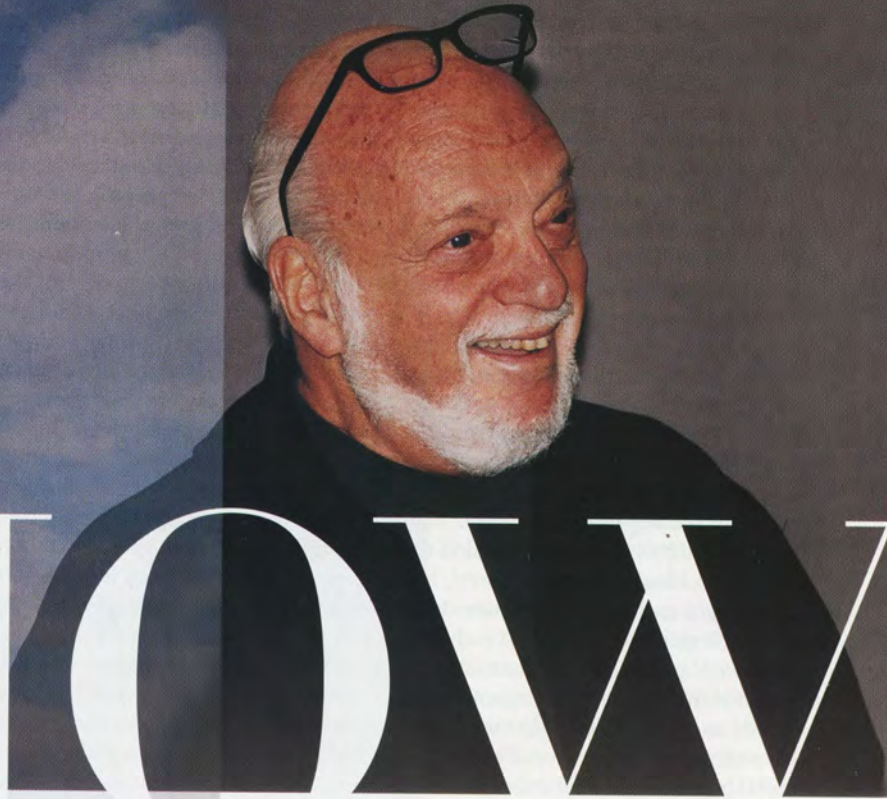




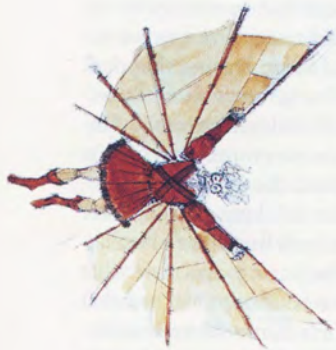
# Putting on a

More than half a century after Hal Prince left Penn to become Broadway's brightest off-stage star, he is still passionately committed to getting new musicals on stage. *By Samuel Hughes*





# SHOW



**T**he Oracle is about to speak.

He stands at the front of a small West Side rehearsal studio, facing his audience: young, fresh-faced actors and actresses; set and costume designers; directors and stage managers and writers and composers. A few minutes earlier, he had been greeting and hugging them and asking about their summers. Now it's time to get down to business. The coffee-spiked chatter flat-lines.

"I don't have to tell you how important I think this whole journey is, and how exciting I think it is," begins Harold S. Prince C'48 Hon'71, better known as Hal. "In the last month or so, there's been an awful lot of publicity about new composers and new lyricists and new librettists—the need for the musical theater to find, identify and develop the next generation. And I think it's wonderful that we're right here at the right time."





He pauses for a moment and looks around, his still-vital visage framed by the trim white beard and black-frame glasses perched on his hairless pate.

"I also can't resist saying something," he adds. "I happen to know that there are, in this room among you, a few people who have turned down very, very high-paying jobs on Broadway to do this. And not only do I celebrate that—but I think it's the right priority!"

Electric laughter, then applause. The collective adrenaline surges. The Oracle has offered favorable omens.

