

FORUM

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Happened on the Way to the Forum" has been a showcase for comedic actors. Zero Mostel originated the role on Broadway, followed by Phil Silvers, Nathan Lane, Whoopi Goldberg and David Alan Grier.

Hanan, a New York-based, Tony-nominated actor, already played Pseudolus in two previous productions.

"This is my third crack at it," he says. The first time was while an undergraduate student at Harvard. The second was 12 years ago at Burt Reynolds's theater

in Jupiter, for which he won a Carbonell Award.

Playing the role a third time "made it very easy for me to learn the lines with very little difficulty," he says, adding, "The lines are so good. It may be the best musical comedy book of them all. Some people say 'Guys and Dolls' is, but this show is just so incredibly well-crafted and so witty. It's very natural to know exactly what you're supposed to say, because it flows. It has the logic of farce in a way no other musical does. It makes complete sense, but at the same time, it's totally wacky...It revived that tradition of vulgar hilarity."

The book is written by Burt Shevelove ("No No Nanette," "The Frogs") and Larry



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Stephen Mo Hanan with John Brothers and Jason Parrish in "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." The musical has been a showcase for comedic actors.



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The cast of "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." The show opens at the Florida Rep in downtown Fort Myers on Friday, Feb. 15.

Gelbart (who was a writer on Sid Caesar's "Your Show of Shows" and also wrote "Tootsie" and the first 97 episodes of TV's "M*A*S*H.") Stephen Sondheim wrote the lyrics and music, with now-classic songs such as "Everybody Ought to Have a Maid" and the show's opener, "Comedy Tonight."

The musical opened on Broadway in 1962, and in London's West End a year later. There were four revivals of the show, two on Broadway, and two in the West End. Among its many Tony Awards, it received a Tony for Best Musical and one for Best Book.

The Florida Rep is going all-out for their production.

"This will be the most expensive show we've ever done at Florida Rep," says Producing Artistic Director Robert Cacioppo. "We have a cast of 18 and an eight-piece band, and we've spent over \$8,000 renting the Broadway costumes. Inside Mo's pants, it says 'Whoopi,' [because they were Whoopi Goldberg's pants.]

"We want it to be from the period, and the style will be a cross between vaudeville and the broad slapstick of the early Romans. The walls are all made out of canvas. I haven't made a set out of canvas since I was in high school. I said to set-designer Richard Crowell, 'Richard, when we slam a door, will the whole wall shake?' He said, 'I hope so!'"

Hanan's looking forward to the run.

"This is the best company I've ever done it with," he says. "The whole cast is so good. I think because of me mellowing some, it's easier to think of it as an ensemble show. The supporting characters are so interesting, and in this case, the supporting actors are so good. I approach it with more humility. Pseudolus is the catalyst who bounces off the lives of all these other stock comedy types."

The musical, which Time magazine called "the cleanest dirty show in town," was based on the writings of the ancient Roman playwright Plautus, who founded the stepping stones of comedy, says Cacioppo, who's directing the show.

"Plautus created the stereotypes of the domineering wife, the henpecked husband who's running after girls, the stupid young lovers," he says. "People may think, 'Oh, this old show,' but this was really experimental theater back in '62. Up until then, there were musicals that had people who could sing, musicals that had people who could dance, but there weren't any musicals that were really funny. Their mission, when they set out to write the show, was to put the comedy back into musical comedy, to find people who can deliver a punch line...It's for people who know how to do a double-take, a stammer, a trip and a spit take."

The role is emotionally and physically draining, says Hanan.

"I throw myself so completely into rehearsal," he says. "I love rolling around on stage. I love to roll around on the floor."

Of course, he got to do plenty of that as part of the original Broadway cast of "Cats," his performance garnering him a Tony nomination. (Hanan wrote about the rehearsal process in his book "A Cat's Diary: How the Broadway Production Was Born.") He also played Captain Hook opposite Cathy Rigby in "Peter Pan" on Broadway, was Fagin in "Oliver!" with Patti LuPone, performed in "The Pirates of Penzance" with Kevin Kline and was in the London cast of "Les Miserables." He also wrote and acted in the Off-Broadway musical "Jolson & Co.," about the life of Al Jolson.

The role of Pseudolus is "physically and vocally demanding," Hanan says, but adds, "I've been doing yoga since I was 23. I've kept in shape."

"What appeals to me about the role of Pseudolus is that it offers so many different opportunities to invent, to be creative," he says. "Because Larry Gelbart, in the introduction to the published version, says this is a scenario for vaudevillians. So there's lots of room to embroider -- not the text, but between the lines. There are so many opportunities to invent, to come up with silly, funny, rib-tickling comic routines. He's a real guy with a real problem and a real objective. Juggling those two sides of the role is wonderfully satisfying."

This is his first time working with Cacioppo.

"Bob's just wonderful," Hanan says. "He has the enthusiasm of a kid. He's totally engaged, up to the elbow...He's as good as his word. He's not at all authoritarian. He's the opposite of an autocrat. He loves everyone's suggestions. If somebody has an idea other than his original one, he goes with it without any hesitation. That's what the best directors do. The ones who get their egos involved are seldom the most talented."

Cacioppo's equally effusive about Hanan. Hundreds of people auditioned and sent in their resumes, but "the minute Mo came in, I said, 'Here is my Pseudolus,'" Cacioppo says. "This guy is the real thing. The greatest thing about him is that he is the nicest man in the world, so unselfish on stage and so amazingly creative. I really feel the audiences of this area are in for a treat with both this amazing show and an amazing top banana in Mo Hanan. You can't give someone talent. If they're very talented, you can shape them and their performance. I went looking, and Mo was exactly what I wanted to find."

"Audiences are so busy laughing in 'Forum' that they don't notice how wonderfully well-crafted and well-structured it is," Hanan says. "It's a show of tremendous precision and style, but it doesn't wear any of that on its sleeve."

"And it's such a good-natured show, which a lot of comedy isn't, especially today. In a comedy like this, we laugh at ourselves, often without knowing it."

"Forum" is artistically sublime. To evoke laughter so effortlessly! ■

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