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Musicals are America's premiere contribution to the theatre and MTI is firmly committed to supporting and nurturing a musical theatre that will continue to develop and flourish into the next century.







Book by BURT SHEVELOVE AND LARRY GELBART  
Music and Lyrics by STEPHEN SONDHEIM

*Forum* Lyrics © 1962, by Stephen Sondheim.

*The MTI Study Guide for A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum* © 1995, 1996, MTI Enterprises, Inc.



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## **About A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum**

*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 plays of the second century B.C. Roman playwright Plautus, *Forum* is gloriously free of serious moments; the show's action, dialogue, songs, and dances are the essence of farce: their single goal is to keep the audience laughing deliriously from the first note of the opening number, "Comedy Tonight," until the final curtain comes down.

The show, which broke from musical comedy tradition by using only one stage set and no change of costumes, has a book by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, and music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Using characters and incidents from Plautus, who was the most popular comic playwright of his day, the creative team wove an ingenious new plot with an array of hilarious subplots and hysterical complications.

*Forum* is constantly in motion as characters whiz from one ridiculous situation to another and its score is full of wonderful songs which contribute mightily to the merriment and zany action. A marathon vaudeville performed in togas, the original production was directed by George Abbott with choreography and musical staging by Jack Cole. Produced by Harold Prince, it ran for 964 performances, proving that some of the world's oldest jokes can still delight us and cause us to laugh at ourselves. *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum* won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 1963.

## **The Characters In A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum**

PROLOGUS, an actor

SENEX, an old man

DOMINA, his wife

HERO, his son

HYSTERIUM, slave to SENEX and DOMINA

PSEUDOLUS, slave to HERO

ERRONIUS, an old man

MILES GLORIOSUS, a warrior

LYCUS, a buyer and seller of courtesans

TINTINABULA, a courtesan

PANACEA, a courtesan

THE GEMINAE, courtesans

VIBRATA, a courtesan

GYMNASIA, a courtesan

PHILIA, a virgin

THE PROTEANS

## Plot Synopsis

*(The play has 2 Acts. Within each act, the action is continuous and not separated into scenes.)*

### 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"). Prologus and the PROTEANS perform bits of pantomime and clowning during musical interludes that occur in the number. 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. We are next introduced to the Proteans, three actors who will be playing many characters, all in different costumes. Prologus calls the entire company to the stage and they all finish "Comedy Tonight."

### Act One

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, orders the slaves to fetch their bags and begins calling for HYSTERIUM and Pseudolus. After confirming that Hysterium has prepared her usual potions, she tells him that while they are gone, Pseudolus is to be responsible for their son, Hero. Pseudolus is to take special care to keep him away from women, particularly those of the shameful house of Lycus. Domina sends Senex into the house to fetch a gift intended for Domina's mother, a bust of Domina. Hysterium is then appointed Slave-in-Chief, with instructions that his word is to be followed in their absence.

Hero drifts toward the house of Lycus after his parents leave; Hysterium goes into the house calling for Pseudolus. Hero tells the audience he's in love ("Love, I Hear"). The Proteans (now dressed as citizens) enter holding Pseudolus by the arms; they tell Hero that Pseudolus, masquerading as a citizen, has cheated them in a gambling game. At Hero's insistence, Pseudolus repays the citizens; he tells Hero he was only trying to gain enough money to buy 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").

Lycus appears from his house and berates a Protean (now dressed as a Eunuch) for fanning the courtesans while they are wet. Lycus announces he is off to the Senate to blackmail a Senator.

Pseudolus takes Hero's money bag and jiggles it behind Lycus; the noise stops Lycus in his tracks. Pseudolus, after lying about where he got the money, asks to see the courtesans. Lycus summons the Eunuch to fetch them. They appear 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, who enters performing a dance. 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 tells him Philia seems healthy and spends the day smiling. Pseudolus says smiling is the signal death is near. 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; Pseudolus also threatens to mention Hysterium's collection of erotic pottery. 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; he has dropped Domina's bust and must now find a stonemason to replace the broken-off nose. 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's 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.

Erronius returns home after his journey abroad searching for his children; he has very bad eyesight and mistakes Hysterium (who has just exited the house carrying a chicken) for a young woman carrying a baby. 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's 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.

Lycus enters; when he asks Pseudolus about Philia's condition, Pseudolus tells him it has clearly deteriorated; she has progressed from smiling to laughing. 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. Lycus insists Pseudolus speak to the captain; Pseudolus agrees as Lycus runs off to move the courtesans from his own house to the center house. 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, orders his soldiers to raze the center house. Miles threatens to kill Pseudolus, and Pseudolus, after begging time for one word, yells, “Intermission.”

## Act Two

Prologus (this time played by Senex) welcomes the audience and recaps the action in Act One as the characters all enter and assume their positions from the end of Act One.

Miles, preparing to kill Pseudolus with his sword, orders a soldier to gag Pseudolus. Pseudolus escapes. He insists Philia must be nearby and he praises her beauty. Miles lowers his sword when Pseudolus tells him, “If you had been born a woman, you would have been she!” Miles orders Pseudolus, accompanied by his soldiers, to find Philia; she is to be brought to the center house where Miles and the rest of the soldiers will be waiting. 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. Miles gives Pseudolus one hour to bring Philia.

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 tells Hysterium the body-snatcher has died and someone has stolen the body. He pulls Hysterium into the house as Senex, still in Erronius’s house, asks Philia, in the center house, to come to him; she is unseen by the captain, who has just appeared on the balcony of the center house. Philia runs into Hero on her way to Erronius’s house; she 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. 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.

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 wants to cremate the body, but Pseudolus convinces him the Gods would be unhappy. 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”).

# Themes and Topics to Explore

## Questions and Assignments

Our study guide focuses on a wide-ranging list of themes and topics suggested by the style and content of *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum*.

Avenues for exploring each theme and topic are suggested in the form of:

**QUESTIONS:** Designed to prompt in-class discussions before and after viewing or reading the show.

**ASSIGNMENTS:** Designed to be researched and written out of class.

## **A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum as Drama**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- Tell the story of *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum* in one sentence.
- Tell the story in one paragraph — include all the main characters.
- Tell the story as it develops action by action through the musical.
- When did the action of *Forum* first grab your attention? When did you start to be interested, care about the characters and the plot?
- Turning points are key moments in our lives and the lives of characters. A turning point changes the course of our lives. What are the key turning points in *Forum*?
- What does the title of the show tell us about it? Can you think of another title for the show?

