no hope of resolution for these very unhappy, frustrated and deluded people, when it seems their struggle can go no further, there is a sudden flourish and a spectacular Weismann Follies production takes over. The main characters are swept up into it, and suddenly, the essential problem of each character is portrayed metaphorically as a presentational "Follies" number. Buddy's number is a vaudeville song, Sally sings a torch song, Phyllis becomes a sleek femme-fatale with a male chorus, and Ben sings a devil-may-care boulevard number, dancing about how sweet life is when you're totally cool even though he is of course totally bollixed up and frustrated. Everybody's predicament suddenly becomes transformed and the metaphor becomes complete. Through this there is some kind of healing that can't be explained but is felt very clearly. Somehow you get the sense that whether or not these people are going to work through their problems, something transforming has happened to them. ■

Left to right: *The Greenwich Village Follies*, 1925; *Ziegfeld Follies*, 1925; *Glorifying the American Girl*, 1929; *Ziegfeld star, Fannie Brice*; and "Hall of Human Harps" from *Fashions*, 1934.



SONG AND DANCE

FOLLIES' KATHLEEN MARSHALL DETAILS THE STEPS TO CHOREOGRAPHING A CLASSIC

AS A CHOREOGRAPHER, MY JOB IS BASICALLY TO DECIDE WHERE AND WHEN AND HOW THE CHARACTERS ARE GOING TO MOVE. THAT JOB USUALLY BEGINS WHENEVER THE MUSIC STARTS.

numbers, which are the recreated "Follies" songs. In a number like "The Right Girl", which is a book number, the character is trying to express his frustration, so the choreography is full of angry, punching movements that look more natural than staged. On the other hand, for a number like "Who's That Woman", which is sung by all the ladies at the reunion getting together to recreate a "Follies" number they used to perform together, the staging involves a very presentational, showing-off kind of movement. Then there is "Loveland", the last big number of the show, which becomes a sort of surreal "Follies" number. The choreography for "Loveland" falls somewhere in the middle of the first two styles.

All of the major characters, both the present and younger selves, go through a kind of emotional catharsis in "Loveland". It is almost like an exorcism; they have to get rid of the past so that they can go on with their lives. Buddy, for instance, a traveling salesman who is torn between love for his wife and desire for his mistress, has a number called "The God-Why-Don't-You-Love-Me Blues", which he sings with two chorus girls. The movement begins with a kind of showy vaudeville style but evolves into a more abstract reflection of how he is being torn between the two women in his life and escalates to a frantic level.

These three styles of movement come out of the fact that the story of *Follies* lives on several planes. There is the reality of what is happening at the reunion, the ghosts of the past that are haunting the reunion, and the moments that are happening in the characters' minds. If the audience pays attention to how the characters' movements fit into these three styles, it will be easier to identify what plane of reality the characters are on and how the contrast between the present and past is affecting them. Ultimately that brings you to why the characters need to move - what is it they so desperately need to release through the dance. ■

In making those decisions, I am always dealing with story and emotion. I have to get into the head of each character and figure out what mood or emotional tone the character is trying to express through the song.

With this show, you will see three very different approaches as to the choreography between the book numbers, which are kind of like sung monologues, and the show



Jon Pertwee (top) and Jessie Evans (bottom) in *Irene*, 1919. Center: Irene and Vernon Castle in *Watch Your Step*, 1914.

BOOK AND MUSIC

FOLLIES DIRECTOR MATTHEW WARCHUS DISCUSSES
GOLDMAN AND SONDHEIM'S COLLABORATION

FOLLIES HAS BEEN PERHAPS THE MOST FORMATIVE SHOW IN MY LIFE AS A DIRECTOR. I SAW A PRODUCTION OF IT IN LONDON WHEN I WAS TWENTY OR TWENTY-ONE. I WAS BLOWN AWAY.

