A Wrinkle in Time

Exploring the dark mysteries of *Follies*, a modernist musical classic

By: David Barbour

The music begins, but is like no Broadway overture you've ever heard, the lead melody being an insistently melancholy waltz, with echoes of Ravel. A ragged, torn show curtain rises to reveal the empty stage of a dilapidated theatre. Well, not quite empty: Standing in a dim, cold beam of light is an absurdly tall, unnaturally pale showgirl, lost in contemplation. As the music continues, other such creatures appear until, in an epiphany that combines an emphatic musical chord with a sudden burst of light, we realize that the stage is filled with ghosts.

For all its glories, the American theatre has rarely, if ever, given us anything as rich and strange as *Follies*. Both a fond tribute to and a ruthless deconstruction of golden-age Broadway musicals, it has divided audiences for four decades. Opening in 1971, a low point for Broadway and recession-plagued New York, *Follies* seemed to some to be a veritable death knell for the traditional song-and-dance show. In fact, it was an open door, leading to a newer, more adult form of musical theatre.

It all stems from the show's bizarre and original premise: It is 1971, and we are in the Weissman Theatre, where, for more than two decades between the wars, Dimitri Weissman (read: Florenz Ziegfeld) presented a series of lavish, showgirl-filled revues. Now, the theatre is to be torn down to make way for a parking lot, and Weissman has invited the surviving Follies veterans back for a drink, a story or two, and a last look back.

As it happens, that look proves to be far more penetrating than anyone can bear, especially for the two married couples at the heart of the show. Thirty years earlier, Buddy Plummer and Ben Stone were best friends, chasing after showgirls Sally Durant and Phyllis Rogers. Ben married Phyllis and made a pile of money, becoming an important player in governmental and philanthropic circles. Buddy married Sally and moved to Arizona, where he became a salesman in the oil industry.

Opposite: Katz uses different colors of light to distinguish between the characters as they are in 1971 and their younger selves. Above: Ben in Loveland, which consists of a series of floral bowers.

Neither story has a happy ending. Ben's overweening ambitions have destroyed his marriage, leaving him and Phyllis in a frigidly polite deadlock. Sally, haunted by the affair she had with Ben, lives inside a cycle of depression and rage, with Buddy as her caretaker. Both marriages are in a state of paralysis, all four partners held hostage by their youthful dreams and expectations.

From the first note, *Follies* follows its own surreal path. In James Goldman's book, what begins as a simple reunion of showgirls turns increasingly strange and disconnected. The largely plotless action consists of snatches of overheard conversations, usually focusing on the relentless passage of time. Without warning, characters burst into song, reliving the performances that made them briefly famous. (Stephen Sondheim's score is a masterpiece of pastiche, drawing on every composer and/or lyricist of the era, from Harold Arlen to Vincent Youmans.) And, as Buddy, Phyllis, Ben, and Sally discover, in Madeline L'Engle's famous phrase, there's a wrinkle in time in the Weissman Theatre, in which their collective past still exists, unfolding over and over again. ("It's like a film in my head that plays and plays and plays," says Buddy.)

As the recriminations and confrontations reach a feverish height, the stage is transformed—

Photos: (left) Joan Marcus; (right) Erica Hemminger

Sondheim has called it "a collective nervous breakdown"—and we enter into a metaphorical *Follies*, known as Loveland, in which the four leads act out their fundamental emotional conflicts in a series of variety turns. Buddy explores his unsatisfying relationships with Sally and his mistress, Margie, in "The God-Why-Don't-You-Love-Me-Oh-You-Did-I'll See-You Later Blues," a raucous vaudeville routine. Phyllis explores the split in her personality in "The Story of Lucy and Jessie," which features a sassy dance routine. Sally all but unravels while delivering the ballad, "Losing My Mind." Ben, still cut off from his true self, tries to present himself as a carefree soul in "Live, Laugh, Love," with devastating consequences.

