No Better Manager in the Business:
The Untold Story of Broadway's Ruth Mitchell

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To my wonderful father, Todd Purdum, who not only gave me my life,
but by ensuring it was full of theatre, has made it worth living.

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Figure 1 (cover image): Ruth Mitchell circa *West Side Story,* 1957.[1]

[1] Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Ruth Mitchell portrait [arms folded]" New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Introduction

I was introduced to Ruth Mitchell mere moments before the world shut down. March 10, 2020, was warm and overcast: a beautiful spring day in New York. Mana Allen, a Barnard theatre professor and former Broadway actress, had generously offered to give me and some of her fellow students a guided tour of an exhibit at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts that she had helped curate. The exhibit explored the work, life, and legacy of Harold S. (Hal) Prince, one of the most celebrated and important Broadway directors and producers of the last century. As Mana walked us through the breathtaking exhibit with meticulous care, we paused at the section of the installation dedicated to Hal's longtime stage manager, associate producer, and assistant Ruth Mitchell. She regaled us with tales of "Ruthie," and spoke of her importance to the Prince production office. She told us, too, of Mitchell's lifelong romantic partnership with the costume designer, Florence Klotz. Despite my lifetime of immersion in the world of musical theatre, I had never heard of this woman who had blazed a trail for women in stage management. Immediately, I was hooked. Mana – ever the model of a gracious teacher – knew I was in the market for a theatrical topic for my history thesis, and with a twinkle in her eye, planted the seed that has since grown into this project. That joyous afternoon was the last I would spend in New York for the next several months, as the next morning I flew home to Los Angeles for what I thought would be one week of spring break. Over the subsequent eighteen months, Ruthie lingered in the back of my mind until it came time to select a topic for this thesis.

Once I began my research, it quickly became clear how little personal information Ruth Mitchell left behind. Her archive at the New York Public Library provides an extensive record of her professional career, but there is little to be gleaned of her life outside of work. To me, this suggests two things: one, that she was completely committed to her work – that it was her life –

and two, that she was selective about sharing her personal information. My immediate assumption is that this is due, at least in part, to her identity as a gay woman and the necessity of employing a certain degree of secrecy in nearly all sectors of her life. Her birthday and specific cause of death (it's written that she had suffered from a "long illness," presumably a euphemism for cancer) are both missing from the record, for instance.[2] This raises the question as to how much Mitchell might have participated in her own erasure from history. Were there facets of her personal life she was forced to give up in a Faustian bargain in order to achieve the professional success that she did? It certainly seems that way. There are two other crucial reasons that Mitchell is absent from mainstream musical theatre history: she was a woman, and she was good at her job. The jobs Mitchell had – stage manager, producer, and assistant to Hal Prince – are all jobs that traffic in invisibility.[3] None of those are positions that earn esteem or acclaim, with the exception perhaps of producing (in its potential to be lucrative). They're jobs designed to be invisible; if, as an audience member, you are aware of the stage manager, it usually means that something has gone wrong. Mitchell's various and interrelated professional appointments required the kind of work that makes itself invisible, and she had a knack for discrete efficiency.

In any event, I realized that I would need to supplement the archival material with interviews of my own. Despite my initial reservations about cold-emailing Broadway veterans, from each person to whom I reached out, I was met with nothing but generosity and fond recollections of Ruthie. Many of them offered to connect me to other people who had known her, and from these interactions, I now feel as though I am part of a secret club of people whose lives Ruthie touched. I was able to connect with – by email, phone, Zoom or face-to-face – Mana

[2] Harold Prince. *Sense of Occasion.* Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, an imprint of Hal Leonard LLC. pp. 248.
[3] A stage manager during this period was somebody in charge of rehearsal management, often serving primarily as an assistant to the director. They would also be responsible for ensuring that all backstage elements of a production run smoothly during performances.

Allen, Annette Meyers, Ted Chapin, Jason Robert Brown, Loni Ackerman, Sal Mistretta, Jennifer Tepper, Clayton Phillips, Lonny Price, Larry Fuller, and Artie Masella. I consider these conversations some of the most fruitful and interesting of my young life. My biggest regret is that I had a message to Stephen Sondheim in my email drafts that I stewed over for weeks, nervous that it would be somehow insufficient. Before I worked up the nerve to press send, he died. It was a (somewhat painful) lesson on urgency, and I only wonder what Sondheim would have shared about Ruthie had we been able to connect.