### **Assignment: Writing Prompt**

- Retell the basic story of *Forum*, setting it in another geographical location and in another time period. What impact does this retelling have on the basic structure of the plot?

## **A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum as Farce**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- Farce is a form of comedy which often places characters in improbable circumstances as a way of examining the human condition. The most popular of all dramatic forms for more than two thousand years, farce turns the difficulties, restrictions, frustrations and embarrassments of life into comedy. It creates tension in the audience and then explodes the tension with laughter. What are some of the difficulties, restrictions, frustrations and embarrassments encountered by characters in *Forum*? How is tension created? How and when it is released?
- Farce is intended to induce laughter by using exaggeration rather than by trying to imitate life. What are some examples of the way in which the authors of *Forum* exaggerate reality to lead their audience to laugh?
- Farce offers its audience reassurance that Man can take his beatings and survive by demonstrating unexpected strengths and coping skills. How does Pseudolus demonstrate this in *Forum*? Can you think of other comic heroes who demonstrate this?
- Essayist Henri Bergson says we laugh at the conflict between living and the rules we try to impose on it. Are there examples of this conflict in *Forum*? How do characters reject restrictive patterns in their lives and break limitations?
- Explore the nature of laughter. How is it physically produced? Do other animals laugh? What does it do to the physiology of our bodies?

- Due to its lack of subtlety, farce can be translated from one language to another more easily than other dramatic forms. What are some elements in the plot of *Forum* that are easily translated from one culture to another?

### Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts

- Read *The Doctor In Spite of Himself* (1666) and *Scapin* (1671) by Molière, who refined the farce form into a comedy of manners.
- Read farces such as *She Stoops to Conquer* by Oliver Goldsmith; *The Italian Straw Hat* by Eugene Labiche; *Hotel Paradise* by Georges Feydeau; *Charley's Aunt* by Brandon Thomas (and the musical it inspired — *Where's Charley?*); *The Waltz of the Toreadors* by Jean Anouilh; *The Matchmaker* by Thornton Wilder (and the musical it inspired — *Hello, Dolly!*); *Three Men On A Horse* by J.C. Holm and George Abbott; *Room Service* by John Murray and Allen Boretz; *June Moon* by George S. Kaufman and Ring Lardner; *Once In A Lifetime* and *You Can't Take It With You*, both by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart; *Teahouse of the August Moon* by John Patrick; and *Rumors* by Neil Simon.
- Although the elements of farce were evident in the theatre of the Greeks and Romans, the term “farce” is thought to have been first used in France when describing plays produced by “clercs de bazoche,” groups of notaries and law clerks who held annual festivals. The works presented by these groups were in sharp contrast to the morality plays produced by religious orders. Read the French farce *L'avocat Patelin* (the lawyer Patelin) which is an often translated 15th century work.
- In his autobiography, Charlie Chaplin wrote, “Because of our use of humor, we are less overwhelmed by the vicissitudes of life.” Write about a time when using humor helped you to deal with a difficult time in your own life? Write about a time when a funny play, or movie, or television show helped you get through a emotionally difficult period.

## The Dramatic Roots of Forum: Roman Comedy

### Questions and Discussion Prompts

- *Forum* was inspired by the writings of Titus Maccius Plautus, a writer of Roman comedy. In the third century B.C., Rome began to expand as a power; as it absorbed the Hellenic world, it also took over the Greek theatre and transformed it. By the second century A.D., the Greek theatre had disappeared and from then until the sixth century A.D. the theatre was primarily Roman. The first regular dramas which were imported from Greek colonies in Sicily and Northern Italy were performed in Rome in 240 B.C. From the vast number of Roman plays written, only the works of three dramatists survive: the nine tragedies of Seneca from the first century A.D., the six comedies of Terence and the twenty-one comedies of Plautus, which date from 205 to 160 B.C.
- The Roman comedies, which were the forerunners of *Forum*, often began with a Prologue. What is a Prologue? Describe *Forum's* Prologue. What do you learn about the style of this

piece, the mood of the evening ahead, and the characters from this Prologue? Plautus always included a few jokes in his Prologues to put the audience in a comic frame of mind. Is this true of *Forum's* Prologue?

- Following the prologue, the introductory scenes of a Roman comedy establish the present conditions out of which the comedy will grow. List the conditions established during the introductory scenes of *Forum*.
- The conclusion of a Roman comedy usually avoided sentiment by providing a final twist. Describe the final twist of *Forum*.

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- All Roman comedy is based on Greek New Comedy. Read about Greek New Comedy. What were its characteristics? When did it reach its zenith?
- Roman comedy abandoned the chorus found in Greek New Comedy and scattered the musical elements associated with the Greek chorus throughout the plays. Roman comedies included spoken scenes, scenes recited to musical accompaniment and formal songs. In the plays of Plautus, of the lines were accompanied by music and there were usually three songs. Although Terence did not use songs, music accompanied approximately half his dialogue. Find examples of modern musicals and operas that include spoken scenes, scenes performed with musical accompaniment and songs.
- In what form did the comedies of Plautus and Terence survive? Were the plays published, printed, copied by hand? How did they survive the centuries? Where are the oldest copies of the plays today?

## **Roman Comedy**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- The comedy of Plautus, like Greek New Comedy, does not deal with political and social problems but with everyday domestic affairs. Describe some of the affairs which are depicted in *Forum*.
- Plautus had little interest in social satire and tended to concentrate on ridiculous situations without exploring the significance inherent in them. Is there any exploration of social significance in *Forum*? Should there be?
- The plots of Roman comedy turn on misunderstandings of one kind or another. List the misunderstandings that occur in *Forum* because of mistaken identity, long-lost children, misunderstood motives, or deliberate deception.
- The action in Roman comedies takes place on the street. Because of this scenes happen on the street in *Forum* that should logically happen inside. Which scenes? Describe instances in *Forum* when characters have to explain what has happened indoors. How are the roofs of the houses used?

- On the basis of the events and situations in *Forum*, what aspects of human nature and the human experience that were comic in 254–184 B.C. are still comic now?

