

# HAL PRINCE

## Broadway's Fiddler on the Roof



By ANTHONY A. LYLE

HAL PRINCE is the most distinguished son the University of Pennsylvania has ever given to the theater.

His contributions to the musical stage as producer and director are enormous. Among the 18 shows he's done for Broadway is the Pulitzer Prize-winning musical biography of Mayor LaGuardia, *Fiorello!*

Seven of his plays, beginning with *Pajama Game* in 1954, have won Tony awards for best musical of the year.

His credits include *Damn Yankees*, *New Girl in Town*, *West Side Story*, *Take Her, She's Mine*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *She Loves Me*, and *Superman*.

Three Prince productions are currently playing on Broadway. *Fiddler on the Roof* is now in its fifth season, *Cabaret* in its third, and *Zorbá* opened in November to rave critical notices.

Yet Prince is a veritable fiddler on the roof.

Like the celebrated villagers of Anatevka in his musical, he leads a shaky existence. For the peasants in the show, the tightrope is suspended between tradition and change. For him, it's between business and art, between being a producer and being a director.

Sitting in his 17th floor office suite in One Rockefeller Plaza, he proclaims defensively, "I'm not a businessman, I'm an *artist*," verbalizing what his full beard, checkered shirt, and suede trousers seem to affirm.

Critics, too, recognize his artistic talents.

Walter Kerr, dean of New York's drama critics, called *Cabaret*, Prince's first big success as a director, a "stunning musical." Others agreed. Prince won the coveted Tony award for directing it.

Clive Barnes, Kerr's partner on *The New York Times* theater desk, spent two-thirds of his column on *Zorbá*, Prince's latest directorial achievement, reviewing Harold Prince. Barnes lauded him as a director "with exquisite style and finesse"—one who "calculates his effects like a Mozart."

It may not be surprising, then, to discover that Prince has found that a *little* directing is a disquieting thing. He puts his dilemma this way: "I attempted to locate an identity (produce), so that I could do what I wanted (direct). I did myself a disservice. By finally achieving what I wanted, I opened the door to pleasure, and other things are less easy to live with."

Beginning on Broadway with a job as George Abbott's assistant stage manager for \$125 a week, Prince soon gained fame and fortune as a producer. But there's no doubt about where his interests lie now.

"I take pleasure in success and in some of the recognition that comes from success," he points out. "There's no denying that it's nice to walk into a room in Vienna and have an identity. But 90 per cent of my pleasure comes in the creating period. Producing things gives me next to no pleasure.

"My wife says that I'm normally distracted. That she never has more than 70 per cent of my attention—except when I'm in rehearsal. Then I completely relate to my family. Probably because rehearsal period is the time when I'm having the most fun."

Because he has the kind of personality he calls "tumultuous", happiness is something that comes to him only "in spurts." He's dead serious when he tells you, "*Happy* is cows in a field chewing on grass."

One day recently he was not terribly happy. He wasn't happy because he wasn't directing. He wasn't directing because "there's a limit to the amount of activity if you want to work on Broadway."

He's almost angry when he says, "One thing wrong with the theater is the economics of it, which prevent you from working more often. It was possible to direct five plays a season a few years ago in England. Tony Richardson directed seven plays in one year—one of which was *Look Back in Anger*. That's not possible now."

Why doesn't he try directing off Broadway or in regional theater? The answer is that he's too busy producing.

And that's what makes Hal Prince tick: he's got a split personality, playing two related, but sometimes clashing, roles. He underscores the point by mentioning that from the time he went into rehearsal with *Zorbá* until the opening in New York, he stayed away from the office. He phoned and took care of some business during lunch breaks, but he remained physically aloof from his producer's domain.

The truth is that he enjoys directing more than anything else, but he *has* to be a producer, too. Because he's not willing to be a starving artist in a garret. While he recognizes that physical privation can be a stimulant to creativity, he is quick to point out that there are different forms of hunger. One, known to him, is psychological.

He worries. About his son Charley, whom his wife has taken to see a pediatrician this day. About actors who weren't getting paid during the Washington run of *Cabaret*, which was forced to cancel several days of performances at the peak of the spring riots of 1968. About secretaries who might have to look for other jobs if he or they should decide it would be best. And about himself.