Once I had my material, the question of structure arose. Early in my drafting process, I had the material that would become my third and fourth chapters. Those chapters analyze Mitchell's life and work against the backdrop of her gender and sexuality. As I was writing, it became clear to me that the task of interpreting the career and life of a woman whose career and life is not chronicled anywhere else was an impossible task. So, I decided to tackle both myself. The first two chapters of this thesis are a biography of Mitchell's professional career which tracks her life and works chronologically. The first chapter examines her early career and work as a stage manager, while the second chapter explores her shift into producing in the mid-1960s and all that followed. The third and fourth chapters examine her role as a lone woman in career paths dominated by men through more theoretical lenses. My goal is a historical recuperation of Mitchell, both of the facts of her life, and an argument for why those facts matter – why she matters – to the overall history of the American musical theatre, and why the story of her influential role must be thrust into the spotlight.

And why does she matter? There is no scholar of the musical theatre worth their salt who would argue that Hal Prince was not one of the single most important contributors to the form throughout its rich and storied history. Without Mitchell by his side, Prince's career would have

undoubtedly looked very different. I hesitate to paint her as the clichéd "woman behind the man," because I suspect her partnership with Prince was more nuanced than that. At the same time, she *was* a woman whose crucial contributions have been forgotten by history, subsumed by the success of the man whose work she made possible. Her gender is inextricable from this dynamic, as is her sexuality, and her relationship with Florence Klotz.

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"Oddly enough, I don't get many applications from women for this kind of work.
Most girls are only interested in acting."[4]
– Ruth Mitchell

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Onstage and in the audience, women have long been cemented as important elements of the theatrical process: they exist to consume and be consumed. Women were much rarer backstage and in production offices, though the history of women in those spaces is currently developing. Ruth Mitchell was a figure in the mid-twentieth century American theatre who both embodied, and served in part to catalyze, the increased presence of women in theatrical spaces of management, production, and power. Her history, like that of women in her occupation writ large, has yet to be told in full, something this thesis will seek to alleviate.

In the mid-twentieth century, at the beginning of Mitchell's career, women were about as rare backstage or in a production office (outside of secretarial roles) as they were common onstage. As is the case throughout the history of the craft, the most remembered female theatre-makers of the last century were actresses, many of whom gained producing power and greater access to decision making as they garnered acclaim. That said, for the most part, women existed onstage as objects of consumption for an audience, as replaceable and commodified as the costumes on their backs or the sets on which they danced. Women who were able to achieve

[4] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

this power without first paying their dues as actresses were a rarer breed, but not entirely absent. It was most common for women to hold the position of costume designer or choreographer, with fashion and dance both feminized fields in their own right.[5] Agnes de Mille, who is heralded as one of the most important choreographers of the twentieth century, struggled to be fairly compensated, another prevalent (and contemporary) issue among women who were able to succeed – reputationally or otherwise – in the male-dominated theatre industry.[6] De Mille is a shining example of another woman who had to prove herself creatively (as a choreographer rather than as an actress) before gaining access to the ranks of directors.

This scarcity of women in management and production was largely a pipeline issue, with entry-level positions for women as inaccessible as leadership roles. Directing itself only became codified in a way recognizable to the modern eye in the early twentieth century. A crucial reason for women's delayed entrance into directing is that the common pathway to the field led through work in stage-management, a restrictively male field.[7] Hal Prince, among others, followed this path from stage manager to producer and eventually to director, working under the tutelage of renowned director George Abbott before coming into his own.[8] Between 1920 and 1950 the percentage of female Broadway directors rose from three to thirteen percent due to the wartime alteration of gender dynamics in the workforce nationwide.[9] However, after 1950, the percentage of female directors saw a sharp decline due to the increased cost of production, an economic factor which disincentivized (male) producers from taking a risk on female directors, and the