Opening in 1971, when the great American postwar cultural consensus was breaking up into a series of armed camps (Nixon's Silent Majority vs. the counterculture) *Follies* thrilled some audiences and terrified others. In its portrayal of time's ruthlessness, the impermanence of passion, and the dangers of living in their past, it has been described as a Proustian musical. To those who love it, it is an endlessly fascinating object of contemplation, one that yields new riches at each stage of one's life.

That is, if they can see it. To be effective, *Follies* must be done on a grand scale, making it a daunting proposition for revival. (The original production ran for more than 500 performances and still lost money.) One obstacle faced by anyone staging *Follies* is that the memory of the original production, staged by Harold Prince and choreographed by Michael Bennett, lives on. (That production, with scenery by Boris Aronson, costumes by Florence Klotz, and lighting by Tharon Musser, is on everybody's list of great Broadway designs.) This summer, however, the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, presented a revival, directed by Eric Schaeffer, which, in its ambition and dark glamour, is surely as close to that original as it is possible to get. (It was certainly good enough to set off a mass exodus of *Follies* fans to Washington, to check out a cast that included the likes of Bernadette Peters, Jan Maxwell, Linda Lavin, and Elaine Paige.) Thanks to the critical acclaim and robust box office, the production will transfer for New York's Marquis Theatre later this summer.

Talking to the designers of the Kennedy Center production, it would appear that designing *Follies* is both a simple and daunting task. All you have to do is 1) get the original production out of your head and 2) dream as big as your imagination, and budget, will allow.

On stage at the Weissman Theatre

This has been a season of musical revivals for Derek McLane, the scenic designer of *Follies*. On Broadway, he has earned acclaim and awards for his work on new productions of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* and *Anything Goes*. But, he frankly admits, neither project caused him the anxiety of competing with the memory of Aronson's design for *Follies.*

In Aronson's conception, the Weissman Theatre was already falling down. And his version of the climactic "Loveland" sequence, when the four lead characters act out their own Follies, had the outsized glamour of the work of Joseph Urban, Ziegfeld's house designer. "I had to begin by clearing my mind of Boris Aronson's work, to create something that would fit the Kennedy Center," McLane says.

And yet, the first challenge was the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theatre, a very contemporary-looking space—it opened in 1969—made even more so by a recent renovation. The sleek, modern-looking interior is inimical to the spirit of *Follies*, which must unfold in an atmosphere of disrepair and decay. "Fortunately," McLane says, "we were able to build the design out into the auditorium." This involved covering the side walls of the theatre with distressed, filthy-looking canvas—making it look as if the wrecking ball were due to arrive at any moment. The ceiling area just above the proscenium is also covered in similar fashion. As a result, anyone sitting in the front half of the Eisenhower feels wrapped inside the Weissman Theatre.

The next element is a deeply distressed proscenium, featuring Doric columns at right and left, huge sections of which are chipped away. Even in this ruined state, the proscenium is beautifully detailed, with paintings of glamorous creatures in the upper left and right corners. As mentioned earlier, the show curtain is a thing of rags and tatters.

The stage, when revealed, is a vivid image of a Broadway house in a tragic state of disrepair. It's a place of brick walls, radiators, and unflattering house light, devoid of warmth or light. A pile of junk resides in the upstage right corner. Clearly, it hasn't been used as a legitimate theatre for decades. At the same time, McLane made sure that the space would meet the show's peculiar needs. There are two gallery levels on the upstage wall where ghosts can promenade, pausing to consider the action on the stage below. A two-story staircase at stage right is used in the stunning first number, "Beautiful Girls." As Roscoe, Weissman's house tenor, sings his traditional tribute to feminine youth and beauty ("Faced with these Loreleis/What man can moralize?"), we see the former Weissman girls, now between the ages of 50 and 80, descending the stairs one last time.

