

## Close...but no cigar: My year of 'Broadway Follies' with a great show, talented cast, & mystery financier

By R.W. Bacon © 2010

**Author's Note:** *This is the story of our experience with a sparkling musical show that 25 years ago came oh-so-close to success on the New York stage – but at the 11th hour was snakebit by a combination of bad luck, financial shortfall, and a mysterious disappearance. Since this “story” may not yet be complete even after 25 years, the title is withheld, the names are changed, and some details are obscured. The uplifting “book” and great songs may yet surface to earn the acclaim they deserve. If not, and I never hear another peep about the show, it stands as a singular experience and an intimate view of both the on-stage art and the behind-the-scenes business of the New York theatre.*

After a show we did somewhere in New York in the early 1980s, May Kafworth, a pleasant and personable woman in her mid-30s, came backstage following a performance to tell us how much she enjoyed it. (During these years L.J. & I were touring with our theatrical show, *The Goodtime Ragtime Vaudeville Revival*.) May was trailed by a procession of children, too many to count, several of which were hers. She kept in touch, and about a year later she hired us for a fund-raising performance for her theatre company and youth drama camp. We learned that in addition to being a busy mom, she was also an actress, director, playwright, TV script-writer, and drama teacher with a graduate degree from a prestigious theatre program. After this show she sent us information about her company's local productions, and favorable reviews of her plays. She attended our shows with her family whenever we were in her area.

Backstage after one such performance, May visited sans children, and told us about a project she had been working on for many years, a “modern-day adult fairy tale,” as she described it, presented as musical theatre. Her collaborator was composer and lyricist Stan Marcus. She described the premise, and the twists and turns of the story, which explained the need at several points for a “fantasy old-time vaudevillian” to materialize out of the mist on a city street and perform his various acts.

The message of the show was that we often get so caught-up in the rat-race of life that we fail to notice the beauty and magic of life that is all around us. This theme was

explored through characters of various backgrounds, with about 20 songs in different styles to carry the story along. Certainly the theme was not new, but May and Stan were tackling it in a fresh way.

May asked if I would be interested in the role of the fantasy vaudevillian – she had been scouting me for years and I was her first choice. She envisioned me making three or four brief appearances within the two-hour show, doing my hat, cane, & cigar box routine, a comedy 3-ball routine, some unicycling, and some song & dance. The plan already in place was to hold a series of preview performances for investors over a two-year period, and then open at a 499-seat theatre in New York. May already had commitments from her hand-picked lead actors and actresses. She had two general managers on-board with successful track-records in shepherding productions for the New York stage. She had the lawyers and accountants standing ready. She had been strategizing on this project for years. I now had something to go home and think about.

In the mid-1980s our engagements were usually arranged through our agents and producers 10-to-14 months in advance.

Reserving a large block of time for a show not yet under contract was risky. And we had a mortgage to pay. This was not the fun-and-games of the young wanna-be actors hustling for the “big break.” Ultimately I agreed to perform at the first preview in New York for a minimal fee. Fortunately it fit into our schedule. Besides, I had a good feeling about her grassroots effort. This was not big-business Broadway. This was a talented, hard-working, motivated, underfinanced-but-tenacious individual grabbing for the brass ring. She was an authentic, sincere person. Her husband worked as a theatre-tech professional in New York, and he was behind her 100%, even singing and acting in the previews. I figured we could evaluate the quality of the material, the cast, the music, and the intangibles at the first preview, and then decide about future involvement.

The first preview performance in 1985 was presented for potential investors in a large soundstage at a recording studio complex in Manhattan. In short, we were bowled over by the songs that helped illustrate the story. It was clear that Stan Marcus was a big deal, a major talent yet to be discovered. For the preview, he sat off to the side of the stage, an ordinary-looking fellow in street-clothes, providing the cast's musical accompaniment on electric guitar only. The core cast, about a dozen theatre professionals ranging in age from 20s to 40s, was already committed to the project and well-rehearsed. They had worked together on earlier incarnations of the production at regional and college theatres. Every single cast member was a distinctive vocalist. A few were May's protégés, having studied with her for years. The preview was impressive enough, but the full Broadway production was slated to have a cast of 20 and a five-piece band.

