Broadway Yearbook, 2000–2001

Steven Suskin

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Broadway Yearbook, 2000–2001

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by Steven Suskin

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BROADWAY YEARBOOK

Steven Suskin

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Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

For

Helen, Johanna,

and Charlie

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Broadway Yearbook, 2000–2001

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The Curtain Rises

The 2000–2001 season was in several ways remarkable. Item one: Most remarkable of all, needless to say, was the arrival of *The Producers*. Broadway typically has a supersmash hit or two every decade. The 1940s had *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*; the 1950s had *My Fair Lady*; the 1960s had *Hello, Dolly!* and *Fiddler on the Roof*; the 1970s had *A Chorus Line* and *Annie*; the 1980s had *Cats* and *Les Misérables* and *Phantom of the Opera*; the 1990s had *Rent* and *The Lion King*. But *The Producers*, in terms of immediate impact, was bigger than them all. That is, the show itself became a news event, setting off its own media frenzy. Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick and Mel Brooks were suddenly all over the place; front pages, feature stories, magazine covers, cartoons. There were even stories in newspapers in China, a country not heretofore noted for its affinity for American musical comedy.

This was a mammoth hit; even people in the theatre, who have connections, simply couldn't get tickets. I've been around since before *A Chorus Line*. While house seats on these earlier blockbusters were not easy to come by, it was usually possible for people in the business to get at least a pair for themselves. *The Producers* was such a tight ticket that many people working in the theatre—including some on fairly high levels—were simply unable to get seats during the first six months. I'll make an educated guess that *The Producers* was the hottest ticket in at least fifty years; from what I've heard, *South Pacific*—in 1949—might have been of comparable stature.

Will *The Producers* be the most successful musical in history? Will *The Producers* be the most lucrative show in history? The $100 top (thanks to a $10 price hike on the day the reviews hit) should help them outearn

shows like *Dolly* (which opened at $9.40). But it is unlikely, in my view, for *The Producers* to approach the profit levels of *Cats* and *Les Misérables* and *Phantom of the Opera*; these imports were built for mass production in multiple languages, while *The Producers* calls for special talents and probably won't translate as well. But as for the effect of a show on its place and time, I don't suppose Broadway has ever seen anything like *The Producers*.

Item two: Let us look at the past ten seasons, specifically, the new American plays that made money. (This list includes new American plays only—no imports, revivals, solo shows, or attractions produced by non-profit theatres.)

The 1990–1991 season had one, Neil Simon's *Lost in Yonkers*. The 1995–1996 season had one, Terrence McNally's *Master Class*. The 1996–1997 season had one, Alfred Uhry's *The Last Night of Ballyhoo*. The new play hits of 1997–1998 and 1998–1999 and 1999–2000 were all imports. (*Dirty Blonde*, the final play of 1999–2000, reported a profit in *Variety* but appears to have ended its Broadway engagement in the red.)

That gives us only three moneymaking new American plays in ten full years. In 2000–2001, in a two-week stretch alone, there were three—count 'em—three. And they did not merely break even: Neil Simon's *The Dinner Party*, David Auburn's *Proof*, and Charles Busch's *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife* garnered sizable profits, with recoupment coming in each case in less than twelve weeks. Three in ten years; three in two weeks. Remarkable.

I have not included revivals in this equation; it should be pointed out that two profitable revivals were also simultaneously on the boards, *Gore Vidal's The Best Man* and Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner's *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*. (*The Best Man*, like *Dirty Blonde*, reported a profit in *Variety* but apparently closed with a small deficit.) All five shows opened within two months. There is only a limited audience for nonmusical shows on Broadway; at least, that's what they've always told us. Suddenly, enough cash-bearing theatregoers materialized to patronize them all.

Item three: The Shuberts are Broadway's most productive producers ever, with something like 650 productions since the firm's founders came to town in 1901. Lee Shubert, the most powerful of the brothers, died on Christmas Day 1953. Three weeks later, the final Shubert-produced show of the era opened at the Royale (and closed the same day). It wasn't until 1976 that the Shubert Organization—as we now know it—picked up the gauntlet, starting with shows like *Sly Fox*, *Amadeus*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*,

and *Cats*. The 2000–2001 season marked the first season in twenty-four years in which the Shuberts did not produce a single Broadway show. (They did produce two in 1999–2000 and planned at least one for 2001–2002.)

Item four: The 1999–2000 season was remarkable for a three-day stretch—April 14 through 16—when for the only time in memory each and every Broadway theatre had a show on the boards. This record was almost, but not quite, surpassed in 2000–2001. Thirty-seven houses—including Broadway's newest, the American Airlines Theatre—were lit for a full four weeks, from April 16 through May 13. One was dark, though; the Winter Garden, which was undergoing a full-scale renovation (and fumigation) in preparation for its fall 2001 booking, *Mamma Mia*. Perhaps this lack of empty theatres to fill helps explain the Shubert Organization's absence from the producing ranks in 2000–2001. Or was it simply a reaction to the Patrick Stewart affair, in which the actor publicly attacked the Shuberts from the stage of *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* in April 2000?