## The Characters in Forum

### Questions and Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between a major and minor character? Who are the major characters in *Forum*? Who are the minor characters?
- Who was your favorite character? Why?
- With which character did you identify most? Why? Did you recognize anything that reminded you of yourself in any of the characters?
- Did any of the characters in *Forum* undergo major changes in the course of the musical? Describe specific moments of change.
- Are the characters in *Forum* aware they are onstage?
- What dreams and problems do Pseudolus and Hero share?
- In Roman comedy, plot is more important than character; characters are only needed to act out the intricacies of the plot. Is this true of *Forum*? How much do you know in depth about any of the characters? Do you need to know more than the authors tell you?
- Certain character types appear in many Roman comedies. Who represents each of these character types in *Forum*:
  - An older man concerned about his wealth or his children.
  - A young man who rebels against authority
  - A clever slave
  - A courtesan
  - A slave dealer
  - A soldier
- The most famous character type is the slave who devises all sort of schemes, most of which go awry and lead to further complications. Describe the ways in which Pseudolus is an example of this character type.
- Few respectable women characters appear in Roman comedy. Is this true of *Forum*? Who are the respectable female characters? Are some of them kept offstage for part of the show in keeping with Roman tradition?
- Characters in Roman Comedy have two methods to achieve success: either through their own persistence or through the elements of accident and unpredictability in the universe. Describe how these elements are present in *Forum*? How do they allow Pseudolus, Hero and Philia to succeed?

- The characters in Roman Comedy were primarily motivated by selfish and material interests. Is this true of the characters in *Forum*? List the motivations for each character in *Forum*.
- Characters in Roman comedies are often of the well-to-do or middle class. Is this true of *Forum*? How do we know?
- The characters in Roman Comedy often indulged in adultery, stealing or deception to contribute to the overall tone of cynicism. Do characters in *Forum* indulge in such acts? Do you dislike them as a result? Do the authors place value judgments on these actions? Should they?
- In the Roman theatre, all parts were played by men. Do you think *Forum* could be performed effectively if all the parts were played by men?

### **Assignments: Writing Prompts**

- When playwrights create characters, they often invent “character maps” before they begin to write. These “maps” list everything about characters; from their favorite color to their political beliefs. A character map tells us what is in that character’s pockets and that character’s heart. Create character maps for Hero, Philia, Miles Gloriosus and Pseudolus. Tell their “back stories.” (Back stories are the histories of characters in a play or film before we meet them.)
- Describe a typical day in the life of Pseudolus — perhaps the day before we meet him.
- Research the term “proteans.” Why do you think the authors of *Forum* chose this group name for these three characters?
- Make a list of details about Pseudolus, Hero, Philia, Senex, Domina, Hysterium, Erronius, Miles Gloriosus, and Lycus indicating where you learned this information. From dialogue, lyric, music, or design elements such as costumes, etc.?
- What do you think happens to these characters after the show ends?

## **Roman Stage Sets, Masks and Costumes**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- The stage background in the Roman Theatre was called the “scanae frons.” It was either a flat wall upon which columns, statues, and other details were painted, or a wall that included three-dimensional niches and porticoes. In Roman comedies the wall often included three openings, each of which became the entrance to a house. The stage was treated as a street and the entrances at either end of the street were thought to be continuations of that street. Windows and second stories for houses were also indicated. How did the nature of the set shape what could be presented onstage? How do you think it influenced the writing of *Forum*?

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- As there was no artificial stage lighting, Roman plays were always performed in daylight. Research the history of stage lighting. What kinds of lighting effects were used before the invention of electricity?

- Why were these lights a constant source of fire? Read about the history of theatrical fires.
- What kind of lighting systems are currently used in the theatres in your community?
- What are some of the important functions of stage lighting beyond illumination?
- Make a drawing of a stage setting from the days of Roman theatre that could be used as a set for a production of *Forum*.
- Actors in Roman theatre often wore masks to facilitate the doubling of parts (having an actor play more than one role). Draw masks for three characters of your choice from *Forum*.
- Characters in Roman theatre were often dressed in costume colors associated with those characters. Slaves wore red and courtesans wore yellow. Using these colors as a guideline, design a costume for Philia and one for Pseudolus.

## **Plautus (Titus Maccius Plautus)**

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Write a brief biography of Plautus, who lived between the years 254 and 184 B.C.
- Describe the world Plautus lived in. Who held political power? How much of the world as we know it was civilized at that time? What was everyday life like in Rome between 254 and 184 B.C.?
- Read plays written by Plautus such as *Amphitryon*, *The Pot of Gold*, *The Captives*, *The Braggart Warrior*, and *The Twin Menaechmi*. Make a list of characters and plot situations that appear in the play or plays you read that also appear in *Forum*.
- Read Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and compare it to its source by Plautus, *The Twin Menaechmi*.
- Read about the life of Terence (Publius Terentius Afer), a contemporary of Plautus. Read plays written by Terence such as *The Woman of Andros*, *The Self-Tormentor*, *The Eunuch*, *Phormio*, *The Mother-In-Law*, and *The Brothers*.
- Although Plautus and Terence are the only two Roman comic writers whose works have survived, there were many other writers. Learn about these other writers. Why didn't their works survive?

## **Theatre in the Days of Plautus**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- In Rome, in the days of Plautus, as in Greece, production expenses for plays were financed by the state or by wealthy citizens. Does "the state" pay for theatre in our country? Do you think government should finance the arts? What are the positive aspects of state sponsorship? What are some of the potentially negative aspects? Do wealthy citizens finance the theatre in our country? How?

- Seats in the Roman theatre were not reserved and audiences were quite unruly. How is seating handled in the theatres you attend? How do audiences conduct themselves at the films and plays you see in theatres?

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Find out how your community theatre is financed.
- Learn about the ways in which Broadway plays and musicals are financed. What is the cost of producing a play for Broadway today?
- Learn about the regional theatre movement in the United States. How is it financed?
- Admission was free to the festivals in Rome where plays were performed. How much do tickets cost to see theatre in your community? How much do Broadway show tickets cost? How do these ticket prices influence the composition of the audience? How does the composition of the audience influence the decisions producers make about which shows to produce?
- In the days of Plautus, managers bought play scripts outright from authors. Plays then remained the property of these managers and could be played as often as the manager wished or the audience demanded. Do producers own plays and musicals in this way today? Explore the issues of “ownership” of plays and musicals. What are royalties? Do the authors of films own their works in the same way authors of plays and musicals do? Do authors own their plays and musicals in other parts of the world?
- In the days of Plautus, the state supplied the theatre in which plays were presented. Who owns the buildings in which theatre is performed in your community? Who owns the buildings in which shows are performed on Broadway? Learn about the Shuberts, the Nederlanders, and Jujamcyn, the major theatre landlords on Broadway.
- Roman theatres during the time when Plautus was writing were temporary since no permanent theatre was built in Rome until 55 B.C. These temporary theatres had scaffolding for audience seating, outlining a semicircular orchestra, and a long narrow stage that rose five feet above the orchestra. Describe the physical attributes of the theatres you attend.
- Research the degeneration of theatre during the Roman Empire which followed the Republic in 27 B.C. What kinds of entertainment replaced the comedies?
- Research the demise of Roman theatre with the advent of Christianity during the reign of the Emperor Constantine from 312 A.D. to 337.
- Explore how Roman theatre influenced Renaissance writers and theatre artists.