Driving straight through to New Hampshire that night on the way to our next engagement, I decided that this was a project I could get behind with enthusiasm. The preview also put my mind at ease about the nature of the role – I had to be certain that this show would portray myself and my craft in a positive light. I have always been wary of engagements or roles that pigeonhole a juggler as a one-dimensional court jester or insignificant throw-away novelty. For myself and my juggling brethren, this role would be worthy of the bright lights of Broadway.



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I let May know that I would be part of the team for the previews – at a favorable rate plus expenses. I believed – and still believe – in the quality of the show. If the show was successful, I would have an extended contract at a good salary and no travel for awhile. There was the possibility that the show could run six months or more. (L.J. was looking forward to the change-of-pace on the sidelines, having performed 300-500 shows per year on the road since the mid-1970s – although she was most definitely *not* looking forward to living in New York City.)

Once-a-month in 1985-86, May arranged for a preview performance of selected scenes and songs. The purpose was to get investors on the bandwagon. The goal was to raise \$500,000 in capital, the amount needed to open the show in New York. Each preview performance was an event planned with military precision. Each involved the well-rehearsed cast, of course, and also the well-rehearsed lawyers, accountants, and business-type schmoozers – to court the invited prospects with the deepest pockets.

L.J. and I continued our customary tours and performances, and sandwiched in the preview performances as best we could, usually racing to New York on a too-tight schedule. Traffic, parking, and load-in in New York City were challenging obstacles for us, with our truckload of props, unicycles, instruments, sound system, and backdrop. A lot of the details from 25 years ago merge into a memory of constant driving, traffic gridlock, and crummy hotels in Bridgeport, Conn. (It was cheaper to stay outside of the city on the way home.) Several non-performing incidents stand out: (1) the tantrum by Yoko Ono's driver after we blocked in Yoko's limousine in the loading zone; (2) warming up and practicing my precision juggling stunts in an upstairs hallway among the wasted and befuddled punk-rockers who had booked studio time in another part of the complex; (3) the building-wide silence enforced during a Paul Simon recording session; (4) lying flat on my back among the prop cases in the back of the truck, wracked with lower back spasms, while L.J. drove from New York City to our next engagement on Cape Cod – where we had to unload the entire truck – and perform a two-hour show; and (5) the theft of our anvil-like PA amplifier from our locked truck, which on my “lucky day” was parked directly in front of the theatre. (The thief used a master key and then lugged the amp down the street.)

The preview performances were easier for me than a typical show. In most cases I was

doing a brief three-ball routine, followed by my hat, cane, 3-cigar-box, and 9-box routine choreographed to music. My entire act in the preview was about 10 minutes. This gave me ample time to “people watch” the range of invitees the business team was courting. The business team was made up of experienced theatre pros, who were glad to brief me on the fun sport of people-watching the rich. In short, the prospects that arrived in fur coats, dripping with gaudy jewelry, were generally phonies who loved being seen, but did not really have that much cash to invest. The most coveted prospects with a track record of bankrolling theatre productions – and a need to tie up piles of cash for tax reasons – were the frumpy guys in baggy pants and soiled sweaters who shuffled in like bums.

After every preview performance, May and the business team evaluated the audience response, analyzed every encounter, and followed-up with every prospect. Then before the next preview, we received a new set of notes – pages of script and continuity – all part of the refined strategy for courting the prospects. The formula: Welcome, refreshments & hors d'oeuvres, presentation by the vice-president, introduction by the director, a selection of scenes & songs, the emergence of the “fantasy vaudevillian,” the closing scene & song, and concluding remarks.