[5] Grace Barnes. "Introduction" in *Her Turn on Stage: The Role of Women in Musical Theatre.* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2015), pp. 16.
[6] Todd S. Purdum. *Something Wonderful: Rodgers and Hammerstein's Broadway Revolution.* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018), pp. 83.
[7] Tamara L. Compton. 1970. "The Rise of the Woman Director on Broadway, 1920-1950." pp. 1
[8] Harold Prince. 2017. *Sense of Occasion.* pp. 10
[9] Tamara L. Compton. 1970. "The Rise of the Woman Director on Broadway, 1920-1950." pp. 1

postwar societal shift back towards traditional values. Of this postwar rejection of women as directors or stage managers, Whitney Bolton wrote in the *Valley Morning Star*:

> Women can and do produce plays, design settings for them, write plays, costume them and, obviously, act in them, and in all of these fields they are made welcome. But the moment an author mentions some brilliant, theatre-wise woman as a prospective director of a new play, all hands react with suspicion and bristles. The same goes when a woman is suggested for a stage manager's job.[10]

Here, the juxtaposition between directing or stage management and other theatrical fields is emphasized. There is no reason for this gap apart from prejudice against women, which is seemingly reserved for keeping women out of leadership positions.

Jennifer Leigh Sears Scheier is one of few historians who has investigated the lineage of women in stage management roles, a complicated endeavor in chronology by her own admission:

> Since I started compiling research on the history of the stage manager, I have run into at least 10 different claims for the "First Female Stage Manager." In a 1987 obituary, the *Los Angeles Times* credited Phyllis Seaton as being "Broadway's 1st Women Stage Manager" (around 1940's), *The Washington Post* interviewed Maude T. Howell about her role as an American stage manager in 1928, and Maud Gill wrote her *See the Players* autobiography which includes a chapter about her experiences as Stage Manager in 1920's London. Even before this, in the 1860s we have Laura Keene stage managing her own theatre, Charlotte Cushman stage managing at the Walnut Street Theatre in 1842-1844, and Charlotte Charke takes up the prompting mantle in England in 1754.[11]

Ruth Mitchell is absent from this list, appropriately, as she was not technically a trailblazer in the specific sense that she was the first and only woman to stage manage on Broadway during the mid-twentieth century. However, for the bulk of her long career, Mitchell was the only woman to be managing what Oscar Hammerstein, in a letter to her, termed "big musical shows."[12] She opened countless doors through her success and prowess.

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[10] Whitney Bolton, "Women Are Resented as Theater Stage Managers," *Valley Morning Star*, February 25, 1959.
[11] Jennifer Leigh Sears Scheier. "Women in Stage Management: Revolutionizing History with Inclusion." *Stage Directions*. 2017.
[12] Mark Eden Horowitz. *The Letters of Oscar Hammerstein II.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. pp. 420.

As a gay woman who broke barriers as a stage manager, producer, and invaluable contributor to the history of musical theatre, Ruth Mitchell's story is urgent, captivating, and crucial. As Whitney Bolton wrote, “I know Broadway male stage managers are not a third as self-possessed or able. […] Mitchell [is] doing much to erase what has always been a ridiculous prejudice, which, of course, all prejudices are.”[13]

[13] Whitney Bolton, “Women Are Resented as Theater Stage Managers,” *Valley Morning Star*, February 25, 1959.

Chapter 1
From Chorus Girl to Stage Manager: Ruth Mitchell's Early Career (1919-1966)

Ruth Mitchell began her career as a performer in the chorus of musicals, the way so many theatrically inclined folk find their way into the business. Amidst a budding career with considerable success, she quickly realized that performance was not for her. Instead, she felt called to the seductive darkness of a theatre's wings and to the too-often invisible work of stage management. She spent twenty years as a Broadway stage manager, with ten of those years in collaboration with Hal Prince, a partnership which would change the face of the American musical forever.

The record of Ruth Mitchell's early life is slim, but what remains in her archive paints a picture of a thoughtful and passionate young woman. Mitchell, affectionately known as Ruthie, was born Ruth Kornfeld in 1919 in Newark, New Jersey.[14] She lived with her parents, Arthur and Marion (née Bierman) Kornfeld, and her older sister Juliette.[15] The family was Jewish, which presumably contributed to Mitchell's changing her last name sometime in the 1930s or 40s. She took the name Mitchell from her mother's side of the family. Her mother's uncle Benjamin Mitchell ran a successful hotel in Northport, New York, on Long Island, and died in 1923, shortly after Mitchell was born.[16] Her mother was likely an elementary school teacher at Public School 63 in Brooklyn.[17] Her father, an inventor by hobby, was issued a patent for an "Indicating instrument for high tension ignition devices" in 1935.[18] But, according to his 1942 draft card, his