### **Quick Takes:**

#### **Additional Topics for Discussion, Research and Writing**

- Prologus addresses the audience when *Forum* begins. In what other plays and musicals do characters address the audience? What is the impact of having an actor break “the fourth wall” to talk directly to the audience?
- Why is Prologus played by one actor in the first act and by a different actor in the second?

- The proteans embody the tradition of doubling in Roman comedy — the practice of having an actor play more than one role. What other dramatic or musical works use actors to play more than one role? Does the use of this convention weaken the believability of these shows in any way for the audience?
- What is the meaning of the line “nothing that’s Greek” in the song “Comedy Tonight”?
- Does the fact the opening song promises a “happy ending, of course!” in any way weaken your enjoyment of watching the story unfold?
- At the end of the prologue, Prologus says, “Oh, Thespis, we place ourselves in your hands.” Who is Thespis? Does this statement reflect a tradition in Roman theatre?
- The subject of slavery is treated with humor in moments such as the one where Hysterium says “I live to grovel.” Do you find treating slavery lightly offensive? If not, what allows the authors this freedom in this particular piece?
- Research the institution of slavery in Rome during the days of Plautus.
- Research the life of courtesans in Rome during the days of Plautus. How did a woman become a courtesan? How were courtesans treated?
- What comment are the authors making by having Lycus remark that he is blackmailing a Senator?
- Pseudolus invents a story about a great plague as part of his campaign to save Philia from Miles Gloriosus. Were there real plagues during this period?
- Actors who create roles often have a great influence on them. Zero Mostel, the actor who created the role of Pseudolus, is indelibly imprinted on many aspects of that character. Read about Zero Mostel.
- Read about *commedia dell’arte*, a form of improvisational theatre that carried on many of the traditions of Roman comedy.
- Make a list of other shows and films that employ the plot devices of lost children, men who disguise themselves as women, and mistaken identities.
- Discuss the elements of Roman comedy present in some of your favorite television situation comedies.

## **Forum as Musical Theatre**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- Would *Forum* have been as successful without music? Why or why not? What do we know because of the music we might not know otherwise?
- Stephen Sondheim said he tried to write songs for *Forum* which functioned as respites from all the frenzied action (as opposed to writing songs which furthered plot development). Listen to the score. Did Sondheim accomplish his goal?

- In what ways is the music indispensable to the plot?
- We can readily recognize a comic song by its lyrics and, frequently, by its music. What are some of the ways that music can be funny?
- Are all the songs in *Forum* comic? Are there any sincere song moments in the show?
- *Forum* contains a prologue, where Prologus explains the situation and characters of the show. Before Prologus appears, however, there is an Overture. Listen to the Overture and discuss what it tells you about the tone of the show. Is the Overture simply a way to introduce some of the composer's favorite songs or does it serve another function? What songs do we hear in the Overture?
- Rhythm is very important to music. We frequently associate fast or slow rhythms with moods, like happiness or sadness. Find examples of different rhythms in the score and discuss what, if anything, they suggest about the character singing the song or the situation.
- Both "Dirty Old Man" and "That'll Show Him" use Latin dance rhythms. Does this rhythm suggest anything to you about Domina and Philia?
- Composers use vocal range and timbre to reveal things about characters. Miles Gloriosus is a baritone, Hero is a tenor, Philia is a soprano and Domina is a mezzo soprano. What would be the effect of "Bring Me My Bride" if Miles were a tenor? Or, "Lovely" if Philia were an alto? What do differences in vocal range suggest to you about characters?
- Dirges are a type of slow, sad song usually played at a funeral. The music of the "Funeral Sequence" resembles a dirge. Is it sad or comic? Why?
- Both "Comedy Tonight" and "Everybody Ought To Have a Maid" add singers as the verses progress; in both cases the music is repeated almost exactly. Does this have a comic effect? Why?
- Listen to "Pretty Little Picture." How does the instrumental accompaniment let you know there is something wrong with the picture Pseudolus is painting?
- Composers and lyricists use different song forms when they write: some songs may be AABA, some ABA, some employ an introduction before moving into a form. What is the form of "Comedy Tonight?" Is this song easy to remember? Is that important to its function as the first song in the show?
- Find examples of duets or shared songs in the show. How do these duets help to define relationships?
- Select one of the following musical songs of the show:
  - "Comedy Tonight"
  - "Love, I Hear"
  - "Free"
  - "Lovely"
  - "Pretty Little Picture"
  - "Everybody Ought To Have A Maid"

- “I’m Calm”
- “Impossible”
- “Bring Me My Bride”
- “That Dirty Old Man”
- “That’ll Show Him”
- “Lovely (Reprise)”
- “Funeral Sequence”
- “Comedy Tonight (Finale)”
- Summarize the contents of the songs. Discuss:
  - a. What learn about the personal philosophies of the character or characters who sing?
  - b. What makes the character or characters sing at this moment? Why do they sing instead of talk? What is the emotional energy of the moment that pushes them into song?
  - c. What does the song accomplish in terms of the plot? Where is the action when the song begins and when it ends?
  - d. Every dramatic scene has a “main beat” or central moment of importance. Does the song become the “main beat” of the scene in which it appears?
  - e. Does the song exist in real time (does each minute of stage time represent one minute of actual time in the world of the play)? Or does it take place in suspended time (does it magnify or expand the moment temporally) or compressed time (does it speed up time)?
  - f. What is the physical action of the character or characters during the song?
- What is the meaning of the word “reprise”? What is its function? What do you know when you hear the reprise of “Lovely” you didn’t know the first time you heard it? Which of the songs are reprised? Why?
- Imagine you have been asked to create a song for the show. Who would sing it? Where in the show would it take place? What would it be about? What kind of music would it involve?
- Why do many theatre song lyrics rhyme? Write a few verses in prose about something you wish would happen and then write it in rhyme. How is the experience of writing in these two forms different?
- What role does music play in your life? If you were to choose moments in your life worthy of being set to music, what would they be?