The set feels enormous, as it should, what with a cast of 40. However, McLane notes, "It's smaller than the Eisenhower stage itself. I moved the back wall downstage, to give it a greater sense of intimacy." Other scenic touches include the use of rain curtain in the number "Who's That Woman?" (about which more later), used to frame the performers.

Perhaps the designer's greatest

Above: Buddy's Loveland number is lit like a vaudeville turn, with hard-edged followspots.

success is the transition to Loveland, a moment which has bedeviled many a production of *Follies.* The script gives no guidance about what is to happen, except to say that the stage is transformed. Here as the two couples squabble furiously, they walk down to the front edge of the stage. A new—and much fuller—show curtain lowers in and a set of footlights comes up. For a second, we see all four performers and their shadows. Then, in a brilliant coup de théâtre, the curtain falls, kabuki-like, to reveal Loveland; the four principals stand with their backs to the audience, stunned, as a procession of showgirls parades downstage, performing the song "Loveland" ("where everybody loves to live").

Above: As lit by Katz, McLane's Loveland set seems to glow from within.

Photos: Joan Marcus

Roscoe serenades the Weissman Girls. Note the ghosts of showgirls on the second and third levels. Opposite: The pre-show look, with the damaged show curtain and distressed proscenium.

Loveland, in McLane's conception, consists of a series of curved portals that are, in effect, bowers of pink, orange, and purple flowers. The designer, who says he went through a number of concepts before settling on this one, notes that each portal is decorated with a flowers made of tulle. The effect is evocative of another era, and it proves extremely flexible, as the portals can fly in and out in different configurations for each number. (The production's scenery was built by Global Scenic Services, of Bridgeport, Connecticut. I. Weiss, of New York, contributed to the Loveland set, providing four digitally printed covers with 400 tulle flowers attached to the faces. All the flowers were hand-made in I. Weiss; shop and were affixed to the set pieces by Global Scenic. I. Weiss also provided soft goods, the show curtain, the kabuki drop and rain curtain, in conjunction with Scenic Art Studios, of Cornwall, New York who did all the painting and distressing of the pieces)

The Loveland sequence ends when Ben's number, "Live, Laugh, Love," breaks down and the stage descends into chaos; the entire cast appears, re-enacting different scenes and songs, creating an unbearable babble that vanishes—McLane makes Loveland disappear as elegantly as it appeared—leaving Ben, Buddy, Phyllis, and Sally alone on the empty stage at the Weissman, facing an uncertain future.

Ghost light

The anxiety of influence was everywhere at Kennedy Center. Just as McLane says he had to rid himself of Aronson's ideas in order to create something new, Natasha Katz, the lighting designer says, "The ghost of Tharon [Musser] was sitting on my shoulder the whole time." This isn't the first time: Katz lit the recent Broadway revival of *A Chorus Line*, translating Musser's circa-1975 concepts using modern lighting gear

"This was daunting in a different way," the designer says. "Derek's set is very different from Boris Aronson's set in that it doesn't allow for any sidelight." She adds that McLane built in some slots, allowing for a certain amount of sidelight, much of which is used to light the two gallery levels, adding texture to the entrances of the ghosts. Still, she says, "The sidelight we have doesn't function the way it would if we had wings in which to place lighting gear; the way it is set up here, you can't carve out the bodies in the same way."

Still, the designer found ways to make many haunting effects. For one thing, she worked out a flexible structure of colors and color temperatures to map out the show's complex terrain of time frames and psycho-

logical realities. She says, "You think, Oh my god, how do we tell this story? There are so many levels. There's the present, the present thinking of the past, the past and the present interacting." For that matter, any of the big solos take place in an indeterminate reality—are they happening at the party? Are they memories or fantasies? And then there's Loveland…

In this production, says Katz, "The present is white or monochrome, and the past has a kind of teal feeling to it. This approach allowed us to isolate the past in the present. It helped that the costumes [by Gregg Banes] took the light beautifully, which allowed us to pick out individuals as we needed."

