

# Shifting Gears in Multiple Styles: An Artist and Teacher of Singing's Journey with the 2011 Revival of *Follies*

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STEPHEN SONDHEIM'S MUSICAL *FOLLIES* opened on Broadway in 1971 and was based on the *Ziegfeld Follies*, which ran 1907–1931. The *Ziegfeld Follies*, created by Florenz Ziegfeld, was known for elaborate productions with top entertainers, such as Bert Williams, Bob Hope, Helen Morgan, and Fanny Brice. The setting of Sondheim's *Follies* is the 30-year reunion party of the Weismann's Follies girls in their old Broadway theater that is soon to be demolished. The reunion allows the characters to reminisce their past performances one more time on their stage. In researching the show, I found that Steve wrote a lot of the music of *Follies* in a *pastiche* style, meaning he wrote in the style of the 1920s and '30s composers and their music, while remaining true to his compositional style. This technique is used by many Broadway composers.

My personal journey with *Follies* began with auditions for its scheduled Kennedy Center revival starring Bernadette Peters in 2011. I had an Actors Equity Association appointment slot for the initial audition and was able to sing a full song. The overriding goal for any actor in an initial audition is to get the callback. I had auditioned for the casting director, Laura Stanczyk, and the music director (MD), Jim Moore, a couple of years prior for another project, singing two legit pieces. As I walked into the audition room at the Kennedy Center, they asked me what I was going to sing. I answered, "You've heard me sing legit, how about a belt piece this time?" Jim said, "No, let's hear 'So in Love.'" My strategy was if they heard me belt, they might call me back to read and sing for Heidi, the opera singer, and Hatti, the traditional belter. Later Jim confessed that he absolutely loves the song "So in Love." As I was getting ready to sing, Jim added, "And then we will hear a little of your belt piece."

When the belt piece was finished, Laura jumped up and looked through my audition book while Jim asked me to sing "Broadway Baby" from the show. I was called back to sing for Heidi ("One More Kiss") and Hatti ("Broadway Baby") and read some sides two days later in front of Laura, Jim, the director Eric Schaeffer, who directed Broadway's *Million Dollar Quartet*, and the producer, Max Woodward. The final callback was in New York City to sing three songs from the show ("Broadway Baby," "One More Kiss," and "Who's That Woman?") and read some sides in front of the casting director, the creative team, the producer, and Barbara Goldman, the wife of the book author James Goldman. All three songs are different styles.

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Within a couple of hours, I received the call and was elated to book the job of standby for five leading women in the revival of Sondheim's *Follies*—Broadway stars Elaine Paige (Carlotta Champion), Linda Lavin (Hattie Walker), Terri White (Stella Deems), Florence “Flo” Lacey (Sandra Crane), and Metropolitan Opera diva Rosiland “Ros” Elias (Heidi Schiller). The contract was basically a “Female Swing.” A swing is an actor responsible for understudying multiple roles in the show, typically in the ensemble. The number of people that swings might be covering varies from show to show and could be up to 20 roles.

However, swinging multiple lead roles is not really heard of. Being a swing is one of the most important and challenging jobs in the musical theatre industry. Swings are required to know all lines, blocking, choreography, music, as well as the backstage traffic for numerous roles. During the COVID-19 pandemic Broadway swings have been invaluable for keeping the shows open.

Four of the five women had large solo songs to sing. Each song was written in the style of a different era and in a style ranging from classical to blues to full Broadway belt. Two of the four songs, “Broadway Baby” and “I’m Still Here,” have become Broadway standards. Three of the women had different dance tracks in the tap number, “Who’s That Woman?”

There were three and a half months before the first rehearsal, which was plenty of time to prepare. Stella Deems was by far the most difficult role to prepare because it included singing a seven minute blues/jazzy style song, “Who’s That Woman?,” while tap dancing.

