

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum

A Musical Comedy
By
Stephen Sondheim



Fort Wayne Civic Theatre
IN THE WINGS
Arts-in-Education Program
Study Guide

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About the Authors

Burt Shevelove (Book), with Larry Gelbart, created programs for television's top comedians in the 1950's. Their writing for such stars as Art Carney, Red Buttons, Bob Hope, and Sid Caesar won numerous Emmy Awards. Before **...Forum**, Mr. Shevelove's theatrical resume was short. He had directed **Small Wonder**, a small Broadway revue to which he also contributed material; and he also directed a revival of Cole Porter's **Kiss Me, Kate** in 1956. After **...Forum**, he temporarily abandoned writing in favor of directing. Among his directorial credits: **Too Much Johnson**, **The Butter and Egg Man**, **Hallelujah, Baby**, and the immensely successful 1971 revival of the 1925 musical **No, No, Nanette**. In addition, he directed the 1973 Los Angeles/Broadway revival of **...Forum**. In 1974, Shevelove returned to adapting the classics with Stephen Sondheim, and also returned to Yale (where he had done his graduate work) with an adaptation of Aristophanes **The Frogs**. This well respected, but seldom-performed work was originally performed in the university's Olympic-sized swimming pool. He went on to direct **Sondheim: A Musical Tribute** in 1973 and **Rodgers and Hart** in 1975. His 1980 musical, **Happy New Year** (which he wrote and directed) lasted only 17 performances. Burt Shevelove died in London in 1982, as he was preparing to direct a musical version of **The Front Page**. He was 66 years of age.

Larry Gelbart (Book), before **...Forum**, had, in addition to his television writings, been the author of two films (**The Notorious Landlady** and **Fair Game**), and had provided the book for **The Conquering Hero**, a musical which ran only eight performances. Since **...Forum**, most of Mr. Gelbart's activity has been in film and television. His film scripts include **Little Me**, **Oh God**, and **Tootsie**. He was also the originator, writer and co-producer of the long-running television series **M*A*S*H**. For the theatre, he adapted Ben Johnson's classic **Volpone** into the hit play **Sly Fox**, starring George C. Scott. **Mastergate**, a political satire of the Iran-Contra hearings, was originally produced at Harvard's American Repertory Theatre in 1989, and was brought to New York the following year. In late 1989, Gelbart scored another major triumph on Broadway with the musical, **City of Angels**, for which he wrote the libretto/book. A spoof of film-noir detective movies and of Hollywood in general, the show boasted music by Cy Coleman and lyrics by David Zippel. It won numerous Tony Awards, including "Best Musical of 1990." More recently, Gelbart has written the television movies, **Barbarians at the Gate** and **Weapons of Mass Destruction**. He published a book of essays, "Laughing Matters," in 1998; and continues to write for both stage and screen.

Stephen Sondheim (Music & Lyrics) was something of a child prodigy, mastering the piano by age 10, and writing his own music in his teens. His mentor was Oscar Hammerstein II (lyricist of **Oklahoma! The Sound of Music**, etc.), whose son was a friend of young Sondheim's. He began his Broadway career as a lyricist, providing words for Leonard Bernstein's music in **West Side Story**, and for Jule Styne's **Gypsy**. **A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum** offered Sondheim his first opportunity to write both music and lyrics. He followed up **...Forum** with **Anyone Can Whistle**; and by stepping into the shoes of Oscar Hammerstein to write the lyrics for Richard Rodgers' **Do I Hear a Waltz?** In 1970, he began collaboration with director/producer Harold Prince that produced **Company**, **Follies**, **A Little Night Music**, and **Merrily We Roll Along**, and **Sweeney Todd**. His other works include **Pacific Overtures**, **Sunday in the Park with George**, **Into the Woods**, **Assassins**, and the play **Getting Away with Murder**. **Saturday Night**, Sondheim's never produced 1952 musical was finally produced in 1997. Now in his 70's, Sondheim is currently enjoying success with revivals of past works (**Follies**, **Assassins**, **Into the Woods**), as well as continuing work on his long-gestating musical, **Wise Guys**.