## Collaboration

### Questions and Discussion Prompts

- *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum* was created by three writers — the book was written by Larry Gelbart and Burt Shevelove, and the music and lyrics were written by Stephen Sondheim. Any time a work is created by more than one person it is called a collaboration. How do people successfully collaborate?

### Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts

- Write a short story with another person. Keep a log of the ways in which writing with another person is different than writing alone. What were the positive aspects of collaboration? What were the negative aspects of the experience?
- Read biographies of great musical theatre writers such as George and Ira Gershwin, and Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II to learn about their collaborative processes.
- What other collaborators are involved in the process of creating a musical? At what point do they become part of the process of putting a musical onstage?
- In what other fields do creators work in collaborative teams? Explore the process of collaboration in one of these fields.

### The AABA Song Form

- Just as stories can be divided into paragraphs, songs can be divided into sections called stanzas. When we listen to a song, we may not always be aware of its structure, but the arrangement of ideas into stanzas and the arrangement of stanzas in relation to each other is carefully thought out by the composer and the lyricist. Different songs are arranged in different patterns depending on their meaning. One classic pattern is called AABA. “Lovely” is an example of an AABA song. “Lovely” appears twice in the show — once sung by Hero and Philia and, later, sung as a reprise by Pseudolus and Hysterium. The following is the first version of the song:

**PHILIA:**

A I'M LOVELY  
ALL I AM IS LOVELY  
LOVELY IS THE ONE THING I CAN DO.

A WINSOME  
WHAT I AM IS WINSOME  
RADIANT AS IN SOME DREAM COME TRUE.

B OH,  
ISN'T IT A SHAME.  
I CAN NEITHER SEW,  
NOR COOK, NOR READ OR WRITE MY NAME,

A BUT I'M HAPPY,  
MERELY BEING LOVELY,  
FOR IT'S ONE THING I CAN GIVE TO YOU.

**HERO:**

A YOU'RE LOVELY  
ABSOLUTELY LOVELY  
WHO'D BELIEVE THE LOVELINESS OF YOU?

A WINSOME  
SWEET AND WARM AND WINSOME  
RADIANT AS IN SOME DREAM COME TRUE.

B NOW,  
VENUS WOULD SEEM TAME  
HELEN AND HER THOUSAND  
SHIPS WOULD HAVE TO DIE OF SHAME.

**PHILIA and HERO:**

A AND I'M HAPPY,  
HAPPY THAT YOU'RE (I'M) LOVELY,  
FOR THERE'S ONE THING LOVELINESS CAN DO —  
IT'S A GIFT FOR ME TO SHARE WITH YOU.

- The stanzas of this song are arranged in a classic AABA pattern. This means that the A sections are basically alike and one the section, the B is different.
- Each part in an AABA song has a job to do. The first stanza of the song sets up the situation. How does the first A of “Lovely” accomplish this?
- The second A tells more about the situation and deepens its importance to the singer. Does the second A of “Lovely” accomplish this?
- The third section, the B section of the AABA song moves the song into new territory. Instead of telling what Philia can do — what does the B section accomplish?
- The final section of the song, the last A, intensifies the emotion, summarizing the message of the song. It also delivers characters to a different place in their understanding of the situation they have been singing about. What does Philia realize at the end of her song?
- Listen to the music. How does the music for the B section differ from the A sections? How does the music reinforce what is happening in the song?
- Many songs have a key or central idea around which they are organized. This idea is called a “hook” because it grabs and brings the listener into the song. Often the hook is expressed in the same words as the title. What is the hook in this song?
- Do you think understanding the form of a song helps you appreciate it more or does it get in the way of your listening to it effectively?

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Each chorus of “Lovely” is only sixty words long. Try to write a song that is only sixty words long for a character in *Forum* to sing.
- Write a lyric and/or music for an AABA song on a subject you feel deeply about for a character of your own invention. Be sure to begin with a hook.

## **Adaptation/Create Your Own Musical**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- Musical theatre works are frequently adapted from sources such as plays, novels, tales, short stories, films, and television shows. How many examples can you name of musical theatre works adapted from such source materials?
- Name five musical theatre works that were not based on any other sources.
- What does a team of musical theatre writers add to a work from another medium in the process of adapting it for the musical stage?

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Try to find translations of the plays of Plautus. What aspects of these works are still present in *Forum*? How did the writers reshape elements from these plays to create the musical?
- What were the source works on which the following musicals were based: *Fiddler On The Roof*; *The Fantasticks*; *Hello, Dolly!*; *Sweet Charity*; *The King and I*; *Cabaret*; *My Fair Lady*; *A Little Night Music*; *South Pacific*; and *Carousel*.
- Select a novel, play, or group of short stories you think would make a strong musical theatre work.
  - Why do you think this piece “sings”? What about it is inherently musical? What can music add to its existing form?
  - What elements of the source will be hard to transfer to musical theatre form?
  - Outline a musical theatre work based on your source.
  - What role would music play in your work? What kind of music would your characters sing? Will it include dialogue and song? What role will dance play in it? What will the musical style of your adaptation be?
  - Make a list of the characters.
  - Try to write the first scene, a turning point scene, and the final scene of your musical.
  - Try to write a lyric or melody for one of the musical segments.

## Critical Analysis

### Assignment: Writing Report

- Write a review of a performance of *Forum*. You may wish to include any combination of the following elements in your review:
  1. Did the show hold your interest? Why?
  2. Describe the manner in which the story was presented to the audience. What was the dialogue like?
  3. What was the structure of the story? Was there a simple story or were there multiple stories? Was anything about the story unexpected? How did the story begin and end?
  4. Describe the way music and lyrics worked in the show.
  5. Describe the sets, costumes, lighting, and musical accompaniment. How did these elements add meaning to the show?
  6. Discuss the effectiveness of the performers.
  7. Discuss the ideas presented in the show. Analyze their importance to your reader.
  8. Explain why your reader should make an effort to see the show.

## APPENDIX

The following background material and bibliography are designed to enrich your exploration of the Themes and Topics.

