



STEPHEN SONDHEIM THEATRE

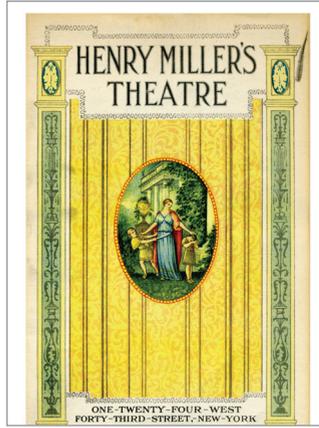
NEWLY RENAMED THE STEPHEN Sondheim Theatre in summer 2010, the old Henry Miller's Theatre is the first and so far only Broadway playhouse designed and built in the twenty-first century. It boasts of being Broadway's first thoroughly "green" theatre, designed to minimize its energy use and contribution to environmental pollution. But it stands on the site and incorporates elements of a far older theatre (which also bore the name Henry Miller's) with a rich history that leaves it with one foot in the past and one in the future.

The distinctive possessive in the "Henry Miller's" name reflects the philosophy of its namesake. The London-born Miller, who had originated the lead role of John Worthing in the 1895 U.S. premiere of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was not just an





358 AT THIS THEATRE



actor and producer of the old school. He was a philosopher of theatre design. He believed the ideal theatre was not too large or too small, that its stage would be just wide enough to encompass the action while occupying a wide range of the viewers' field of vision, so they could all the better immerse themselves in the illusion being presented on the stage. On the other hand, while second balconies were beginning to go out of fashion, Miller opted to include one.

He was part of the generation of "personality" managers like David Belasco, Martin Beck, George Howells Broadhurst, John Cort, and Winthrop Ames, who built theatres, named them after themselves, and programmed them like a later generation would do with their personal websites. Miller's vision was bankrolled by philanthropist Elizabeth Milbank Anderson, who owned the land on which the theatre was built. Miller worked in partnership with the producing team of Klaw and Erlanger.

Architects Allen, Ingalls, and Hoffman incorporated Miller's theories in the 950-seat gem of a playhouse, which rose at 125 West Forty-third Street, half a block east of Times Square. It opened on April Fool's Day 1918, just as Germany was preparing to assault the allies at Ypres, Belgium, in one of its final offensives of World War I, and the day Britain merged her various airborne fighting forces into the Royal Air Force.

Henry Miller inaugurated his namesake playhouse with Louis Evan Shipman's romantic comedy *The Fountain of Youth*, starring none other than himself. Wartime audiences were not impressed with the play, but the playhouse itself was another matter. In the coming decades many distinguished American dramas and comedies would debut here, along with a bumper crop of flops, and many great careers would get their starts here. In all, more than 150 shows would open at Henry Miller's, which managed to sur-

vive the Depression, wars, numerous recessions, and even a long stint as a discotheque.

In fact, Henry Miller's theatre survived more or less intact until 2006, when everything but its landmarked facade was demolished, right down (and into) the Manhattan schist that underlies much of the island. But owing to a remarkable effort by owners the Durst family (notably the developer's granddaughter, theatre lover Anita Durst), a brand-new, state-of-the-art, 1,055-seat theatre rose on the same site behind the original facade, incorporating many of Henry Miller's original theories and—significantly, in an age of corporate branding of theatres—restoring Henry Miller's name (at least for a few months).

Miller played *The Fountain of Youth* for thirty-two performances, then appeared in the fifty-three-performance revival of the 1897 John Drew vehicle *A Marriage of Convenience*, which opened on May 1, 1918. In the years to come, the theatre hosted many dramas and comedies but only rarely a musical. Miller produced and/or starred in many of the early productions and hired his favorites, like Lillian Kemble-Cooper, who appeared in *The Fountain of Youth* and then again in Douglas Murray's flop *Perkins* (October 22, 1918), and Frances Goodrich Ames, who also appeared in *Perkins* and then returned less than a month later in Jean Webster's *Daddy Long Legs*, also with Miller (and also a failure, at fifteen performances).

Miller seemed to be searching for the kind of audience-pleasing melodrama that had been his bread and butter before World War I, but also trying to provide a showcase for writers who might earn the respect of a new generation, like Eugene O'Neill. Thus, in the early 1920s, Miller was both slightly behind and ahead of the times and suffered a series of short runs like *Back to Earth* (1918, sixteen performances) and *Tillie* (1919, thirty-two performances) as a result.

Left to right: Builder of the theatre that bore his name for more than ninety years, producer and actor Henry Miller. (Photo courtesy Cook + Fox).

A 1920s era PLAYBILL cover for shows at Henry Miller's Theatre.

The landmarked façade of the theatre during its original incarnation, circa 1929. (Photo courtesy Cook + Fox)

Miller turned over producing responsibilities to the team of George M. Cohan and Jed Harris in February 1919 with Laurence Eyre's "comedy of moonshine, madness and make-believe," *Mis' Nelly of N'Orleans*, which was performed by name star Mrs. Fiske (aka Minnie Maddern Fiske) in a thick Creole accent for 127 performances.