History of the Musical

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, one of Broadway's most brilliantly conceived musical comedies, opened in May, 1962. Inspired by the plays of the second century B.C. Roman playwright, Titius Maccius Plautus, **...Forum** is gloriously free of serious moments. The show's action, dialogue, songs, and dances are the essence of classic farce.

The show, which broke from musical comedy tradition by using only one stage set and few changes of costume, has a book by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Using characters and incidents from the twenty-two surviving plays of Plautus, who is still considered the father of all theatrical comedy, the creative team wove an ingenious new plot with an array of hilarious subplots and hysterical complications.

A marathon vaudeville in togas, **...Forum** was greeted with ecstatic enthusiasm from critics and audiences alike when it debuted on Broadway. The original production starred Zero Mostel as Pseudolus, Jack Gilford as Hysterium, David Burns as Senex, Ronald Holgate as Miles Gloriosus, and John Carradine as Lycus. Legendary director George Abbott, choreographer Jack Cole, and director/choreographer Jerome Robbins (who came in at the last minute to stage the opening number, "Comedy Tonight") guided the show toward an impressive win of six Tony Awards. That original production ran 966 performances, and spawned numerous touring and international productions.

The relatively unsuccessful movie version, starring Zero Mostel, Jack Gilford, Buster Keaton and Phil Silvers, was released in the fall of 1966. Then, in 1972, Phil Silvers (finally taking the role of Pseudolus, which had originally been written with him in mind) starred in a successful Los Angeles/New York revival. It was on it's way to a healthy run when Silvers ill-health (and eventual death) forced it to close. Other, smaller, productions have starred the likes of Milton Berle, Mickey Rooney, and Jose Ferrar. Then, in 1996, Broadway audiences were brought to their knees with laughter again by a new production of **...Forum** directed by Jerry Zaks and starring Nathan Lane. This production, which also garnered numerous Tony nominations and wins, played 715 performances. During it's run, Lane was replaced by Whoopi Goldberg and David Alan Grier.

The Plot

Prologue

Prologus enters and welcomes the audience to the theatre, which, he says, is a temple where the gods of comedy and tragedy are worshiped. After announcing that tonight's presentation is a comedy, he goes on to explain the particulars of what is to follow ("Comedy Tonight"). The curtains part to reveal the set as Prologus introduces the characters and the location for the play: the street in Rome on which sit, in a row, the houses of Erronius, Senex and Lycus. Prologus explains that Erronius is an old man searching abroad for his son and daughter, who were stolen as infants by pirates; his house is stage left. Lycus is a buyer and seller of beautiful women; his house is stage right. Senex, also an old man, lives with his wife, Domina, their son, Hero, and their slave, Pseudolus, the part that Prologus will be playing; they occupy the house stage center. Prologus calls the entire company to the stage and they all finish "Comedy Tonight."

Act I

As the play begins, Hero is on the balcony of his house while Philia is at the window of Lycus's house. Senex comes out of his house and tells the Proteans (now dressed as slaves) that he and Domina are about to begin their journey to visit her mother in the country. Domina, who is clearly the ruler of the house, calls for Hysterium and Pseudolus. Pseudolus is to be responsible for their son, Hero, taking special care to keep him away from women, particularly those of the shameful house of Lycus. Hysterium is then appointed Slave-in-Chief, with instructions that his word is to be followed in their absence.

As his parents leave and Hysterium goes off in search of Pseudolus. Hero tells the audience he's in love ("Love, I Hear"). When Pseudolus returns after a failed attempt to gain his freedom, Hero tells Pseudolus he is in love with a girl from the house of Lycus. When Pseudolus explains to Hero he could never afford a courtesan from the house of Lycus, Hero announces he would give anything for this girl. Pseudolus asks for his freedom if he can arrange for Hero and his love to be together. Pseudolus, with encouragement from Hero, imagines all the things freedom would mean for him: the ability to vote and own property, as well as the responsibility for providing for himself ("Free").

