



# Insights

*A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival*



*A Funny  
Thing  
Happened  
on the  
Way to the  
Forum*

The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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For more information about Festival education programs:

Utah Shakespeare Festival  
351 West Center Street  
Cedar City, Utah 84720  
435-586-7880  
[www.bard.org](http://www.bard.org)

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

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# Synopsis: *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*

The setting for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is a street in ancient Rome, in front of three adjacent houses. First is the brothel of Lycus, who takes his profession of peddler of fresh very seriously. Next is the house of Senex, his wife Domina, and their son Hero. Last is the house of Erronius who continually bemoans the unsolved kidnapping long ago of his son and daughter.

Pseudolus, a slave in the household Senex and the property of Hero, is anxious to obtain his freedom. To do so, he will resort to all kinds of trickery, abetted reluctantly by fellow-slave Hysterium. ("I live to grovel," he says complacently.) Pseudolus, who is a coniving and quick-witted rascal, has figured that the best way of bargaining for his freedom is to cater to the sex-hungers of the men of the household, especially Hero, who yearns for the beautiful Philia, a still virginal girl who is in basic training for a courtesan's career in the bawdy house run by Lycus. Hero agrees to give Pseudolus his freedom if he can help him win Philia.

Hero's aging father, however, lecherously wants to have a last fling and likewise has his eye on Philia. Thus, Pseudolus must also try to give him what he deserves. Finally, as the ultimate complication, Pseudolus is faced with the contracted fact that Philia has already been sold by Lycus to Miles Gloriosus, a soldier momentarily absent from Rome.

Forced to foil all the males who are after the lovely but dumb Philia, Pseudolus has to maneuver with resourcefulness and agility, and the action crosscuts from the chaste to the chase with dizzying speed. Guffaws keep erupting as the schemes of Pseudolus boomerang and get him ever deeper into a mire of deception, entangling everybody who comes near. When the vainglorious and licentious Miles Gloriosus returns to Rome and demands fulfillment of his contract for Philia, Pseudolus is in desperation and quickly declares that she is dead. To help him in this charade, he persuades Hysterium to don a wig and women's clothes and pretend to be the corpse.

The very much alive Philia, hearing her contracted owner has returned, dim wittedly thinks that old Senex is the man who has purchased her, so Senex excitedly tries to escape his battle-ax of a wife, Domina, in order to enjoy his good luck. In preparation for the anticipated encounter, he oils himself with sweet ointments and begins issuing a gurgling mating call.

The ever-funny comic bit of mistaken identities kicks into high gear as there are suddenly three Philias: the real one, Hysterium in his fright-wig and women's clothes, and Domina, who, in a similar wig, is attempting to snatch back her husband in the guise of the young courtesan. Suddenly everybody is chasing everybody else, mistakenly and hilariously, as the wily Pseudolus keeps the three unsuspecting Philias from confronting each other.

In the end it is discovered that the real Philia and Miles Gloriosus are long-lost brother and sister, the kidnapped children of Erronius. Since they are siblings, Miles Gloriosus voids his contract for Philia, and she is found of sufficient high birth to become Hero's bride. And, of course, the scheming Pseudolus wins his freedom.