One of Broadway's all-time greatest talents marked a milestone at Henry Miller's Theatre: composer George Gershwin wrote his first complete score to a musical, *La, La, Lucille*, which bowed here May 26, 1919, with lyrics by B. G. "Buddy" DeSylva. It ran 104 performances, interrupted by the late-summer actors' strike that helped establish the power of Actors' Equity Association, the actors' union. After the strike, the show tried to come back at the Criterion Theatre but managed only a few extra performances, leaving behind the Gershwin rag "Tee Oodle Um Bum Bo."

Eva Le Gallienne starred in Grace Heyer and Rita Olcott's *Lusmore* (September 9, 1919, twenty-three performances), an Irish fancy about a poet hunchback who is suspected of having a supernatural birth.

With the women's suffrage movement gaining steam before women were granted the right to vote in 1920, playwright James Forbes brought to Henry Miller's Theatre a reactionary woman's-place-is-in-the-home drama, *The Famous Mrs. Fair*, which gave the theatre its longest run so far, 183 performances, beginning December 1919. Blanche Bates starred as Nancy Fair, a female war hero who returns home with a feminist agenda but decides to set it aside when she realizes her husband (Henry Miller) and daughter (Margalo Gillmore) are drifting away.

A. E. Thomas welcomed the 1920s with a fantasy called *Just Suppose*, about a European royal much like the Prince of Wales coming to the United States and falling in love with an American girl. Fred Kerr, Patricia Collinge, and Leslie Howard starred in the play. The royal lead was changed to the "Prince of Koronia" for the subsequent film version after Brits objected to the very notion that their sovereign might consider anything so vulgar. (Ironically, the then-current Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VIII, would indeed fall for an American and renounce his throne to be with her.)

Long before *Avenue Q*, Mrs. Fiske got advice from puppets in *Wake Up, Jonathan!*, an early Elmer Rice play (co-written with Hatcher Hughes) described by the *New York*

Times as a "fair to middling whimsy" about a woman trying to choose between a businessman and a poet. It opened January 7, 1921, and ran for 105 performances.

The Irish Players from the Abbey Theatre in Dublin brought over Lennox Robinson's hit London play *The White-Headed Boy*, on September 15, 1921. It was the story of a spoiled young man who blarneys his whole town into believing he's headed for an adventure in Canada, when actually he's just flunked out of college. The show did not repeat its London success, and by November 7, 1921, Henry Miller's Theatre was ready for its fifth show in less than a year: *The Intimate Stranger*. Alfred Lunt and Billie Burke starred in Booth Tarkington's comedy about a woman who tests her suitor by pretending to be much older than she is. This was Tarkington's first return to Broadway after his success with *Clarence*, and the new play suffered by comparison.

Three plays had short runs in 1922 before the Selwyn brothers brought in a hit revival of *Romeo and Juliet* on January 24, 1923, starring Jane Cowl and Rollo Peters as the star-crossed lovers. The lovers were united in death 157 times.

The state of modern marriage was explored in *The Changelings* by two mismatched couples and a daughter who elopes with an unsuitable husband. Lee Wilson Dodd's comedy opened September 17, 1923, with Blanche Bates, Ruth Chatterton, and Henry Miller, and it marched down the aisle 128 times. It was chosen by Burns Mantle as one of the ten best plays of the season.

Six undistinguished plays flitted across Henry Miller's boards in 1924, leaving barely a memory. But April 1925 brought an influential (if short-lived) comedy, *The Poor Nut*, by the father-son writing team of Elliott Nugent and J. C. Nugent. It told the story of a nerdy college student who writes love letters to a beauty contest winner, proclaiming his love and bragging about his looks and sports prowess. But when she shows up on campus to claim her superman, he has to find a way to live up to his self-created image. The play ran only thirty-two performances on Broadway but found greater success in several film versions, including one with Joe E. Brown. The plot device was recycled by plays, movies, and TV sitcoms for generations.

Noël Coward chose Henry Miller's Theatre for the September 16, 1925, U.S. premiere of his London hit *The Vortex*, which painted a portrait of the British upper class occupied with

drugs, nymphomania, and a hint of homosexuality. The play had created a scandal, so naturally proved to be popular everywhere. Coward starred in his own play with Lillian Braithwaite and Leo G. Carroll and earned his first success in New York, as well.

Henry Miller's theatre was hung with black April 9, 1926, to mark the passing of its owner and namesake. Miller's son Gilbert took over the management of the playhouse, and it remained in the family until 1968. Gilbert Miller had an emphatic production philosophy of his own, and under his guidance his father's theatre reached even greater heights, hosting New York premieres of works by Eugene O'Neill, George Bernard Shaw, Thornton Wilder, T. S. Eliot, W. Somerset Maugham, Terence Rattigan, S. N. Behrman, Horton Foote, and many other of the leading lights of the eras through which it passed.