*Continued*

Photographed by  
ROBERT PHILLIPS

(On the cover, the director-producer stands behind a poster advertising his most recent production)



Just turned 41, Prince is beginning to get reflective. "Melancholy and *angst* are the worst things about being 40. At 40 people think about how they're half-way through.

"That's optimistic," he adds, remembering that a reporter for *Newsweek* once suggested Prince was presumptuous to speak as though he would live to be 80. The journalist had a point. Last summer, while at his vacation home on Long Island, Prince came as close to death as he's ever been. This bout with death was caused by—of all things—a bee sting.

Prince remembers the experience well. It intrigues him because he almost welcomed the prospect of ending a relatively young and brilliant career. The death-wish was there.

Now the life-wish is very much in evidence: "I want to be creative and productive."

To prove it, he's just gone to Munich to direct his first film, *The Dreamers*. He's doing it for several reasons. First, because he likes films. Second, because "I think I'm a visual director; I'd like to see if that's true." Finally, he wants a respite from the whole Broadway scene.

"I'd like to take some pressure off of me of the back and forth debates we have on the future of the theater. The theater is prey to so much."

He pauses, searching carefully for the right words, then finds them. "Movies are now and tomorrow. The theater is not dead, but I'm just as pleased by a great movie as by a great play. It's harder to do a *good* play than it is to do a *good* movie, but it's just as hard to do a *great* film as a *great* play."

Still, he's not abandoning Broadway. Early next year, he will produce and direct a new musical, *Company*, starring Tony Perkins.

There are other ways in which he's been productive. One is as president for two terms of the League of New York Theatres. The wall opposite his office desk tells some of the story of that bit of service to New York's producers' colony. There, in gilded frames with crimson velvet borders, are congratulatory letters from Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, Jacob Javits, and John Lindsay.

Mayor Lindsay also appointed him chairman of New York City's Theatre Advisory Board, which was instrumental in taking a bit of Broadway into the city's ghettos last summer.

Prince has also been active in the University's expanding living arts program as chairman of a new Advisory Council for the Performing Arts. A full-page photograph

from a recent issue of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, tacked to the cork wall in his office, is one source of satisfaction to him. It shows the construction of Pennsylvania's new Annenberg Center for Communication Arts and Sciences, which will house a laboratory theater named for him. He's excited about the experimental possibilities of the Harold Prince Theater and has already shown the design to those interested in building new stage facilities in Manhattan as an example of one kind of theater sorely needed.

Prince attended the University from 1944 to 1948—the end of the war years. He once described himself as one of 200 civilians in a student enrollment of 10,000 soldiers and sailors. After graduation he spent two years in the Army, but even as a student he woke at 5:30 every morning to the call of a bugle.

He remembers that he would dress and cross Woodland Avenue to an all-night sandwich shop where he would greet the dawn with a foot-long roll stuffed with salami, luncheon meats, pickle, onions, and hot peppers. (No wonder he now avoids breakfast!) Then he would go back to his room and work on a play he was writing. The play opened under the auspices of the Penn Players and won an award for him.

As an undergraduate, he was a moving spirit not only in Penn Players, which he served artistically as writer and actor and administratively as treasurer of its Board of Governors, but also in WXPN, the campus radio station which he helped to found and became station manager of.

He even tried out for Rusty Callow's 150-pound crew, but, as he said, "it gets cold on the Schuylkill and that is really hard work." In fact, he viewed the whole thing as a theatrical pursuit on his part, rather than a sport: he had a fleeting image of himself "in a sweater with a big letter, carrying a shell to the water's edge and helping to toss the coxswain in the drink after victory."

But if he never got to Henley, he's now a regular visitor to London's West End—and to dozens of other foreign capitals where his shows play.

Meanwhile, back in his office, he hangs up the phone and, like a stage-struck starlet, exclaims, "Clive Barnes wants to see *Cabaret* for the *third* time! Why, for God's sake? He hates it!"

Prince is happy. And admits it.

Then, preparing to leave, he offers a quartet of pretty young assistants the use of his car and driver to get them home. "We have a very good time most of the time," he says convincingly. And the small talk on the elevator confirms it.