Pseudolus approaches Marcus Lycus and convinces him to let them view the courtesans. Each appears as Lycus describes their charms to Pseudolus, who looks to Hero to find the one he is in love with. After rejecting Tintinabula, Panacea, the Geminae, and Vibrata, Pseudolus becomes captivated with Gymnasia. Hero then has to remind Pseudolus of their agreement. As the courtesans go back in the house, Philia again appears at the window; Hero points her out to Pseudolus as the one they are looking for. Pseudolus asks Lycus about her, and Lycus explains she has already been sold to Miles Gloriosus, a great captain, who is coming later in the day to claim her. After Lycus tells Pseudolus Philia is from Crete, Pseudolus invents a story, telling Lycus Crete is suffering from a plague; Philia will soon die. Lycus, believing Pseudolus and afraid the plague is contagious, agrees to let Pseudolus look after Philia in Senex's house until the captain arrives.

Pseudolus goes to the harbor in search of a way out of their dilemma, leaving Philia and Hero together. After introducing themselves, Philia tells Hero she was never taught to add or spell or cook. Her only talent is that she is lovely. Hero quickly agrees with her ("Lovely"). After the song, they kiss and profess their love for each other. Hysterium enters and becomes very nervous when he sees them embracing; he gets more upset when he learns Philia is from the house of Lycus. Pseudolus enters just as Hysterium begins calling for him. After sending Philia and Hero off, Pseudolus first tries to tell Hysterium she is his daughter. When Hysterium refuses to believe that, Pseudolus tells him the truth about the soon-to-arrive captain. Hysterium announces he will tell the boy's parents, but changes his mind when Pseudolus reminds him that as Slave-in-Chief, Hysterium will be held responsible. When the two young lovers return, Pseudolus announces his plan: they will go to the harbor with their belongings and take a ship to a far-off island where they can be free from all cares ("Pretty Little Picture"). They are about to go, but Philia reminds them all she is duty-bound to honor the contract with Miles Gloriosus. Pseudolus, realizing he will lose his chance for freedom if Philia does not run away with Hero, puts Philia in Senex's house to wait for the captain, whose arrival Pseudolus will announce with three knocks on the door.

Pseudolus decides upon a plan: he steals Hysterium's potion book in order to make a powerful sleeping potion for Philia; Pseudolus will tell Lycus and the captain she has died from the plague; Hero will then take the body away to the waiting boat. As Pseudolus goes off to find the sweat of a mare (a crucial ingredient for the potion), Senex returns. After calling out for Pseudolus, Senex goes to the door of his house and knocks three times. Philia opens the door, she assumes Senex he is the captain. She throws herself at him just as Pseudolus returns with a vial of mare's sweat. Philia exits back into the house. When Senex asks Pseudolus who she is, he tells him that she is the new maid. Senex and Pseudolus then discuss the joys of having a maid. They are eventually joined by Hysterium and Lycus ("Everybody Ought To Have a Maid").

Before Senex can enter his house to meet Philia, Pseudolus sprinkles some mare's sweat on Senex and convinces the old man he needs a bath after his long trip. Senex goes off to the empty house of Erronius to take his bath and wait for Philia. A very nervous Hysterium returns in time to see Senex enter Erronius' house. Hysterium tries to calm himself after Pseudolus goes off to make the sleeping potion ("I'm Calm"). He has almost calmed down when Senex yells for him; Hysterium runs into the center house.

By chance, the nearly blind Erronius returns home moments later. Senex (who is still waiting in Erronius's house for the arrival of Philia) begins to sing. Hysterium tells the startled Erronius his house is haunted. Erronius demands that Hysterium find a soothsayer. Pseudolus hears this and introduces himself to Erronius as a soothsayer. With Hysterium frantically gesturing behind Erronius, Pseudolus guesses the nature of Erronius' long trip abroad and tells him he can find his long-lost children. Erronius gives Pseudolus his ring, copies of which are worn by his children. Pseudolus then sends Erronius off to circle the entire city of Rome - with its seven hills - seven times; this will rid the house of ghosts.