Gilbert Miller found his first hit in November 1926 with Hungarian author Ferenc Molnár's sophisticated backstage farce *The Play's the Thing*, in a translation by P. G. Wodehouse. Holbrook Blynn was featured in the story of a young playwright who is in love with an older actress but unable to write a word after he overhears her being wooed by another man. His desperate producer concocts an elaborate ruse to convince the author that all he heard was the actress rehearsing another play, one much inferior to his own. At 326 performances, *The Play's the Thing* was the theatre's greatest success so far. Even greater things were to come.

Pre-Hollywood Spencer Tracy was showcased by his mentor, George M. Cohan, in the 1927 farce *The Baby Cyclone*, about two women battling over the title character, a pet Pekinese. It ran five months. W. Somerset Maugham exposed the immorality of the British upper classes in the sarcastically titled *Our Betters*, which starred Ina Claire and Constance Collier, for 128 performances starting February 20, 1928.

Set in the city room of a big-city daily newspaper, *Gentlemen of the Press* (August 27, 1928) was notable for having been written by a real-life press gentleman, theatrical columnist Ward Morehouse, whose son, Ward Morehouse III, later served as theatrical columnist of the *New York Post*.

This theatre's next hit was one of the most heartbreaking plays of the 1920s, R. C. Sherriff's wartime drama *Journey's End*. Set in a trench on the front lines of World War I, the play painted a lifelike portrait of a group of British soldiers who

are preparing for a major offensive against the Germans. The play introduced each man as an individual, full of hopes and fears and plans for what he might do after the war. The play let the audience understand that their unit was to be sacrificed as a diversionary action in the coming battle, and that all were doomed. Many in the audience were World War veterans themselves, and grown men were seen to weep during performances. The production opened March 22, 1929, and had a healthy run of 485 performances despite the fall 1929 stock market crash.

Molnár returned to Henry Miller's Theatre September 29, 1930, with a pair of one-act plays, *The Violet* and *One, Two, Three*, but they did not repeat the success of *The Play's the Thing*. The dark curtain of Depression was closing around Broadway, eventually leading to the shuttering and demolition of nearly half of Broadway's theatres. Henry Miller's Theatre, however, had the good fortune to stay steadily booked throughout the Depression, World War II, and the postwar boom with numerous short and medium runs, and it even enjoyed the occasional long-running hit.

In *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (January 13, 1931), playwright Philip Barry presented the predicament of a man who raises a child he thinks is his own but who was really fathered by his wife's lover. It stayed for six months. Helen Hayes starred in Molnár's November 1931 comedy *The Good Fairy*, about an innocent movie usherette who embarks on a campaign of doing good deeds for strangers—but winds up creating a chaos of lust and greed for all concerned. After a run of 151 performances it was adapted for film by Preston Sturges, and it later returned to the stage as a Broadway musical called *Make a Wish*.

Eugene O'Neill presented one of his lesser works, *Days without End*, on January 8, 1924. In this experimental Jekyll-and-Hyde-like story, Earle Larimore and Stanley Ridges played the good and bad sides, respectively, of a single character named John Loving. It lasted fifty-seven performances. October 1934 brought Lawrence Riley's hit comedy *Personal Appearance*, starring Gladys George as a Hollywood glamour girl who finds herself smitten with a hunky salt-of-the-earth mechanic while on a PR tour for her new movie. The Broadway version ran 501 performances and was snatched up by real-life movie star Mae West, who adapted it as her classic *Go West, Young Man*.

A reputed war hero is denounced as a fake and a murderer in Edward Wooll's drama *Libel*,

Top: The original lobby (looking toward the 43rd Street doors) during renovation. (Photo courtesy the Museum of the City of New York)

Bottom: Exterior of the theatre during its long decline. (Photo courtesy Cook + Fox)



which opened in December 1935 and played 159 performances. Playwright Terence Rattigan made his Broadway debut September 28, 1937, with the lighter-than-air London comedy *French without Tears*, about romantic high jinks among English students taking a crash course in French. The production lasted 111 performances and opened the door to Rattigan's successful career on Broadway.

On February 4, 1938, Henry Miller's Theatre hosted the most distinguished play in its long history, and one of the greatest of all American plays: *Our Town*. Thornton Wilder's deceptively simple drama about a few days in the ordinary lives of two neighboring families in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, somehow managed to capture the profoundest joy and sorrow of human life in its masterfully chosen tiny details. The drama was notable at the time for being performed on a virtually empty stage, narrated by an omniscient Stage Manager who could start and stop the action and cause the story to jump in time. *Our Town* earned the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and while its reputation has waxed and waned over the years, its fascination has lasted and it continues to be produced around the world. Frank Craven originated the role of the Stage Manager, with Martha Scott as Emily.

Ironically, owing to doleful reports from the play's out-of-town tryout, the Henry Miller's management assumed that they had a flop on



their hands with *Our Town* and had already rebooked the house by the time it opened. As a result, Wilder's classic stayed just a few days at this theatre before transferring to the Morosco and completing a run of 336 performances.