# Characters: *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*

- Prologus:** An actor who introduces the play, Prologus then changes into the character he plays throughout: Pseudolus.
- Senex:** An older man, but one still attracted to wine, women, and song, Senex is the perennially henpecked husband. His wife, Domina, doesn't trust him, but ultimately they do love each other, as Domina evidences by singing: "Angel, my angel! Where is he, that dirty old man divine? I love him, I love him, that lecherous, lewd, lascivious, loathsome, lying, lazy, dirty old man of mine!"
- Domina:** The battle-ax wife of Senex, Domina is not only domineering, but proud. It is she that tells a slave who is carrying a sculpture of her to "carry my bust with pride"—and she doesn't even know it's a funny line!
- Hero:** The handsome son of Senex and Domina, Hero is a lovesick juvenile who schemes with Pseudolus how he can win the hand (and body) of Philia.
- Hysterium:** A slave of Senex and Domina, Hysterium is the frantic and frenetic straw boss of all the slaves in the household. Pseudolus cons him into helping him in his plots, including dressing Hysterium up as the corpse of Philia.
- Pseudolus:** A slave of Hero, Pseudolus is sly, conniving, and willing to do anything for his freedom, leading to a deal with Hero that if the slave can win Philia for his master, his master will, in turn, grant his freedom. It is this desire that fuels the action of the play and many of the sight gags. For instance, it is Pseudolus who, in searching for Philia, finds himself back-to-back with Gymnasia, a voluptuous prospective concubine. Eager salesman Lycus assures him they make a great fit. "Yes," says Pseudolus, "but how often will we find ourselves in this position?"
- Lycus:** The owner of the brothel, Lycus is the snaky, slimy, lecherous procurer of courtesans. He takes a businesslike care of his concubines; for instance, he won't let them be fanned while wet, afraid they might catch cold; and he warns one fanner: "If you're not careful you'll be a eunuch all your life."
- Tintinabula:** One of Lycus's courtesans, Tintinabula has "the face of an idol . . . the arms of a willow tree . . . and the pelvis of a camel."
- Panacea:** Another of Lycus's courtesans, Panacea has "a face that holds a thousand promises, and a body that stands behind each promise."
- The Geminae:** Twin courtesans, the Geminae are, according to Lycus: "A matched pair. Either one a divinely assembled woman, together an infinite number of mathematical possibilities."
- Vibrata:** Another of Lycus's courtesans, Vibrata is "exotic as a desert bloom . . . wondrous as a flamingo . . . lithe as a tigress . . . for the man whose interest is wildlife."
- Gymnasia:** Another of Lycus's courtesans, Gymnasia is "a giant stage on which a thousand dramas can be played."
- Philia:** Still a virginal girl, the beautiful and young, yet dumb, Philia none the less belongs to Lycus and is a courtesan-in-training, already contracted to be sold to Miles Gloriosus. She and Hero, however, are in love; and Hero has enlisted Pseudolus to get her for him. In the end the day is saved by the revelation that she is the sister of Miles Gloriosus who then nullifies his contract and allows her to go to Hero.

**Erronius:** A befuddled old man who is partially blind and always confused, Erronius spends most of the play bemoaning his two children who were kidnapped by pirates years ago. However, he is overjoyed when it is revealed that Philia Miles Gloriosus are the long-lost children.

**Miles Gloriosus:** A roman soldier, Miles Gloriosus is handsome, strong—and pompous, so much so that he proudly declares: “I am a parade.” In the end it is revealed that he is the brother of Philia and son of Erronius.

## About the Playwrights

### Burt Shevelove, Larry Gelbart, and Stephen Sondheim

The three creators of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* have a list of credits that would rival any writing teams of any age or place. In fact, a list of Bert Shevelove’s, Larry Gelbart’s, and Stephen Sondheim’s accomplishments reads like a “Who’s Who and What’s What of Entertainment.”

#### Burt Shevelove

Burt Shevelove, with Larry Gelbart, created programs for television’s top comedians in the fifties. Their writing for Art Carney, Red Buttons, Bob Hope, Sid Caesar, and others won the Emmy, the Christopher, and the Sylvania awards.

Before *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Shevelove had directed *Small Wonder*, a small Broadway revue to which he contributed material and in which he performed. He also directed a revival of *Kiss Me Kate* at the New York City Center in 1956.

After *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, he adapted and directed the farce *Too Much Johnson* in 1964, then abandoned writing for a time to concentrate on directing. Then, in 1974, he returned to adapting the classics with Stephen Sondheim. This madcap Sondheim/Shevelove collaboration, which Shevelove also directed, was an adaptation of Aristophanes’s *The Frogs*. It featured the Yale swimming team, contained a good deal of water ballet, and was staged in the university’s swimming pool.

Shevelove died in London in 1982, as he was preparing to direct a musical version of *The Front Page*. He was sixty-six years old.

#### Larry Gelbart

Before *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Larry Gelbart had, in addition to his television writings, been the author of two films, *The Notorious Landlady* and *Fair Game*, and had written the book for the musical *The Conquering Hero*.

Since *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, most of Gelbart’s activity has been in film and television, with the triumphant exception of *Sly Fox*, his 1976 adaptation of Ben Johnson’s classic *Volpone*. On the west coast he provided film scripts for *Little Me*, *Sly Fox*, *Oh God*, and *Tootsie*. He was also the originator, writer, and co-producer of the long-running television series, *M\*A\*S\*H*.

