

## NEWS

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### YOU'RE STILL GOOD, CHARLIE BROWN BY PETER FILICHIA

You're a Good Man, Michael Presser.

Hail to the founder and executive director of Inside Broadway, now in its 40th year of bringing theater to kids – and kids to the theater.

One of Presser's projects is the Summer Stock, Jr. series. It has allowed kids who ranged in age from nine through 16 to meet director Vanessa Spica (<https://www.vanessaspica.com/>), choreographer Taurean Everett (<https://www.instagram.com/taureanje/?hl=en>) (a veteran of Broadway's MISS SAIGON, MAMMA MIA! and MOULIN ROUGE!) and music director Robbie Torres (<http://www.robbietorres.com/>). The three pros guided their students through a 60-hour, two-week musical theater camp which resulted in a most delightful production of YOU'RE A GOOD MAN, CHARLIE BROWN. How those kids shyly smiled as we applauded!

Just as The York Theatre Company did a few years back, here was an age-appropriate rendering of the famous 1967 musical version of Charles Schulz' immortal PEANUTS comic strip – which certainly made him more than peanuts.

Financially speaking, Clark Gesner, the bookwriter-composer-lyricist of YOU'RE A GOOD MAN, didn't need to move to the poorhouse, either, for he made what is a still-roastable chestnut out of PEANUTS. Some reports say that YOU'RE A GOOD MAN, CHARLIE BROWN has been the most produced musical in the world. If that's not true, the day may come when it is, for Charlie Brown and Snoopy, as well as Lucy and Linus Van Pelt, could each justifiably proclaim, "I'm still here."

Want another way to show how long Gesner's musical has been with us? Gary Burghoff, the original Charlie Brown, is now in his 80th year; Reva Rose, the first Lucy, is even older.

In a musical that deals with "Little-Known Facts," here's one: CHARLIE BROWN's original cast album was originally recorded live soon after the musical had opened on March 7, 1967. MGM released it, and then decided that a studio recording would better serve the hit.

It actually contacted the stores and recalled each live recording, which became quite the collector's item.

I've never heard an official explanation of the recall, but, after hearing that live album, I'll advance a theory: CHARLIE BROWN played Theatre 80 St. Marks, which could only accommodate 160 theatergoers. Every seat was probably taken during the night the show was recorded (just as every seat was for a few years). But the sound

of laughter and applause from a mere 13 dozen people sounded anemic when compared to the response we're used to on such live recordings as JUDY AT CARNEGIE HALL.

The eventual studio recording was terrific, yes, but it was superseded by the one made from 1999 Broadway revival. The original off-Broadway album credits two musicians: one on piano, one on percussion. Most of that percussion, by the way, came from a xylophone, which was virtually *de rigueur* in off-Broadway musicals of the 1960s (just as the cello seems to be today).

The 1999 recording has a percussionist as well as a pianist, and it doesn't stop there; a viola, violin, bass, reeds, guitar and keyboard augment and enhance Gesner's score.

And speaking of augmenting and enhancing, that's what Andrew Lippa did for the 1999 revival. First, he added a few new licks and lyrics to the title tune. Far more important, though, were the two songs that he initiated.

One went to Schroeder, arguably the youngest expert pianist and classical music enthusiast since that guy with the middle name of Amadeus annoyed Salieri. Lippa gave Schroeder "Beethoven's Birthday," which has caused some to grouse that it should have had a classical music bent instead of a rock-tinged sound. Well, we could say that Schroeder's excitement over the Big Day is what Lippa wanted to stress.

The other song is one that really made a difference as well as a name for Kristin Chenoweth. The four-foot-ten bundle of dynamite first came to Broadway in 1997, when she had a small role in STEEL PIER. She was nevertheless noticed and notable, for she received a Theatre World Award (a prize given for outstanding Broadway or off-Broadway debuts). Nineteen months later, however, the *actual* theater world would take great notice when she played Charlie Brown's sister Sally.

This character wasn't even in the original 1967 production. Sally would replace Patty – not to be confused with Peppermint Patty, a completely different character whom Schulz preferred to plain ol' Patty, whom he booted from the strip in 1985.

Lippa had Sally fiercely give "My New Philosophy," which showed that she didn't remotely resemble her meek and mild brother. Chenoweth made such an impression with the song that multiple raves, a Tony and a ton of newsprint greeted her performance.

Alas, as much as she made the news, her surname was spelled incorrectly more times than Charlie Brown had struck out at bat. To those who plan to write her a fan letter or request an autographed eight-by-ten, remember the lesson you were taught in school: "i" before "e," except after "c." So put the "i's" in her first name before you put the "e's" in her second. What's more, in her name, those "e's" *do* come after "C," don't they?

That YOU'RE A GOOD MAN, CHARLIE BROWN ever happened was a miracle in itself. Gesner started writing some songs about Charlie Brown, Snoopy and company in the late 1950s. He submitted them to United Features Syndicate that controlled the strip.

The company wasn't impressed to be approached by a comparative nobody. True, Gesner was one of the first writers for *Captain Kangaroo*, the children's TV show, when it debuted in 1955, but that wasn't a credit commensurate with the household-name juggernaut that PEANUTS had become. So, he was told not to continue and not to expect the rights.

But with the nerve of Lucy Van Pelt, Gesner went over their lofty heads and approached Schulz himself. The cartoonist was charmed by what he heard and gave Gesner the go-ahead.

(It's a much nicer version of the quintessential David-and-Goliath story. It also reminds us that perseverance and talent sometimes emerge victorious.)

Ironically, Gesner didn't have a stage show in mind, but just an album of songs which he did call YOU'RE A GOOD MAN, CHARLIE BROWN. He took the role of Linus, while Orson Bean, lately of SUBWAYS ARE FOR SLEEPING, and Barbara Minkus, soon to be in THE EDUCATION OF H\*Y\*M\*A\*N K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N, played Charlie Brown and Lucy, respectively. Bill Hinnant portrayed Snoopy, and, as it turned out, not for the last time. Little did he know that this would serve as an audition for the off-Broadway musical.

For no one on the recording knew that the show would soon take to the stage. Arthur Whitelaw, another Broadway neophyte who'd been a production assistant on BAKER STREET and an associate producer on a short-running one-person show, thought that the album had stage possibilities. And, oh, was he right.

Whitelaw was a producer of the 1999 revival, too, and became a big fan of the bigger sound that this production had. Here's betting that you will, too.

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



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