The show for which *Our Town* was evicted, Frederick Lonsdale's old-fashioned comedy *Once Is Enough*, opened February 15, 1938, and struggled through three months of performances. *Time* magazine said the play "seemed even more dated than deft [and] appeared at times to be celebrating the love life of ice cubes."

The theatre had better luck with *Kiss the Boys Good-bye* (September 28, 1938), Clare Boothe Luce's scalding sendup of the much-publicized search for an actress to play Scarlett O'Hara in the film *Gone with the Wind*. Helen Claire played the southern belle determined to land the role of Violet O'Toole. Brock Pemberton's production ran 286 performances and was made

362 AT THIS THEATRE

into a film with Mary Martin in the central role.

The 1940s got off to a rocky start with nine failures in a row, including George Bernard Shaw's *Geneva* (January 1940), Molnár's *Delicate Story* (December 1940), and S. N. Behrman's *The Talley Method* (February 1941).

The popular wartime comedy *Janie* opened a 642-performance run here on September 10, 1942. Gwen Anderson played the seventeen-year-old Janie Coburn, who invites a handsome serviceman and his friends to use her parents' house for a party, only to have things get out of control. Antoinette Perry directed the script by Herschel Williams and Josephine Bentham.

Flare Path, the U.S. premiere of Terence Rattigan's play about RAF pilots and the sweethearts who waited for them, flew only fourteen times but was made into a popular film. Helen Hayes returned to Henry Miller's Theatre in March 1943 for Colin Clements' and Florence Ryerson's *Harriet* and stayed for 377 performances.

Twin-brother playwrights Julius J. Epstein and Philip Epstein, best known as Oscar-winning scriptwriters for the film classic *Casablanca*, debuted their play *Chicken Every Sunday* here on April 5, 1944. It told the entertaining story of a long-suffering woman who runs a boardinghouse while her husband pursues a series of wacky get-rich-quick schemes. The show moved to the Plymouth Theatre, where it completed a nine-month run.

After several more brief tenancies, Henry Miller's Theatre hosted Norma Krasna's hit comedy *Dear Ruth*, whose plot was not all that different from 1925's *The Poor Nut*, but with the genders reversed. Trying to impress her soldier pen-pal, a teenage girl (Virginia Gilmore) sends a photo of her prettier older sister. When the soldier shows up on leave, a comedy of mistaken identities ensues. Moss Hart directed the play, which ran 680 performances. The next production of note was F. Hugh Herbert's *For Love or Money*, a May–September romance between a naive young woman (June Lockhart) and an older man. The November 1947 production stayed for 263 performances.

On November 9, 1948, Henry Miller's Theatre welcomed a transfer of Garson Kanin's hit comedy *Born Yesterday*, which moved here from the Lyceum and played out its 1,642-performance run, with its star-making lead performance by Judy Holliday. *Born Yesterday* was the first of three satisfying hits in a row at this theatre.



The musical *Urinetown* (2001) gave Henry Miller's Theatre a late-life hit.

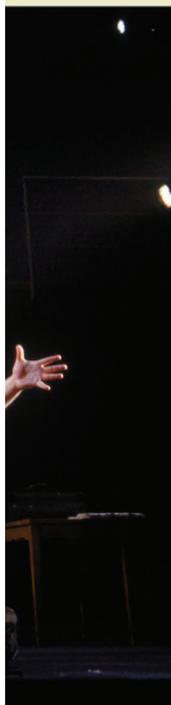
Top: Jeff McCarthy and the cast sing the title number.



Bottom: John Cullum as the wealthy Caldwell B. Cladwell warns, "Don't Be the Bunny." (Photos by Joan Marcus)

Next up, on January 21, 1950, was T. S. Eliot's London drama *The Cocktail Party*, about a couple who separate just before they plan to host the party of the title. But a mysterious Uninvited Guest (who may be an angel) winds up convincing them that they would be better off staying together. Alec Guinness and Cathleen Nesbitt costarred in the production, which ran 409 performances and won the 1950 Tony Award as Best Play. Another European import, *The Moon Is Blue*, was the story of two men who try, over the course of a dinner party, to seduce a young actress but wind up earning some valuable wisdom instead. F. Hugh Herbert's comedy opened May 8, 1951, and ran an enviable 924 performances. Future film director Otto Preminger staged the production, which featured Barbara Bel Geddes, Donald Cook, and Barry Nelson.

Future Pulitzer Prize winner Horton Foote wrote the next production, *The Trip to Bountiful*, the story of an elderly woman who travels back



to her girlhood home. Audiences had only thirty-nine chances to see Lillian Gish, Jo Van Fleet (Tony Award), and Eva Marie Saint in this touching November 1953 play. But Geraldine Page won an Oscar as Best Actress when she played the leading role in the 1985 film version.

Things got personal for a psychiatrist when he discovered that one of his patients is the ex-boyfriend of his fiancée in Edward Chodorov's December 1953 comedy *Oh, Men! Oh, Women!*, which starred Gig Young, Franchot Tone, Betsy Von Furstenberg, and Larry Blyden. It lasted 382 performances. Another psychiatrist contended with a disabled priest for the soul of a young woman (Barbara Bel Geddes) in a relationship with an older man in *The Living Room* (November 17, 1954). Novelist Graham Greene's first play had proved a sensation in London but seemed more like a sermon in New York and survived only 22 performances.

