

Bells are Ringing

There are a good number of Broadway shows that are justifiably neglected by the theatre...and, arguably, just as many that should be neglected and aren't! Bells Are Ringing is a show that we feel belongs to neither of these categories; being neglected, but unjustifiably so. We hope that after today's performance, you will feel the same.

The plot is comparatively straightforward, even if it has been somewhat overtaken by modern-day technology. We're in New York of the 1950s, the action focusing on Susanswerphone, a down-at-heel telephone answering service. (Remember, this is before the advent of the modern answering machine.) Things should be simple; the girls give and receive messages for their subscribers. That is all that they need to do and, indeed, is all they're allowed to do by law. Enter Ella Peterson, our heroine. The personal problems of her clients prove too strong to resist and each one receives her individual attention. She has her head firmly in the clouds but, of course, her heart is in the right place...and it belongs to one subscriber in particular.

The show has a superb, (if unfamiliar), pedigree. Originally produced by the Theatre Guild (they brought us most of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals) in 1956, it was written by Betty Comden and Adolph Green.

Betty and Adolph who???

This writing duo has an impeccable CV. They began in satire as part of a successful night-club act, The Revuers, that played at various top New York venues during the '30s and '40s before disbanding. Later they joined the powerful Arthur Freed unit at MGM as staff writers. Look at the credits of many of the most famous MGM musicals of the 40s and 50s, and you will find that Comden and Green are responsible for the "book" (the story and dialogue, to you and me). Undoubtedly their greatest triumph is Singin' in the Rain, a book they wrote around the songs of Freed himself and which is regularly listed as a top-ten film by most film critics.

We're on more familiar territory with the show's composer, London-born Jule Styne. Together with Green and Comden, he wrote eight musicals, contributed songs to more than 30 movies (including the Oscar-winning Three Coins in a Fountain) and worked with other lyricists on Broadway hit shows such as Gypsy and Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.

Whilst in revue, in 1938, Comden and Green worked with actress Judy Holliday. For her, this was the beginning of a promising career in New York which she then hoped to repeat in Hollywood. Unfortunately, her first foray into films proved disappointing and she quickly returned to the Broadway stage. The comedy Born Yesterday suddenly found itself without a star and Judy was rushed into the role after only three days of rehearsals. Winning a clutch of awards and touring with the play for three years, this was just the impetus her career needed. She returned to Hollywood with a supporting role in the Tracy/Hepburn classic Adam's Rib and the film version of Born Yesterday for which she won an Oscar. Her career somewhat preceded that of Marilyn Monroe, but between them these two women virtually cornered the market in dumb blondes; Monroe bringing a potent vulnerability and Holliday, sassiness.

Comden and Green's friendship with Judy Holliday extended beyond their work together in New York and, realising that she had a prodigious talent, long cherished the idea of developing a vehicle for her. As is often the way, it was a seemingly insignificant event that provided the spark. They saw an advertisement for a telephone answering service in the telephone directory and toyed with a few ideas before contacting Jule Styne to get his reaction. From that day on, they had no doubts that they had hit on a winner.

In fairness, it cannot be claimed that Bells Are Ringing is exactly a giant of the musical repertoire. However, its record on Broadway (opening at the Shubert Theater on 29th November 1956) was more than respectable, clocking up 924 performances before moving to a lengthy tour in which

Judy Holliday headed up an experienced cast. The London run (starring Janet Leigh...before Alfred Hitchcock got to her in the shower) was rather less successful, but by no means a disaster, beginning on 14th November 1957 and running for 292 performances. (There was a West End revival in 1987 starring Lesley Mackie and, in America, one in 1990 by the Goodspeed Opera House, Connecticut.) The original USA production was handled by a team that reads like a "Who's Who" of Broadway technicians. Sydney Chaplin (son of Charles) played opposite Judy. Like Alfred Drake and John Raitt, Chaplin was destined to be one of those leading men who originated leading roles on Broadway only to be denied them in the transfer to Hollywood. This time, the part went to Dean Martin. It was to be Judy Holliday's last film. Within three years she had died from throat cancer.

The recording of the original Broadway cast has the distinction of being the first ever Broadway show to be recorded in stereo. Produced by the veteran Broadway record producer Goddard Lieberson, it still sounds better than many recordings of much more recent provenance. The show was also distinguished by being presented with two Tony awards; "best actress" to Judy Holliday and "best supporting actor" to Sydney Chaplin. This recognition is of greater significance when one considers the other major contender of the year; winner of "best musical" My Fair Lady.

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