Senex enters and sends Hysterium off to make a bath just as Hero enters looking for Philia. She steps onto the balcony, and Senex and Hero both realize that the other is watching her. This leads each of them, first, to deny the possibility that the other could be interested in her, then to find reasons why she would be more interested in the other ("Impossible"). Senex sends Hero to the public baths as Hysterium announces Senex's bath is ready.

As Pseudolus is about to finish preparing the sleeping potion, a Protean (dressed as a soldier) arrives looking for the house of Marcus Lycus. He announces the imminent arrival of the captain, Miles Gloriosus, who is only half a league away. After the soldier leaves, Lycus and Pseudolus panic. Pseudolus decides he will tell the captain the center house, the house of Senex, belongs to Lycus. Two soldiers arrive carrying the contract between Lycus and the captain, and announce the captain is a quarter of a league away. Pseudolus, now claiming to be Lycus, tells them he intends to stand behind the contract. Hysterium enters calling Pseudolus; Pseudolus tells the soldiers his name is really Pseudolus Marcus Lycus and Hysterium is his eunuch. He tells Hysterium he deserted from the army long ago, and the soldiers are looking for him; Hysterium agrees to call him Lycus. Pseudolus instructs Hysterium to give Philia a few drops of the potion in a beaker of wine; at Pseudolus's command, Hysterium is to carry out her seemingly lifeless body. The soldiers leave after Pseudolus assures them the captain's bride will be ready when he arrives; Pseudolus tells Lycus to pose the courtesans informally in front of the center house. Everyone stops and watches as Erronius enters and exits after his first trip around the city.

Pseudolus sends Lycus into the house as a fanfare announcing the captain's arrival is heard. Pseudolus greets the captain and introduces himself as Lycus. Praising himself continuously, Miles Gloriosus demands to see his bride ("Bring Me My Bride"). Pseudolus calls for Philia to be brought out, but Hysterium enters and tells him Philia won't drink the wine for religious reasons. Pseudolus goes into the house with Hysterium to make Philia drink the wine. When Miles again demands his bride be brought out to him, Pseudolus exits the house and announces Philia has escaped. When Miles reminds Pseudolus (still pretending to be Lycus) the money for Philia has already been paid, Pseudolus drops his disguise and tells Miles Lycus will pay him back his money. Lycus and Hysterium enter and insist Pseudolus is Lycus. Miles Gloriosus, now in a rage, threatens to kill Pseudolus. After begging time for one word, Pseudolus yells, "Intermission."

Act II

After being calmed down, Miles orders Pseudolus, accompanied by his soldiers, to find Philia and bring her to him in the center house. Pseudolus tells Hysterium to bring Philia up to the roof of the house. Everyone stops and watches as Erronius arrives and exits after his second trip around the city.

Senex, still in the house of Erronius and fresh from his bath, tells Hysterium to bring Philia to him; he also asks Hysterium to bring any left-over passion potion.

Pseudolus succeeds in losing the soldiers accompanying him and tells the audience his plan will still work if he can find a body. After he runs off to find the body-snatcher, Domina arrives. She runs into Hysterium, who is on his way to Senex with the passion potion. Domina tells Hysterium she still loves Senex despite her suspicion Senex is chasing other women

("That Dirty Old Man"). Domina, who is the daughter of a general, doesn't object when Hysterium tells her he has invited Miles and his men into the house. Miles, who thinks he is in the house of Lycus, believes Domina is an older courtesan.

Pseudolus returns and pulls Hysterium into the house of Lycus as Senex, still in Erronius's house, asks Philia, in the center house, to come to him. Philia runs into Hero on her way to Erronius's house and tells him her revenge against being taken by the captain will be to think of Hero while making love to Miles ("That'll Show Him"). Pseudolus enters and sends Hero and Philia into the garden to avoid being seen by Miles. He also discovers Philia will go with Hero if Hero obtains the captain's contract. He then calls for Hysterium to come out of the house of Lycus. Hysterium enters wearing a virgin's dress and wig. He complains about the costume as Pseudolus convinces him he must impersonate the captain's dead courtesan. When Hysterium continues to protest, Pseudolus tells him how pretty he'll look as a dead virgin ("Lovely - Reprise"). Pseudolus tells him to lie down and places Erronius's ring on Hysterium's finger for decoration.