**T**he production these mostly young theater-makers and their septuagenarian sage have embarked on is *Three*, a trio of one-act musicals that begins a two-week run on November 4 at a certain theater in Philadelphia. That theater company used to be called the American Music Theater Festival, but when it got itself a home in a remodeled movie theater in Center City, producing director Marjorie Samoff threw caution (and the lucrative naming rights) to the winds and named it the Prince Music Theater after her mentor. That, along with the one in the Annenberg Center, gives Prince the signal honor of having two theaters named after him in the city where he spent all of four years—albeit pretty important ones, both for his purposes and ours.

It's *Three's* opening rehearsal this bright September morning, and though the curtain won't rise for another six weeks, a lot of work has already gone into the production. Prince is famous for his attention to detail—call it craft—and his ability to keep a project moving from idea to opening night, a process that often takes years. ("What spills out of Hal's mouth at a meeting," Stephen Sondheim once said, "could fill 67 songs and 87 scenes.") The scripts have been worked and reworked. Detailed costume sketches are taped on the walls. A model of the theater's stage—a talismanic black box the size of a portable TV—sits on the table in front of Prince. It looks like a dollhouse, with three sets of tiny furniture and props. Since *Three* consists of three totally unrelated musicals—"The Mice," "Lavender Girl" and "The Flight of the Lawnchair Man," which Prince himself is directing—the staging logistics are daunting. Especially since he wants to bring a sense of Occasion to the production.

"The question was: Do we have one unit set that we move adroitly around to

accommodate three pieces, or do we do three full productions?" Prince delivers those last three words with extra inflection, making it clear that there was only one acceptable answer. "We went with something that occurs to me all the time—which is theater, performing arts, as a sense of occasion. I miss it. In the golden years of Olivier and Gielgud and Richardson, there was a sense of occasion about attending theater. There still is.

"Now, there are three one-acts. But there will be more of a sense of occasion, because the scenery is different. The style of each play is totally different. So why should they be hobbled by a unit set, which is what you expect when you go to that kind of theater?"

The plays also have different authors and directors, so trying to link them all thematically is out of the question—although Prince gets a good laugh when he notes that somebody had suggested that they're "really three hilarious musicals about death." That's a *reductio ad absurdum*, of course, and yet in a way, it captures the artistic legacy of Hal Prince: take deep and sometimes dark subjects, add a sense of occasion and a fresh vision, and somehow—impossibly—turn them into great entertainment.

**BY** the time he was 13 years old, Hal Prince already had a recurrent daydream: "that one day I'd have an office in Rockefeller Center in which I wrote and directed plays."

It didn't take him long to get there, though he did more or less abandon the writing part. "I started here when I was 20, so it's 52 years of coming to Rockefeller Center," he says. "I am the only living human being who has never worked in a different venue. Pretty peculiar—but wonderful. However, it gives you *such* a distorted view of the world."

Prince is sitting in his office on the 10th floor of 10 Rock, as the locals call it, wearing a loose black sweater-jacket over a gray tee-shirt and managing to look both elegant and slightly ruffled at the same time. He's an old pro at interviews, voluble and frank and instinctual, and though he sometimes interrupts himself, he edits himself very lightly. One doesn't so much interview him as toss him a question or two and let him talk until the curtain drops on his time. The glasses are, as usual, perched up on his dome, and at one point I have the odd notion that they're actually being used by his hidden third and fourth eyes, the ones

that are always looking around for new ideas and ways to do things. The other eyes, pale blue and slightly protuberant, are focused and intense.

Right below the name *Harold Prince* on the door to his suite of offices is the name *George Abbott*. Abbott, the legendary Broadway producer/director who died in 1995 at the age of 107, gave Prince his first job soon after he got out of Penn and worked with him for many years. A better mentor is hard to imagine.

"Yeah, I'll always have it there," says Prince. "He had everything to teach. And he was very generous. And what was it he was teaching? Not essential taste, your taste *vis-à-vis* my taste. No: discipline, craft, how-to—and how to be honest. Even when he was doing farce comedies with people slamming doors—they *never* slammed a door because it was funny to hear a door slam. You can't *make* an audience laugh. High jinks—it has to come out of character and a situation. Well, that prevails if you're doing *Sweeney Todd*. So I learned all those lessons from him. Because, I venture to say, he was so generous—and he was generous because he was so secure."