### About The Creators

**LARRY GELBART** (co-bookwriter), a Chicago-born writer and producer who has achieved success for his work in radio, television, film and theater. He began his professional career in the late 1940s, before reaching the age of twenty, writing for such radio shows as *The Eddie Cantor Show*, *The Maxwell House Coffee Time* with Danny Thomas, *Duffy's Tavern*, *Command Performance*, *Jack Carter*, *The Jack Paar Show*, *The Joan Davis Show* and *The Bob Hope Show*. By the early 1950s he had begun writing for television, including *The All-Star Revue*, *The Red Buttons Show*, *Honestly*, *Celeste*, *The Patrice Munsel Show*, *Caesar's Hour* and *The Pat Boone Chevy Showroom*; his television work in the 1960s, '70s, '80s and '90s includes *The Danny Kaye Show*, *The Marty Feldman Comedy Machine*, the long-running and hugely successful *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Barbara Streisand... and Other Musical Instruments*, *Roll Out!*, *Karen*, *After M\*A\*S\*H* and the award-winning HBO television film, *Barbarians at the Gate*. In addition to *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum*, his work for the theater includes the plays *My LA* (1950), *Sly Fox* (1976) and *Mastergate* (1989); and the musicals *The Conquering Hero* (1960), *One, Two, Three, Four, Five* (1988) and *City of Angels* (1989; which won 6, 1990 Tony Awards, including Best Book of a Musical and Best Musical). His film work includes *The Notorious Landlady*, *The Thrill of It All*, *The Wrong Box* (co-written with Burt Shevelove), *Not With My Wife, You Don't*, *The Chastity Belt*, *A Fine Pair*, *Oh, God*, *Movie, Movie*, *Neighbors*, *Tootsie* and *Blame It on Rio*.

**BURT SHEVELOVE** (co-bookwriter) was born in Newark, New Jersey, graduated from Brown University and received a Master's degree in theater from Yale. While at Yale he wrote lyrics for a musical version of Plautus's *Mostellaria* and later became the resident director for the Yale Dramatic Association. After serving as an ambulance driver in World War II, he began a career as a writer, director and producer for radio and television, working with such stars as Judy Garland, Red Buttons, Jack Paar, Cyril Richard, Nancy Walker and Victor Borge; his work won him Emmy and Peabody Awards. His Broadway career began in 1948 with *Small Wonder*, a revue for which he wrote material, co-produced and directed. He also directed a revival of *Kiss Me Kate* (1956), *Hallelujah Baby!* (1968), *No, No, Nanette* (1971; he also wrote the book), *The Frogs* (1974; written with Stephen Sondheim and performed in and around the Yale University pool) and *Happy New Year* (1980; he also wrote the book). He co-wrote the film, *The Wrong Box*, with Larry Gelbart. Burt Shevelove died in 1982.

**STEPHEN SONDHEIM** (composer/lyricist), one of the most influential and accomplished composer/lyricists in Broadway history, was born in New York City and raised there and in Pennsylvania. As a teenager he met Oscar Hammerstein II, who became Sondheim's mentor. Sondheim graduated from Williams College, where he received the Hutchinson Prize for Music Composition. After graduation, he studied music theory and composition with Milton Babbitt. He worked for a short

time in the 1950s as a writer for the television show *Topper*; his first professional musical theatre job was as the songwriter for the unproduced musical *Saturday Night*. He wrote the lyrics for *West Side Story* (1957), *Gypsy* (1959) and *Do I Hear A Waltz?* (1965), as well as additional lyrics for *Candide* (1973). In addition to writing music and lyrics for *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum*, he wrote music and lyrics for *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964), *Company* (1970 — New York Drama Critics Circle Award and 1971 Tony Awards for Best Musical, Best Music, Best Lyrics), *Follies* (1971 — 1972 Tony Award for Best Score and New York Drama Critics Circle Award; revised in London, 1987), *A Little Night Music* (1973 — Tony Award for Best Score), *The Frogs* (1974), *Pacific Overtures* (1976 — New York Drama Critics Circle Award), *Sweeney Todd* (1979 — Tony Award for Best Score), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984 — New York Drama Critics Circle Award; 1985 Pulitzer Prize for Drama), *Into the Woods* (1987 — Tony Award for Best Score), *Assassins* (1991) and *Passion* (1994 — Tony Award for Best Score). He is the co-author (with George Furth) of the comedy-thriller *Getting Away With Murder* (1996). He composed the songs for the television production “Evening Primrose” (1966), co-authored the film *The Last of Sheila* (1973) and provided incidental music for Broadway’s *The Girls of Summer* (1956), *Invitation to a March* (1961) and *Twigs* (1971). *Side By Side By Sondheim* (1976), *Marry Me A Little* (1981), *You’re Gonna Love Tomorrow* (1983; originally presented as *A Stephen Sondheim Evening*) and *Putting It Together* (1993) are anthologies of his work as composer and lyricist. He has written scores for the films *Stavisky* (1974) and *Reds* (1981), and composed songs for the film *Dick Tracy* (1990 — Academy Award for Best Song). He is on the Council of the Dramatists Guild, the national association of playwrights, composers and lyricists, having served as its president from 1973 until 1981, and in 1983 was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1990 he was appointed the first Visiting Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Oxford University.

**GEORGE ABBOTT** (director), an actor, writer, director and producer, had one of the most active and distinguished careers in the entire history of the American theater. The longevity of his theatrical career is legendary: he began as an actor on Broadway in *The Misleading Lady* (1913) and continued working as a director and play doctor well into the 1980s. He was born in Forestville, New York, and moved with his family to Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Hamburg, New York. He attended the University of Rochester, where he joined the Dramatic Club. In 1912 he enrolled in a playwriting course at Harvard and won \$100 for his play, *The Man in the Manhole*. In 1915, two years after *The Misleading Lady*, he was hired by producer John Golden as office boy/assistant casting director/associate playwright. He was named one of the 10 best performers of 1923 for his work in *Zander the Great*. He had his first hit as a playwright and director with *Broadway* (1926). His later directorial credits include the plays *Twentieth Century* (1932), *Three Men on a Horse* (1935; introduced Shirley Booth and Garson Kanin), *Brother Rat* (1936; introduced José Ferrer and Eddie Albert), and *Too Many Girls* (1939; introduced Desi Arnaz and Van Johnson). He directed his first musical, Rodgers and Hart’s *Jumbo*, in 1935; in addition to *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum*, a short list of landmark musicals he directed includes *On Your Toes* (1936), *The Boys From Syracuse* (1938), *Pal Joey* (1940), *On the Town* (1944), *Beggar’s Holiday* (1946), *High Button Shoes* (1947), *Where’s Charley* (1948), *Call Me Madam* (1950), *Wonderful Town* (1953), *Pajama Game* (1954), *Damn Yankees* (1955), *Once Upon*