With her thriller *The Mousetrap* having settled into its world-record run in London, Agatha Christie sent another of her hit murder mysteries to Broadway on December 16, 1954. Based on one of her own short stories, *Witness for the Prosecution* was the story of a dying attorney who believes in his client's innocence even when the client's own wife agrees to testify against him. Tony Awards went to actors Francis L. Sullivan and Patricia Jessel, and the play kept Henry Miller's audiences at the edge of their seats for 645 performances. It was later filmed and won numerous Oscars, including Best Picture.

An English society girl scandalizes her upper-crusty parents when she falls in love with a common musician in William Douglas Home's October 1956 play *The Reluctant Debutante*, which starred Adrienne Allen, Wilfred Hyde White, and Brenda Forbes. Master clown Bert Lahr returned to Broadway April 11, 1957, in Georges Feydeau's bedroom farce *Hotel Paradiso*, which set some sort of Broadway record for slamming doors. The superb supporting cast included Angela Lansbury, James Coco, and Sondra Lee, but the production titillated for only 108 performances.

After a decade-long golden age full of hits, things began to thin out for Henry Miller's Theatre in the late 1950s. Still gamely programmed by the aging Gilbert Miller, the theatre rarely had trouble finding plays to book—but actual hits came more and more seldom. Dylan Thomas's elegiac portrait of Welsh village life, *Under Milk Wood*, had been a success as a radio

play, but the October 15, 1957, Broadway adaptation lasted only thirty-nine performances.

The Playwright's Company brought in a January 1958 production of *The Rope Dancers* that lasted nearly six months with a cast that included Art Carney, Siobhán McKenna, Joan Blondell, and Theodore Bikel. But the theatre suffered five quick folds in 1959 alone. The wreckage included Noël Coward's ill-advised March 1959 adaptation of Georges Feydeu's comedy *Look After Lulu!*, starring Tammy Grimes as a prostitute. She hung out her red light just thirty-nine times. May of that year saw the Broadway transfer of *The Nervous Set*, a musical about life among Greenwich Village beatniks. The show had proved a sensation in St. Louis, where it was written, but it flopped after just twenty-three performances on Broadway. The cast album, which became a cult favorite, captured the score by Tommy Wolf and Fran Landesman, and performances by Larry Hagman, Gerald Hiken, and Tom Aldredge.

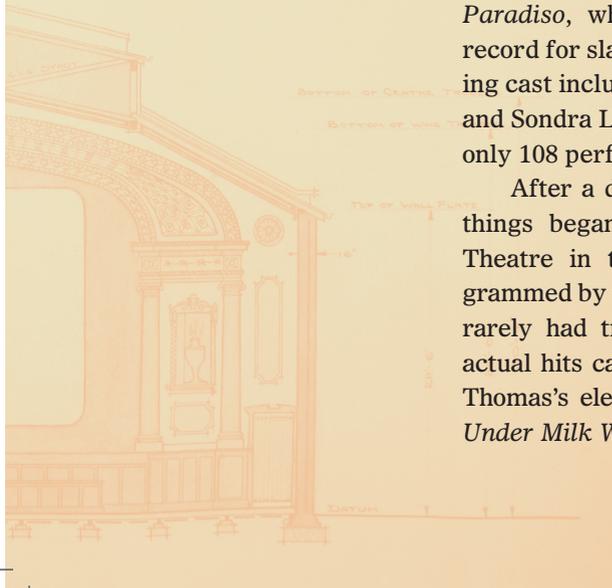
The sixth show of 1959 proved to be the charm, however. George C. Scott earned a Tony nomination as Best Actor in a Play for his performance in the Civil War atrocity drama *The Andersonville Trial*, by Saul Levitt. It opened December 29, 1959, and ran 173 performances through June 1960.

The November 1960 attraction *Under the Yum-Yum Tree* was presented as a swinging sex comedy about a playboy landlord who rents apartments to attractive young women he intends to seduce. Lawrence Roman's play ran a respectable 173 performances.

Alan Arkin (Tony Award as Best Featured Actor in a Play), Vivian Blaine, and Sylvia Sidney starred in *Enter Laughing*, Joseph Stein's comedy about a stagestruck young man trying to break into the smallest of small-time theatre. Based on the semi-autobiographical novel by Carl Reiner, the play bowed March 13, 1963, and ran 419 performances.

After the triumph of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* at another theatre, fans eagerly awaited the "young, gifted and black" author's next play, despite its unpromising title, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*. It turned out to be the story of a progressive Greenwich Village neighborhood that must face up to the fact that the reformist candidate for public office isn't as honest as he seemed to be. Starring Gabriel Dell, Alice Ghostley, and Rita Moreno, the production opened October 15, 1964 at the Longacre Theatre,

OWNER	WHERBERT
LONGITUDINAL & CROSS SECTION	
SCALE	1/8" = 1 FOOT
DATE	2-10-28



364 AT THIS THEATRE



moved to the Henry Miller's on December 29, 1964, and closed on January 10, 1965, after ninety-nine performances. Sadly it was the final Broadway production for the talented young playwright. She died of cancer at age thirty-four on January 12, 1965, two days after the show closed.