Pseudolus calls out to the captain and his soldiers he has found the dead girl. Pseudolus offers to dispose of the body, but Miles insists on conducting a funeral service ("Funeral"). Miles then places the contract on the body. When Miles is about to kiss the body, Pseudolus tells him 'she' died from the plague in Crete. Miles, who has just returned from there, knows there is no plague. He leans over the body and declares "this girl is alive!" Hysterium jumps up and runs off, followed by Pseudolus and the soldiers.

Much running about and many scenes of mistaken identity follow: Senex mistakes Hysterium for Philia; Hysterium mistakes Domina for Philia; Pseudolus mistakes Domina for Hysterium. Finally, Domina runs into Senex, and Pseudolus, who has found the contract, gives it to Hero. Erronius enters after his third trip around the city and sees Hysterium, still in the virgin's clothes, running out of his house. Erronius, after mistaking Hysterium for the ghost who has been haunting his house, sees the ring on Hysterium's finger, and thinks Hysterium is his long-lost daughter. Senex arrives and announces Hysterium is his new maid. Miles enters and claims Hysterium as his virgin. Hysterium's wig falls off and everyone's identity is revealed. An angry Miles is again about to kill Pseudolus, who asks to be allowed to kill himself. He tells Hysterium to bring him what he thinks is the sleeping potion; Hysterium, however, brings him the passion potion. Lycus enters with Philia and presents her to Miles. When Erronius mentions his confusion about the ring on Hysterium's finger, it is revealed Miles and Philia each have identical rings - they are brother and sister, and Erronius is their father: Erronius is finally reunited with his children. Hero tells his parents of his wish to marry Philia. The entire ensemble joins Pseudolus as he explains everyone has gotten what they have been looking for ("Comedy Tonight - Reprise").

Synopsis of Scenes & Musical Numbers.

Time: A day in Spring, two hundred years before the Christian Era

Place: A street in Rome in front of the Houses of Lycus, Senex, and Erronius

Musical Numbers

Act I

"Overture".....	Orchestra
"Comedy Tonight".....	Proteans & Company
"Love, I Hear".....	Hero
"Free".....	Pseudolus & Hero
"The House of Marcus Lycus".....	Lycus, Pseudolus & Courtesans
"Lovely".....	Philia & Hero
"Pretty Little Picture".....	Pseudolus, Hero, Philia
"Everybody Ought to Have a Maid".....	Senex, Pseudolus, Hysterium & Lycus
"I'm Calm".....	Hysterium
"Impossible".....	Senex & Hero
"Bring Me My Bride".....	Miles Gloriosus, Pseudolus, Courtesans & Proteans

Act II

"That Dirty Old Man".....	Domina
"That'll Show Him".....	Philia
"Lovely" Reprise.....	Pseudolus & Hysterium
"Funeral Sequence".....	Miles Gloriosus, Pseudolus, Courtesans & Proteans
"Comedy Tonight" Reprise.....	Full Company

Characters

- **Prologus:** A Roman actor who appears in the first scene to introduce the setting and characters before assuming the character of Pseudolus.
- **The Proteans:** Four male actors adept at comedy, song, and dance who assume a variety of roles throughout the play, including soldiers, eunuchs, and pirates.
- **Senex:** A stereotypical "dirty old man", Senex is a wealthy Roman patrician who is constantly getting himself into trouble with his domineering wife.
- **Domina:** Senex's aristocratic but overbearing and controlling wife. She spends her days bossing around slaves, babying Hero, and henpecking Senex.
- **Hero:** The naïve young son (20ish) of Senex & Domina. He is Pseudolus' master and is in love with Philia.
- **Hysterium:** The extremely nervous Slave-in-Chief of the house of Senex. He "lives to serve", but spends most of his time trying to keep Senex out of trouble and Pseudolus in check
- **Lycus:** The greedy and unscrupulous owner of "The House of Marcus Lycus", a business dealing in the buying and selling of beautiful women
- **Pseudolus:** A playful and comic, but wily and cunning slave in the house of Senex. He is constantly scheming to gain his freedom, and will stop at nothing to reach that goal.
- **The Courtesans (Tintinabula, Panacea, The Geminae, Vibrata, and Gymnasia):** The current "residents" on display in the House of Marcus Lycus.
- **Philia:** A lovely but dim-witted young virgin in the House of Marcus Lycus.
- **Errorius:** A senile old man. He is the next door neighbor of Senex, but has spent many years abroad in search of his children, who were stolen in infancy by pirates.