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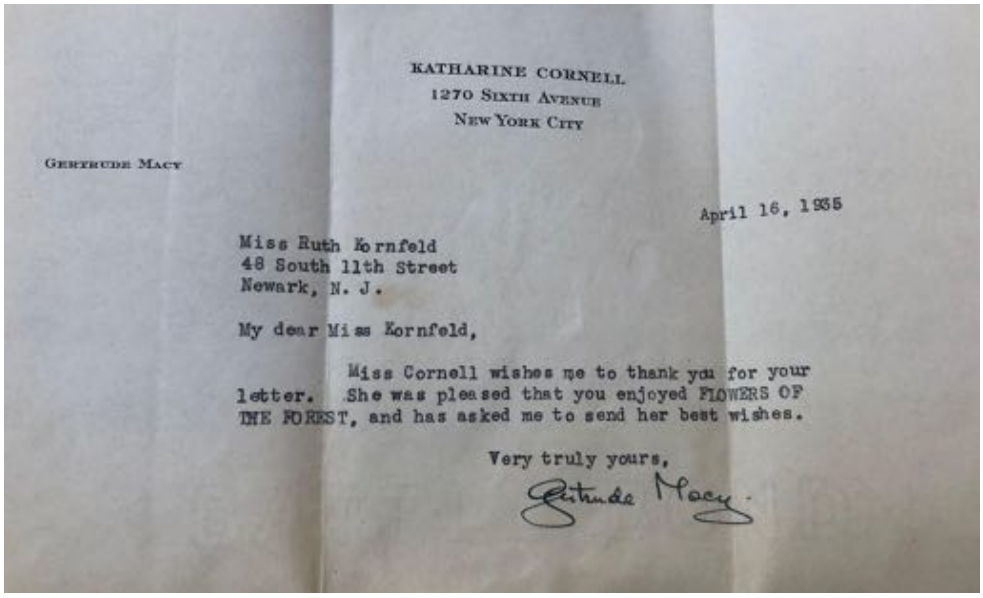
[14] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.
[15] Marion Kornfeld is listed in some sources as "Miriam."
[16] E. O. Crowell. *Benjamin Mitchell*. The Long-Islander. (Huntington [N.Y.]) 1839-current, December 28, 1923, Page 8, Image 8 – NYS Historic Newspapers.
[17] "The City Record." The City Record – The Department of Education. New York University, January 31, 1923. (This source describes a Marion Kornfeld who, based on the location and year, can be presumed to be the same Marion Kornfeld as the one in question, but it is unconfirmed.)
[18] Arthur Kornfeld. "Indicating Instrument for Hightension Ignition Devices." Espacenet, January 15, 1935.

bread-and-butter occupation was more prosaic: he was employed at L. Bamberger & Co., a Newark-based department store.[19]

Aided by her family's proximity to the theatre district of midtown Manhattan, Mitchell was a theater fan from an early age. She kept scrapbooks full of photographs of Ethel Merman and wrote fan letters to Katharine Cornell.



KATHARINE CORNELL
1270 SIXTH AVENUE
NEW YORK CITY

GERTRUDE MACY

April 16, 1935

Miss Ruth Kornfeld
48 South 11th Street
Newark, N. J.

My dear Miss Kornfeld,

Miss Cornell wishes me to thank you for your letter. She was pleased that you enjoyed FLOWERS OF THE FOREST, and has asked me to send her best wishes.

Very truly yours,

Gertrude Macy

Figure 2: A response to a letter Mitchell had written to Katharine Cornell, from Gertrude Macy, Cornell's personal secretary, 1935.[20]

Following in the wake of these heroes, she began her theatrical career as an actress, spending "several summers hoofing on the summer theater circuit."[21] She got her start as a performer in the 1936 Mohawk Drama Festival in Schenectady, New York, on the campus of Union College.[22] She spent roughly the next ten years as a dancer and actress in the musical theatre before setting her sights firmly on stage management.