I had never seen a musical which had the density and complexity of a great classical play with the euphoria, ecstasy and delight of a great musical as well. As one would expect from a great musical, this story could be told without songs just by acting the book, but it could also be told purely through the songs by removing the book, so you have one strand amplifying and enhancing the other. On top of that, the story is psychologically authentic. The people are believable, the situation

is believable, and the journey they make is detailed, true, and extreme. It is a very visceral piece of writing dealing with the emotional and psychological collapse of four people, but it's not trivialized in any way to make it work as a musical. Meanwhile, the piece is infused with ideas of death and decay, which is very uncompromising subject matter for a musical. *Follies* doesn't shirk or circumnavigate those themes, however, it dives straight in and delivers an emotionally enriching evening in the way that a great classical tragedy does.

In Follies we deliberately decided not to create characters with warts and all. Everybody would be, not a type, but an essence of whatever they were about ... it was a very conscious choice, to create poetic essences, and by poetic I mean the reduction of a human character in a situation to its most succinct form. They never spoke a normal English sentence. Everything was written. Jim [Goldman] was drawing essences.

- Stephen Sondheim ("The Musical Theater: A Talk by Stephen Sondheim," *Dramatists Guild Quarterly* (15 Autumn, 1978)).

I think the success of *Follies* as a classic is due to the fact that Stephen Sondheim and the late James Goldman sought each other out to work on a project together. What they must have admired in each other was this psychological complexity in their work. They are both honest in their writing, neither of them is shallow in any respect, and they are both typically drawn to some meaty subject matter. I see Sondheim as a very emotional writer. There is an overpowering sense of yearning in his work, while there is also a feeling of frustrated idealism, melancholy, and pain. It's a strange cocktail, capable of communicating pain and great joy at the same time. Many of these things could describe Goldman's writing as well. He writes in a romantic style, but puts a lot of grit and pain in it, so it too becomes an interesting, twisted weave of beauty and pain. Both of these men feel like a turbulent personality in their work, which is very artistic and very inspiring. James Goldman is a great writer and Stephen Sondheim is a great writer, and that's why their collaboration on *Follies* is so rich. ■

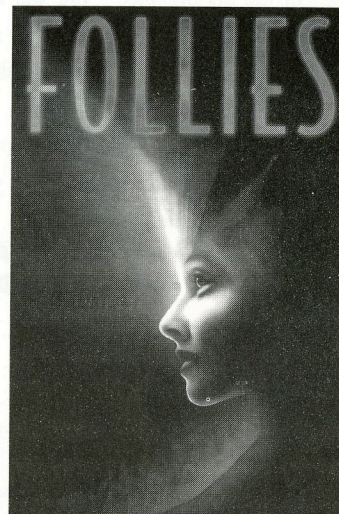
THINK THEATRE

BEFORE YOU GO:

Take a quick inventory of your current life. What are your interests? What relationships do you have with friends and family? What do you do on a day to day basis? What are your ambitions?

Now think back to a time when you were much younger. What did you imagine then about what your life would be like now? How are your past speculations different from you present circumstances? How are they the same? What would you do over again if you could? How do you intend to shape your future?

Rent some classic song and dance movies from the 1930s. As you watch them, consider the following questions: What musical styles seem familiar? How are those styles represented in contemporary pop music? How do the dances tell a story? How are the emotions of the characters reflected by their gestures? How is the emotional journey of each character portrayed by the overall structure of the dance?



Follies (2001) illustration by Wim Hardeman.

AT THE THEATRE:

Consider the following questions as you watch the show: How is what the characters say about their past similar or different to what the ghosts from their past say and do? What musical styles seem familiar? How are those styles represented in contemporary pop music? How do the dances tell a story? How are the emotions of the characters reflected by their gestures? How is the emotional journey of each character portrayed by the overall structure of the dance?

AFTER YOU'VE GONE:

Consider again something you would do differently if you had the chance and write a fictitious letter to the person or persons most affected by your actions.

