

A Critical Look at the 1964 Production of *What Makes Sammy Run?*

If the original Broadway production of *What Makes Sammy Run?* seems little more than a footnote in musical theatre history, it is an undeserved fate. Like other “lost musicals” before it – *Lady In The Dark*, *She Loves Me*, *Do Re Mi* – all it needs is a worthy revival to restore it to the repertory. Unfortunately, the superb Original Cast Album on Columbia Records has been out of print for decades, limiting the potential for such a rediscovery.

What Makes Sammy Run? had hit potential right from the start. Based on Budd Schulberg’s fabulously successful 1941 novel, the story had already been dramatized twice on television and the name Sammy Glick had entered the lexicon as a synonym for a certain type of back-stabbing hustler. During its month of previews in New York, the show did astonishing business – performing well early in the week and giving standing-room-only performances on weekends with no discount tickets. Even after a series of mixed reviews, the show continued to draw audiences for the next sixteen months. Unfortunately, the failure of the show to recoup its initial investment – the true “test” of a musical’s success – relegated *Sammy* to the status of “flop.” Had a successful tour been mounted, it might have overcome that stigma, but following a series of regional productions, mostly in theatres-in-the-round, the show was pretty much forgotten.

The 1964 production of *What Makes Sammy Run?* was clearly a missed opportunity. The story and characters were in place, and Ervin Drake’s score contained some of the best theatre music of the period. What went wrong?

Drama critic Walter Kerr, then writing for the *Herald Tribune*, may have pinpointed the primary problem with the original production: “It starts out as a hard-headed, mean-minded musical about a whizz of a kid on the make... and then it cheats. Every so often, every too often, it grabs hold of the very things it means to be satirical about and uses them to make it cozy and cute.” The person primarily responsible for this schizophrenia, according to composer Ervin Drake, may have been the show’s producer: “We were deprived of staging a tougher show by the producer, Joe Cates, who felt it would not appeal to the audience of that time. Both the script and the songs were softened and Steve Lawrence’s ‘Sammy’ was played *fetchingly*. The audiences loved him, but we felt the novel had been betrayed.” Richard P. Cooke of the *Wall Street Journal* also recognized that the real Sammy was missing: “Mr. Lawrence was allowed to indulge his vaudeville-TV talents, which are genuine enough but which have little to do with his stage character. It isn’t the first time this expedient has been tried in musicals and it probably won’t be the last. If you’re a Steve Lawrence fan, this may be enough, but it won’t be if you’re not.”

Clearly, the original production suffered from too many viewpoints. Producer Joe Cates wanted to keep it light and entertaining, while the brothers Schulberg and composer Drake were hoping for a more serious form of musical (i.e. *Pal Joey*). Whether or not Cates was right may be argued, but the failure of Stephen Sondheim’s *Anyone Can Whistle*, which opened one month later and closed after only nine performances, suggests that audiences in 1964 may not have been in the mood for musical comedies with an edge. Abe Burrows, who had been summoned hastily to Philadelphia to replace the show’s original director, Arthur Storch, had co-written and directed the then still-running hit, *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying*, so it was perhaps inevitable that his version of Sammy Glick would bear

more than a passing resemblance to that earlier show's lovable con artist J. Pierpont Finch. (Coincidentally, the New York corporation at the center of *How To Succeed* was called World Wide Wickets, but Schulberg had coined the named World Wide Pictures, the setting for much of *Sammy*, in his novel twenty years earlier.) Out of town, Steve Lawrence had been playing Sammy as an all-out heel, with no redeeming qualities whatsoever, a clear misreading of the book's character. According to a Philadelphia interview with Lawrence quoted in *The New York Times*, "Why, a guy like Sammy Glick, as he was written originally, the minute he walks into somebody's office, he'd be thrown out on his ear. It's obvious he's an operator, a liar. He wouldn't get away with it. No, he's got to have charm. How I see Sammy Glick, he's got like a spigot in him, which he twists on and it pours charm, and he can turn it off fast and then pour out his animal drive. But he's got to be likable. I've know a lot of Sammy Glicks, hell, the music business is crawling with Glicks, and they're guys with plenty [of] charm, they're lovable and friendly while they're trying to con you out of something. That was what was wrong with the show the way we were doing it up until last week. I couldn't put it into words but I felt uncomfortable. Then Abe Burrows came down and took over."

Burrows was recognized even then as one of the theatre's great comedy directors (his son James has earned a similar reputation in television), so it is understandable that he wanted to emphasize the comic elements of the story. He was even quoted at the time saying he wanted to make the show funnier, but that the Schulbergs and Drake disagreed. Remaining diplomatic, he told *Newsday* reporter Al Cohn, "Listen there has to be a lot of strong ingredients before I'll stick my head into a meat grinder and try to get a play ready in four weeks. I really feel the stuff is here for a smash. But we're making constant changes in order to put the story together and make it tighter. New scenes and songs are being written; the choreographer is working out new dance numbers. There's much to be done and not much time to do it in." Burrows' take on the material is hard to determine at this point, since he told columnist Stuart Little that he wanted to "get back to fundamentals, to get back to the basic story of *What Makes Sammy Run?* Whenever I saw Sammy Glick abandoned, I put him back. Whenever he looked soft, I toughened him up." Undoubtedly, Burrows pulled out all the stops to mold the show into his type of theatre. Norman Nadel of the *New York World-Telegraph & Sun*, who admired the show a lot, wrote that Burrows tried "every technique that has ever worked in a show. So Sammy sometimes looks like an encyclopedia of the American musical, but it's entertainment."