Three more flops came and went in five performances or fewer that year. But on December 22, 1965, the theatre recaptured something of its glory days with a transfer of the hit *The Subject Was Roses*, Frank D. Gilroy's portrait of a dysfunctional family, which had won both the Tony Award as Best Play and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. It stayed at Henry Miller's Theatre for a year.

As Gilbert Miller passed his eightieth birthday in 1965, his family tried to help him keep the theatre going but found it increasingly difficult to find quality material. Nine more shows followed in quick succession in the mid-1960s, some by distinguished writers, including Jerome Chodorov's *3 Bags Full* (March 1966), Maria Irene Fornes's *The Office* (April 1966), Aleksei Arbuzov's *The Promise* (November 1967), Lawrence Holofcener's *Before You Go* (January 1968) with Marian Seldes, and the Theatre of Genoa's staging of Goldoni's *The Venetian Twins* (May 1968). But none found an audience.

In 1968, tired of struggling to book the theatre in a Times Square that was sliding steadily downhill, the Miller family sold the playhouse to a rising theatrical family, the Nederlanders. Henry Miller's Theatre survived as a legitimate house under Nederlander ownership for less than a year. During that time it had some historic firsts, though they didn't seem so at the time. Off-Broadway favorite Jack Gelber (*The*



Connection) made an inauspicious Broadway debut September 24, 1968, with the pro-Fidel Castro drama *The Cuban Thing*, which provoked a near-riot on Forty-third Street as opponents of the communist dictator tried to storm the theatre and disrupt the show. *New York Post* critic Richard Watts Jr. wrote the next day, "Perhaps as a salute to Fidel, the play seems as long as one of his speeches." Despite a cast that included Rip Torn, Jane White, and Raul Julia, there was no second performance.

Future multiple-Tony-winning playwright and librettist Terrence McNally made only his third Broadway appearance beginning November 28, 1968, with *Noon*, one of three one-acts on a triple bill called *Morning, Noon and Night*. The other two plays were written by rising Off-Broadway stars Israel Horovitz and Leonard Melfi, who made their Broadway debuts with this production.

On February 27, 1969, the theatre made one last stab at legitimacy with Julius J. Epstein's *But, Seriously . . .*, which featured Tom Poston, Dick Van Patten, and a young Richard Dreyfuss, but it lasted only four performances.

The Nederlanders then sold the theatre to developer Seymour Durst, who had a long-range plan to buy up all the properties on the block bounded by Forty-second Street, Seventh Avenue, Forty-third Street, and Avenue of the Americas. Durst wanted to build office towers on the site. As it turned out, it took more than three decades before the last holdout succumbed to Durst's



Left to right: Roundabout Theatre Company's Executive Director Julia Levy, Artistic Director Todd Haimes, and Managing Director Harold Wolpert cut a ribbon July 28, 2009 to officially reopen Henry Miller's Theatre following a ground-up rebuilding. (Photo by Aubrey Reuben).

A period photo of the theatre's original interior in 1929. (Photo courtesy Cook + Fox).

A detail saved in the 2008-09 renovation and highlighted in the rebuilt theatre. (Photo courtesy Cook + Fox)

The theatre's interior as it looked just before reopening in 2009. (Photo courtesy Cook + Fox)



offers. Durst didn't live to see his plans realized; his theatre and his master plan were inherited by his son Douglas on Seymour's death in 1995.

In the meantime, there was the question of what to do with Henry Miller's Theatre. The house left live theatre behind in 1970, the year of Gilbert Miller's death, and began to screen feature films as the Park-Miller Theatre. But even that level of respectability did not last long. This was the period when the drug and pornography industries began to battle live theatre for the soul of Times Square. In 1972, one of the bleakest years for the neighborhood, this theatre was leased to the Avon chain of triple-X cinemas, and under the name Avon-at-the-Hudson it hosted hardcore for the next five years.

Then redemption appeared from an unexpected direction. The success of the Studio 54 discotheque in the old Gallo Theatre on Fifty-fourth Street encouraged the Henry Miller's next transformation. In 1978 the seats were removed from the orchestra section to make room for a dance floor, and the building was converted into a disco, christened Xenon. Operated by impresario Matt Johnson, Xenon quickly rose into the second tier of New York discos for the next two decades, long past the end of the actual disco era.

Even as the name on the marquee changed, the theatre's original appellation, "Henry Miller's Theatre," remained etched into the top of the landmark-protected facade and was visible from the street throughout this period, as if to say that it never really forgot its legitimate

origins. And the building did revert to a kind of legitimacy for a single performance on May 2, 1983, when the managers experimented with a variation on dinner theatre that might have been called "disco theatre." They presented a production of Terrence McNally's farce *The Ritz*, which is set in a gay bathhouse and includes a wild floor show. Ticket holders were allowed to stay after the performance and dance the night away. The experiment was not judged a success. Xenon went back to an all-music-and-dancing policy and stuck with it into the 1990s.