Item five: *The Producers*, again. Broadway musicals are a life-and-death matter to die-hard theatre fans; but a Broadway musical making worldwide news? In the twenty-first century, when you're unlikely to hear a new show tune on the radio, ever? Hard to believe, and remarkable.

Broadway Yearbook, 2000–2001 presents an analytical discussion of each show that opened on Broadway between May 29, 2000, and May 27, 2001. I have also deemed it fitting to include certain non-Broadway productions of importance, namely, the City Center Encores! series. The shows are discussed in chronological order; an alphabetical arrangement might make it easier to browse through to find a specific show, but it seems pertinent to have the reader discover each show in the same order as the critics and theatregoers. Timing—that is, the competition on the date of opening—was a significant factor in the reception and fate of some of this season's offerings.

The opening night credits and cast list are accompanied by a discussion of the production. I neither ask nor expect the reader to necessarily agree with my opinions. You will no doubt concur with some and not others—hopefully more of the former than the latter. Taste is individual, or at least it should be. I have tried to be consistent in my opinions and to support my arguments (in the nonargumentative sense of the word). It is one thing to turn thumbs up or thumbs down; it is another thing to ex-

plain *why* the thumb is nudged toward the heavens or the opposite. Or someplace in between.

My aim has been to keep things informative and instructive; hence, the discussion is laced with examples from general Broadway history (and my checkered twenty-five years on and around Forty-fourth Street). What were the shows like? How were they received, by both the critics and the audiences? What other factors contributed to their success or failure?

The discussion of each show is followed by a section of related data, starting with dates and length of run. Performance and preview totals have been compiled using information from the League of American Theatres and Producers. In some cases these differ from the "official" counts distributed by press agents; I consider the League tabulation—reported week by week, along with the grosses—to be more accurate. Profit-and-loss information comes from a variety of sources, including the invaluable *Variety*. Shows from nonprofit organizations have been similarly classified where applicable, based on an estimate of surplus income generated by the production. It should be understood that a show that ends its Broadway run with a loss might well make up the difference from post-Broadway income. Conversely, it is not unknown for a show to have recouped its costs but—due to an overextended run or unforeseen touring costs—to slip back into a deficit.

Shows that were still running on May 28, 2001—the first day of the 2001–2002 season—are so indicated. (For the sake of completeness, closing dates and performance totals are included for shows that ran into 2001–2002 but closed before this book went to print.) Next comes the critical scorecard, which gives the reader a general idea of the critical reception of each production. The scorecards are based on the opinions of seven to ten critics from major newspapers and magazines. The number of reviews varies; not all attractions were covered by all the critics. (In a few "special" cases, productions discussed herein were reviewed by only a handful of reviewers.) The scorecards reflect the opinions of the critics from the *New York Times*, the *Daily News*, the *New York Post*, *Newsday*, the Associated Press, *Variety*, the *Village Voice*, and *New York Magazine*. Weekly magazines that offer occasional reviews, such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, and the *New Yorker*, were also included in some of the tabulation.

Reviews have been rated in five categories:

Rave Overwhelmingly positive, enthusiastically indicating that the show should be seen

Favorable	Positive, indicating that the show is good though not outstanding, or that the show is good despite minor flaws
Mixed	Positive and negative aspects are presented, with no overall recommendation; sometimes the reviewer is simply unclear
Unfavorable	Negative, indicating that the show doesn't work—often despite positive elements or good intentions
Pan	Overwhelmingly negative, indicating—often with a hint of annoyance—that the show was downright bad

Quite a few of the reviews fall somewhere between two categories. I have called 'em like I see 'em, although a pollster would probably say that there is a two-point margin of error.

A brief financial section gives the reader an idea of the show's economic performance. Figures, again, have been compiled using information from the League of American Theatres and Producers. Finally, Tony Awards (and nominations) received by the show and its personnel are listed, along with other major awards.

Following the main body of the book are six appendixes that, it is hoped, will prove a useful supplement to the discussion of the season.

And so the curtain rises, as they say, on *Broadway Yearbook, 2000–2001.*

See you at the theatre.

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The Shows

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JUNE 15

Macbeth

Word from Boston spread around town on the afternoon of May 31 that Kelsey Grammer's *Macbeth*—the first new Broadway show of the season—was about to disband its band of witches and shutter four days later, on Tony Award Sunday. This in the face of the worst pre-Broadway reviews in—well, nine weeks, when Elaine May's *Taller Than a Dwarf* met similar resistance from the same critics at the same theatre in the same town.

Terry Byrne of the *Boston Herald* noted that the play—which "usually incites gut-wrenching terror, sadness and, finally, redemption"—in Grammer's hands "elicits only snickers and the kind of horror that comes from seeing a production go completely awry." Ed Siegel in the *Boston Globe* called it a "two-hour freight train of an adaptation." Markland Taylor of *Variety* called it "a reasonably competent, underlit staged reading," finding the star "a stolid, somewhat flat-footed middle-class, middle-aged man."