*a Mattress* (1959), *Fiorello!* (1959), *Tenderloin* (1960), *Flora, the Red Menace* (1965) and *On Your Toes* (revival, 1983). He helped many performers, directors, writers and choreographers early in their careers, including Harold Prince, Bob Fosse, Shirley Maclaine and Richard Adler. He received numerous awards, including a Pulitzer Prize (in 1960 for *Fiorello!*), the 1960 NY Drama Critics Circle Award, 4 Donaldson Awards (1946, 1948, 1953 and 1955), 4 Tony Awards (1955, 1956, 1960 and 1963) and the Handel Medallion from the City of New York (1976); he was a Kennedy Center honoree in 1983. He died in 1995 at the age of 107.

**HAROLD PRINCE** (producer) attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he began writing, acting and directing shows as a member of the Penn Players. After graduation, Prince began working as a television scriptwriter for a short-lived production company set up by the legendary Broadway writer/director/producer George Abbott. After the company disbanded in 1949, he became the assistant to Robert Griffith, Abbott's production stage manager. In 1953 Prince and Griffith formed a producing partnership; their first show, *The Pajama Game* (1954), was a huge success, playing over 1,000 Broadway performances and winning the both the Tony Award and the Donaldson Award as Best Musical of the season. The Griffith-Prince partnership went on to produce *Damn Yankees* (1955 — 1956 Tony Award for Best Musical), *New Girl in Town* (1957), *West Side Story* (1957), *Fiorello* (1959 — 1960 Tony Award; Pulitzer Prize for Drama), *Tenderloin* (1960), *A Call on Kuprin* (1961) and *They Might Be Giants* (1961, London). After Griffith's death in 1961, Prince produced *Take Her, She's Mine* (1961), *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum* (1962 — 1963 Tony Award), *Fiddler On The Roof* (1964 — 1965 Tony Award), *Poor Bitos* (1964) and *Flora The Red Menace* (1965). He began directing as well as producing shows with *She Loves Me* (1963) and went on to direct and produce or coproduce many shows, including *It's A Bird, It's A Plane, It's Superman* (1966), *Cabaret* (1966 — Tony Award), *Zorba* (1968), *Company* (1970 — 1971 Tony Award), *Follies* (1971; co-director with Michael Bennett — 1972 Tony Award), *A Little Night Music* (1973 — Tony Award), *Candide* (1974), *Pacific Overtures* (1976) and *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981). He has directed numerous musicals, plays and operas, including *Evita* (1978, London; 1979, NY), *Sweeney Todd* (1979 — Tony Award), *Madama Butterfly* (1982), *Turandot* (1983), *Phantom Of The Opera* (1986 — 1987 Tony Award), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993) and *Showboat* (1994 — 1995 Tony Award). He has directed the films *Something For Everyone* (1970) and *A Little Night Music* (1978). He is the recipient of 17 Tony Awards and numerous Critics Circle Awards.

## About **A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum**

*A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum* had its roots in research done by Burt Shevelove in preparation for writing lyrics for a musical version of Plautus's *Mostellaria* during his first year of graduate school at Yale in the years preceding World War II. Later, as the resident director of the Yale Dramatic Association, he staged *When in Rome*, an original production which combined the plots of Plautus's *Miles Gloriosus* and *Pseudolus*. After the war, while working as a writer and director for theater, television and radio, he complained to friends about the lack of low comedy on Broadway. Shevelove began working with Larry Gelbart, another television writer, to create a farce which could contain many of the stock characters found in Plautus — the conning slave, the hen-pecked husband, the courtesans, the boastful captain, the young lovers, the

lecherous old man — and where the comedy derived more from comic situation and less from jokes. Following the example of Plautus, the draft observed unity of time and place (the story takes place in front of the three houses and doesn't shift time or location). By 1958 an initial draft, entitled *A Scenario for Vaudevillians*, was almost ready. Jerome Robbins was initially set to direct the piece, and Stephen Sondheim joined the team as lyricist/composer. The show would be Sondheim's first Broadway composing credit. David Merrick signed on as producer and the show was set to proceed when Robbins left the project. The script, now entitled *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum*, was then picked up by the production team of Robert Griffith and Harold Prince and George Abbott became the director. Griffith, however, died soon after, leaving Prince to produce the show alone. The show was scheduled to begin rehearsals in February, 1962. The role of Pseudolus was offered to Phil Silvers and Milton Berle, both of whom turned it down; Zero Mostel was chosen in early 1962. Other members of the production team included Tony Walton (set and costume designer) and Jack Cole (choreographer); other cast members included John Carradine (Lycus), David Burns (Senex), Jack Gilford (Hysterium), Ronald Holgate (Miles Gloriosus), Ruth Kobart (Domina), Brian Davies (Hero), Presley Marker (Philia) and Raymond Walburn (Erronius).

The cast performed a triumphantly successful gypsy run-through (without costumes and played to other Broadway professionals) in New York before leaving on their out-of-town tryout period. They received a mixed reception in New Haven and a bad one in Washington, D.C. Jerome Robbins, who was working in California, flew in for 10 days at the invitation of Abbott, Prince and the writers. Robbins felt the show was essentially in the right shape, but he suggested a new opening number be written. He felt that the existing number, "Love Is in the Air," did not tell the audience enough about the tone of the piece. Stephen Sondheim wrote "Comedy Tonight" over one weekend during the Washington run. Robbins then staged it. The new opening, which audiences first saw during the preview period in New York, worked beautifully. The show opened on May 8, 1962 at the Alvin Theatre and ran for 964 performances. A national tour followed. In 1972 a well-received revival played on Broadway; it was directed by Burt Shevelove and starred Phil Silvers as Pseudolus. A screen version was made in 1966, directed by Richard Lester and starring Zero Mostel, as Pseudolus, Phil Silvers, as Lycus, and Jack Gilford as Hysterium. The show won 6 Tony Awards in 1963: Best Musical, Best Libretto, Best Director of a Musical, Best Producer of a musical, Best Actor in a Musical and Best Featured Actor in a Musical. The cast album was originally produced by Capitol Records; a CD of the recording is available on Angel Records (ZDM 7 64770 2 2).