The rebirth of Henry Miller's Theatre as a Broadway house was set in motion in 1993 in London at the Donmar Warehouse Theatre, which hosted Sam Mendes's unusual revival of the 1966 Kander and Ebb musical *Cabaret*. Codirected by Mendes and Rob Marshall and choreographed by Marshall, it was set in a sleazy Berlin nightclub in the early 1930s twilight of the Weimar Republic. To recreate that atmosphere in London, Mendes staged an "environmental" production that spilled across the footlights to give the audience the sensation not only that they were watching a show about a Berlin cabaret, but that they could imagine themselves actually in such a place.

Rights to recreate the show in New York were awarded to Roundabout Theatre Company, an institutional theatre that had begun performing in an Off-Broadway space below a supermarket in 1965 and had grown into progressively better spaces downtown, then moved to Broadway in 1991, under the direction of Todd Haimes, with its

headquarters in the center of Times Square at the Criterion Center (now the site of a Toys “R”Us store). In granting permission to stage the show in New York in spring 1998, Mendes required that Roundabout also recreate the seedy environment. The sleekly corporate environs of the Criterion Center didn’t fit the bill. But Haimes and Mendes found the right spot just two blocks south and around the corner.

By 1998, Henry Miller’s Theatre looked just as decadent as anyone could wish. You still entered through the neo-Georgian brick facade, but inside, the once-beautiful oval foyer had been nearly filled with a makeshift plywood box office. After you entered, you made a sharp left over cracked black and white tiles around the box office, then a right to enter the rundown performing space. Circular club tables were arrayed around the empty orchestra floor, which was pitted where seat bolts had been shorn off or ripped out. Threadbare leopard-print carpet on the stairs took you to the balcony.

And it was left just that way for the opening and run of *Cabaret*. “Henry Miller’s Theatre” seemed too top-hat a name for such a dive, so, just in time for the start of previews, the building was rechristened the Kit Kat Klub, after the fictional cabaret where *Cabaret* takes place. Mendes even tried to do away with the tradition of handing out PLAYBILLS as patrons entered. He felt it was yet another reminder to audiences that they were indeed on Broadway and not in Berlin. In the end a compromise was reached and the PLAYBILL was distributed at the end.

The Broadway production of this revival was codirected by Mendes and Rob Marshall and choreographed by Marshall. It starred Natasha Richardson as Sally Bowles and Alan Cumming, leering and flaunting rouged nipples at the audience, as the creepy Emcee. Both actors won Tony Awards for their performances, as did Ron Rifkin as Herr Schultz.

Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* wrote, “the production pushes hard to remind us that the decadence of Weimar Berlin was far from divine. This *Cabaret* is seedier, raunchier and more sinister than either the original groundbreaking Broadway version, directed by Harold Prince, or the 1970 movie by Bob Fosse.”

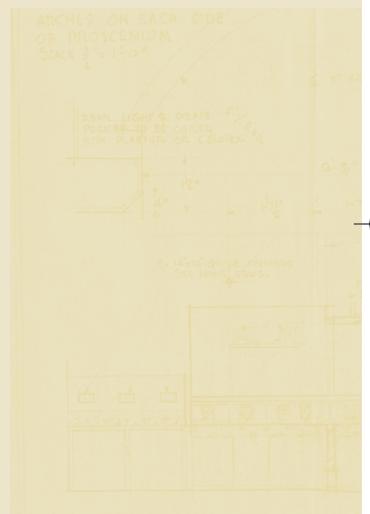
The revival proved to be a bonanza for Roundabout, eventually running 2,377 performances, more than double the 1,165-performances of the original production. However, most of those performances were given at Studio 54, to

which *Cabaret* transferred in November 1998. The status of the Kit Kat Klub as a Broadway theatre was in limbo for a time.

Cabaret was considered a Broadway production for the Tony Awards, but the next planned production in the space was to have been *Rollin’ on the T.O.B.A.*, a tribute to the all-black touring circuit in the 1920s South. However, when the Tony committee announced somewhat arbitrarily that the space would be considered an Off-Broadway theatre for that production, its planned March 1999 transfer from the Forty-Seventh Street Theatre went on the rocks.

After a legal wrangle with promoter Matt Johnson, Durst took back control of the eighty-one-year-old playhouse and restored its designation as Henry Miller’s Theatre. Anita Durst, landlord Douglas Durst’s theatre-loving daughter, hosted *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*, based on Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s play and film about a lesbian couple in the world of high fashion. The production starred Rebecca Wisocky as Petra and Durst as Marlene. It opened November 30, 2000, and ran seventy-nine performances. Anita Durst, an avant-garde theatre artist behind the floating Chashama Theatre (it pops up here and there around Times Square in vacant storefronts), would prove instrumental in the playhouse’s future.