Here, you had a surefire crowd nonpleaser. But you also had a major television star in tow. A TV star who, presumably, was likely to sell a certain number of tickets on the basis of his name. What's a producer to do? It takes a certain amount of integrity to simply return that ticket money, to admit that the TV star was ill served and his fans would no doubt be bored silly. To say, in effect, "We're not going to stick you even though we've already got your money in our bank account."

> **It did not take three weird sisters, or a theatre-producing genius, to forecast that lousy reviews for the show—and condescending ones for the star—awaited on Broadway.**

THE ESTATI

Kate Forbes

John Ahlin, St
Mark Mineart

Directed by
TERRY HANDS

Cast (in order of appearance)

Seyton Peter Gerety
Witches Myra Lucretia Taylor, Starla Benford, Kelly Hutchinson
Duncan Peter Michael Goetz
Malcolm Sam Breslin Wright
Ross Michael Gross
Macbeth Kelsey Grammer
Banquo Stephen Markle
Lennox Ty Burrell
Lady Macbeth Diane Venora
Fleance Jacob Pitts
A Porter Peter Gerety
Macduff Bruce A. Young
Donalbain Austin Lysy
An Old Man Peter Michael Goetz
Murderers John Ahlin, Mark Mineart
Lady Macduff Kate Forbes
Her Son Grant Rosenmeyer
Her Daughter Parris Nicole Cisco
An English Doctor Peter Michael Goetz
A Scottish Doctor John Ahlin
Gentlewoman Kelly Hutchinson
A Servant Jacob Pitts
Young Siward Austin Lysy
Siward Peter Michael Goetz

Of course, the out-of-town reviewers might have been far, far, far off base; this has been known to happen. In this case, though, they weren't—and the producers presumably recognized the fact. Under the circumstances, what did *Macbeth* have to look forward to? It did not take three weird sisters, or a theatre-producing genius, to forecast that lousy reviews for the show—and condescending ones for the star—awaited on Broadway.

That *Macbeth* would decide to close was a bit of a surprise, unless one noticed producer Emanuel Azenberg's name above the title. Manny Azenberg has been at it for almost forty years, with a pretty good track record. He has produced some exceptional shows—like *Ain't Misbehavin'* and the 1998–1999 revival of *The Iceman Cometh*—and a very few failures along the way. (Does anyone remember the cannibalism drama *Devour the Snow*?) But Manny knows, generally speaking, what to expect once his shows leave the rehearsal hall and hit the stage. He has also pro-

duced some worthy but difficult shows, some of which have succeeded (like *Children of a Lesser God*) and others that have been heartbreakers (like *Side Show*, the Siamese twin musical). He has also produced all of Neil Simon's new work since 1972.

Azenberg's most recent play was the Donald Sutherland–John Rubinstein starrer *Enigma Variations*. It was scheduled to open in late April 2000 at the Brooks Atkinson, just six weeks prior to *Macbeth*'s Broadway opening. After seeing the reception of the show's Toronto tryout, Azenberg and his partners decided to cancel New York. (The show went to London instead—under the title *Enigmatic Variations*, without Azenberg's involvement—and received a hostile reception.) Faced with the same situation on *Macbeth*, it seemed that Azenberg had been wise enough and brave enough to simply pull the plug.

Then word came, on Friday, June 2, that it was all unfounded rumor and *Macbeth* was coming to the Music Box as scheduled. Buyer beware.

Macbeth marked a not-so-auspicious Broadway debut for SFX, the entertainment industry behemoth. In the last few years of the twentieth century, SFX bought or leased 120 "live entertainment venues" in the top fifty markets. "The world's leading promoter, producer, and presenter of diversified live entertainment, SFX is all about providing Spectacular, Fun, and X-citing live entertainment on a scale never before imagined." The plan, it appears, is to make it difficult for a show or an act or a rock band to successfully tour without having SFX as a landlord or—preferably—as a partner. (In July 2001, following the period covered by this book, SFX changed its name to Clear Channel Entertainment.)

SFX's first move into live theatre had come with its purchase of PACE Theatrical. PACE began in 1982, when a group of operators of theatres in secondary cities got tired of being cut off from the big-money touring shows. By banding together, they reduced costs and attracted better product by offering more playing dates than they could individually. PACE grew and grew, as they affiliated with more and more venues and accumulated an impressively large base of money-paid-in-advance subscribers. PACE eventually began to produce shows of their own to fill empty playing time, although their choices—geared toward their theatrically unsophisticated subscribers—were inevitably lowbrow by Broadway standards. Like a clunky 1988 touring production of *South Pacific* starring Robert Goulet, which did phenomenal business but skirted Broadway. The PACE formula was to find a "star," submit the name to their marketing department, and—once cleared—build some show or other around said star.