## About Plautus and Roman Comedy

Because all surviving information about Plautus comes from statements made by later Latin writers, the details about Titus Maccius Plautus's life are not known with certainty. Some things are generally agreed upon: he was born sometime around 254 B.C. and probably died in 184 B.C., meaning he lived for seventy years; he came from a town in northeastern central Italy, possibly Sarsina, in the Umbria region; his original name may have been Titus Plotus — Maccius may have been derived from Maccus, the name of a stock clown character in the farces developed in

Atella, or it was possibly the family name of rich patrons — however, the name Plautus, a Roman spelling of Plotus, may also have been a stage name, referring to a dancer in pantomimes.

It is believed Plautus began his early career in theatre playing Maccus, the clown, in the Atellan farces, which were developed in the town of Atella and preceded the introduction of Greek influences into the regions conquered by Rome. These farces were very popular with the Oscans, a tribe who had been conquered by Rome. The plays were short, with very carefully worked-out plots that involved cheating and trickery and were often obscene. The actors, playing one of the stock characters — which included Maccus, the fool or clown; Bucco, the greedy, boastful coward; Pappus, the silly old man; and Dossennus, the clever cheat — wore recognizable masks. The plays developed stock routines, jokes and business, and made use of an accompanying flute player.

Two other early theatrical forms in Italy were the Fescennine verses and the *saturnae*. The Fescennine verses — named either after the Etruscan town of Fescennium or because they were relied upon to ward off *fascinnum*, or black magic, and had a religious purpose — used no music or dancing, and were short scenes in verse, usually performed at country festivals. They were apparently improvised on the spot or were passed by word-of-mouth from performer to performer. The scenes were rude and frequently made fun of well-known people. They became so slanderous and obscene that a law was passed to control them. The *saturnae*, which supposedly developed as another attempt to gain favor with the gods and ward off disaster, used music — an accompanying flute player — and dance, and were more worked out than the Fescennine verses.

In the second and third centuries, B.C., the Roman Senate commissioned the writer Livius Andronicus to translate Greek tragedies and comedies into Latin; he had to first develop a more poetic style of Latin, and then organize and train companies of actors to perform the work. He was followed by Naevius, whose comedies based on Greek originals became standard fare at Roman festivals. The Greek comedies chosen by Livius and Naevius are known as New Comedy, to distinguish them from the Old Comedy of Aristophanes, whose 11 surviving plays are some of the earliest examples of comic drama. Old Comedy was deeply satiric and contained very little plot. Instead, a series of episodes used song, dance, obscene humor, invective and clowning to make its point; a chorus might represent animals or gods. New Comedy, which began to appear frequently around 336 B.C., concerned itself with the private affairs of ordinary people. New Comedy used more carefully worked-out plots, many of which dealt with stock situations: the meeting of two long-lost siblings; the joining of two lovers against the wishes of their families; the financial devastation of a miser who is too careful with his gold; the attempts of a clever slave to help the young son outwit his father. The playwrights — the best known of whom are Menander, Diphilus and Philemon — created a comedic style based on character: the way that people did things was more important than what they did. The stories made fun of tradition in ways the audiences fully understood; the satire, however, did not begin to approach the sharpness of Old Comedy.

Plautus was influenced by Menander and New Comedy. Some of his plays, 21 of which survived, use plots and characters taken from two or three Greek plays; these plays are called *contaminatio*. Most of his plays are lively farces, and use witty, colloquial Latin; they preserve unities of time and place (they do not jump forward or backward in time between scenes, nor do they change location between scenes). One invention of Plautus was the comic aside, in which a character speaks

directly to the audience, but is unheard by the other characters. All but six of the surviving plays contain prologues, delivered by a character named Prologus, where an explanation of the story up to the beginning of the play is told, or a complicated plot is explained to the audience. About two-thirds of Plautus is in a lyrical rhythm; these sections were called *cantica* and were sung to flute accompaniment. Another tradition developed by Plautus was the ‘running slave,’ who would run on breathlessly from the harbor bringing news which was usually ignored, and the use of sudden, hurried entrances and exits. Plautus wrote for the popular Roman audience, and the comedy is frequently produced by slapstick and burlesque, rapid action, exaggeration and rude humor. Even though the actors wore Greek clothes and the plays took place in Greek towns, they all ridiculed Roman customs and traditions.

The plays of Plautus were frequently performed after his death until the time of Cicero, but the poet Horace thought the plays lacked polish. The plays of Terence — after Plautus, the only other Roman comic playwright whose work survives — were more widely known, until the mid-14th century, when the Italian scholar and poet Petrarch wrote of knowing eight of Plautus’s plays. Plautus began to widely influence European comedy after the Italian Renaissance poet Ariosto wrote imitations of his work in vernacular Italian. Plautus’s influence can be found throughout the subsequent history of Western comedy, from the 17th-century comedies of Molière and the stock characters of *commedia dell’arte* up to the 20th-century musicals of Cole Porter and *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum*.

## Critical Acclaim

You won’t find anything more hilarious the length of Broadway than the zany opening of *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum*. It has Zero Mostel, Eddie Phillips, George Reeder, and David Evans getting mixed up in a whirlwind of arms and legs. It’s about as crazy as anything you’ve ever seen in old-time vaudeville or films... We suspect that *A Funny Thing* will prove the most controversial song-and-dancer of the season. You’ll either love it or loathe it. In our book, it looms as a hot ticket. A riotous and rowdy hit.

— Robert Coleman, Daily Mirror (May 9, 1962)

Know what they found on the way to the forum? Burlesque, vaudeville and a cornucopia of mad, comic hokum. The phrase for the title of the new musical comedy that arrived last night at the Alvin last night might be, *caveat emptor*. *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum* indeed! No one gets to the forum; no one even starts for it. And nothing really happens that isn’t older than the forum, more ancient than the agora in Athens. But somehow you keep laughing as if the old sight and sound gags were as good as new.

— Howard Taubman, The New York Times (May 9, 1962)

The thing to be noted immediately about *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum* is that it really is funny. The new musical comedy, which opened last night at the Alvin Theater,

makes no pretenses of subtlety, delicacy or lavishness.... It is simply a burlesque show with a pseudo-classic Roman setting and a firm conviction that pace and simple basic humor are important to farce. But the fact remains that, in its shameless fashion, it is downright hilarious.

— Richard Watts, New York Post (May 9, 1962)

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