For example, the opening moment, revealing a single ghost on stage, takes advantage of different color temperatures "There's just one moving light on that ghost," Katz says. "The rest of the stage is lit with incandescent light. I started with moving lights, then gradually took them out, turning on the incandescents, which just felt more and more right. That scene is all Lee 161 [Slate Blue] and a lot of gobos."

The designer notes that her approach allowed the 1971 characters and the ghosts to exist side by side on stage. For example, during the opening, Sally runs on stage, the first guest at the party; she nearly bumps into the specter of her younger self, who stares at her, curiously. Then there's the number "Waiting for the Girls Upstairs," in which the four principals recall, in jocular fashion, their youthful nights on the town; in the middle of the song, their younger selves make a disturbing and unwanted appearance; thanks to the lighting, two distinct time frames can exist side by side. In an especially touching moment, the elderly soprano Heidi Schiller (here played by opera diva Rosalind Elias), sings "One Last Kiss," with its melody redolent of Viennese operetta; she is joined by the ghost of her younger self, gorgeously gowned, for a melancholy duet. "You're constantly cross-fading from into the past from the present," Katz says; "It's like watching someone's unconscious unfold, from thought to thought."

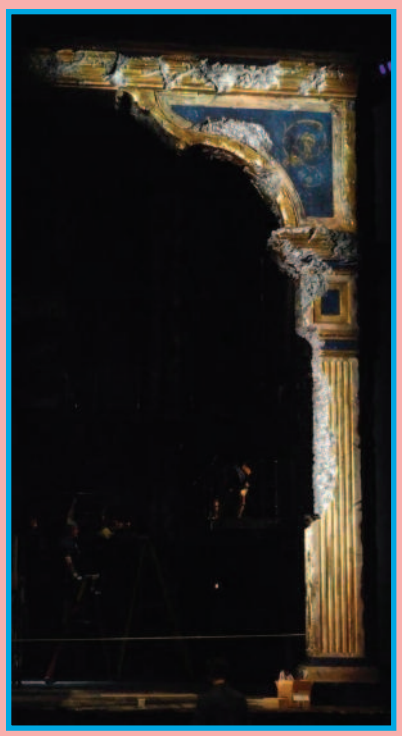
At the same time, she says, "We didn't stick to this approach like the Bible." For example, past and present collide in "Who's That Woman?" in which Stella Deems, a former Follies star, recreates her signature number, supported by Phyllis, Sally, and a few other ladies. In the middle of the number, the membrane of time rips open and the ladies are joined by their youthful ghosts in a stunning juxtaposition of past and present. This number, Katz says, "is a world of its own," and had to be lit for its own values, not according to any programmatic plan about time frames. "It's a melding of two worlds," she adds.

Photos: Erica Hemminger

In lighting the show's variety numbers, Katz took into account each performer, some of whom offered unusual interpretations of the songs. For example, "Ah, Paris!," a kind of Cole Porter parody, here voiced by Regine, as the chanteuse Solange LaFitte, is delivered with plenty of color, "because that's how I think it would feel to Solange." On the other hand, "Broadway Baby," which is often staged in a deadpan comic manner, is here given a full-belt rendition by Linda Lavin; using a few accent lights and a followspot, Katz transforms it into a brilliant example of chiaroscuro. Similarly, Elaine Paige transforms "I'm Still Here," which can be a bitter summing up, into the wry memoirs of a showbiz survivor; working off the actress' blue gown, Katz fills the stage with blue accents, acting a slightly rueful undertone.

Loveland, of course, requires a look all its own, and Katz responds by using a variety of techniques to make it look as if the flowery portals are glowing from within. "From a tech point of view, they really needed sidelight, she says. "We ended up attaching units to the back of the portals; we also built [Philips Color Kinetics] ColorBlazes into the floor to uplight the portals." She adds delightedly, "The portals are so lightable. When you see Bernadette Peters [at the beginning of [her number] 'Losing My Mind,' she looks like she's in a candy box."