Having taken jazz, tap, and ballet lessons in the past, I fully understood the effort and energy that go into singing and dancing at the same time. It had been quite some time since I sang while dancing in a production; it was time to build up my stamina for the role of Stella.

I set up a fast walk/run routine on the treadmill with some inclines and increased speeds interspersed throughout an hour workout six days a week. I practiced singing “Who’s That Woman?” while on the treadmill, working on breath flow, pressure, and relaxation. It can be difficult controlling all these aspects while dancing.

Functionally speaking, those tones are supported by the amount of air that flows between my vocal folds (transglottal airflow) during phonation. The amount of air intake, subglottic air pressure, and flow depended on the vocal timbre intended. Consequently, the air force

or speed of exhalation was supported or controlled by the amount of breath inhaled and by activating ribs and abdominal muscles for all the vocal tone desired which would continue to be interrupted by the dancing. All of this needed to be coordinated.

To anticipate the amount of exertion the choreography might entail, I would switch it up a little bit and sing during the treadmill inclines and increased speeds. I learned early which phrases would be or could be more challenging because of the increased energy demanded by the tap dancing, and I adjusted my breath and support accordingly.

Stella is a take charge woman, who loves life. She’s the better dancer in the *Follies*. Her song “Who’s That Woman?” was more of a bluesy-jazzy swing style.

Understanding the origin of the blues and jazz styles and listening to the great blues and jazz artists such as Ella Fitzgerald, BB King, Sara Vaughn, and BJ Crosby are essential to learning and performing the style. The style originated in the Deep South among the African American communities at the end of the nineteenth century. The melody is based on the blues scale and is distinguished by the use of the flatted third, fifth, and seventh. These flatted notes are called the blue or bent notes. A singer can emphasize these particular notes. Often there is a variety of vocal colors throughout a song with a swung rhythm. It is also important to feel the groove of the song and feel the pulse and syncopations in the body. Internalizing this groove affects how we sing the song and express ourselves vocally. This was crucial to how “Who’s That Woman?” was sung.

I used dark and bright vowels and a variety of vocal qualities, including a light mix; a dark, rich, sultry mix; bright chest mix and full out belt with a swing feel and some delayed vibrato.

We can greatly vary our tone quality by altering the shape of the vocal tract through experimenting with organic primal sounds, vowel shaping, and vowel distortion shaping. Science has taught us that resonance is affected by shaping the vocal tract, which includes the laryngopharynx, the oropharynx, and the nasopharynx. As singers, we are in control of these mechanical, physiological, and acoustical changes by shaping of our vocal tract through movement of our jaw, tongue, and soft palate. Cross training my vocal production muscles creating vocal tract and laryngeal flexibility early in my

life was a byproduct of growing up in the Congo learning multiple languages (English, French, and Lingala), listening to many great singers from many different genres and decades, and singing in a variety of styles.

The vocal stylisms I used for “Who’s That Woman?” were those found in blues and jazz—bent notes, cries/sobs, neighbor tones, fall offs, and slides. Vocal stylisms is an umbrella term I gave years ago to all the melodic interpolations and extra nuances added vocally to a song for emotion, expression, and vocal style effect, including onsets and releases. They are most often not written in the music. I use the term vocal stylisms because character roles in musical theatre can use stylisms/effects from pop, country, R&B, jazz, rock, etc. in the song for expression, although the song itself may be written in a traditional musical theatre style. Singing styles found in musical theatre such as blues, country, jazz, pop, R&B, rock, etc., all have their own various expressive stylisms or effects.