Here Prince pauses briefly. "And of course, he was the first person to tell me, 'You can direct,'" he adds. "Everybody else told me I couldn't. Nobody encourages you very much when you're starting." It's a lesson that he has never forgotten.

Prince himself had a nervous breakdown in his mid-teens, a year or so before he came to Penn. During that dark period, his earlier fantasies about directing great actors suddenly seemed "insane," he told an interviewer some years ago, "and scared the hell out of me, 'cause you start thinking you're never going to come back from that place."

I ask him if he'd care to speculate what his career might have been like had that not happened. He thinks for a moment.

"I wouldn't be able to guess," he says finally, with a Tevye-like shrug. "I literally came out of it a different person. Maybe braver; maybe falsely braver. More ambitious, certainly, and determined. I sort of positioned myself in a place where I said, 'If I don't have the life that I want, I don't know how I'm going to live.'"

He got it—and then some. It's hard to describe the influence of Hal Prince on the American musical theater without sounding like a hyperventilating flack, so for now, just the facts: He has



won 20 Tony awards, some for producer, some for director, some for both, starting with *The Pajama Game* and running through *Damn Yankees*, *Fiorello! A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Cabaret*, *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, *Candide*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Evita*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Show Boat* and, just last year, *Parade*. That list doesn't include *West Side Story* (co-producer), *Pacific Overtures* (director), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (director), and quite a few others. He has directed two films: *Something for Everyone* and *A Little Night Music*. He has directed 11 operas and was a 1994 Kennedy Center Honoree. His autobiography, *Contradictions*, was published in 1974, but he has no plans to write a sequel for the very sensible reason that two good biographies have already been written about him, and both are being updated by their authors. He is, as one of those authors (Carol Ilson) wrote, "perhaps the first 'star' producer-director in Broadway musical history."

And yet for all the astonishing artistic and commercial success, he is still very much involved in discovering and encouraging new talent—and putting on such relatively risky productions as *Three*.

"Isn't it fabulous that a man in his seventies would choose, after his production of *Parade*—which won a Tony for best music and best book, and was also a collaboration with a young composer—that his next project would be to work with three young teams?" says Marjorie Samoff. "That really says it all." That commitment to new and innovative work, she adds, is "one of the hallmarks of his career," and the reason they named the theater after him.

"You see why, don't you?" says Prince. "I mean, Abbott did it with me. It's not generous; it's selfish, if you look at it really carefully. Abbott used me—unconsciously—and everyone else he ever worked with. Comden and Green and Bernstein and Robbins—they were all decades younger than he, and he loved working with them. He preferred working with them—because guess what? It was a terrific exchange: what he knew for this younger interpretation of things. Well, seeing that firsthand, why wouldn't I do that for myself?"

"In the core of his being, he believes in the theater as a mentorship system," says Brad Rouse, Prince's young assis-

tant, who is directing "The Mice." "He knows he's got an incredible resource in his experience, and he's trying to make sure people know the process that works in creating musicals. It's the best. As long as I'm in the business, his process will forever ring in my ears."

"Hal is also very conscious of the fact that he came of age at a time when, as Shakespeare said, the stars all came together to provide for him a wonderful

## "The Flight of the Lawnchair Man," says Prince, is



## "almost a farce comedy" about something "very spiritual—a man wanting to fly, and what that means to the spirit."

time to be producing and directing in American musical theater," says his old friend Catherine S. ("Kaki") Marshall CW'45, who directed Prince as an undergraduate in Penn Players. "That today, a young man with all the same talents and drive would not be able to do it because of the economic climate and the culture."

*Note to Penn's admissions office: You might want to skip this part.*

"I was devastated," Prince is saying back in his office. I assume that I'm just not hearing him right. I've just asked him a question about Mask & Wig, which he had not joined because Jews were pretty much relegated to the chorus back then. But Prince isn't interested in revisiting that old story, which he's told before to the *Gazette*, among other publications; so he's telling me about his experience applying to Penn in 1943. The information that he got turned down is just not registering, so I ask if he's referring to Mask & Wig.