In December of 1989, Gelbart again had a major triumph on Broadway: *City of Angels*, with music by Cy Colman and lyrics by David Zippel, earned him a 1990 Tony Award for best book of a musical. In 1993 he adapted *Barbarians at the Gate*, the history of the takeover of RJR Nabisco for a made-for-television movie starring Jonathan Pryce and James Garner.

## Stephen Sondheim

Stephen Sondheim began his Broadway career as a lyricist. He provided words for Leonard Bernstein's music in *West Side Story* and for Jule Styne's *Gypsy*. His first Broadway music was written for a straight play, Arthur Laurent's *Invitation to a March* in 1960. His first complete Broadway score was for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* in 1962. Of course, he wrote the lyrics too, as he was to do throughout his career, joining the somewhat rarefied company of the theatre's twentieth century composer/lyricists: Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, George M. Cohan, Noel Coward, and Frank Loesser.

His plays' subject matter has ranged from fairy tales to discreet Victorian cannibalism; his settings have roamed from Japan and Sweden to Paris and London to New York and Hollywood. Along the way, he has collected most of the awards that the theatre has to offer, including five Tony Awards and a Pulitzer Prize shared with James Lapine.

Some of his most popular shows have been *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964), *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), *Into the Woods* (1986), and *Assassins* (1990).

He also composed the film scores for *Stavisky* (1974) and *Reds* (1981), wrote songs for the motion pictures *The Seven Percent Solution* (1976) and *Dick Tracy* (1990), and co-authored the film *The Last of Sheila* (1973).

# *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum: Something for Every-Bawdy*

By Kelli Frost

From *Insights*, 1995

From the opening number ("Comedy Tonight") theatre-goers will know what to expect from *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*: "pantaloon and tunics! Courtesans and eunuchs! Funerals and chases! Baritones and basses! Panders! Philanderers! Cupidity! Timidity! Mistakes! Fakes! Rhymes! Mimes! Tumblers! Grumblers! Fumblers! Bumpers! No royal curse, no Trojan horse, and a happy ending, of course!" (*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* [New York City: Applause, 1991], 23-24). And this is just a sampling of the lyrical gymnastics provided by the genius of Stephen Sondheim who wrote the lyrics and music.

Everyone knows Sondheim as the foremost living composer/lyricist of American musical theatre. He studied music composition and lyricism literally at the knees of his neighbor, Oscar Hammerstein, III (of Rodgers and Hammerstein). He began his professional career in the fifties, providing lyrics for *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*. Since 1957, Sondheim has written music and/or lyrics for nearly two dozen Broadway musicals, with the help of producer/director Harold Prince. Yet, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* was the first Broadway blockbuster Sondheim enjoyed as both composer and lyricist, followed by a string of hits during the next three decades that included *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*, and his current hit, *Passion*.

Nearly everyone also recognizes the name Larry Gelbart as writer of television's M\*A\*S\*H, but not necessarily as co-writer of this stage comedy's book. In the early days of television, Larry Gelbart surrounded himself with such comedic powerhouses as Neil Simon, Phil Silvers, Mel Brooks, Sid Caesar, and Ernie Kovaks. Gelbart can be credited with writing comedy scripts for radio, television, and film for over thirty years.

But who remembers the third member of this creative triumvirate that created *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*? Burt Shevelove collaborated with Gelbart on the libretto for the play back in 1962? Before venturing into such a project with the likes of George Abbott (director) and Hal Prince (producer), Burt Shevelove wrote and directed for the Broadway stage.

So it is safe to say that *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is both a forerunner of and follow-up to some amazingly successful entertainment careers. (In fact, who knew in 1966 when casting a young Michael Crawford as Hero that he would one day take Broadway by storm as the Phantom of the Opera.

When *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* opened on Broadway in May 1962, it was premeditated to offend all. The burlesque qualities inherent in the play were stolen from a variety of sources that included ancient Greek comedy situations, Shakespearean language, stock characters of Italian commedia dell-arte, bawdy antics of Molière's comedy, and American vaudeville, providing ample gags, puns, farcical characters, and broad comedic schtick. One of the most entertaining aspects in the play is its cast of characters. Flesh-vendor Marcus Lycus sets out to sell his collection of courtesans, aptly named Tintinnabula, Panacea, the Gemini twins, Vibrata, and Gymnasia. But more comical than the courtesans are their guardian eunuchs.