PACE began circling Broadway, providing investment money for "class" shows like Manny Azenberg's production of *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*. They realized that they were spending millions of dollars booking big hit musicals—namely *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, and *Phantom of the Opera*—into their theatres again and again. Why not try to produce their own? (Big hit musicals, that is.) Their first major attempt was the moderately successful *The Who's Tommy*, in 1993. They finally hit the big time, in a manner of speaking, with the long-running *Jekyll & Hyde*. Despite scathing reviews, Frank Wildhorn's first Broadway musical opened in 1997 and ran into 2000–2001, closing after 1,543 performances. A three-year run, yes; but *Jekyll & Hyde* lost millions and millions of dollars. Anyone can keep a Broadway show running for a year or two or more if they don't mind pouring in millions; the trick is to generate enough money at the box office to turn a profit.

In 1997, PACE was purchased by SFX for $130 million. And then in June 1999, SFX purchased the bankrupt Livent as well. Livent's first big Broadway musical was *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, which bested *Tommy* in the Tonys and went on to become the longest-running musical ever to lose millions of dollars (until bested by *Jekyll & Hyde*, that is). SFX Theatrical—run by the former PACE staff—took over Livent's critically praised *Ragtime*, which also closed after two years with a hefty loss, and *Fosse*, which appears to have been the only Livent-originated musical to break even.

Other Livent assets included some prime real estate, such as Broadway's spanking new Ford Center, and several musicals in preparation. These included *Sweet Smell of Success*, a Marvin Hamlisch–Craig Carnelia–John Guare–Nicholas Hytner effort that at this writing is scheduled for the 2001–2002 season and—more immediately—the can't-miss blockbuster *Seussical*. The latter, from Stephen Flaherty, Lynn Ahrens,

and Frank Galati of *Ragtime*, promised to be one of the important Broadway events of 2001. But before *Seussical* came to town, SFX tried its hand with *Macbeth.*

What happened, apparently, is that three-time Emmy Award winner Kelsey Grammer was unable to find a suitable movie to make during the hiatus between the sixth and seventh seasons of his sitcom, *Frasier*. Before heading to Hollywood, Grammer was a stage actor; he played Lennox in Sarah Caldwell's 1981 production of *Macbeth* at the Vivian Beaumont. When leading man Philip Anglim was raked over the coals by the *Times* critic, he became indisposed (as they say), and on went his understudy: Kelsey Grammer. Grammer long relished another crack at the role (as they say), and—with no suitable movie in the offing—his wife suggested that he just bite the bullet (as they say).

Lady Grammer—Camille Donatacci, that is—called a friend, concert promoter Ron Delsener. Delsener, a colorful throwback to the sixties who enthuses at an energetic clip, must have said something like "That's-great-babe-whatever-Kelsey-wants-hey-I've-got-a-partner-whatever-Kelsey-wants-babe." Delsener's company, Delsener/Slater, was the first of the major promoters bought by SFX. He called his partners—the PACE people at SFX Theatrical—and Broadway had its first show of the 2000–2001 season.

Broadway has long welcomed Hollywood stars looking for what they used to call a respite from Tinseltown. Many such luminaries have headed east during career lulls. In the old days, people like Katharine Hepburn and Henry Fonda consistently returned to the Broadway from which they sprang. Even nowadays, still-in-demand A-list stars like Dustin Hoffman, Al Pacino, Meryl Streep, Glenn Close, Kevin Kline—and newcomers like Liam Neeson and Ralph Fiennes—occasionally disappoint their agents and managers and money people by insisting on doing stagework.

Kelsey Grammer wasn't bad, really; he was simply ill-starred. He seemed to be gingerly dancing about, carefully executing his remembered moves and crosses.

Grammer is not, perhaps, in a class with these thespians; but he certainly had an immense following, a successful full-time job that paid him scads more than he could make on Broadway, and no need to subject himself to what turned out to be a scathing reception. There was no earthly reason for this *Macbeth*—except that Kelsey Grammer felt like doing it.

Macbeth
Opened: June 15, 2000
Closed: June 25, 2000
13 performances (and 8 previews)
Profit/Loss: Loss
Macbeth ($70 top) was scaled to a potential gross of $268,376 at the 945-seat Music Box. Weekly grosses averaged about $186,000. Total gross for the run was $489,308. Attendance was about 54 percent, with the box office grossing about 61 percent of dollar-capacity.

Critical Scorecard

Rave	0
Favorable	0
Mixed	0
Unfavorable	1
Pan	9

One of the advantages of SFX's across-the-board connections is that a project like this can become a fully funded reality with a snap of the fingers. One of the disadvantages, as *Macbeth* demonstrated, is that a project like this can become a fully funded reality regardless of artistic merit. As Dr. Einstein never theorized: S(tar)FX + money = profit.

SFX appears to have attempted to come up with as classy a production as possible. Azenberg—the highly visible lead producer of Kevin Spacey's *Iceman Cometh*—was invited in, apparently, to take care of the art stuff. Terry Hands, the former artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, was hired to direct. Diane Venora, a frequent essayer of Shakespearean roles in America, was named Lady Macbeth. Venora had been an acting-scene partner of Grammer's at Juilliard, from which he was expelled.