The character Carlotta is a woman who is driven, a survivor, loves young men, parties well, and has reinvented herself after the *Follies* ended becoming a movie and television star. She sings the bluesy torch-like song “I’m Still Here,” with lyrics pertaining to her life experiences through the years. Steve said the lyrics are of Joan Crawford’s life. “I’m Still Here” is one of the most iconic numbers in the show; it was a replacement to the original song “Can that Boy Fox Trot,” which was cut from the show tryout in Boston. It’s a list-style song and a *pastiche* of Harold Arlen. To me it was comparable to Harold Arlen’s “The Man That Got Away.” The music and the vocal energy build throughout the song to the triumphal ending “I’m Still Here!” It is a song that definitely needs vocal pacing, and luckily, it is brilliantly arranged by Jonathan Tunick. For vocal style effect I used bent notes, cries/sobs, neighboring tones, and fall-offs. For text painting on “heebie-jeebies,” which means nervousness or having the jitters, I added a little shake in my voice when singing the word to add more emphasis to the meaning of the word.

The character Hattie is a gutsy and frumpy woman who has been a widow five times. Her song “Broadway Baby” is sung in a more traditional belt with a swing dance band feel of the 1920s and ’30s. The song is a showstopper and can easily be excerpted from the show. The song was originally set in the middle of a trio montage of songs; however, it was very clear by audience

reaction in the Boston out of town tryouts that the montage needed to end with “Broadway Baby.” Interestingly, in 1971 the original Hattie was played by a true former Ziegfeld Follies gal, Ethel Shutta. For vocal expression, I gave a pulse feel on phrases like “Broadway baby” to match the *marcato* markings in the orchestra and a little more accent to the rhymes like “at,” “flat,” and “cat.” I added slides, a growl on the word “hell,” and fall-off on the last “great” with a descending slide on the ending B<sub>4</sub> to G<sub>4</sub> on the word “show.”

The fourth character is Heidi, an elegant opera diva. Heidi’s “One More Kiss” was a pure classical operetta style song. Interesting fact: Steve said “One More Kiss” was the first song he wrote for the show, stating he wanted to “see if I could write in the old style.” “One More Kiss” was written as a *pastiche* of the early twentieth century operetta style. In fact, Heidi’s dialogue references the style and two likely prominent composers Steve imitated: “That’s my waltz they’re playing. Franz Léhar wrote it for me in Vienna. Or was it Oscar Strauss?”

Because Heidi is an elderly opera singer, I chose to darken my voice as well as round out my vowels. I added some extra nuances for style effect, which included a couple portamentos.

After learning the songs, I traveled to NYC to coach them with the MD. Jim had worked with a couple of the women in the show, so it was good to get a feel for what he was wanting musically prior to the first rehearsal.

The four songs in *Follies* are pretty familiar and are often sung the same way from show to show. That being said, “Broadway Baby” tends to be the song many well known artists have done their own spin on. In our production of *Follies*, Linda Lavin, who has her own jazz concert, decided to sing “Broadway Baby” with a jazzier style throughout, rather than the traditional belt. She inverted some of the notes in places and added notes, with a swing rhythm. Stephen Sondheim liked what Linda was doing, so I wrote in the stylistic choices she made, just in case I would be expected to sing the song the same way. When I coached the four songs with our brilliant MD Jim, I asked if he wanted me to sing the song the same way or the more traditional. Jim asked me to sing it traditionally.

Broadway choreographer Warren Carlyle (*The Music Man*, *Hello Dolly*, *After Midnight*) choreographed *Follies*. Normally, a standby or a swing would sit on the sides

and learn the choreography on her own. Luckily, I was called for the tap rehearsals. Warren spent two rigorous hours every day for nearly a month with eight of us working the tap choreography for “Who’s That Woman?” Warren would tell us to go home and ice our feet every night. The assistant choreographer, Parker Esse, offered the half hour before we were called to work with those of us who wanted extra time on the steps. Most of us showed up.

Incidentally, Rosiland Elias was not in the number, but showed support and appreciation for our hard work by attending the choreography rehearsals. I truly admired her for that.

The dance rehearsals always began and ended with stretches. Warren taught us a few awesome stretches that I still use today for myself and with my singers.