The designer's rig includes 20 Philips Vari*Lite VL2000 Wash units and 26 Martin Professional MAC 2000 Performances—chosen in part because she was dealing with trims of 40'—in addition to approximately 340 ETC Source Fours in various models, 96 MR16s, six DHA Light



Left: A detail of the proscenium, showing how much time has eaten it away. Top right: McLane covered the walls in fabric, to extend the Weissman Theatre into the Eisenhower auditorium. Bottom right: A set model showing the Weissman Theatre. Opposite: Most of the performers wear Countryman B6 mics.

Curtains, 40 Wybron Coloram scrollers, 10 Philips Color Kinetics ColorBlaze 72s and 12 CK ColorBlast TRs. She is also the latest Broadway designer to take advantage of LED tape, in this case, from Super Bright. "We put it on the top of the railings on the galleries," she says. "It lights the walls and uplights the ghosts." Lighting is controlled by an ETC Eos, for the movers, linked to an Ion for the conventionals. Mark Polemini programmed the Eos. Lighting gear was supplied by PRG.

Skillful programming must have been especially important here, because Katz's work is marked by a dreamlike fluidity, crossfading across time periods and emotional states, capturing conversations on the fly, and slipping in and out of musical numbers at a moment's notice—all while maintaining an ethereal, otherworldly atmosphere. A challenging project, to be sure, but also, she says, a satisfying one: "I feel so blessed to have worked on this show. It crawls into your body and just doesn't leave."

Voices of the past and present

The first thing you hear entering the theatre at *Follies* is the subtle sound of wind whipping through the Weissman Theatre. It's an effectively chilling grace note, and it exemplifies the attention to detail that is the hallmark of sound designer Kai Harada's work on the production.

Harada notes that the idea of the wind effect came from Eric Schaeffer, adding, "Eric really trusts the people he works with; it's been a great collaborative process." He also praises the Eisenhower Theatre's acoustics as "fantastic." He is similarly superlative when describing the 28-piece orchestra, combined with a star-studded cast. "It's been my goal recently to do a natural-sounding show, and the acoustics, coupled with the cast and orchestrations, have made it a reality." Among other things, the sound design allows some of Sondheim's most fiendishly intricate lyrics to be heard, clearly and transparently.

Interestingly, Harada found himself working with a set of gear that is quite different from what is found in most Broadway shows these days. For example, the Eisenhower Theatre was the beneficiary, a few years ago, of an all-Harman loudspeaker rig, donated by the late Sidney Harman. Thus the setup for *Follies* includes arrays of JBL VerTec indoor/outdoor background and foreground units for both the orchestra and mezzanine levels. JBL Control 25 speakers are used for front fill and underbalcony delays. JBL7210/95DP powered 10" two-way integrated boxes provide additional fill in the orchestra and mezzanine areas. The surround system consists of JBL MS26 ultra-compact two-way full-range speakers in addition to another set of JBL Control 25s. Harada specified a set of Meyer Sound UP Jrs for additional reinforcement of the orchestra. A pair of Meyer Sound Galileo systems provides speaker processing. Additional sound gear was supplied by PRG Audio.

Onstage foldback is provided by Apogee AE 3M units. Interestingly, there are no personal mixers in the orchestra, a decision that Harada said he made jointly with Jim Moore, the musical director. "He doesn't like personal mixing, and I agree, especially for this type of show. The musicians really have to listen to each other."

In addition, *Follies* is mixed on a console that may seem unfamiliar to many. "The theatre has a Studer Vista 5," says Harada, "but, as I'm not as familiar with it, we brought in a Stagtec Aurus." Stagetec, he explains, "is a German manufacturer who demo'ed their system for me in 2007. Their Aurus console is based on their Nexus digital audio routing system; both have been popular in the broadcast market and in theatre

installations in Europe. Recently, I've used the Aurus/Nexus on two musicals in Europe, and we use the Nexus on the second national tour of *Wicked*. It's the best-sounding, most reliable digital system I've found."