Whether or not Burrows hurt or improved the show during the month he worked on it is open to debate, but clearly there was a strong difference of opinion among the critics as to the direction the show should have taken. *Variety* declared that "The unpleasantness of the book is unflinchingly preserved in the musical comedy edition." Considering the state of the theatre at the time, however, this was not necessarily a good thing in terms of box office. "The unsavory quality of the title character and, in fact, the story as a whole, infects the show. So *Sammy* tends to be a progressively unpleasant musical, climaxing in a repulsive scene of the venomous hero in a frenzy of frustration and rage, but unregenerate lust for power. This bitter flavor is consistent with the show's theme, of course, but hardly enhances its appeal as entertainment." In marked contradiction, Howard Taubman of *The New York Times* preferred the more truthful aspects of the show that emerged in the second act: "The change occurs when the musical pauses in its illustration of Sammy's string of ruthless triumphs, which has become boring, and confronts its sleazy little hero with some difficulties. The first of these is the arrival of Sammy's brother, Seymour, at a penthouse party with a reminder that there are decencies to be observed in families. The second confronts Sammy with the studio head he has jimmied out of a job, and the third slaps him hard with the brutal truth of the kind of female he has just married. In it's final song, with Mr. Lawrence grinding out a bitter 'Some Days Everything Goes Wrong,' the new musical arrives at something more

than the obvious comment it has been making about self-serving, hypocritical, murderous little men on the make.” Peter Share in the *Village Voice* further defined the problems with the show’s softened script: “*What Makes Sammy Run?* is a lavish show – scenery flies, rolls, and disappears, there are Egyptian costumes and South Sea costumes (for two movie-production production numbers) and elegant clothes, there are wild dances, there is pace. There is everything but a musical play about what it is that makes a Sammy, any Sammy, run. But then, theatre party audiences may not be interested in that.”

According to John McClain, drama critic for the *Journal-American*, “This is a tough tale to tell in a musical, but both authors and the composer have done an artful job of staying with the true ingredients. The fact remains that we are caught and held by the saga of a newspaper copy boy who runs roughshod over friend and foe alike to finally become the head of a major motion picture studio.” But like many shows of the period, *What Makes Sammy Run?* was over produced. McClain ended his review with, “I was not impressed by the lavishness of the production, or the all-around eminence of the choreography, but I hold that it is an intriguing story, well and tunefully told, and I believe it should prosper.” George Oppenheimer of *Newsday* didn’t like the superfluous comic and dance elements either: “When the musical stays close to the original book, it is at its best. The episodes of Sammy gouging his way to the top on a ladder of faces still possesses a rude reality and a certain repellent fascination... The old, tired clichés of a submarine picture, of a South Sea epic (depicted in an uninspired ballet), no matter how they are travestied, somehow come out old and tired and cliché.” Martin Gottfried of *Women’s Wear Daily* also preferred the original Sammy. Referring to the original novel, he wrote, “It is what is generally called, ‘not a very pretty story,’ otherwise known as ‘a little downbeat for a musical.’ That’s meaningless, of course. It’s a good, juicy plot and very apt for a musical version. But the rightness of the novel and the aptitude of Mr. Lawrence were not enough, even though Ervin Drake provided a superior score for the show. It dragged and dragged through a first-actful of chintzy scenery, with signs of hastily injected material showing up at every turn... It must be conceded that things picked up so well in the second act that it seemed a whole new show was beginning. And it finished off reasonably well from there, right into a slam-bang Lawrence solo to ring down the curtain.”

In spite of these clearly mixed reviews, *Sammy* managed to hang on for an unusually long run in a season that included both *Hello, Dolly!* and *Funny Girl* (not to mention *Here’s Love, Jennie, 110 in the Shade, The Girl Who Came To Supper, High Spirits, Foxy, Fade Out-Fade In* and *Anyone Can Whistle*). “We licked the critics,” Budd Schulberg told a *New York Post* columnist at the time. “We broke through the critic barrier. By great word of mouth.” In retrospect, many writers have attributed the show’s 540 performances almost exclusively to the popularity of singer Steve Lawrence, but even at the time there were many who recognized the intrinsic value of the show itself. A year into *Sammy*’s run, *Variety* wrote that “Lawrence’s performance now is too broad in the first act, with excessive exaggeration of the New York accent and unprofessional clowning and mugging.” Critic Norman Nadel also returned to the show for a fresh look. “Lawrence appeared to lose interest about halfway through the evening,” he noted, “and indulged in little jokes with others in the cast, jokes which aren’t that hilarious to the whole audience.” But the show, he suggested, had “inherent quality. As a character, Sammy has more moxie than almost any leading figure in a current Broadway musical. The story itself is swift and purposeful. Ervin Drake’s songs have a sting to match the Schulbergs’ playbook... Real songs, real singers and an honest, sharply satirical book are the worthiest assets of *Sammy* – enough to keep it running through off nights and 57 weeks of generally happy houses. They are what make *Sammy* run.”