1. The sternocleidomastoid can become gradually tight. To stretch the left sternocleidomastoid muscle, rotate your head away and look toward your right side, then move your left shoulder back for a nice stretch. Then slightly lift the chin up. Hold the stretch for 30–45 seconds. Repeat on the other side.
2. To get a good stretch of the scalene, sternocleidomastoid, and the trapezius muscles, begin by tilting your head gently toward your right shoulder as far as you feel comfortable. Take your left arm and put it behind your back. Make sure your elbow is leaning a bit toward the back rather than leaning forward. Make sure the chin is loosely tucked. Hold this position for about 45 seconds. Repeat on the other side.

When learning a tap number with everyone at the same level of dance experience, one can get pretty close. Bernadette Peters was a gracious artist, and she, her assistant Patty, and I enjoyed many lunches together after our morning tap rehearsals. I have to say there was a lot of laughter in that rehearsal room as we powered through learning those steps. I injured my left toe while learning a new tap step. I wasn’t the only one having difficulty with this step. Nearly everyone else slammed their heel into their left toe as well. The costumer had to make an adjustment to my tap shoe so that my toe fit in with the bandage. And on with the rehearsal.

What made the choreography of “Who’s That Woman?” even more challenging was being a standby for three women—Terri White, Elaine Paige, and Flo

Lacey—who all have different choreography moves and different crossings throughout the song. It really kept this woman on her game.

Creating a set of track cards for each character was critical to being organized and prepared for a “put in.” These were 5 x 7 index cards bound together with a ring clip for easily scrolling through the role. My cards included a blank stage diagram with the stage grid (numbers marked on stage indicted to help actors to know where to stand or move to in a scene), character blocking, dance crossings, dialogue, bow order, and notes for backstage traffic. The role of Stella had a solo tap break in the middle of “Who’s That Woman?,” so I added a card of her tap break.

Stephen Sondheim attended only a couple run-throughs. Though very quiet, his presence filled the room. Steve of course had a lot of diction notes and had input on costume and wig color changes for some of the characters. Linda was looking much too pretty, and Steve wanted Hattie to look “frumpier.”

I had my own dressing station and was required to arrive at the half-hour call and remain until the curtain call. I would watch parts of the show from the presidential box if it were available or in the back of the orchestra. When it was time for “Who’s That Woman?,” I would sneak out to the lobby and dance through the entire choreography while watching on the lobby monitor. The ushers were always supportive cheering me on.

As both an artist and a teacher of singing, my advice for those who must sing in a variety of different styles within one show is, above all, to understand that singing is a motor learning skill. Cross training voice production muscles is essential.

I developed an exercise for myself in 1988 I have since called “Commercial Style *Messa di voce*” to help coordinate going from chest/belt (mode 1) to head (mode 2) register on a single note, switching in and out of registers without any breaks, a vocal effect that is often used in jazz, blues, gospel, and R&B. This exercise helps to balance and coordinate the air pressure, the transglottal air flow, the larynx, and the vocal tract shaping. It begins with a full out belt note (thyroarytenoid muscle dominant) produced with high subglottic pressure, high volume, and a longer closed phase, then moves to pure head register (cricothyroid muscle dominant) produced with low subglottic pressure, low volume, and a short, closed phase, all on a

High voices/  
Estrogen-influenced

Belt/Chest(M1)  
Y[ae]or[E]

Head(M2)  
[a]

Belt/Chest(M1)  
Y[ae]or[E]

Low voices/  
Testosterone-influenced

Belt/Chest(M1)  
Y[ae]or[E]

Head(M2)/Falsetto  
[a]

Belt/Chest(M1)  
Y[ae]or[E]

**Example 1.** Commercial Style Messa di voce exercises.

single note, and ends back in full chest. It is essential a singer has balanced registers and smooth transitions to execute this exercise on the notes below.

Advanced estrogen influenced voices, begin on  $A_4$  and move up the scale by half steps to a  $C_5$  or  $D_5$ . Advanced testosterone influenced voices, begin  $E_4$  and move up the scale by half steps to  $G_4$ .