About Titus Maccius Plautus

Sometime around 254 B.C., in the tiny mountain village of Sarsina, ancient Rome's best-known playwright was born-- Titus Maccius Plautus. Born "Plautus" or "splay-foot", he apparently managed to escape his backwoods village at a young age--perhaps by joining one of the itinerant theatrical troupes, which commonly traveled from village to village performing short boisterous farces.

We know, however, that at some point the young Plautus gave up his acting career to become a Roman soldier, and this is probably when he was exposed to the delights of the Greek stage, specifically Greek New Comedy and the plays of Menander. Sometime later, he tried his hand as a merchant, but at the age of 45, he found himself penniless and reduced to a wandering miller, trudging through the streets with a hand-mill, grinding corn for householders.

Meanwhile, translations of Greek New Comedy had come into vogue and Plautus, who remembered the comedies of Menander from his days as a soldier in Southern Italy, decided to try his hand at writing for the stage. His earliest plays, **Addictus** and **Saturio**, were written while he still made a living with his hand-mill. Soon, however, his comedies began to suit the public taste and Plautus was able to retire his hand-mill and devote himself to writing full-time. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Plautus' plays were not mere translations of Menander. He adapted the rough and tumble colloquy of the environments he knew best- the military camp and the marketplace- wild and boisterous like the Roman farces he may have performed in as a young man.

In those days, plays were never performed alone. They were presented at public celebrations and had to compete with chariot races, horse races, boxing matches, circuses, etc. Since a close translation of a play by the refined Menander would hold little interest for a rowdy Roman crowd, Plautus quickly parted company with the Greek original. He generally

took only the outline of the plot, the characters, and selected segments of dialogue, then stepped out on his own. His objective was to entertain. At all costs, he kept the pot of action boiling, the stream of gags and puns and cheap slapstick flowing; anything to make the audience laugh and keep them from peeking in on the boxing match next-door! To this end, Plautus often included scenes in song and dance. Unfortunately, the musical accompaniments to his plays have now been lost.

In all, Plautus composed approximately 130 pieces - 21 of which have survived to this day. He was eventually granted citizenship and given permission to assume three names like a trueborn Roman. The name he chose for himself was Titus Maccius ("clown") Plautus.

He continued to some extent the social satire of Aristophanes. His **Miles Gloriosus** refers to the imprisonment of the poet Naevius for satirizing the aristocracy. His **Cistellaria** alludes to the conflict with Carthage. **Epidicium** and **Aulularia** refer to the repeal of the puritanical Oppian Laws. And **Captivi** and **Bacchides** mention the wars in Greece and Magnesia. For the most part, however, he preferred the style of the more recent Greek writers like Menander. Along with his younger Roman counterpart, Terence, Plautus kept Greek New Comedy alive for later generations of theatregoers.

In addition to Gelbart, Shevelove and Sondheim, many later playwrights have adapted Plautus' works. His **Amphitryo** was the basis for Giraudoux's **Amphitryon 38. Menaechmi** or **The Menaechmus Twins** inspired, among others, Shakespeare's **The Comedy of Errors** and Rodgers' and Hart's **The Boys from Syracuse**. **The Pot of Gold** became Moliere's **The Miser**.