So here you had a respectable-sounding package, although the package turned out to be empty. The director came up with a minimalist production—minimal in scenery, costumes, cast, and thought. Hands has done some interesting work as a director, including the notable *Cyrano de Bergerac/Much Ado About Nothing,* which Derek Jacobi played at the RSC in 1983 and on an American tour in 1984. I worked on the American leg, as it happens, and both productions were striking. What I found most remarkable about them, aside from Derek's performances, was the lighting. Hands—one of only two lighting designer–directors I've ever come across—sculpted the stage in darkness, showing us only precisely what he wanted us to see.

The two RSC shows were first-rate; but, then, Terry was working with Sir Derek and an acting company of Shakespearean veterans. Hands returned to America with a big Broadway musical: the infamous *Carrie*, which some of you might recall. His only subsequent local appearance

has been with *Macbeth*, which had a company of non-Shakespearean veterans.

The lighting, anyway, was striking.

You knew you were in trouble right from the start, when you couldn't understand what the bag-lady witches were saying. (It sounded something like "When'll we three me again, thunder babble bab inrai.") Grammer's Macbeth entered wearing a mask, which was a good idea. When he got to Invernesse, he changed to a nice white T-shirt, displaying his muscles and hearty physique. All the other guys wore long sleeves, but it gets cold in those castles and over-air-conditioned Music Boxes.

The star wasn't bad, really; he was simply ill-starred. Grammer's grammar and diction were impeccable, he had his lines down, and he knew how to produce the sounds. But for a Juilliard graduate—or, rather, a Juilliard student—he was strangely uncomfortable onstage. In the premurder soliloquy ("Is this a dagger which I see before me . . ."), he seemed to be gingerly dancing about, carefully executing his remembered moves and crosses. Or maybe he was just remembering his Boston reviews? He turned out to be one of the neatest dagger murderers in memory, doused in blood from wrists to fingertips but otherwise clean as a whistle. Bruce A. Young's Macduff, though, was pretty good.

"Screw your courage to the sticking-place and we'll not fail." Grammer screwed his courage, as it were, in coming to town after being besieged in Boston. But screwed courage wasn't enough.

"Screw your courage to the sticking-place and we'll not fail," said Lady M just before Mr. M climbed the stairs to do the most foul deed. Grammer screwed his courage, as it were, in attempting *Macbeth*, and even more so in coming to town after being besieged in Boston. But screwed courage wasn't enough, not this time it wasn't.

Still, one must keep these things in perspective. In June 2001, it was announced that Grammer had re-signed with *Frasier* for $1.76 million per episode. If the man wishes to return to Broadway next season, or every season, I say—let him.

JULY 27

The Man Who Came to Dinner

While preparing to go off to the 7:00 P.M. official opening of the new American Airlines Theatre and *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, I received an e-mail from the author of one of the most controversial musicals of the 1999–2000 season castigating me for a comment I had made on the Internet about his work. Not castigating me, exactly, but upset by a comparison I'd made between his show and a similar one.

The point of his e-mail, though, appeared not to have been what I had said. (He acknowledged that I at least *listened* to his music, while other critics make off-the-cuff comments—in this case blithely comparing his work to that of Frank Wildhorn and Igor Stravinsky—without any critical basis.) What upset him, mostly, was that his show did not receive a "respectful" review in the *New York Times*. The critic didn't actually address his score, the composer complained, because he (Ben Brantley) went on at length complaining about the director's prior Broadway musical. And he (the composer) expressed the popular—and reasonably accurate—assessment that a bad review in the all-powerful *Times* was fatal. Finally, he concluded that the treatment he received from the *Times* and its "incompetent critic"—his words, not mine—was an important topic for people like me to write about. But, of course, he didn't expect me or anyone to write anything critical of the *Times*.

Seeing as how the composer raised serious issues in his e-mail, I felt it proper to carefully address his questions. I made it clear that I respected his work (which I do). But certain portions of the show, simply and clearly, did not work for me while I was sitting in the theatre. I cited specifics, and in our continuing interchange of e-mails he indicated that

he was quite aware of these specific weaknesses. The fact is, once you have fifty or sixty or eighty people acting and staging and designing and producing and operating the scenery, your work might not necessarily come across the footlights precisely the way you intended. And once $5 or $6 or $8 million have been spent, it ain't so easy to fix it. Anyway, we ended up with a clutch of mutually respectful e-mails.

Part of my response addressed the composer's complaint about "respectful notices" from the paper of record: "That's something I've grown not to expect. Ever since I've been in this business people have been complaining about the critic from the *New York Times*. The fact is, whoever they hire gets to say whatever he wants. I'd like to think that the opinions are well-founded, but the most you can hope for is that the critic is consistent and that he explains and supports his views. (I use the word 'he' because there hasn't been a first-string female drama critic in New York since 1943.) As for being respectful—well, it's much easier to write a bad review than a cautious review.