For beginners, start on a lower pitch that feels comfortable than what is shown below in the exercise.  $E_4$  works well for beginner estrogen influenced voices and  $G_3$  for beginner testosterone influenced voices. It may take some time for processing information and for your muscles to learn new skills (Example 1).

Immerse yourself in the styles you will need to sing by learning their origins and listening to the great artists that sing these styles. Pandora and Sirius XM have a plethora of channels devoted to different genres and subgenres through the decades.

You will be wearing a body mic; audio technology is a key tool in helping reduce the amount of effort in your singing. Rely on the mic to do the work for you for projection. Lastly, find a good voice teacher with a rich background in multiple singing styles to work with. There are a lot of the ideas or approaches out there from some wonderful colleagues that are working and singers are getting great results. Science and research continue to evolve and they have truly helped us better understand why some techniques might or might not be effective.

Recalling my *Follies* experience, I feel so incredibly blessed and honored to have been able to work with

one of the greatest composers of Broadway musicals. Stephen Sondheim gave us so much to sing about. A brilliant man and a legend in his own time!

**Edrie Means Weekly** is the Cofounder of the Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) Vocal Pedagogy Institute at Shenandoah University and was a Master Teacher for the NATS Intern Program in 2013. Edrie is the recipient of the 2021 Van Lawrence Fellowship Award. She is an internationally recognized expert in training singers in all vocal styles and an active professional singer. Edrie has presented numerous papers, countless workshops, and master classes at national and international conferences. She regularly presents workshops at the Voice Foundation Symposium, NATS National Conference, Pan-American Vocology Association, the Southeastern Theatre Conference, Mid-Atlantic NATS, Northwestern NATS, and universities throughout the United States. She serves as a peer editor for various professional journals and publishers. As a leading researcher in functional voice training and healthy vocal production, she has authored research publications in the *Journal of Voice* regarding the teaching of the Broadway voice. She is a contributing author for four books: *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century*, *The Vocal Athlete* (second edition), *The Voice Teacher's Cookbook: Creative Recipes for Teachers of Singing*, and *Training Contemporary Commercial Singers*. Edrie is on the Advisory Boards for the NATS National Musical Theatre Competition and NATS National Student Auditions, the Voice Foundation, the Pan American Vocology Association, and the Musical Theatre Educator's Association. She is the biological daughter of The King of Bluegrass, Jimmy Martin.

Edrie has sung lead roles in the world premieres of works by Philip Glass, Dominick Argento, Jacob Druckman, and in *Kaballah* (Koch Records) by Stewart Wallace. NPR broadcast Dominick Argento's *The Dream of Valentino*, in which she created the role of Jean Aker and PBS broadcast Philip Glass's *The Making of The Representative of Planet 8*, in which she created the role of Klin. Nationally and internationally, she has appeared in leading roles with the Houston Grand Opera, Washington Opera, Wolf Trap Opera, Cleveland Opera, Des Moines Metro Opera, Opera Mid-Michigan, Opera Grand Rapids, Pittsburgh Playhouse, and the State Opera of Cairo, Egypt. Her many performances have been broadcast internationally on NPR and PBS. She was last seen on TV in the role of Suzy in the opera *La Rondine* (DVD by Decca).

She has sung extensively in leading roles of musical and operetta productions, including *Follies*, *My Fair Lady*, *Carousel*, *The King and I*, *West Side Story*, *Show Boat*, *The Sound of Music*, *The Merry Widow*, and *Zorba*.

Guest artist with symphony orchestras of Houston, Cleveland, Corpus Christi, Victoria, and the National Symphony. Edrie was standby for Patti LuPone in the title role of *Regina* at the Kennedy Center and was a member of the Sondheim production of *Follies* starring Bernadette Peters, where she was standby for Broadway stars Elaine Paige, Flo Lacey, Linda Lavin, and Terry White. She returned to the Kennedy Center in *My Fair Lady* with Jonathan Pryce and Cloris Leachman.