

BARNES & NOBLE REVIEW

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By BROOKE ALLEN



Put On a Happy Face: A Broadway Memoir (Union Square Press) engagingly recounts the composer's progress from classical studies at the Eastman School of Music to Broadway fame by way of piano gigs at summer theaters, jazz dives, and even strip clubs. Strouse went on to compose hits like *Bye-Bye Birdie*, *Golden Boy*, *Applause*, and *Annie* (and cult-favorite flops like *It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman*) and won a string of Emmy, Grammy, and Tony Awards, yet he still seems sweetly incredulous that fat little "Buddy" Strouse could somehow have morphed into "Charles," the sought-after pop music wizard.

Full of appealing (and sometimes appalling!) anecdotes about luminaries like Sammy Davis Jr., Lauren Bacall, Cameron Mackintosh, Alan Jay Lerner, and Chita Rivera, *Put On a Happy Face* is also highly informative about the creative process. Strouse is at his best when describing the often agonizing birth pangs that accompany the out-of-town tryouts of a new musical (a ritual all but dead nowadays, with expenses driven so high that new shows have to open cold in New York without the benefit of a gestation period in front of an audience). These tryouts, with everyone from agent to stage doorman putting his two-cents'-worth in, have led Strouse to a conclusion "that Darwinists would surely agree with: Throughout history, the strongest drives in human beings are the seeking of food, shelter, sex, and the rewriting of someone else's musical."

Strouse's *Annie* launched a number of careers, but none, perhaps, has been more remarkable than that of the 19-year-old apprentice who was given the job of obtaining and training a dog for the show's original, summer-stock production. Bill Berloni found Sandy, a big, mangy mutt, on death row at a Connecticut dog pound and ransomed him for seven dollars; the rest is Broadway history.

Brooke Allen is the author of *Twentieth-Century Attitudes*; *Artistic License*; and *Moral Minority*. She is a contributor to *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New Criterion*, *The New Leader*, *The Hudson Review*, and *The Nation*, among others. She was named a finalist for the 2007 Nona Balakian Citation for Excellence in Reviewing from the National Book Critics Circle.