Harada continues, "The Kennedy Center let me bring Patrick Pummill, a seasoned Broadway operator, to mix the show, and he was able to spend a week with the Aurus at Stagetec's new office in Brooklyn prior to coming to Washington, DC." By the time of the load-in in Washington, Pummill says he was totally up to speed on the Aurus: "The truck was unloaded on Monday morning, and the console was passing audio by Monday afternoon. We had the first day of cast on stage on Saturday whereupon we did a complete stumble-through of the show. We were through 80% of our total work by that point; normally, we'd be 50% or 60%. This allowed us to spend the next several weeks of tech and previews dealing with the most difficult remaining 20%: the details and the finesse."

Harada says, "I can't speak highly enough about Patrick. He has a fantastic ear, and this is a challenging show to mix." One of the most challenging numbers is "Who's that Woman?" "After the dance break, you have eight divas who have to sing again—it's a matter of pulling the orchestra back just enough so they can be heard, but without losing energy. When we get to Loveland, everything changes—the orchestrations, scenery, and costumes—so we change along with that, changing the perceived acoustics of the room ever so subtly through the surrounds." But, he adds, having a console like the Aurus made the process easy and efficient. Pummill agrees: "Although it looks intimidating, it works very much like an analog surface: it responds like an analog desk, and also allows multiple people to work simultaneously." Harada continues, "I can work on the orchestra mix while Patrick is mixing, and Jana Hoglund, my associate, can be working on effects on the other side of the desk." (The show's sound effects are fired via a QLab system, connected to the Nexus via MADI.)

Most of the cast members are wearing Countryman B6 mics, chosen for their small size; most of them are placed at the performers' hairlines, making them hard to see. Danny Burstein and Ron Raines, who play Buddy and Ben, have Sennheiser MKE 1s; Harada notes that this choice of microphone, placed over their ears, suits their voices better. The performers all use Sennheiser SK5212 wireless transmitters and 1046 receivers. In the orchestra, there is a full array of mics from AKG, Sennheiser, Neumann, and Shure, provided by the Kennedy Center's extensive collection.

Harada adds that working with an orchestra of this size "is a foreign—yet wonderful—experience. Recent shows are orchestrated differently, with many more electronic instruments and many elements that get in the way of the lyrics. Jonathan Tunick's orchestrations for *Follies* know when to pull back to make room for a vocal line, and there's something so organic and visceral listening to real musicians with real instruments."

In spite of certain time pressures, Harada adds, almost jokingly, "This may become a show that I compare to every other show, because there were so few issues. Everyone—from crew to creatives to cast—was simply wonderful to work with."

Additional key personnel on Follies includes Shari Silberglitt (production stage manager), Erica Hemminger and Shoko Kambara (associate scenic designers), Yael Lubetzky (associate lighting designer), Brett Banakis (assistant scenic designer), Kathleen Dobbins and Peter Hoerburger (assistant lighting designers), Matthew Elias Hodges (properties supervisors), Jeremy Lydic (properties coordinator), Thomas M. Hewitt (production carpenter), Gilford M. Taylor (production electrician), Robert E. Clark (production properties), and J.P. Reali (head of sound at the Eisenhower Theatre).

As *Follies* makes its way to New York, some key roles will have to be recast and perhaps the designers may find themselves making different gear choices. How the production will be received there remains to be seen. *Follies* fans are a notoriously picky bunch, forever finding new productions inadequate compared to the original (an ironic turn of events considering this is a musical about the dangers of living in the past). Whatever happens, New Yorkers will be seeing a production that makes that best case for a show that stands apart as a stunning and utterly unique achievement.

Photos: (left) Erica Hemminger; (right) Joan Marcus