AISLE SAY Review of the 1996 Broadway Revival

Not much in musical theatre is totally foolproof, even the stuff you *remember* as foolproof. I remember, as a young songwriter having just written a genuine showstopper of a number that was soon to be performed, popping off to one of my mentors that people would "have to try very hard to screw it up." His response was to caution me against such *hubris*. "I have," he said, "seen everything from 'Summertime' to the Carousel 'Soliloquy' come to naught..." And in the ensuing years since that sobering warning, so have I. The flawed concept of a director, an inappropriately cast performer, an inept choreographer, bad lighting...any *number* of things can mitigate against a moment working, let alone a show. That's only one of the reasons why the business of making musicals is so hard.

Yet there are two shows that seem to persist in being impervious to damage. The first, and most indestructible, is **Guys and Dolls**, revived on Broadway in 1992. Coming up a close second is **A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum**, currently in revival at the St. James Theatre. Interestingly, both revivals were directed by Jerry Zaks—and as if to illustrate the point, his **Guys and Dolls** was wildly misconceived, while his **...Forum** is, for the most part right on target. And both revivals are/were stunning successes.

Probably the reason Zaks' **...Forum** works so well is precisely the reason his **Guys and Dolls** was so infuriating. The latter is a warm show, and Zaks had leached the heart out of it, rendering it cold and comic book-y. Meanwhile, **...Forum** is a piece for vaudevillians, based on the plays of Plautus. It isn't about heart; it's about belly laughs. It's just fine on its own, and yet it welcomes almost anything you can do to embellish it. Subsequently, Zaks can throw the kitchen sink at it - which occasionally he does - and it cheerily cooperates with the excess.

Another reason **...Forum** is so notable is the fact that it is the only musical farce ever produced that genuinely works. Indeed, librettists Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, and then-young composer/lyricist Stephen spent eight years getting it right prior to its 1962 Broadway premiere. Why should musical farce be so difficult, and why should **...Forum** be singular?

For one thing, farce is plot driven; musicals are character driven. Plot depends upon the machinations of events, dry information that is rarely (in and of itself) the stuff of songs. Characters, though, sing about feelings, ambitions, needs. Furthermore, even if you stop a farce plot to let the characters sing about themselves (as **...Forum** does), you have to do it in such a way that you don't incur audience impatience when you bring the show to a halt. More still...the stakes have to be high enough to care about and be worthy of song. Your average Feydeau door-slammer is too light a confection to bear the weight of musicalization.

But **...Forum**, despite its surface silliness, manages to be about something too. That's the secret. Pseudolus has a noble character-driven objective (freedom), and events get so tangled that the only alternative to getting what he wants...is death. Not only are the stakes high enough for the audience to care about...but the nobility of the hero keeps the farce from ever being mean-spirited.

An interesting aspect of this production is how—by accident or design—the casting and playing styles acknowledge the passage of time.

Originally, **...Forum** was a piece for vaudevillians, schtickmeisters from the Borscht Belt and comedy clubs, and extreme character types. Its original players included Mostel, Gilford, John Carradine, David Burns; an early 70s revival included Phil Silvers (the authors' original choice for the role), Nancy Walker, Mort Marshall and Carl Ballentine.

The above is an interesting list of players to contemplate for the following reason: Ballentine aside, they're all dead. That particular generation of comedy is almost entirely gone from the face of the earth, along with their particular sensibility and personality, preserved now only on record, on film...and in memory.

So Zaks (and, I assume, Sondheim and Gelbart had a hand too) has cast a mostly younger group—younger in spirit anyway. They don't reflect the music hall and Burlesque sensibility because that isn't their heritage...so they bring a more contemporary energy to it. The energy of the well-made, low-comedy sitcom. The performances are streamlined and sleeker, the touch a bit lighter and a tad more cerebral. (As *Hysterium*—compare the image of craggy, smoky voiced old timer Jack Gilford with that of the current *Hysterium*: round-cheeked, baby-faced Mark-Linn Baker. The 1962 performance was one of ineradicable persona; the current one a brilliant character actor's turn—and one of the best things in the show.)

