

## **Merrily We Roll Along**

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by George Furth

Despite a savage reception and a disappointingly brief sixteen-performance run, Stephen Sondheim's *Merrily We Roll Along* has proven its worth and merrily rolled along to a happy and acclaimed afterlife.

*Merrily We Roll Along* was based on George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's 1934 play of the same title, which itself was an unwieldy and unsuccessful attempt to break new ground. "A puzzling but interesting novelty," said critic Bruns Mantle at the time. The play examines eighteen years in the life of playwright Richard Niles, who achieves professional success but personal failure by continually compromising his principles. The other two main characters are his old friends, who grow with and apart from him: A principled painter named Jonathan Crale, and an alcoholic writer named Julia Glenn. (The latter was patterned on writer [Dorothy Parker](#), who was apparently not amused by the portrait. There was also a self-absorbed composer of musical comedies and concertos named Sam Frankl, modeled after Kaufman's frequent collaborator [George Gershwin](#).)

While this tale was already timeworn, Kaufman and Hart had a trick up their sleeves. Rather than proceeding in linear fashion, or by using a flashback—even then a familiar device—authors chose to work backward. The play opened in 1934 with Niles at forty, his life in turmoil. The plot proceeded in reverse, showing various key moments in his life (set in nine different years); and ended at the beginning, with his idealistic high school valedictory speech in 1916. "To thine own self be true," is his motto, a creed he broke again and again over the course of the play."

In 1981, the Kaufman and Hart play, this almost fifty-year-old failure, seemed unlikely source material for the next Stephen Sondheim musical. The composer/lyricist and his director/producer, Harold Prince, had collaborated on five ground-breaking (if not necessarily lucrative) musicals since 1970: *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, *Pacific Overtures*, and *Sweeney Todd*. Prince, at fifty-three, wanted to do a musical about young people. Searching for a suitable property, Prince came up with *Merrily*, which had opened and closed when he was only six.

Prince fixed on *Merrily* to serve as his "youth" show, fashioning the material to suit actors at the young end of the twenty-year age spectrum. Thus, Prince, Sondheim, and librettist George Furth fell into the trap of fitting the material to the concept, rather than finding a concept to fit the material. This turned out to be a fatal miscalculation. Sondheim addressed the situation in a 1995 interview: "I think the major problem was the production and the casting, and we were all responsible for it—that wasn't just Hal." *Merrily* quickly shuttered, effectively ending the Sondheim-Prince years.

A new and revised version opened under James Lapine's direction in June 1985 at the La Jolla Playhouse in California. Several important changes were made to the show; still more alterations were made for subsequent productions, until *Merrily* was finally "set"

with the York Theatre production in 1994. The last production at London's Donmar Warehouse (2000), directed by Michael Grandage, won the Olivier Award for Best Musical—a far cry from the original *Merrily's* ignominious demise.

The Kennedy Center's new production marks the show's first major large-scale mounting—in a Broadway-sized theater, with a full set—since the original. *Merrily We Roll Along* has come full circle, revealing itself as a provocative modern-day musical of enormous strength, intricate theatricality, and—in Sondheim's soaring melodies—great beauty.

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Find out about the Kennedy Center's production of [Merrily We Roll Along](#).

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### Synopsis:

Sondheim's musical adaptation of the Kaufman and Hart play transforms the story of three successful people looking back on their lost friendship. Frank, Mary, and Charley grew up to realize their dreams and goals, but may have paid a greater price than they anticipated. Frank's anguished question—"Why?"—begins the journey backwards in time, recalling rivalries, jealousies, triumphs, failures, and loves both unrequited and reciprocal, as the three seek to discover how they got from "there to "here." *Merrily We Roll Along* tells a masterful tale of three remarkable people reflecting on years of aspiration and reality, and dreams both fulfilled and lost.

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### Things to think about:

Kaufman and Hart chose to present the plot of *Merrily We Roll Along* in an innovative way—from the end to the beginning. Can you think of other ways to present a plot on stage (i.e., use of narration, flashbacks)?

Sondheim and Prince's first production of *Merrily We Roll Along* was unsuccessful because the material was fitted to the concept, rather than the concept to the material. Look at other musicals by Sondheim. What elements were driving the production (i.e., the script, music, lyrics, characters, time period in history)?

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