

NEWS



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GIVE OUR REGARDS TO GEORGE M! BY PETER FILICHIA

So what's inspired me to listen non-stop to GEORGE M! (<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/george-m-original-broadway-cast-1968/>)?

Inside Broadway gets the credit.

If you grew up attending a New York public school, Inside Broadway may be familiar to you. For 40 years, founder and executive director Michael Presser has been sending 45-minute shows to P.S. This-and-That to acquaint kids with what a Broadway musical is.

Last month, Hunter Elementary School played host to writer-director Marc Tumminelli's MY TOWN: A NEW GEORGE M. COHAN MUSICAL. The story involves a middle school field trip to Times Square where eighth-grader Mary – described in the script as “charming, funny, sassy, curious, tough, and smart” (and played that way by Paola Robles-Vazquez (<https://www.paolaroblesvasquez.com/>)) – meets George M. Cohan (an appropriately swaggering Brian Klimowski).

Yes, the self-proclaimed “statue outside a half-price ticket booth” comes to life. It's the hard-knock life, as he relates, for pigeons land atop him and leave unwanted souvenirs.

(For the record, Cohan wrote a play called PIGEONS AND PEOPLE. Could that 1933 effort have had anything to do with the complication related in MY TOWN?)

As Cohan guides Mary around “his town” – impressed as I was with what was happening on stage – I often looked away so I could watch the grade-schoolers in their seats. Some weren’t in them at all times, for many were bouncing up and down with excitement at “Yankee Doodle Dandy” and “Harrigan” – songs that they almost certainly had never heard before. They so loved “You’re a Grand Old Flag” that they were soon clapping in rhythm to the 2/4 tempo.

Better still was seeing children sway side-to-side to “Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway” – which may well have been the first waltz that they’d ever heard. There is that old children’s theater assumption that kids won’t sit still for slower or sentimental songs; that was disproved here.

During the curtain call, the kids roared in approval. And why shouldn’t they, given the wealth of the material? How wonderful to see that songs over a century old can still please. The experience was so moving that I just had to come home and play the 1968 original cast album of GEORGE M!

(<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/george-m-original-broadway-cast-1968/>)

(And I haven’t stopped.)

Cohan was musical theater’s first true superstar-hyphenate. From 1903 to 1931, there was never a year that Cohan wasn’t represented on Broadway. His debut in 1901 with THE GOVERNOR’S SON had him starring in a show for which he had also written book, music and lyrics AND had directed. He’d do pretty much the same for more than a dozen shows, and he often took to the stage in plays he’d written, too.

Such a giant legend deserves to be feted, and a bit more than a quarter-century after Cohan’s death in 1942, GEORGE M! (<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/george-m-original-broadway-cast-1968/>) opened on Broadway, using more than two dozen of the master’s songs.

A jukebox musical, you say. Yes, but people were primed to hear Cohan’s songs once again, and a bio-musical seemed an ideal way to do it.

Leading the book writers was Michael Stewart, who’d had three musical hits in a row: BYE BYE BIRDIE (<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/bye-bye-birdie-original-broadway-cast-1960/>), CARNIVAL and HELLO, DOLLY! (<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/hello-dolly-original-london-cast-1965/>) This time he’d share his librettist duties with Fran Pascal, his sister, and John Pascal, her husband.

Stewart would go on to work on eight more Broadway musicals (most notably, BARNUM and 42nd STREET (<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/42nd-street-original-broadway-cast-recording/>)) while the married couple would never return to Broadway. Don’t cry for her, gentle readers: Francine Pascal founded the SWEET VALLEY HIGH young adult novel series that has yielded more than 15 dozen books, the vast majority of which she has written.

Broadway has many oh-so-strange stories, and one belongs to GEORGE M! (<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/george-m-original-broadway-cast-1968/>) Back in the late ‘60s when producers wanted to option the show, Stewart said any one of them could have the honor on the condition that he or she also produce his play THOSE THAT PLAY THE CLOWNS. He was having a hard time stoking interest in a script that didn’t sound particularly commercial: Danish itinerant actors who are always seeking work arrive at a castle called Elsinore and are hired by a prince named Hamlet to stage that big 14th-century hit THE MURDER OF GONZAGO.

Only David Black was willing to send in THE CLOWNS to Broadway, which he sent out after four 1966 performances. Now that that was out of the way, Black could produce GEORGE M!

(<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/george-m-original-broadway-cast-1968/>) (with a little help from his friends Konrad Matthaehi and Loren E. Price).

A further irony is that one of Black's previous projects would play a big role in GEORGE M!

(<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/george-m-original-broadway-cast-1968/>). He'd optioned GOODBYE TO BERLIN, with a score by Sandy Wilson, whose THE BOY FRIEND had made a star of Julie Andrews. She had expressed some interest in playing Sally Bowles in this adaptation of Christopher Isherwood stories.

Then Harold Prince called Black and said that he too wanted to do a musical of the Isherwood stories with a score by Kander and Ebb. Wrote Black in his 2014 memoir FALLING OFF BROADWAY, Prince "offered to make me a silent partner if I would let him be the producer."

Black agreed, and on November 20, 1966 – his 35th birthday – he was at the opening of CABARET (<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/cabaret-original-broadway-cast-recording-1966/>) in a fourth-row orchestra seat. But even if he were in the last row of the Broadhurst's balcony, within seconds of "Willkommen," he would have known that he'd found his George M. Cohan in Joel Grey.

On the Grammy-nominated album, Grey sounds crystal clear and magnificent. He partakes in a dozen songs and does superb justice to one of musical theater's greatest anthems: "Give My Regards to Broadway." He also scores on what may well be a discovery for you, as it once was for me: "Twentieth Century Love." True, we're now in a later century, but the song passes the test of time.

Two future Tony-winners were also in that original cast. One was Janie Sell, who in 1974 made the two surviving Andrews Sisters into a trio in OVER HERE! And let's not forget Bernadette Peters, who played George's sister Josie. She can be heard to great advantage in "Billie," a song that explains how her character received her name.

While I've been listening, I've kept my ears sharply attuned to see if I could pick out voices that I know from other shows and cast recordings: Loni (STARTING HERE, STARTING NOW (<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/starting-here-starting-now-original-cast-recording-1977-arkiv-version/>)) Ackerman, Jill (PROMISES, PROMISES (<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/promises-promises-broadway-revival-2010/>)) O'Hara, Harvey (ANYONE CAN WHISTLE (<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/anyone-can-whistle-original-broadway-cast-recording/>)) Evans, Alan (HALLELUJAH, BABY! (<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/hallelujah-baby-original-broadway-cast-recording-1967/>)) Weeks and Jerry (HELLO, DOLLY! (<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/hello-dolly-original-london-cast-1965/>)) Dodge. All right, I seldom could, but perhaps you can.

GEORGE M! (<https://masterworksbroadway.com/music/george-m-original-broadway-cast-1968/>) opened too late for consideration for the 1967-68 Tonys, prompting Clive Barnes, then critic of the New York Times, to write, "It can have a personal Tony Award from me, and Mr. Grey can have a couple."

And Michael Presser can have a personal Tony Award from me, and Inside Broadway can have a couple. They deserve them for planting the idea in kids' heads that in a few years, they should give their regards to Broadway.

*Peter Filichia can be heard most weeks of the year on www.broadwayradio.com (<http://www.broadwayradio.com>). His new book *The Book of Broadway Musical Debates, Disputes and Disagreements* can now be pre-ordered at [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com).*



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