



Program Notes

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Television played an important role in reinvigorating Broadway musical comedy in the 1960s. A new musical, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, penned by successful screen, radio and stage writer Abe Burrows opened on October 14, 1961 at the 46th Street Theatre. At that time, screenwriters such as Neil Simon, Larry Gelbart, Joseph Stein, and Michael Stewart had begun to write outstanding musical comedy librettos for the stage. These writers perfected the art of sketch writing for television and they brought those skills with them to the theatre. Upon arrival, they combined forces with Broadway veterans to revive a lively and amusing style of musical that would appeal to the proverbial “tired businessman.” Successful shows emerged such as *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*; *Bye Bye Birdie*; *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*; and *Promises, Promises*.

In the 1960s the Great White Way wasn't teeming with tourists from every corner of the globe. A large portion of the potential audience for Broadway shows was sitting in nearby offices, wealthy and weary after a long day of work. Producers knew that capturing the interest of businessmen would require attractive performers, high-energy physical comedy, and a story with which they could identify. Some lesser known shows focused too much on bringing in working men and lacked substance such as *How Now, Dow Jones*; *Oh, Captain!*; *Let It Ride!*; *I Had A Ball*; and *Subways Are for Sleeping*. These productions had short runs and they were classics of the tired businessman genre. However, New York Theatre has been steeped in shows for the male workforce since the early 1900s. For example, the 1913 edition of *The Passing Show* featured a character named The Tired Businessman, played by Herbert Gilfoil. *The Passing Show* was an elaborate revue designed to compete with the popular *Ziegfeld Follies*, which had begun in 1907. In *The Passing Show*, the Shuberts used underpaid staff writers to produce numbers that were lacking in style but filled with half-clothed chorus girls.

Much later, *How to Succeed's* producers Cy Feuer and Ernest Martin helped begin a trend on Broadway of adding interest to a production by featuring one buxom bombshell. This technique was used in their productions of *How to Succeed*, *Can-Can*, and *Whoop-Up*. Virginia Martin assumed that role while playing Hedy La Rue in *How to Succeed*. However, the show would require more than one knockout dame to make it a first-rate hit.

How to Succeed would need to be one of the funniest musicals in Broadway history, and many agree that it accomplished that feat. Part of the credit goes to Edward Shepherd Mead, who published the book from which the show takes its name in 1952. The book was inspired by his corporate experiences at Benton & Bowles advertising agency. Mead worked his way up from mailroom clerk to vice-president by the time he left in 1951. The story follows a relentless young climber of the corporate ladder. It is a caustic satire of the business world written in the form of a comedic instructional manual.

Jack Weinstock, a neurosurgeon, and Willie Gilbert, an established playwright, adapted the book for the stage. In 1960, an agent named Abe Newborn brought the unproduced play to Cy Feuer and Ernest Martin. They saw potential in the script and Feuer remarked, “We sensed a good musical in the debauched hive of corporate conformity.” Feuer and Martin convinced Abe Burrows to pen the book of the musical and Frank Loesser to write the score. After bringing them onboard, Feuer went to a trade show and was impressed by a dance that was choreographed by a young man named Hugh Lambert. After hiring him, they learned that Lambert's talents were limited to working on the specific musical number they had seen. He duplicated it for the show and they billed it as the Pirate Dance. Fortunately, Bob Fosse agreed to choreograph the rest of the production. Fosse was credited with “Musical Staging” and he insisted that Lambert maintain the title of choreographer. Feuer recounted that Fosse did not want Lambert to be fired from his position because he was just starting out in the business.

A number of other problems emerged during the development of the musical. Despite the challenges, the excellent score, legendary creative team, talented performers, and remarkable book combined to form a sensational hit. *How to Succeed's* appeal reached far beyond the tired business people of New York City and it had a grand run of 1,417 performances. It also went on to win seven Tony Awards, the 1962 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and the Best Musical Award from the New York Drama Critics Circle.