This is especially true of Nathan Lane's Pseudolus. Though he does bridge the generation gap with the most sublime mugging, pratfalls and double-whammy takes, he's also a naughtier, more contemporary Pseudolus than Mostel or Silvers, reflecting his era in nuance. (E.g. In the opening number, he throws a doll, representing a baby, into the wings. At the performance I saw, he miscalculated: the doll bounced off the proscenium arch and back onto the stage. The audience reacted both to the symbolism—a doll-child hitting a wall still makes you think of a real child hitting a wall—and to the gaffe. What would Lane do? He picked up the doll, looked out into the house and said, "No babies were harmed in tonight's performance." Huge applause, he flung the doll offstage and continued. What's notable here is that the ad lib—a recognizable variation of "No animals were harmed in the filming of tonight's episode"—is a TV ad lib, and a nod to political correctness, reflecting our culture and the way we live now.)

The Sondheim score is as indestructible as the show itself; in its last Broadway revival, it picked up two songs ("Echo Song" and "Farewell") and dropped two ("Pretty Little Picture" and "That'll Show Him"). This version goes back to the original 1962 song roster, though "Pretty Little Picture" is eliminated. (It's my favorite song in the score, but I must admit that somehow, in the Zaks staging, it would seem superfluous and slow down the antics.)

The Gelbart-Shevelove libretto is also mind-bogglingly fresh. I thought I heard interpolated lines in this revival, went back to the original script and...lo and behold, there they were, so vital as to seem anachronistic thirty years later.

In any event, get yourself down to the St. James Theatre. Where for two and a half hours you can at least *ride* one. A foolproof one. With the fools to prove it...

Review by David Spencer, 1996

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum Review Questions

Name: _____ Date: _____

Character Identification

Directions: Read the following list of characters and then match them with the appropriate description below. Place the letter of the description beside the correct name. Each answer is used once.

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| _____ 1. Pseudolus | A. Has recently returned from Crete. |
| _____ 2. Hysterium | B. Accidentally drinks Hysterium's love potion. |
| _____ 3. Domina | C. Schemes to gain his freedom. |
| _____ 4. Senex | D. Had his children stolen from him by pirates. |
| _____ 5. Hero | E. Erronius' daughter. |
| _____ 6. Philia | F. Is convinced that Philia is his new maid. |
| _____ 7. Erronius | G. Is mistaken by Erronius for a young woman with a baby. |
| _____ 8. Lycus | H. Promises Pseudolus his freedom in exchange for Philia. |
| _____ 9. Miles Gloriosus | I. Pretends to be a leper. |

Multiple Choice

Directions: Select the best answer and place the letter on the line provided.

- _____ 10. The story takes place on a street in...
- ...Greece.
 - ...Rome.
 - ...Crete.
 - ...Sesame.
- _____ 11. What does Pseudolus tell Miles Philia has died of?
- Heart-attack.
 - Flu.
 - Plague
 - Hunger.

_____ 12. Philia believes that Senex is her master because...

- a. ...he has the contract.
- b. ...he tells her so.
- c. ...he knocks on the door twice.
- d. ...he knocks on the door thrice.

_____ 13. Why does Erronius believe he must run around the hills of Rome seven times?

- a. For exercise.
- b. To find his children.
- c. To rid his house of evil spirits.
- d. None of the above.

_____ 14. Which of these three characters are all dressed alike during the climax of Act II?

- a. Philia, Domina & Erronius.
- b. Philia, Panacea & Lycus.
- c. Philia, Hysterium & Domina.
- d. Senex, Pseudolus & Lycus.

True or False

Directions: Indicate "T" for true or "F" for false beside each statement.

_____ 15. Hero falls in love with Philia before even meeting her.

_____ 16. The play is, despite its title, a serious Greek tragedy.

_____ 17. Before leaving for the country, Domina leaves Pseudolus in charge of the household.

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum Review Questions

Answer Key

1. C
2. G
3. B
4. F
5. H
6. E
7. D
8. I
9. A
10. B
11. C
12. D
13. C
14. C
15. T
16. F
17. F