Gelbart and Shevelove borrowed generously from the plays of Roman comedy writer, Plautus (circa 254 184 B.C.), borrowing openly from two of his plays, *Miles Gloriosus* and *Pseudolus*. In both *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and the plays of Plautus, *Miles Gloriosus* is a braggart soldier, while *Pseudolus* is a saucy servant. The characters, their situations, and the dialogue are as entertaining today as they were 2,000 years ago.

Ancient Roman theatre consisted mainly of comedies, presented in an aggressive style at parties, circuses, and animal and gladiator contests. Unlike the Greek comedies, Roman plays were relatively free of cultural rituals, religious odes, serious politics, or worshipful revelry, and they were most often accompanied by musicians. Adapting Plautus's farcical comedies to the American musical theatre setting is particularly apt, as nearly two-thirds of Plautus's witty repartee was originally set to music. Knowing this must have given Stephen Sondheim rich fodder for inspiration.

Typically, all of the action in Roman comedies takes place in the street; so scenes that logically would occur inside are placed out-of-doors. Eavesdropping is common, and many complications hinge on overheard conversations. One hilarious example of this occurs in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* when father and son find they both want the same young virgin, Philia. They sing a duet ("Impossible") enumerating each others' romantic weaknesses. Of course, neither can hear the other as they lament in song, "The situation's fraught, fraught than I thought, with horrible, impossible possibilities!" (70). But the lyric show-stopper comes early in the show, when four grown men gather in the street to justify, through song, their collective needs for maid service. They assert that "everybody ought to have a maid! . . . Pattering through the attic, Chattering in the cellar, Clattering in the kitchen, Flattering in the bedroom, .

. . Jiggling in the living room, Giggling in the dining-room, Wiggling in the other rooms, Puttering all around the house!” (58-60). The choreographic possibilities are limitless, especially since the men seem oblivious to an audience!

Four years after the play’s Broadway success, the film version opened to mixed reviews. The film cast borrowed from the stage’s success, using Zero Mostel as Pseudolus (the slave whose story is being told) and Jack Gilford as Hysterium (Pseudolus’s sidekick). But the film also employed television’s popular comedian Phil Silvers as Marcus Lycus (local vendor of flesh), as well as then-new-comer Michael Crawford as Hero (the young lover). Yet, most poignantly cast was the aging Buster Keaton as the wanderer, Erronius. Keaton, who was known to filmgoers as the enduring star of silent movies, brought the film genuine Vaudevillian manners as a myopic old man searching for his children who were stolen by pirates years ago. Ironically, Keaton died before the film was released, guaranteeing this movie a place in film history archives as Keaton’s last.

However, slapstick and broad comedic acting in film are distinctly different from the physical antics used in live theatre. With no camera lens to zoom in on a particular bit of schtick, the stage actor must rely on his place within the ensemble, taking into consideration comic timing, audience reaction, blocking, and focus—all technical terms for the artist. And this stage business is what sets the director of live theatre apart from the film director: the spontaneity of the live experience must be sought in each performance. A good director will provide the means for that spontaneity to occur over and over.

Theatre-goers can expect great things from the Festival’s production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, including loads of laughs from a great script and score, an outstanding cast (which is set to include Festival founder Fred C. Adams as Pseudolus), recognizable music with witty lyrics, eye-pleasing sets and lighting designs typical of the Festival, and top-notch direction that is sure to include the puns, gags, lechery, and raucousness for which the play has come to be known. You can expect “nothing that’s formal, Nothing that’s normal,” (20) but “stunning surprises” and “cunning disguises” (23). This show has “something for everybawdy—comedy tonight!” (23).