"The way to change the power of the *Times* is simple: Just have producers refuse to take ads (which of course is impossible). The way it works now, Brantley can give a show a really devastating pan—like he gave *Footloose* or *Saturday Night Fever*—and the producers will still spend, literally, hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars on full-page ads. So why should the *Times* try to restrain their critic?"

Oddly enough, something of the sort did occur back in 1915. The critic from the *Times* wrote a lousy review of a lousy play called *Taking Chances*. The producers—Lee and J. J. Shubert—banned the critic from their theatres and demanded that the *Times* replace him. The *Times* sided with their man and retaliated by banning all Shubert advertising from its pages. This was big-deal news, with columns full of coverage; freedom of the press and all that. (While they were fighting it out, another war started—the *Lusitania* was sunk the day that the courts ruled in favor of the critic.)

Woollcott loomed large over the cultural scene of these United States until his death in 1943; imagine a combination of Larry King, Oprah Winfrey, and Liz Smith. For all his importance and self-importance, his books all but disappeared within a generation.

But getting back to the evening of July 27, I read the e-mail from the composer; walked over to the new Roundabout; and returned to answer the message. The next morning I combed all the reviews I could readily

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TODD HAIMES, Artistic Director
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JULIA C. LEVY, Executive Director, External Affairs

Presents

Nathan Lane Jean Smart

THE Man WHO CAME TO Dinner

by

Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman

Terry Beaver Stephen DeRosa William Duell
Byron Jennings Lewis J. Stadlen Linda Stephens
Hank Stratton Mary Catherine Wright
Ian Blackman Julie Boyd Kit Flanagan
Mary Catherine Garrison Julie Halston Jeffrey Hayenga
Ruby Holbrook Zach Shaffer Ryan Shively
Michael Bakkensen Hans Hoffman André Steve Thompson

and

Harriet Harris

Set Designer Tony Walton
Costume Designer William Ivey Long
Lighting Designer Paul Gallo

Sound Designer Peter Fitzgerald
Hair/Wig Designer Paul Huntley
Production Stage Manager Andrea J. Testani
Technical Supervision by UNITECH
Casting by/Director of Artistic Development Jim Carnahan, C.S.A.

Founding Director Gene Feist
Associate Artistic Director Scott Ellis
General Manager Sydney Davolos
Press Representative Boneau/Bryan-Brown
Director of Marketing David B. Steffen

Directed by

Jerry Zaks

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Cast (in order of appearance)

Mrs. Stanley Linda Stephens
Miss Preen Mary Catherine Wright
Richard Stanley Zach Shaffer
John Jeffrey Hayenga
June Stanley Mary Catherine Garrison
Sarah Julie Boyd
Mrs. Dexter Kit Flanagan
Mrs. McCutcheon Julie Halston
Mr. Stanley Terry Beaver
Maggie Cutler Harriet Harris
Dr. Bradley William Duell
Sheridan Whiteside Nathan Lane
Harriet Stanley Ruby Holbrook
Bert Jefferson Hank Stratton
Professor Metz Stephen DeRosa
Prison Guard Hans Hoffman
Prisoners Michael Bakkensen, Ian Blackman, André Steve Thompson
Expressmen (Act 2) Michael Bakkensen, Ian Blackman
Sandy Ryan Shively
Lorraine Sheldon Jean Smart
Beverly Carlton Byron Jennings
Mr. Westcott Ian Blackman
Radio Technicians Hans Hoffman, André Steve Thompson
Choir Boys Jack Arendt, Zachary Eden Bernhard, Jozef Fahey, Brandon Perry, Matthew Salvatore, Ryan Torina
Banjo Lewis J. Stadlen
Deputies Michael Bakkensen, André Steve Thompson
Police Officer Ian Blackman
Expressmen (Act 3) Ian Blackman, André Steve Thompson

Setting: The home of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley, in a small town in Ohio

put my hands on. Raves from the *Daily News* and the *New York Post*. Favorable reviews—edging toward raves—from *Variety*, the Associated Press, and *Newsday*. And only one bad review, from the *Times*. A couple of other pans eventually turned up, but as of that Friday morning, it was Brantley against the world. There he was again, pounding away at a show

that—in this case—everyone else seemed to like. He sat in the same theatre at the same performance as his colleagues—a laugh-filled performance, for whatever that's worth—and he just poked holes in virtually everything director Jerry Zaks and star comedian Nathan Lane and the rest of them did.

And everything Brantley said, in my opinion, was absolutely correct. Let other reviewers find the evening—or at least parts of it—funny; the play, as a whole, came across dated and leaden, buoyed by the sometimes funny gags grafted on by Mr. Zaks. But the minority view—that is, Mr. Brantley's and mine—was that Kaufman and Hart's well-written play succumbed to the fixing.