My admiration of the stellar cast was constant from the beginning. But it was the music and lyrics that became more and more impressive with repeated listening. Stan Marcus was something special. We learned that he had been May's musical collaborator since their undergraduate days in the Midwest. At times he was her housemate, even through her multiple marriages. They shared composer/author credits on a number of well-received musical plays. Stan was a

quiet, non-showbiz-like fellow whose manner – and short, rotund appearance – would never suggest a major musical theatre talent, or a flowing fountain of melody. He crafted songs in a number of styles, and every one was polished to a shine. “These songs are too good for this show not to make it,” I would say to myself and to anyone who would listen.

With every preview performance, the company's optimism grew. Although two target opening dates had to be pushed back, finally the amount of committed investment capital was moving the show closer to setting a real opening date. We were in contract talks, and L.J. & I were scouting out places to live in New York – outside the city. Publicity went out that May was angling for an early spring 1987 opening at the 499-seat Princess Theatre on Broadway and 48th St. (This was not the famed Princess Theatre that was the cozy venue for the Guy Bolton - Jerome Kern - P. G. Wodehouse musicals 1915-1918, but rather the re-purposed venue that had been the famed Latin Quarter nightclub from 1942-1969. This new “Princess Theatre” gained notice for the 17-month run of *Pump Boys & Dinettes* in 1982-83.)

The optimism was cramped temporarily in January 1986. On the morning of January 10, L.J. & I left Newburyport for New York to perform in what May told us was the most critical backer's preview yet. Slated to attend on this evening was a reclusive high-roller that the team had been working on for months. Furthermore, he was to attend with his “people,” who kept track of his money.

We were already on the highway when we turned on the radio. Minutes after tuning in, we heard the news that something had gone wrong with the launch of the *Challenger* space shuttle. Like most Americans that day,

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The Kafworth/Marcus production was slated for the Princess Theatre, a 499-seat venue at Broadway and 48th St. The three-story wedge-shaped building, at the north end of Times Square, was the site of the famed Latin Quarter nightclub (1942-1969) that featured the biggest names in showbusiness. The venue was converted into a theatre in 1979, and opened as a nightclub again in 1987. The building was torn down in 1989 and replaced with the 22-story Ramada Renaissance Hotel.

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we were glued to the news: At 11:38 a.m., 73 seconds after liftoff, the *Challenger* broke up over the Atlantic Ocean, with the loss of all seven crew members. We drove to New York mostly in silence, listening to the details unfold. After five hours of this, whatever inner drive to thrill and amuse the masses was wrung out of me. When we arrived backstage, a morose cast was wondering how they were going to deliver an upbeat performance. Two cast members in particular were in a panic – because the introduction to their song actually made a humorous reference to astronauts and flying in space. May rewrote the script for them that afternoon, and they were on the spot to make it work with minimal rehearsal. We were also concerned about the mood of the audience.

Our team of resilient professionals made the best of a difficult situation. The audience of prospects was smaller than expected. The targeted high-roller showed up, but sat there like a lump. We heard later that some in the subdued audience actually voiced concern for the cast on this difficult evening. It was a long day. When L.J. & I got to our crummy hotel in Bridgeport after midnight, we turned on the TV news and for the first time saw the sickening video of the *Challenger* explosion. It looked even worse than our imaginations had led us to believe.

The optimism was renewed for the next few backers' previews in the spring of 1986. We were told that we were getting closer to the magic figure of \$500,000. We learned that reaching the magic figure hinged on one unidentified backer who would be the major investor. Information was hard to come by. May, who was usually forthcoming about every detail, clammed up when asked about this investor. The cast knew nothing. Those on the team that did know something spoke of this man in low tones and in the vaguest of terms. Apparently he demanded special handling. We learned that this individual had to make one more trip to his ancestral home on an island in the Mediterranean before his commitment of cash would be final. We learned that May's "money team" was watching this man's every move, and he boarded a plane out of the country in June 1986. He was to be gone for three weeks.