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[19] *Arthur Kornfeld Draft Card*. 1945. *Fold3.com*.
[20] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.
[21] Mckinley, Jesse. "Ruth Mitchell, 81, Producer Who Energized Broadway." The *New York Times*. 2000.
[22] Backstage Staff. "Ring Lardner Jr., 85, Screenwriter Ruth Mitchell, 81, Producer, Stephanie Lawrence, 50, Actress" *Backstage*, November 2000.

"Life Upon the Wicked Stage:" Mitchell's Beginnings as an Actress

Ruth Mitchell was an actress during the final days of the old fashioned musical comedy. In 1943, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II premiered their first joint musical, *Oklahoma!.* This production marked a turning point in the form of musical theatre, fully integrating song, music, and dance as equally weighted storytelling elements.[23] By the end of the 1940s, the genre had been overhauled and suddenly absent were the chorus-girl-heavy revues and plotless musical comedies of the 1920s and 30s. Mitchell made her Broadway debut in 1942, at the tail end of this pre-*Oklahoma!* era, in a musical called *The Time, the Place and the Girl* produced by Georges D. Gersene. The production featured music by Joseph E. Howard, lyrics by William B. Friedlander (who also directed), and a book by Will M. Hough, Frank Adams, and Howard. This was a 'revisal' of a show of the same name originally staged in 1906, though it had never made it to Broadway.[24, 25] Reviewers called it "hilarious," with "younger reviewers" hailing it as a glimpse into "'the good old days" of musical comedy, though little other record of the show remains.[26] In 1943, while in a production of *Cocktails at Five* – a musical she later deemed "lousy" – she became the second assistant stage manager as a means of passing the time.[27, 28] Mitchell's next Broadway appearance was in *Follow the Girls* in 1944, produced by Dave Wolper in association with Albert Borde. The musical had music and lyrics by Dan Shapiro, Milton Pascal and Phil Charig, and a book by Guy Bolton and Eddie Davis. It was directed by Harry Delmar, and, most interestingly, choreographed by the legendary Catherine Littlefield, founder of the Philadelphia Ballet, whose protegees were instrumental in the foundation of both

[23] This shift built on the trend previously established in 1927 by Oscar Hammerstein and Jerome Kern with *Show Boat,* a crucial revival of which Mitchell would later work on.
[24] "Joe Howard Gets Role in Musical." *The New York Times.* The New York Times, August 14, 1942.
[25] A "revisal" is a revival which makes significant changes to the book and/or music of a show.
[26] George Jean Nathan. "The Theatre Book of the Year, 1942-1943." Associated University Presses, Inc. 1943. pp. 104-107.
[27] Jesse Mckinley. "Ruth Mitchell, 81, Producer Who Energized Broadway." The *New York Times.* 2000.
[28] No record of *Cocktails at Five* exists outside of Mitchell's obituary.

the New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre.[29] Here, Mitchell's background as a dancer must have served her well.

In 1946, Mitchell was cast as an ensemble member in *Annie Get Your Gun* which not only represented an opportunity for her to perform alongside Ethel Merman, one of her childhood heroes, but marked a shift in her career toward backstage work. *Annie Get Your Gun,* a property produced by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, had music and lyrics by Irving Berlin and a book by Herbert and Dorothy Fields. It was directed by Joshua Logan, a celebrated director who soon became a mainstay of the Rodgers and Hammerstein circle. Mitchell, though initially only in the cast, was credited as the assistant to the director by the end of the run after she began working closely with Logan. Logan was the first director with whom Mitchell collaborated, and he was instrumental in her entry into stage management.

Beginner's Luck: Early Forays into Stage Management

In an interview from years later about her transition from performing to stage management, Mitchell is quoted as saying: "I really wasn't a very good dancer or actress. I'm doing now what I think I can do."[30] Her first official stage management gig was in 1946 on Anita Loos's play, *Happy Birthday,* directed by Joshua Logan and featuring music by Rodgers and Hammerstein, who also produced. Her next stage management venture was on another production directed by Logan, *Mister Roberts,* produced by Leland Hayward in 1948. It was while working on this play that Mitchell met Hal Prince, her future collaborator and friend. He describes his first impression of her in his memoir, *Sense of Occasion*: "I met Ruth Mitchell, Hayward's stage manager on *Mister Roberts.* One day Ruth dropped by the office, a sensational

[29] "Catherine Littlefield." catherinelittlefield.com. Wordpress.
[30] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

looking woman with a silly black poodle on a long leash. She was and remains very glamorous."[31] During the run of *Mister Roberts,* a comedy about Navy life in World War II, Mitchell made a weeklong return to acting, playing opposite Henry Fonda in the role of Navy nurse Lieutenant Ann Girard while the actress Jocelyn Brando, Marlon's sister, was out on vacation.[32] This part was the sole female character in the play, a part which almost went to Eva Marie Saint.