"No!" he ejaculates. "Penn! Penn turned me down!" Oh ...

"And so my mother said, 'We're going down to Philadelphia on the train, and you're going into the admissions office.' And I said, 'Oh, God? I was very shy. Terrified. And she said, 'No, we're doing it.'

"So I went down to Penn with her, and I walked into the admissions office—no appointment or anything—and I asked to see the admissions director. And I said, 'This is where I want to go. I don't want to go anywhere else.' I had good reasons; it was a great school; it's a great city; there was a lot of theater coming in and out of that town on the way to New York. And it was near New York.

Everything worked for me.

"So anyway, I talked to this man. I must have been incredibly shy, and he said, 'Well, I'm looking at your record, and the reason you have not been accepted is you want to be a liberal-arts English major, and your English marks aren't high enough.'

"And I said, 'But I've just won the graduate English prize at school, which is the top award you can give for English, and my teacher happens to be one of the principals of the school, and he doesn't believe in giving anything over Bs.' And he said, 'Really?' And I said, 'Yes.' And he said, 'Oh, my.' And he said, 'Go on home.' And I went to my mother, who was waiting, sitting in front of Ben Franklin's statue, and I said, 'They're taking me.' And she said, 'How do you know?' And I said, 'I know.' And I was taken and I started."

World War II was still turning young men into soldiers, and Prince, who describes himself as a "wimpy, frightened 16-year-old," felt like a "child" compared to all the guys in uniform. But he soon



found a home with the Penn Players, winning the Best Male Performance Award in 1945 for his portrayal of the Reverend Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, under the direction of Kaki Marshall, known in those days as Catherine Santa Maria.

"They gave me a great role, and I got the award for best actor," he recalls. "Over-actor, I think it probably was. But I'll tell you—they never gave me another part. Because the next year, everybody came back from the war, and they got back all the actors that they really admired, so I was reduced to not acting. I hated acting."

"He was later quoted as saying that was when he realized that acting was not going to be his career," says Marshall with a laugh. "I thought he made a very good decision at that point."

"Oh, I knew it wasn't my metier," Prince says. "No one ever shook so much; no one was ever so terrified. Insofar as a director has to know something about acting, I know how to indicate, if it's necessary, what I want. But don't copy me, because it would be poisonously ill-advised."

His real metier was directing, and in 1947 he won the J. Howard Reber Award for directing a Penn Players production. (He wrote the play in question, though he can't remember the name of it.) Curiously, he was not interested back then in musicals, which he found "trivial" and "camp."

"I like character," he says. "You know, my idea of theater is that Russian stuff that Meyerhold did and Piscator's German stuff, and I loved the whole tradition of Asian theater. So—ask me how many times I've seen *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Or go to the movies—*Citizen Kane*. Those are the high-water marks in my audience attendance. So even though I thought the songs were fun and so on, it didn't interest me."

At Penn, he points out, "the pre-eminent theatrical attraction was the Mask & Wig show and guys putting on drag," which left him cold. "I never got it! I don't get it now! I guess I'm not a cheery enough guy to think, 'Oh, isn't it funny—guys in dresses.' You know—they're not trying to be drag queens; they're trying to be funny. And they're trying to make a lot of people laugh. But it closed off any opportunity I might have had to get involved with musical theater at Penn. I wasn't really interested."

He did get interested in—and helped found—WXPN, serving a stint

as station manager. It was an "amazingly useful" experience, he says, especially when he began adapting plays for radio. He even wrote a soap opera, called *Stella Fort Worth: A Woman of 65 for Whom Romance Is Never Over*.

"We did it on the air five nights a week," he recalls. "Which means I had to write the script—15 minutes, it was—take it in, rehearse it, and provide it for two seasons."

His idea of "extra-curricular entertainment" was to "haunt" the old library.

