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## Follow Spot

by Michael Portantiere

### EVERYTHING IS ROSIE FOR CHARLES STROUSE

As the composer of such Broadway hits as *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Applause*, and *Annie*, as well as such flops as *Dance a Little Closer* and *Nick and Nora*, Charles Strouse has had a life and career marked by personal and professional relationships with hundreds of fascinating people, from his longtime lyricist-collaborator Lee Adams to such notables as Mel Brooks, Mike Nichols, and Arthur Laurents.

From an interviewer's standpoint, the great thing about Strouse is that he doesn't hesitate to honestly express his feelings about various shows, colleagues, etc. Such candor infuses his memoir, *Put on a Happy Face*, which is just now being published by Union Square Press as part of a multi-event celebration of his 80th birthday year. (He hit that milestone on June 7.) At Strouse's lovely home on West 57th Street, I recently spoke with him about his five-decade career.



BROADWAYSTARS.COM: Congratulations on all the salutes, parties, tributes, and other events.

**CHARLES STROUSE:** Thank you. It's been a very happy year for me. My youngest son just got married, so it's a great time in my life.

STARS: I should apologize in advance, because I'm sure I'm going to ask you lots of things that you've been asked countless times before...

**CS:** May I say, I don't give a shit. I'm used to talking to people, and talking about myself is pure pleasure.

STARS: I'd like to start off by asking about your show *Marty*, which was done up at the Huntington in Boston. What's the status of that?

**CS:** It's in abeyance. But our star, John C. Reilly, is still committed to it. The show is about three-quarters done, but I think it may need one new song. Mark Brokaw, the director, has a new, smaller conception of it, so we're sort of following that path. A theater in Texas is very interested in doing the show, but to get John to go to Texas is a whole different thing than doing it here in New York.

STARS: My colleague Peter Filichia has remarked that no composer has done more than you to get young people interested in the theater. Do you remember if you and your co-writers were conscious of tapping into a new audience when you were working on *Bye Bye Birdie* and *Annie*?

**CS: No, we weren't. The idea to write about a rock singer in *Bye Bye Birdie* was mine and Lee's and Mike Stewart's. At the time, Lee and I were writing material for Dick Shawn, who did a great Elvis imitation. We picked up on that, and it informed the show. When it became a hit, I was surprised. And when it started to be done by high schools all over the country, I was amazed.**

STARS: You've had so many flops and disappointments to go along with your hits. Were you ever discouraged?

**CS: I wouldn't say discouraged, because that would imply that I considered not composing anymore. I was very depressed. That was a family trait; my mother was severely depressed, and blackness would often steal over me. But the only thing I know how to do is to write music.**

STARS: What shows were your biggest heartbreakers?

**CS: Well, one of them was *I and Albert*, which Lee and I did with Jay Presson Allen. [Director] John Schlesinger wanted us to do it in London, and the English really didn't like it, but I thought it was a beautiful show. *Nick and Nora* was another great disappointment -- but I knew that was coming, because Arthur Laurents was so mean to me. There was a real schism between us. I loved Alan Jay Lerner, but in retrospect, I realize that we broke some major laws of the theater on *Dance a Little Closer*: The lyricist, book writer, and director shouldn't be the same person, and all three of them shouldn't be fucking the leading lady. I mean, they were married...**

STARS: When composers are asked to name favorites among their own works, they often cite some of the less-popular ones. What are your personal favorites?

**CS: I think some of the greatest songs Lee and I ever wrote are in *Golden Boy*, and also in *I and Albert*.**

STARS: And what are your favorites among shows by other people?

**CS: I love *The Boy Friend*. I find it delightful. Everybody loves *West Side Story*, and I think what Lenny wrote for that is terrific-- though it didn't overwhelm me as much as it did some other people, simply because I was already familiar with Lenny's jazz. I love *Follies*, but I was never a big *Company* fan. That show is just a little bit too cynical to suit me.**

STARS: What have you seen lately that you enjoyed?

**CS: I liked *In the Heights* and *Passing Strange*, but my wife hated them both. So I think we're a good microcosm of the general audience. I found *A Catered Affair* very earnest and slow, though I had a lot of respect for the score. I didn't see *South Pacific*, because I've seen it so many times, or *Gypsy* for the same reason -- and I didn't want to run into Arthur [Laurents]. We dislike each other, let's put it that way. He's smart as a whip, and funny and gifted, but he's a mean son of a bitch. My wife and I also saw *Young Frankenstein*, and she disliked it intensely. It amused me, but I know Mel quite well, and I like him.**

STARS: What was your experience when you worked with him on *All-American*?

**CS: He used to imitate Frank Sinatra, and I'd play for him. Often, we'd be in a crowded room he'd be doing his shtick, and he would never stop until somebody laughed. He'd just keep jabbing, like a boxer, until he got a laugh.**

STARS: It's a testament to the popularity of *Bye, Bye Birdie* and *Annie* that there are two movie versions of each. Would you like to comment on those?

**CS: Yes! I thought the TV version of *Annie* that Rob Marshall did was sensational. I liked it even better than the show; he found things in it that were really wonderful. None of us liked the John Huston movie, but it gave the songs a worldwide popularity and made me a lot of money. Same with *Birdie*. And as for the TV version of *Birdie*, I liked it, but it never soared.**

STARS: It has been rumored that, at some point, Mike Nichols took over the direction of the Broadway production of *Annie* from Martin Charnin.

**CS: Not true. I write about that in my book. Jay Presson Allen saw one of the later performances of the show at Goodspeed, and she said she thought it was a hit. Mike lived in Connecticut, and she called him from backstage; I remember this vividly. Mike's wife was having a baby at the time, but Jay said, "I don't care, get your ass down here and see this show." Nobody ever disagreed with Jay, so Mike came and saw it, loved it, and said he wanted to produce it on Broadway. And that's what he did. He was a great arbiter, but Martin directed the whole thing.**

STARS: One of my great regrets is that I didn't get to see Betty Hutton as a replacement in the role of Miss Hannigan.

**CS: She was a sweet, sad person. As I recall, she was quite good in the part.**

STARS: What are you working on now?

**CS: *The Night They Raided Minsky's*, with lyrics by Susan Birkenhead and a book by Bob Martin. Casey Nicholaw is directing, and I can't say enough about him. He's great. I've got another, small musical that I did in Providence with Oskar Eustis; it's called *You Never Know*, and I wrote it all, so I'd like to see something happen with that. I think of it as my after-school project. And I'm writing my first play.**

STARS: Well, congratulations again on everything.

**CS: Thanks again. Funny story: We had a book party last night at 21, and John Simon was there. Men kiss each other all the time these days; I didn't start out doing that, because I'm straight, but I do it now. I've gotten used to it. So I went to kiss John at the party, but he recoiled. I said, "John, guys in New York are always kissing each other." And he said, "I guess I'm old fashioned!"**

[For more information, visit [CharlesStrouse.com](http://CharlesStrouse.com)]

Michael Portantiere comes to BroadwayStars after seven years as Editor in Chief of TheaterMania.com, having previously worked as an editor and writer for InTheater magazine and Back Stage. He has contributed articles to Playbill and Stagebill, and has written notes for several major cast albums. Michael is also a professional photographer.

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