There were no more backers' previews scheduled for the summer, so everyone connected with the show moved on to other projects and awaited the word on the mystery man's return. May carried on with another season of summer theatre camp sessions. Stan left for a resort island to work at his friend's tourist gift shop. By this time

L.J. & I were into our busiest time of year, with only about 10 days off between June and October. With three shows per day and travel besides, we did not keep up with day-to-day news of the Kafworth/Marcus show.

In late August at a week-long engagement north of New York City, we met a member of the business team after a show who gave us the first inkling that things were not well: Some of May's "money people" had "deserted." It was easy to read between the lines: May's own cash was probably running low, and she could no longer pay everyone. "What about the 'mystery man'?" I wondered. The response: A wordless shrug.

A month or so later I called May to get the latest news and the dates of the next round of backers' previews. Instead, May informed me, in a heavy-hearted tone of resignation, that there were no previews planned, and that the project was stalled. I was impressed by her calm. She had nurtured this show for almost a decade, so I figured that I must have just missed the weeks of her crying and screaming in disappointment. "What about the 'mystery man' who was going to put the show over the top?" I asked. "I don't know anything," May said. "He didn't come back in three weeks like he said. And no one has heard from him or been able to contact him." Then, with her voice rising in frustration, "It's like he disappeared from the face of the earth!"

I checked in a month later and learned that May's lawyer, who she relied on so heavily, resigned from the project, and kept for himself bundles of important paperwork. There was still no sign of "the mystery man."



The preview performances were held at the soundstage of **S.I.R. Studios** on W. 52nd St. & 8th Ave. – a block from Broadway. Since its founding in 1974, it had acquired legendary status for being the rehearsal space and recording studio for artists like the Rolling Stones, The Who, Aerosmith, Blondie, Eric Clapton, Bruce Springsteen, Paul Simon, and more. In 2004 S.I.R. sold the building for \$9 million to make way for a 40-story luxury condominium tower.



The cast, facing a new theatre season, could not afford to remain with the stalled project. As for L.J. & I, although it was all disappointing news, we did not miss a beat and continued with business-as-usual, booking shows for a busy 1987 season.

I fully expected the stall-out would be temporary, that perhaps the production would be set back a year, and that eventually all the investors would be happily lined up for this great show. I figured May Kafworth would give me a call when the situation improved. We stayed in sporadic contact, and she remained on my mailing list for a few years until the postal service lost her trail. But subsequently over the next several years, we were updated on the bizarre postscript: As far as anyone knows – and people *were* watching – the mysterious fellow who went to his island homeland in the Mediterranean for some essential business was never seen again back New York. I don't presume to draw any conclusions. I am just including the sketchy and puzzling information that came my way over 20 years ago.

May Kafworth? In the 25 years since her determined effort to bring her creation to Broadway, she wrote for television, raised her children, moved far from New York, married again, and is still involved in theatre. Stan Marcus? Today he lives in the same town as May, and is no doubt still collaborating.

The cast? Every cast member had high-level talent that would stand out anywhere. Still, when the show stalled I was disappointed for the young cast members for whom the show might have been a real stepping stone in their careers.

My enthusiasm for the show, especially the music, has never waned. The songs deserve to be heard. May and Stan are into their fifth decade of nurturing the muse together. They are two sincere people who have something worthwhile and uplifting to say. Their artistry may yet rise to the top, and the applause will be well-deserved. But so far, despite the tenacity of the author/director, the brilliant quality of the songs, the camaraderie of a talented team, and the over-the-top effort of many, this *particular* Kafworth/Marcus show is still unrealized potential. It came *soooo* close 25 years ago. Close, but no cigar. ■

**A final word:** Some 25 years removed from my "Broadway Follies," today I have to be content with just my *books* having a presence on Broadway – at No. 520 – Brian Dubé, Inc. This preeminent manufacturer and supplier of juggling and circus equipment continues to keep my books before the specialized market worldwide. While I'm no longer "treading the boards" at showtime, my work is still "on Broadway" *every day* – and I don't even have to find a place to park!