



June 6, 2008

The Party's on the Strouse

Had a nice time on Monday night at the Paley Center for Media. I was on stage helping to celebrate the career of Charles Strouse, who turns 80 this weekend. I was asked to participate because I've seen most every original production of a Strouse show. "Though," I told the crowd on hand, "I didn't see *Six*, his 1970 off-Broadway musical in which he wrote a song criticizing critics - which is why I'm glad I missed it," I joked.

Pat Mitchell, the center's president and CEO, moderated. When she asked Strouse when he realized he had talent, he answered 15. That cued me to mention that I too was 15 when I realized he had talent, for it's when I saw *Bye Bye Birdie* on stage. (I'd later add that few people have done as much to get kids interested in musicals: *Bye Bye Birdie* brought musical theater awareness to my generation, and *Annie* to the subsequent one.)

Mitchell asked me to typify and describe "A Strouse tune." What I first mentioned was that Strouse is so adept at writing for a specific time period. You want turn of the century? There's the score of *Rags*. The '20s? Note "Kids" from *Bye Bye Birdie*, in which Harry McAfee uses the "rock music" of his youth - the Charleston - to complain about the '50s rock music. The '30s? "You're Never Fully Dressed without a Smile." The '40s? "Who's That Girl?" from *Applause* has the appropriate boogie-woogie. '50s and early '60s? *Bye Bye Birdie*. And when the '60s were about to turn darker, it was Strouse who provided Broadway with its first black power anthem in "No More" in *Golden Boy*.

I stopped there, but I could have continued with the '70s sound of *Applause*, and '80s punk in *Bring Back Birdie*. Instead, I turned to what makes Strouse's melodies distinctive. I talked about what I called "The Bounce Factor." Don't you agree that many of his melodies indeed do bounce: "Put on a Happy Face." "It's a Hard Knock Life." "Melt Us." The title songs to *Applause*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *I and Albert*, *It's a Bird ... It's a Plane ... It's Superman*, and *A Broadway Musical*.

Don't know the last one? You're pardoned; the show only ran one performance. But get *A Visit with Charles Strouse*, which DRG released on video, and you'll hear this fetchingly bouncy melody that ends with the immortal Lee Adams' lyrics about a Broadway musical: "And when it works, forget the jerks, who said it couldn't go, for there's nothin' like a Broadway show." (And there isn't.)

I had meant to say that "And when you write melodies that bounce, you have checks that don't" - but forgot to, because I moved on to the many blues songs that Strouse has excellently penned. "Lorna's Here" and "While the City Sleeps" from *Golden Boy* each has a distinctive blues feeling, as does "Look Who's Alone Now" from *Nick & Nora*. Then I went onto *The Beautiful Songs*, including "Once upon a Time" and "I Want to be with

You.” “In fact,” I mentioned, “when a writer was doing a story on ‘The Most Romantic Song from a Musical,’ I named ‘Blame It on the Summer Night’ from Rags.” (Michael Dale of Broadway World later wrote me and said that he thought it could have been the Sexiest Song from a musical, but not the most romantic. Yeah, that’s me, never able to tell the difference between love and sex.)

En route, Strouse told some fun-filled stories, including his almost-knock-down, drag-out fight with Warren Beatty over a Bonnie and Clyde disagreement. Perhaps this will be in his book *Put on a Happy Face: A Broadway Memoir*, which comes out next month. (Full disclosure: My girlfriend, Linda Konner, is a literary agent, and she sold it to Union Square Books.)

Tell you what Strouse said that I didn’t know: That when he and Lee Adams began work on *Birdie*, Adams was working as a weatherman. “Ah,” I said. “Now I understand why the first song in *Golden Boy* starts, ‘Summer; not a bit of breeze.’” My buddy Matthew Murray did one better when I told him of this: “Why didn’t you just say, ‘Gray skies are going to clear up?’”

Of course, because this was the Paley Center, there were plenty of Strouse clips from stage and screen. While there was a big screen behind us which the audience could see, Strouse and I had a small TV monitor at our feet where we could view the clips, too. More than one person later told us that the light from the screen allowed them to see our faces as we watched, and we both looked quite transfixed. How could we not be, with Sammy Davis, singing “Stick Around” from *Golden Boy*; the Muppets doing “Take 10 Terrific Girls, but Only 9 Costumes” from *The Night They Raided Minsky’s*; and – most fascinating of all -- a different recording of Carroll O’Connor and Jean Stapleton singing “Those Were the Days,” in a pilot when the show wasn’t yet called *All in the Family*, but *Till Death Us Do Part* (the title of the British show from which it was adapted). Stapleton, by the way, didn’t enunciate the word “LaSalle” any better on that take than she did in the one that million watched for years on end.

There was a generous selection from *Annie* on the 1977 Tonys. And from my seat, I could see the look on Andrea McArdle’s face, as the first Broadway *Annie* relived the most significant time in her youth from a front-row seat. How she beamed when she saw herself sing “Tomorrow,” the orphans do “You’re Never Fully Dressed without a Smile,” and “Easy Street” with Bob Fitch, Barbara Erwin, and – last but hardly least – Dorothy Loudon.

Later McArdle told me that she and Loudon always got along well – “though Dorothy did warn me in advance that if I moved an iota while she was doing a piece of business or delivering a funny line, it wouldn’t be pretty.” McArdle also mentioned they did have a few harsh words when someone brought a pin-ball machine to the Alvin, but we got interrupted by well-wishers, and I never got the full story.

But before that happened, McArdle joined Strouse at the piano, where they sang “I Don’t Anything but You” and “N.Y.C.” She’s still sensational, and from my seat, I could see both *Annie* bookwriter Thomas Meehan and lyricist-director Martin Charnin sitting in the second row, each visibly moved. Strouse also sang a new song called “My City,” about New York and all the pleasures it offers among the pain. This evening proved his point very well. Happy birthday, Charles.

