

## ARTS & LETTERS

### **EVERYTHING WAS POSSIBLE: *The Birth of the Musical Follies.***

By Ted Chapin. Knopf. 331 pp. \$30

A show on the scale of the original 1971 production of *Follies*—with a cast of 50, plus 27 musicians (and no computers) in the orchestra pit, a monumental set, and 140 costumes—would have little chance of making it to Broadway today. The financial risk would be too great. Of course, *Follies* was too grand for 1971 as well: It closed after 522 performances (not a bad run under ordinary circumstances) without recouping a penny for investors. The show did win seven Tony awards—for its score (Stephen Sondheim), direction (Harold Prince and Michael Bennett), choreography (Bennett again), set (Boris Aronson), costumes (Florence Klotz), and lighting (Tharon Musser) and for one of its female stars (Alexis Smith)—though not the Tony for best musical, which went to *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Hum anything from that lately? Once *Follies* was gone, it became the stuff of legend.

Ted Chapin, president of the Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization, has written a

wonderfully detailed book about the progress of *Follies* from its prelegendary beginnings to opening night. During the three months of rehearsals and previews, he was the company's unpaid gofer (elevated to "production assistant" in the *Playbill* credits), and he took notes. A Connecticut College undergraduate at the time, he got course credit for his *Follies* experience.

What's *Follies* about? Mortality, unhappiness, delusion, resentment, the doomed, irresistible promises we make to one another ("Love will see us through till something better comes along"), and, oh yes, the dazzling distractions of the American musical theater. The time is the present (1971), the setting a Broadway theater that's being torn down to make way for a parking lot. Between the two world wars, the theater was home to extravagant follies shows, and a group of individuals who once appeared in them, and who haven't seen one another since, gather on the stage of the partially demolished theater for a farewell party. The characters' younger selves walk among them, like ghosts, and sing and dance far more nimbly than the



*Al Hirschfeld captures Follies' opening night on Broadway, in April 1971.*

older folk. Two unhappily married couples who are the focus of the show suffer a kind of collective nervous breakdown in a concluding production number of Ziegfeld-like splendor. At the end, the whole cast faces the dawn through the shattered back wall of the theater.

What a lot of mopey, rainy-day stuff, and thanks largely to Sondheim's virtuoso score, how exhilarating.

In telling the story of this one show so precisely, Chapin writes a shadow history of every Broadway show that ever had a difficult birth and pulled itself together. What seems now all of a piece was once just a lot of pieces, and he lets you watch as they're put together, first one way and then another—songs added and dropped, lyrics altered, dances adjusted, dialogue introduced one day and excised the next, costumes sewn, fitted, and shredded. He records the actors' daily bouts of generosity, jealousy, insecurity, and fear. He notices when they blow a line, flub a lyric, or miss a dance step, all of which happen surprisingly often. As the matter-of-fact details accumulate, you're reminded just how *live* live theater is, and how subject to human frailty: a crapshoot behind a velvet curtain.

*Follies* may be the smartest Broadway musical ever—not the fleetest or wittiest or funniest, surely, or the most moving, if only because there's *Carousel*, but the one in which the layers of emotional resonance are built with so much intelligence. If the show had an epigraph, it would be from A. E. Housman: "With rue my heart is laden." But *Follies* is shrewd enough to wear its rue with a difference: sequins.

—JAMES M. MORRIS

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**TILT:**

***A Skewed History  
of the Tower of Pisa.***

By Nicholas Shrady. Simon & Schuster.  
161 pp. \$21.95

Pisa's problematic bell tower, the final component of a complex of religious buildings undertaken to celebrate the triumph of Christianity over Islam in general and the victory of Pisan forces over the Saracens in particular, began leaning soon after construction

began in 1172. Six years later, when the tower was three stories high, work on it halted—nobody knows exactly why—and didn't restart for a century. Between 1272 and 1278, the uppermost four stories were added, after which construction was once again suspended. In 1370, the tower was finally completed with the addition of the belfry.

Once the tower reached its intended height of 180 feet, the political fortunes of Pisa began to head in the opposite direction. After a century of sieges, the city surrendered to Florentine forces in 1509. It would have been symbolically logical for the tower to collapse then, but this was not to be. Instead, it went on to become the ideal setting for young professor Galileo Galilei's experiments with falling objects, a story as appealing as it is unfounded.

In the 19th century, clever but desperate marketers concocted a different fiction about the tower in order to invert potential embarrassment. They maintained that the lean was intentional. The tower-de-force, so to speak, standing firmly on the brink of disaster, was meant to reflect Pisan survival and past glory.

In his enjoyable account of the creation and survival of the tower, Nicholas Shrady, the author of *Sacred Roads: Adventures from the Pilgrimage Trail* (1999), rescues one of the world's most familiar architectural oddities from the bin of one-liners. He reconnects the tower with the curious collection of people and events caught in the pull of its off-kilter orbit. His pleasant, clear, and often amusing tale is weakened, however, by somewhat stingy illustrations and by all-too-gimmicky packaging. Instead of the usual rectangle, the book has a slanted parallelogram shape intended to evoke the tower—as if the publisher lost faith in the content and felt the need to jazz it up.

—DAVID MACAULAY

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**PUSHKIN:**

***A Biography.***

By T. J. Binyon. Knopf. 727 pp. \$35

In the view of his friend Nikolai Gogol, the poet Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799–1837) was "an extraordinary and perhaps unique manifestation of the Russian spirit." And not only that: Gogol believed