"I would go in idly and leaf through the file cards and send for things," he told a small crowd of theater fans at Van Pelt Library in 1993. "You know: a playwright's history; the history of a period of the theater; the history of an acting family; the history of the Walnut Street Theater—which is as rich a one as you can get; and so on. I'd sit there with whatever I got from the library and just leaf through it, and indulge my hunger for that history—and my dream of having a place in it someday."

A pistol-packing cowgirl catches my eye as I walk along Broadway toward Prince's office. It's Cheryl Ladd, gazing fetchingly from a promotional poster for *Annie Get Your Gun*, which first hit Broadway in 1946 and is currently being revived at the Marquis Theatre. Nothing wrong with revivals, of course—Prince himself won a Tony a few years ago for his direction of the classic *Show Boat*, though part of his interest in doing that was to restore some key parts of Oscar Hammerstein's original book, which had been cut by Florenz Ziegfeld and never put back. But since only a handful of musicals are being produced today, a nice, safe revival of an *Annie Get Your Gun* only makes it harder for new work to see the light of klieg. That economic and artistic climate has been a concern of Prince's for years.

"I wonder, today, if you could get most of the historical musicals up on the stage in New York," he muses back in his office. "The incursions of economics have certainly eliminated enormous casts, so you couldn't do *Show Boat*—that had 72 people in it six years ago, and a whole lot of scenery. Could you do *West Side Story*? And could Sondheim and I do *Follies*? No way. They're doing it at the Roundabout Theater off-Broadway because it's history. Now they wouldn't touch it with a 10-foot pole! *A Little Night Music*? *Pacific Over-*

*tures*? Please! I think *Sweeney Todd* is a lot of people's favorite Sondheim musical. Fine. Could you get it on now? I don't know?"

He and Sondheim will get to test the waters again soon enough. They, along with writer John Weidman, are working on a new musical, marking the first time Prince and Sondheim have collaborated in 19 years. Though it's still "a season and a half" down the line, his enthusiasm is palpable. "Yesterday I got the first 20 pages," he says, "and they're just swell—my word, *swell*; nobody else uses it anymore."

It was the "devastating emotional failure" of *Merrily We Roll Along*, Prince says, that led to the creative fissure between him and Sondheim.

"It just absolutely pole-axed us," he says. "I don't want to speak for Steve; I was pole-axed, and I was just running for cover. Not from him, God knows. We've talked about getting back for years. Everybody tries to make these ruptures mean something. He went off and did some great shows, and won a Pulitzer Prize with one of them; and I went off and did some swell shows that I'm glad I did. Fine. But I think the need to work together again was very strong."

While the musical artistry of Sondheim is much admired by critics, it remains somewhat on the outskirts of American popular culture. If the Golden Age of American musical theater is over—and Prince has certainly suggested as much in the past—I wonder: what's the most that he can hope or strive for?

"You never know what will happen with the musical theater, because it's so totally dependent upon what is popular music," he says. "We've had now a decade and more of making musicals without making popular music. Popular music at the moment is predominantly crappy."

"There are real exceptions," he adds quickly. "There are real composers out there. And there are even people putting words in songs that are marvelous. But predominantly, it's every singer, every performer, writing their own material—three songs over a weekend, or five, putting them in the albums and making a goddamn fortune. It's sloppy, and it doesn't feed the musical theater. Because we have to hear what they're saying. And the lyrics have to do something for the material."

"Paul Simon wrote quite a fine score



for *Capeman*,” he acknowledges. “The trouble is, *Capeman* wasn’t fine. And he didn’t, for whatever reasons, know that he should write the score and let somebody else do the other things.”

Prince also suggests that the success of last year’s musical “dance play,” *Contact*—“no new score, no composer, no orchestra, and no one singing”—does not make it a blueprint for the future. “Musicals,” he says firmly, “are meant to be sung.”

His prescription: “If contemporary music evolves, and the level rises so that it *has* quality, and can speak thoughts and words—and not just the same words over and over and over again—then it can feed the musical theater, and the musical theater can combine with popular music again. That would bring you back to a golden age of musicals. *Only* that would do it.”