Henry Miller’s Theatre returned to the Broadway fold September 20, 2001, with the opening of an unusual new musical comedy, *Urinetown*, which had music by Mark Hollmann, book by Greg Kotis and lyrics by both. Originally developed at the New York Music Theatre Festival, *Urinetown* was not intended for Broadway. Alternately bleak and funny, the show was set in a dystopic future when water is so scarce that private toilets are outlawed and people must pay to relieve themselves. Written in the style of the 1920s German political musicals like *Happy End* and *The Threepenny Opera* by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, *Urinetown* is the story of a group who rise up against the capitalist head of the local water monopoly (the “Urine Good Company”), only to find that things are not as rosy afterward as they expected. With Hunter Foster as Bobby Strong, John Cullum as Caldwell B. Cladwell, Jeff McCarthy as Officer Lockstock, and Spencer Kayden as the grimly adorable Little Sally, the show, whose previews had been delayed by the September 11 terrorist attacks, captured the blackly comic spirit of the moment and ran 965 performances.



The final performance on the well-trod Henry Miller's stage came on January 18, 2004, after which the building was demolished, with only its landmark brick facade preserved. The wall was stabilized by steel and wood bracing and scaffolding that were maintained throughout the construction period. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent to equip the four-story edifice with motion sensors that would automatically shut off construction equipment if the vibrations threatened its stability.

The new Henry Miller's Theatre was designed as part of the fifty-seven-story Bank of America Tower at One Bryant Park, which, along with 4 Times Square, headquarters of the Condé Nast publishing empire, at last fulfilled Seymour Durst's dream of owning and rebuilding the entire city block on which they stand.

Designed by the firm of Cook + Fox, the 1,055-seat Henry Miller's Theatre 2.0 is unusual for several reasons. Where most classic theatres were built with their orchestra sections opening on the street, Henry Miller's descends four stories below the pavement, with the topmost rear of the balcony at street level, and the orchestra section and stage a level below that, accessible by elevator and staircase. The trap beneath the stage occupies a third underground level, along with dressing rooms and an air-filtration room. The bottommost level is used for ice storage.

Ice storage? The theatre/office complex is also notable for employing some of the latest "green" technology, including systems that capture, filter, and recycle heat, water, and fresh air, plus walls made of recycled paper, men's washrooms that employ waterless urinals (Caldwell B. Cladwell would approve), and a women's room with nearly two dozen stalls. Though most seats are reachable only by stairs or an elevator, the seats are wider and have more generous legroom than in nearly any other New York playhouse. Fragments of the old theatre were preserved, including sculptural friezes, old doors, and the house-right upper corner of the proscenium, and are used as decoration in the new theatre. New wood used in construction is North American cherry harvested from a Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)—certified forest.

But Henry Miller's Theatre 2.0 might as well be called Anita Durst's Theatre. Her dedication to its preservation is remembered in Anita's Way, the midblock Shubert Alley—like pedestrian passageway that runs along the west wall of the theatre between Forty-second and

Forty-third streets, providing outdoor seating, a stagelike raised wooden platform, and access to the Henry Miller's stage door, which is dominated by an electric sign, rescued from the demolition, which bears the theatre's name.

In 2007 it was announced that the Dursts would welcome back their old tenant, Roundabout Theatre Company, to run Henry Miller's Theatre as their third Times Square—area stage, along with the American Airlines Theatre, Studio 54, and the Off-Broadway Laura Pels Theatre. Their lease runs twenty years.

The first production in the new theatre was the supposedly can't-miss teen musical *Bye Bye Birdie* (October 15, 2009), having its first Broadway revival since its debut in 1960. The show starred John Stamos as Albert, Gina Gershon as Rosie, Nolan Gerard Funk as Conrad, and Bill Irwin as Mr. MacAfee. Unfortunately, the production was judged a letdown. Director Robert Longbottom was unable to accomplish what middle schools across the United States had been doing for the previous half-century: have a hit with this feel-good show about an Elvis-like rock star who kisses one of his fans on the Ed Sullivan show as a publicity stunt before being drafted into the army. Critics blamed miscasting in several key roles, and the show closed in January 2010 after a disappointing ninety-two-performance run.

As happened with the opening of the original playhouse in 1918, the best reviews went to the theatre itself, which Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* described as "handsomely renovated. It seems ready to embark on a second fruitful life as a desirable up-to-date medium-size theatre." At this printing, singer Michael Feinstein and Australian comic Dame Edna were planning to join forces for an evening of allied music and laughs titled *All About Me*.

On March 22, 2010, Roundabout Theatre Company announced that Henry Miller's Theatre would be renamed the Stephen Sondheim Theatre after the preeminent theatre composer of the late twentieth century. Sondheim wept publicly at the surprise announcement, which came from his longtime writing partners James Lapine and John Weidman at a Studio 54 concert marking the composer's eightieth birthday. The rechristening was secured by an anonymous group of Sondheim devotees who donated an undisclosed sum to Roundabout's Musical Production Fund. Roundabout artistic director Todd Haimes called Sondheim "an artistic genius."