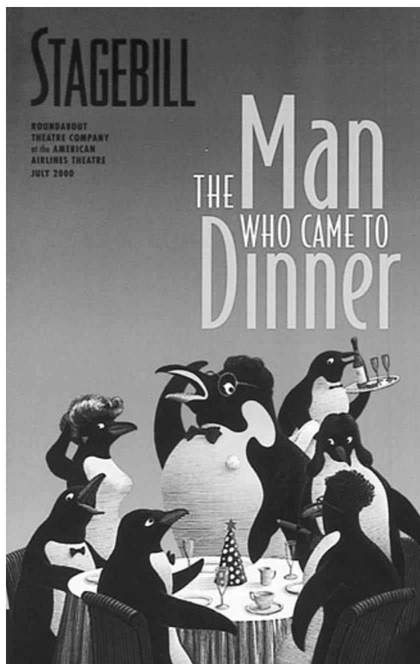
There is an odd coincidence in all of this. (There must be, or else why would I go on like this?) The old-time critic whose seat Mr. Brantley presently occupies—the one who gave the Shuberts a bad review and ended up going to court over his right to express his critical opinion—was an exceedingly odd fellow named Alexander Woollcott: the thinly veiled protagonist (or is it antagonist?) of *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. The Shubert affair made Woollcott famous along Broadway. Some years later he was stolen away from the *Times* by the tottering *New York Herald*. Not interested in moving to a second-rate paper, Alec made the ridiculous demand of $2,000 a month—he was earning $100 a week at the *Times*—and couldn't turn away when the *Herald*'s cash-rich new owner unblinkingly met his demand.

Woollcott loomed large—very large—over the cultural scene of these United States until his death in 1943. In 1929, he went on the airwaves and became one of the most famous personalities of the day. The Town Crier, he was called; he talked about anything and everything, three times a week (sponsored by Cream of Wheat, manufacturers of mush). Imagine, if you will, a combination of Larry King, Oprah Winfrey, and Liz Smith. That gives you some idea of the power Woollcott wielded in his day. He had no real competition, either, which made him quite the *enfant terrible*. That he was celebrated as a wit, raconteur, and arbiter of taste was odd, in that his taste appears to have been set in the 1890s and his writing style was floridly purplish. For all his importance and self-importance, his books and other work all but disappeared within a generation, and he is remembered today mostly—if at all—for his association with *The Man Who Came to Dinner*.

Woollcott was the center of two overlapping circles of celebrities of the twenties and thirties: the Algonquin Round Table of literary lights

and quipping wits, and his own personal club of very important people. Alec was at their beck and call, serving as confidant and—not incidentally—boosting their careers in the newspapers, in magazines, and on the airwaves. He also had the power to take a floundering book and praise it onto the best-seller lists, as he did with James Hilton's sentimental novel *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. The flip side to all this was Woollcott's dark underbelly. When crossed he turned waspish and vile, with his public platforms giving him multiple opportunities to be lethal. Woollcott was famously generous and magnanimous with his friends; they were expected to pay court, though, and when Woollcott wanted a favor, they had no recourse but to come through.

One of those favors resulted in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. In 1938, playwright S. N. Behrman—a Woollcott pal—created a role for Alex in his comedy *Wine of Choice*. (Burns Mantle of the *Daily News* called him "a third-rate actor in a fourth-rate play.") Woolcott was nevertheless enthused by the easy money he could earn appearing onstage and pleased by the public adulation he could receive from his numerous fans, so he asked the Pulitzer Prize–winning team of George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart to write a play he could star in. Kaufman knew Woollcott as well as, or better than, anyone. He had been drama editor at the *Times* when Woollcott was the critic; the pair had collaborated on two (minor) plays; and Kaufman's wife, Beatrice, was one of Woollcott's very closest friends. Bea and Alec would go touring Europe together, as a platonic couple. (Word has it that Woollcott was rendered impotent by a childhood case of measles, leaving him asexual.)



While Woollcott was playing *Wine of Choice* in Philadelphia, he spent one memorable Sunday night at Hart's farm in Bucks County. Woollcott not only demanded that Hart immediately get to work on "his" play but

also insulted the other house guests, took over his host's bedroom, terrorized the staff, demanded chocolate milkshakes at midnight, and inscribed in the guest book: "I wish to say that on my first visit to Moss Hart's house I had one of the most unpleasant evenings I can ever recall having spent." Relaying the events to Kaufman, Hart looked on the bright side. "Wouldn't it have been horrible if he'd broken a leg or something, and been on my hands the rest of the summer?" The two comedic scribes looked at each other, and a hit was born.

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The goal had been to come up with a play for Woollcott to act in, not a play about him. Hence, the notion to place the character in a wheelchair; the ungainly and unkempt Woollcott was terribly obese, and the authors foresaw that he would have trouble moving gracefully onstage. As they proceeded to work, they realized that the role would be far too demanding for an amateur actor like Woollcott to handle. Fortunately, Alec agreed that it would be immodest for him to appear more or less as himself. He suggested that they get the similarly rotund Robert Morley—a British actor who was just then the toast of Broadway—to play the role. With Morley disinterested, the part went to Monty Woolley, a buddy of Cole Porter who had directed several musicals. (Porter and Hart wrote their 1935 musical *Jubilee* while on a grand round-the-world cruise with Woolley, who directed.)

