

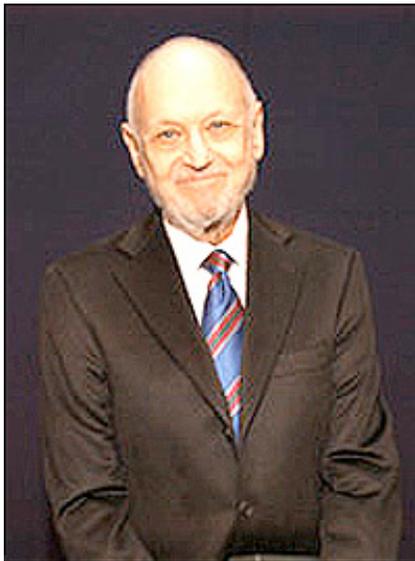
<http://www.playbill.com/news/article/114864.html>



05 Feb 2008

***Applause* for Composer Strouse: At 79, He's Got Concerts, a Memoir, a Website, and New Shows**

By Kenneth Jones



Charles Strouse

Charles Strouse, the Tony Award-winning composer of such classic musical theatre songs as "Tomorrow," "Once Upon a Time" and "Put on a Happy Face," will turn 80 years old on June 7, but the celebration has already begun — and will continue in 2008.

First up, the songwriter is the subject of a Feb. 6 Lincoln Center American Songbook concert at the Allen Room, *This Is the Life: Eric Comstock Salutes Charles Strouse @ 80*, featuring Comstock, vocalist Barbara Fasano and Strouse himself, with jazz musicians infusing his classic songs with fresh twists. Click [here](#) for more information.

On Feb. 7-10, his 1970 Tony Award-winning musical *Applause* (written with lyricist Lee Adams and librettists Betty Comden and Adolph Green) will be revived in concert by Encores! at City Center. Christine Ebersole stars in the role created by Bette Davis (in the film "All About Eve") and then by Lauren Bacall (to Tony-winning results in the musical).

How does "almost 80" feel? "Oh, yeah, they're making a lot of hay out of that," Strouse said Feb. 4, the start of a busy week.

Too much hay for his taste?

"Well, you know, a little bit, yes," he said. "I'm modest by nature. I'm not humble or anything, but I'm a little modest."

Nevertheless, a new Charles Strouse website (www.charlesstrouse.com) was unveiled in recent days; he penned "Put on a Happy Face: A Broadway Memoir" (Union Square Press), to be released in summer; and he's been in creative meetings recently with new collaborators Bob Martin and Casey Nicholaw, revising and fine-tuning his long-gestating musical comedy with lyricist Susan Birkenhead, *The Night They Raided Minsky's*. A Los Angeles bow is expected in 2008-09.

Need we mention that Roundabout Theatre Company has shown recent interest in his 1960 classic, *Bye Bye Birdie*? The Encores! revival of that smash (which gave the world "Put On a Happy Face," written with lyricist Adams) proved the show is ready for a major revival.

A new generation will be introduced to *Applause* at the Encores! performances. Although the show was a hit, winning the Best Musical Tony, and was seen in a TV version in the '70s and in a brief tour in the late 1990s, the juicy backstage musical tale of an aging actress named Margo Channing and her hungry assistant/rival Eve Harrington doesn't loom large in the public imagination, as *Annie* and *Birdie* do.

The project that resulted in 1970 was put together by producer Lawrence Kasha, but Strouse himself "was

running around with the idea for a number of years" before that, the composer told Playbill.com.

"I just loved the screenplay [to 'All About Eve']," Strouse said. "I think it's as close to a masterpiece as you get. I worked with [screenwriter-director] Joe Mankiewicz, I did music for one of his films, and we spoke about it a lot. I had the idea of Carol Lawrence and Ethel Merman [starring as Eve and Margo] when they were in their heyday. I brought it to [director-producer] Hal Prince. I always remembered he said, 'Nobody's interested in the emotional problems of actors.' I always carried that with me."

Kasha pitched it to Bacall, who had never done a musical before, and Strouse and Adams played four songs for her. She liked them and said she'd do it. "She was very up front, which was her nature," Strouse said.

By Playbill.com's count, Strouse & Adams have penned songs for no fewer than nine produced musicals: seven on Broadway, one (*I and Albert*) in London, and one (*Marty*) in regional theatre. Their musical version of Theodore Dreiser's "An American Tragedy" is on the shelf at the moment.

"We've always been very closely collaborative," Strouse said of their working process. "I'm that way, kind of, with everyone, but I'm more married to Lee, in a sense. That is, we gave and took from one another and argued like married people. I still have that closeness to him. One of the reasons we don't work much today is that he leads a healthier life than I do. He likes sitting around in the country and reading. I don't — I'm lost unless I'm composing."

Did they sit in a room together and write songs?

"More than anybody I can think of that I've worked with...I very often would put a song down on tape a song," Strouse said. "I would play him a tune. He was very sensitive to it, very free to be critical. I would say that was the secret of Lee's and my working together and being 'married,' so to speak: That he was very open with me. If he didn't like it, or if he did, he would say, 'Can't we do the middle section faster...?' or something."

Strouse represents a community of post-Rodgers and Hammerstein musical theatre composers still shamelessly addicted to writing potentially melodic show tunes that pump oxygen into musical comedy plots. Think "Put on a Happy Face" from *Birdie* or "Nightlife" from *All American* or "This Is the Life" and "Stick Around" from *Golden Boy* or "N.Y.C." from *Annie* or the title number from *Applause* or "You've Got Possibilities" from *It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman*.. There's no tune like a show tune.

"I love them," he said. "I'm sometimes embarrassed that I love them so much, but I do."

Strouse quickly added that he loves writing in many musical idioms and plunging into deeper dramatic depths. He points to the sophisticated colors of the musical *Rags*, a score (with lyrics by Stephen Schwartz) cherished by musical theatre fans for its ambition (jazz, ragtime, klezmer, Yiddish lullaby, Irish tune and more all find a home there). The lesser-known *An American Tragedy* and *Marty* flirt with richer sounds than are heard in his primary-color musical comedies.

More easily in reach, listen to the volatile, bitter, anxious music and lyrics of "Welcome to the Theatre," Margot's expose of the underbelly of showbiz, which ends the first act of *Applause*..

"It's the best first-act ending I've ever been associated with," Strouse said.

On the edge of age 80, Strouse looks to be starting his own second act.

