

DAILY NEWS

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Put On a Happy Face



In the fall of 1964, the musical version of Clifford Odets' "Golden Boy," with a score by Charles Strouse and Lee Adams, at that time best known for their hit "Bye, Bye, Birdie," was on its melancholy pre-Broadway tryout tour.

The creators were having nightmares translating Odets' Depression-era story about a violinist who jeopardizes his musical career by becoming a professional boxer into a vehicle for Sammy Davis, Jr. Their efforts almost didn't matter, since, with Davis as the star, the show was selling out despite its book problems.

Strouse had written the score in close collaboration with Davis, whose eccentricities and demands he recalls entertainingly in his memoir "Put On a Happy Face" (Union Square Press, \$19.95) The songs worked, though Strouse was upset that "somewhere along the way, my harmonies and rhythms were washed and dried out in that bright-shiny-money-back-guaranteed washing machine known as Sammy Davis Jr."

In Detroit Strouse had to write a new song for Davis, a song that would later be reprised by the whole cast and thus had to have "social significance." Because Adams had to fly back to New York to nurse an ailing wife. Strouse had to write the lyrics as well as the music. The pressure, already immense, was intensified when, after discussing the song with Arthur Penn, who was directing the show, Strouse expressed his doubts and Penn told him, "Just write the f---ing song," in a tone he had never heard Penn use before.

Strouse wrote "No More," which begins, "I ain't bowin' down/No more."

Shortly after it went into the show Martin Luther King, Jr., came to see it. When Davis introduced him to Strouse, King called the song his "all-time favorite."

The moment is a useful reminder of how central the musical theater once was to American culture. Now it is largely a key factor in New York's tourist business.

The memoir is full of funny anecdotes, juicy gossip (including the fact that Gower Champion, who had a habit of romancing his leading ladies, apparently had an affair with the "principal female lead" of "Hello, Dolly!") and a lot of valuable background for musical theater obsessives, comme moi-meme. Some of the most amusing anecdotes concern Alan Jay Lerner, with whom Strouse collaborated on the ill-fated "Dance A Little Closer," a musical version of "Idiot's Delight," a score for which I have the deepest affection. (When I do my nightclub act I will include two haunting songs from it, the title song and "There's Always One You Can't Forget.")

The title of the memoir, "Put On a Happy Face," takes on an ironic tone as Strouse discusses his lifelong bouts with depression, which he confronts in the form of an alter ego, his pudgy childhood self, a sad boy called Buddy.

The book, beautifully written, funny and touching, is a wonderful evocation of a great career.