**B**ack at the Second Stage rehearsal studio, Prince is about to address the troupes again. He had disappeared while Brad Rouse talked about the allegorical feel and Edward Goreyesque visual style of “The Mice”; while Scott Schwartz described the gauzy, Southern Gothic quality of “Lavender Girl”; and while Walt Spangler explained the nuances of the three sets he had designed. Now he has a few minutes to talk about “The Flight of the Lawnchair Man” before he dashes off to a meeting with actress Carrie Hamilton and her mother, Carol Burnett. (He’s going to be directing their new play, “Hollywood Arms.”)

“The first two pieces will be done as the first act,” he is saying. “But again, I’m ever-striving to give a sense of occasion, and in the old musical game, we’re going to have overtures. During the overture for this piece you just saw [“Lavender Girl”], we’ll set up “The Flight of the Lawnchair Man.” And that’s a very different book, as you’ll see.”

“The Flight of the Lawnchair Man”—written by Peter Ullian, with music and lyrics by Robert Lindsey Nassif—is based on the true story of a man who strapped himself into a lawn chair to which several hundred balloons had been attached, and who soared to something like 10,000 feet. While Prince describes it as “almost a farce comedy,” it is also about something “very spiritual”—namely, “a man wanting to fly, and what that means to the spirit.”

In his flight from the earthly con-

“If you fall on your face today,” says Prince, “it’s very unlikely that anyone’s going to let you stand up again.”



finer of Teaneck, New Jersey, Jerry—the Lawnchair Man—encounters Leonardo Da Vinci, Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart. I won’t give away the ending, but I will say that during a number by Lindbergh—who will be wearing the *Spirit of St. Louis*—the rest of the cast will break into an offbeat, Busby Berkeley-style dance routine.

“It’s hilarious material,” Prince says. “I’m very excited by it. I think it’s marvelous.”

Prince knows a thing or two about publicity, and he’s well known for his positive spirit. (“Hal conceals through humor,” writes Sondheim, “and defuses through enthusiasm.”) But his excitement *feels* genuine, and he is equally enthusiastic about the two opening musicals in *Three*. He compares “The Mice”—written by Julia Jordan, with music by Laurence O’Keefe and lyrics by Nell Benjamin—to a musical version of the movie *Fargo*, and describes “Lavender Girl”—written by James Waedekin, with music and lyrics by John Bucchino—as “very romantic, very much in the mode of *Scott and Zelda*.” Together, he says, “They do one more thing than I ever intended: They make an evening. And I think the evening will not end in Philadelphia.”

**I**T took about a year and a half for *Three* to evolve from lightbulb over Prince’s head to the stage—which, all things considered, is pretty fast. It’s a process that he has been through many, many times, and one that he clearly still loves. Prince, as Carol Ilson writes in her 1989 biography, is “happiest when he is involved with half a dozen projects.”

“I’ve been kind of nursing projects, and going in and seeing them at different stages,” Prince explains—“first the composer playing it, then actors learning it and reading it; then workshoping it on its feet. What that did over these years is introduce me to young composers. Getting young composers heard on Broadway is hell. I accomplished it two seasons ago with *Pavade*, and Jason Brown won a Tony award and is now a much sought-after composer/lyricist. But you have to have a great deal of clout to cajole and bully and entice someone into putting up the kind of money it takes to do a full production in New York. So it’s very hard to do. Plus, this prevailing mentality today is commercial, and it’s diluting the impact of contemporary musical theater big-time—and, worse than anything, it is slowing down the process of these people developing. ‘Cause no matter what you learn in a room and in a workshop and in a reading, there’s so much more to be learned in a full production. That’s how Sondheim happened; that’s how Bock and Harnick happened; that’s how Kander and Ebb happened; that’s how I happened. You do your first show, with all the available toys you need—full orchestras, orchestration, scenery, costumes and the world’s most dangerous audience. And you fall on your face! Well, if you fall on your face today, it’s very unlikely that anyone’s going to let you stand up again. But every one of the people I just mentioned, including me, their first show was a box-office flop—and we came back to Broadway very often within a year. And had a success. And we were on our way. And that’s the way it should have been—and that’s the way it should be.”