

# At 80, Charles Strouse recalls his journey through the golden age of Broadway

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NEW YORK (AP) The subtitle, "A Broadway Memoir," says it most succinctly.

"Put on a Happy Face," the autobiography of Charles Strouse, chronicles a jam-packed journey through the sunset of the American musical theater's golden era and beyond \_ by the composer of "Annie," "Bye Bye Birdie" and "Applause."

And the trip is not over yet. Melodies still pour out of the man, as Strouse, at age 80, prepares for his next project, "Minsky's," trying out later this season in California.

"I work every day. Activity \_ it's a life force," the New York-born Strouse says, searching for words to explain why he keeps coming back to the piano to write. "When you enjoy doing what you're doing, which I do very much, I have something to get up for."

That work takes place is a bright, cheerfully cluttered room off a long hallway in Strouse's midtown apartment, a room centered on a big black piano and filled with posters from many of his shows. "Annie," of course. "Birdie" is there, too. And so are more than a few musicals that may be known only to the most dedicated theater buff. Anybody remember "I and Albert" \_ only seen briefly in London but still one of the composer's personal favorites?

"Charles has this great, almost magical gift of melody, an unending well of it," says Susan Birkenhead, Strouse's lyricist on "Minsky's," scheduled for a Los Angeles run at the Center Theatre Group's Ahmanson Theatre, Jan. 20-March 1, 2009.

"What he does seems very easy and most people think it is: to write these simple melodies that stick in your head



Composer Charles Strouse is interviewed in his New York apartment Tuesday, June 3, 2008. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

and never go away. But he studied very seriously at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y., with composer Aaron Copland at the Tanglewood Music Center in Massachusetts and with composer, conductor and music professor Nadia Boulanger in Paris.

Birkenhead continues: "Charles works

like a fiend. He gets up in the morning and he goes to the piano and he works almost to the exclusion of everything else. It's the love of his life, his work. He adores Barbara (his wife) and the kids but he's really obsessed with working."

Strouse, a soft-spoken, thoughtful man dressed casually in black, has known it

all: the highs of smash hits (it doesn't get bigger than "Annie"), the lows of quickly closed flops (his 1983 Alan Jay Lerner collaboration "Dance a Little Closer") and just about every point in-between.

Along the way, he has met some extraordinary people, big stars such as Sammy Davis Jr., Lauren Bacall and Mel Brooks, some not-quite-so-famous folks (playing piano for Butterfly McQueen, Prissy in "Gone With the Wind") and many of them a little bit, to use his own adjective, "weird."

And it's work that has taken Strouse through an extraordinary array of experiences, many retold in his memoir.

As a young composer, when he returned from France, he wrote serious compositions, but he had to make a living. "I started playing piano accompaniment for a lot of singers. Suddenly, I was in nightclubs, strip joints \_ I used to play on 52nd Street \_ I always had a feeling for jazz even when I was writing more serious works."

Theater beckoned when he (along with Lee Adams, his eventual lyricist for "Bye Bye Birdie") got a chance in the early 1950s to write songs for weekly revues at an Adirondacks summer camp called Green Mansions. Performers such as Danny Kaye, Imogene Coca, Carol Burnett, Don Adams, Charlotte Rae, Dick Shawn and more had honed their theater skills there or at Tamiment in Pennsylvania.

"I would write a song and I would orchestrate it and copy the parts," he says. "And rehearsal was the next day at 9, so at 4 in the morning, I am crossing the lake with the parts still wet. I just loved it. I never was happier."

Breaking onto Broadway wasn't easy, despite some off-Broadway success with small entertainments, including "The Shoestring Revue" in 1955. As the show's musical director and one of its several composers, he heard a young dancer named Chita Rivera sing, "with a vocal range ... as long as her legs."

Rivera went on to co-star with Dick

Van Dyke in "Bye Bye Birdie" (1960), Strouse's first Broadway success, the tale of an Elvis Presley-like crooner being drafted into the Army. At the time, Strouse was working as a rehearsal pianist for a Harold Arlen-Johnny Mercer musical called "Saratoga." The show's stage manager, Edward Padula, had heard something Strouse and Adams had written for Green Mansions, and he had this idea for a show about teenagers \_ and Padula needed a composer.

Strouse not only wrote the music, but he played piano at auditions as the neophyte producer tried to attract financial backers\_ for a show that would cost \$185,000. By comparison, "Minsky's," nearly 50 years later, will have a \$13 million price tag, according to Strouse.

"We never stopped giving auditions \_ and people never gave money at all. The idea of using rock 'n' roll \_ everybody was so turned off," Strouse says. Until Padula found Texas oil man L. Slade Brown. This time it was different. After Brown heard the score, he said, in a Texas twang, "I like those songs," pushed Strouse aside and picked out the tune of "Put on a Happy Face" on the piano.

Brown then said, "How much do you fellas need?" and wrote out a check for \$75,000 to cover the start of rehearsals. "Suddenly, the world turned Technicolor," Strouse says with a laugh.

Nearly a dozen more Broadway musicals would follow, including "Golden Boy," in which Strouse and Adams had to get the OK from star Sammy Davis Jr. "His agents would not let him sign the contract until he approved every word and note that Lee and I wrote," he recalls. "Which meant that we had to, at great expense to the producer, follow Sammy all over the world. ... We spent three years of our lives, a week or so each month, out in Las Vegas, playing songs for him."

Yet the ambitious score is one of which Strouse is quite proud and he would love to see the Tony-nominated show \_ as well as "Rags," another neglected work \_ revived again. Yet right now, he is preoccupied with "Minsky's," which, says Strouse "has had a long,

checkered and sad history."

The show, a love story set against the backdrop of the fabled burlesque empire, was the brainchild of English director Mike Ockrent, who died of leukemia in 1999 before the project could be completed. By then, Strouse and Birkenhead had written some dozen songs.

"Minsky's" languished until Birkenhead ran into Casey Nicholaw, an up-and-coming director-choreographer who had made a name for himself with "The Drowsy Chaperone" and a City Center concert version of "Follies." A script and a demo CD of some of the songs followed. Nicholaw signed on to the musical last year, bringing in Bob Martin, one of the authors and star of "The Drowsy Chaperone," to provide a new book.

"What I love about the score is that it is just good, old-fashioned tunes," Nicholaw says. "They are hummable. They are great to listen to and really evokes the era of the 1920s."

Strouse rewrites furiously. "He is like most really great composers \_ quick to tear something up if somebody says it doesn't work," Birkenhead explains. "He will do it 40 times on one song, which is sort of what you have to do but you would be amazed at how many people don't."

Not that "Minsky's" is Strouse's only project at the moment. He's hoping to get another production of "Marty," his musical based on the Ernest Borgnine movie, on the boards. He's also started a play and has begun writing with Steven Sater, the lyricist of "Spring Awakening," a musical he greatly admires.

Strouse says he was never paralyzed by success, although the enormous popularity of "Annie," one of the biggest Broadway hits of the 1970s, had "an aura of disbelief," he concedes.

"But I never said to myself, 'How will I ever top this?' That never even occurred to me. I mean I like things to be a success, but the main thing is to keep working."

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