Write out a plan for your future. Take stock of all the things you imagine you will do and have in your life. What kind of work will you do? What kinds of relationships will you have with friends and family? Next consider what decisions you will have to make and what actions you will have to take to make these dreams become reality. ■

WHEN YOU GET TO THE THEATRE

TICKET POLICY

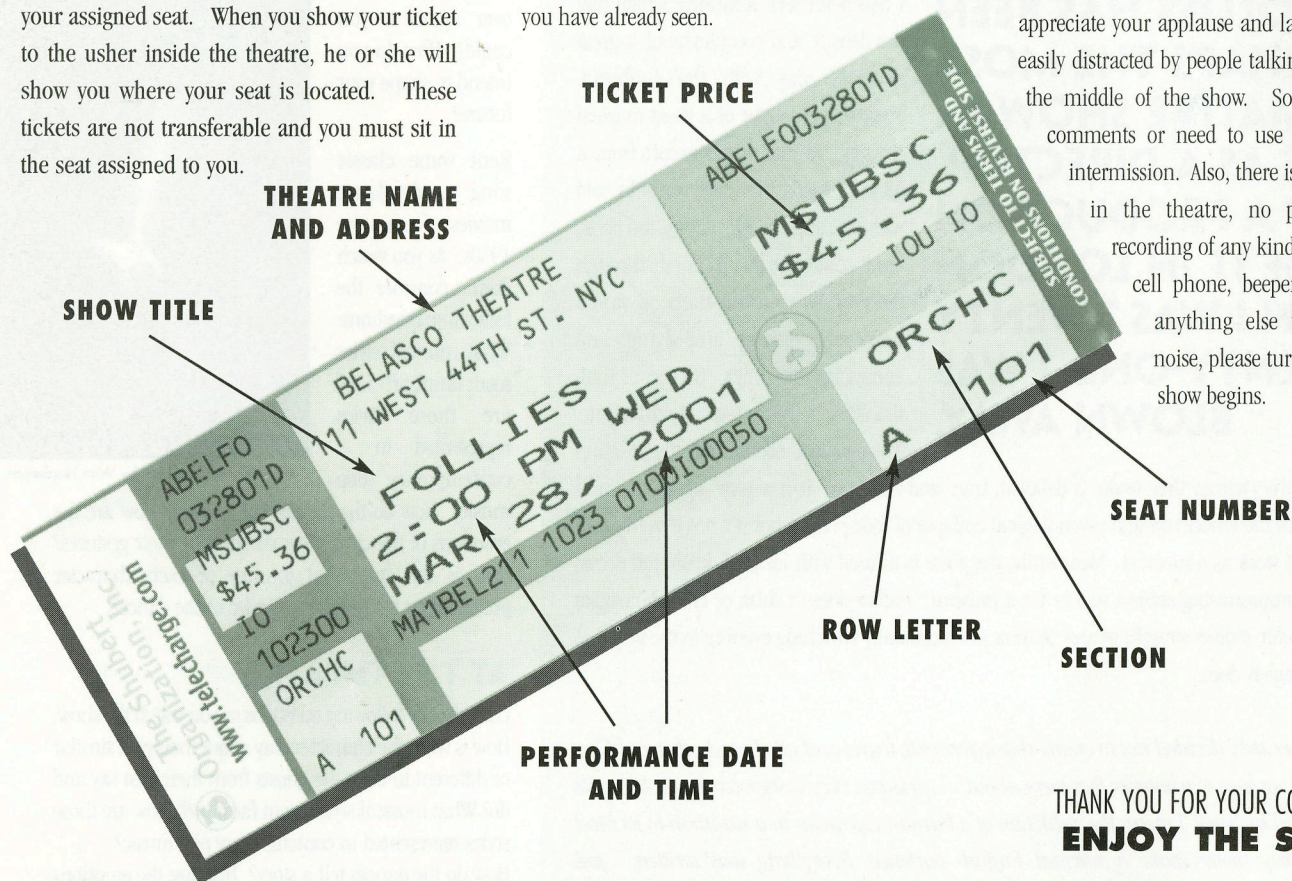
As a student participant in **Page To Stage** or **Theatre Access**, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films; perhaps some you have already seen.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



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ENJOY THE SHOW!

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