Woolley created Sheridan Whiteside on both stage and screen; Clifton Webb headed the national company. Woollcott himself starred in the second touring company, although he seemed somewhat too benevolent in the role of the monstrous guest. Kaufman knew Woollcott's warts all too well, and he couldn't help but write them into the play; the hero is described as "a selfish, petty egomaniac who would see his mother burned at the stake if that was the only way he could light his cigarette." The public Woollcott was lovable, and the man seemed incapable of publicly "acting" otherwise.

"Of course, this is a libelous caricature," Woollcott wrote a friend. "I should feel insulted, but, knowing me, you understand why I swallow the insult with relish."

Flash forward sixty years to Nathan Lane, one of the few present-day actors with the comic presence to undertake such a role. Nathan Lane as

Sheridan Whiteside sounded like a pretty good idea, initially; but on examination one had to wonder. Under his sometimes cranky demeanor, Lane is immanently likable. Fussy, yes; infuriating, yes; even annoying, perhaps. But dangerous? Vicious? Monsterish? Nope, the audience just won't buy it. And that was one of the main problems with this *Man Who Came to Dinner*. Woolley and Webb both had tart-tongued, acidic, bitchy sides to their nature. One look at Nathan Lane in Sherry's wheelchair let you know that this Whiteside was, at heart, a puppy dog of a fellow. Lane's favorable public image worked against his performance in the role (as had been the case with Woollcott). So what the play ended up with was a genial observer of the festivities rather than a raging cyclone at its center.

The topical nature of the play also presented some tricky problems. Woollcott lived for his friends, and the authors obliged by cramming the script with name-dropping. A hundred or so 1930s celebrities and near celebrities clutter the discussion, many of whom are long forgotten (starting with Woollcott himself). Because the action is specific to the late 1930s, how to bridge the gap for the audience? Print a biographical glossary in the Playbill, perhaps?

There are at least two ways of handling this. One is to do the play as written, and hope that the material will take care of itself. Old Mr. Molière based some of his characters on living beings, we are told, who were instantly recognizable by the people in the loges. These celebs, whoever they were, are long forgotten, but the plays seem to have done all right in the long run. The other option is to try to update the outdated references, but it can be extremely tricky to update some while keeping others. This is what Zaks and the Roundabout halfheartedly tried to do, with unfortunate results.

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Most of these "fixes," by some unnamed somebody, were merely odd. A speech citing Maude Adams, Irving Berlin, Rembrandt, and El Greco was changed to Maude Adams, Irving Berlin, Raphael, and El Greco. Go figure. At least one change was especially jarring, a joke about the 1932 kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby. This was, at the time, the crime of the century. I was pretty much appalled that George S. Kaufman (whose work

I greatly admire) would allow such a joke. So much so that I made a note of it and vowed to check the script. Kaufman and Hart, needless to say, did *not* poke fun at the Lindbergh baby. Someone else put it in, and I'm rather surprised that Anne Kaufman Schneider—who is a careful and diligent guardian of her father's work—let it slip by.

The original joke was about the Charley Ross case; Ross was the first child kidnapped for ransom in the United States, back in 1874. Over the years, several impostors stepped forward claiming they were Charley Ross, much in the same way that people claimed to be Anastasia (daughter of Nicholas and Alexandra) or even the Dauphin (the child of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette). This is all pretty obscure today, but audiences in 1939 were aware of Woollcott's fascination with unsolved crimes because he featured them on his broadcasts. As it happened, Woollcott grew up near the old Ross mansion in Germantown, New Jersey; as a child—a strange and unhappy child—Alec used to stand on the street corner where Charley was abducted and hope for something to happen.

Granted, few of today's theatregoers can be expected to laugh at the Charley Ross line. But the Lindbergh baby didn't get a laugh, either; more important, it was jarring enough to take at least some audience members away from the play. In a fast-paced comedy like *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, the last thing you can afford to do is get the audience to thinking logically (and missing the next series of lines).

What caused more puzzlement, perhaps, was the treatment of the real-life characters written into the play. The most effective portion of Zaks's production was the whirlwind scene in which a character named Beverly Carlton dropped by. Byron Jennings seems to have heard of Noël Coward and been encouraged to play him to the hilt. The evening—which had been meandering through an act and a half—suddenly picked up, briefly. (The delicious Cowardish pastiche, "What Am I to Do," was written by Porter, whose name does not appear anywhere in the Roundabout program.) A second real-life character, Dr. Gustav Eckstein—a then-renowned naturalist and pal of Woollcott's—was renamed Professor Metz and played more or less as written by Stephen DeRosa.

The other two "real" characters were problematic, though. Jean Smart swept in as Lorraine Sheldon, playing what seemed to be a full-scale Tallulah imitation. (How many in today's audience remember Tallulah, anyway?) Zaks and Smart proceeded to do anything for a laugh, but the laughs only hurt the texture of the play. Kaufman and Hart quite clearly patterned Lorraine after Gertrude Lawrence, the musical comedy star