## The Top Ten Reasons You Will Love Forum

By Kelli Frost

From *Midsummer Magazine*, 1995

There are certainly a number of great reasons to see *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* this summer at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. There’s the music by Stephen Sondheim, perhaps America’s premiere musical composer today. There’s the jokes by Larry Gelbart, the creator of the amazingly successful television series, *M\*A\*S\*H*. There’s a chance to see the Festival’s first musical in many years. But there are still more reasons; in fact, I think there are ten more reasons, appropriately dubbed the “Top Ten Reasons You Will Love *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* This Summer in Cedar City. They are:

10. Fun. People like to see and produce *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* because it is a fun show—fun to watch, fun to sing and dance, fun to direct, fun to

act—for everyone. “I want to present the play as two and one-half hours of sheer entertainment!” said director Roger Bean, who arrives from Manhattan’s Circle Repertory Theatre to direct for the Festival this summer. “We know it’s corny and full of one-liners, but it’s one hell of a lot of fun!”

9. Surprises. Composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim has given the Festival permission to use two previously unused songs. When Bean contacted Sondheim about using the new material for the 1995 Festival production, Sondheim readily agreed. The first new number comes directly after the overture and is sung by Domina, the dominating wife of Senex. She sings “Farewell” to everything and everyone as she reluctantly leaves home to attend the senate in Rome. By the time she exits everyone else is celebrating her departure—especially her son, Hero, who immediately falls in love with a courtesan named Philia. But she’s an unusual courtesan—a virgin!

8. More New Songs. The second new song in the show is “The Echo Song” which replaces “That’ll Show Him” from the original score. Philia asks the gods whether or not she should follow Hero, and the “gods” (Hero on the roof) echo from above “of course you should!”

7. Stars. Don’t miss Fred C. Adams, Festival founder and executive producer appearing as the comic lead, Pseudolus—a captive slave who is bent on finagling his freedom by show’s end. “One reason Roger Bean asked me to play Pseudolus is that he knows my strengths and limitations as a performer. Roger and I have a wonderful rapport, since we have done this show before [at Southern Utah University],” says Adams. One of the most delightful aspects of this show is the list of characters whose names are actually descriptions of them: Senex (a dirty old man), Domina (his wife), Hysterium (a frantic hypersensitive slave to Domina), Pseudolus (a great pretender), Erronius (a befuddled old man), Lycus (a real hard-to-like guy) Miles Gloriosus (a pompous warrior). You get the idea.

6. A Visual Feast. Scenic designer George Maxwell is bubbling with ideas that incorporate Bean’s directoral concepts. According to Adams, “Roger and George see the goal of this production with a singular eye—fun!” The Roman comedies of Plautus, on which *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is based, include sight gags and visual gimmicks in the vein of Three Stooges humor, slapstick and physical acrobatics intent on evoking laughter.

5. History. “Did you know that Plautus is the father of the actual slapstick instrument?” asks scenic designer George Maxwell. The slapstick is traditionally used by a master to keep his servants in line. It is made of two thin wooden planks that make an intimidating slapping sound when the servant is hit—still very effective on today’s stages. Audiences will also recognize many other remnants of Roman comedy that have influenced modern vaudeville and British music hall genres.

4. Family Entertainment. This show is a terrific family favorite! Just like Saturday morning cartoons, the humor is sophisticated and physical, sometimes bawdy, sometimes going over the heads of younger people, but always delightful. “Roger Bean knows our audiences here at the Festival, and he will no doubt make the most of the scripted and musical allusions to adult themes without the lewdness that sometimes riddles stagings of this play. We guarantee this is a show for the entire family.

3. Extras. The old adage “there are no small roles, only small actors” has no basis in this play, where the most entertaining roles in the show are the Proteans—three of the most ridiculous clown characters imaginable. “We have cast the three zaniest actors we could find

to play these guys,” said Bean.

2. Great Refreshments at Intermission. You will laugh so hard during the first act that you’ll welcome intermission to give your face a rest. There, you will spend your few minutes mingling with other theatre-lovers, enjoying the Festival ambiance, and savoring the terrific taste treats.

1. And the Number One Reason You Will Love the 1995 Production of A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. [Editor’s Note: Excuse me, we can’t print that! This number one reason is a secret the Festival administrators want kept until opening night. However, I can tell you that it involves Fred C. Adams as you have probably never seen him before.]

Well, that’s about it. Anybody can find a reason to enjoy this year’s production of this hilarious musical comedy. Pick your favorite, and I’ll see you there.