Despite Mitchell's initial success as a stage manager, she was often met with gender discrimination. Mitchell was a candidate to stage manage *The King and I* (1951), but was initially rejected for the position due to her gender. In a 1950 letter to Mitchell, an apologetic Oscar Hammerstein wrote:

> I have never been sure that "this is a man's world," but back-stage certainly is. I know there is no manager in the business any better than you, but it is very hard to buck the tide of prejudice against women stage managers for big musical shows.[33]

Not long after, when Jerry Whyte, Rodgers and Hammerstein's first stage manager on *The King and I*, left the production, Mitchell was called upon to save the day – which she did with aplomb.[34] *The King and I* was an important moment in Mitchell's career as it not only represented her ability to, as Hammerstein wrote, "buck the tide of prejudice against women stage managers," but it was the production that introduced her to two important future collaborators: the choreographer Jerome Robbins, and her life partner, the costume designer Florence Klotz.

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[31] Harold Prince. *Sense of Occasion.* New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, an imprint of Hal Leonard LLC. 2017. pp. 4.
[32] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.
[33] Mark Eden Horowitz. *The Letters of Oscar Hammerstein II.* pp. 420.
[34] Jerome (Jerry) Whyte was a stage manager and production manager who worked on shows including *Pal Joey, Oklahoma!* and *Bells Are Ringing* (with Mitchell). He is remembered as an intense figure, described by some as a bully. In 1948, he and his assistant Herman Kantor were suspended as members of the Theatre Guild for discriminating against actors who were union members. [Louis Calta. "Equity Finds Pair Hurting Union Aim; Whyte and Kantor of Theatre Guild Suspended as Members Pending Future Behavior." *The New York Times.* The New York Times, April 13, 1948.]

Understanding the relationship between Ruth Mitchell and Florence Klotz is crucial to understanding either woman's individual career, as both had to overcome the personal and public challenges of being in a lesbian relationship. Kathrina Klotz was born in Brooklyn, New York, on October 28, 1920. She later renamed herself Florence, but was called "Flossie" by those who knew her. After graduating from the Parsons School of Design, she began her career working on *The King and I.* Later, she became the assistant to and protégé of Broadway costume designer Lucinda Ballard before debuting as a solo designer on the 1957 revival of *Carousel* at New York City Center.[35] On *The King and I,* Klotz worked as an assistant to the costume designer Irene Sharaff, and though Klotz and Sharaff were purportedly lovers during this period, Klotz and Mitchell remained partners for the next fifty years after their meeting until Mitchell's death in 2000.[36]

But Klotz and Mitchell's was not always a stable partnership, especially in the beginning. In later years, by all accounts, the two had settled into a happy relationship that included professional collaboration. However, Annette Meyers, a former secretary at Prince's production office, purported that early in their relationship, Mitchell left Klotz to pursue an affair with actress Kaye Ballard, among other rumored indiscretions. A different source, actress Loni Ackerman, who worked closely with Mitchell on *Evita* (1979), recalled a rumor that at one point in her life, Klotz was considering eloping in Las Vegas with fellow costume designer, Raoul Pène Du Bois, who was also gay.[37] As the story goes, this was in the 1930s or early 40s, before Klotz and Mitchell met. Though this alleged marriage plot did not immediately affect Mitchell and Klotz's romantic relationship, it indicates the levels of pressure they both must have felt to

[35] "Florence Klotz Papers." New York Public Library.
[36] Annette Meyers, Hal Prince's former assistant. Interview with the author. November 2021.
[37] Loni Ackerman, actress. Interview with the author. February 2022.

conform to certain heteronormative standards, standards they consciously eschewed by making a life together.

Mitchell spent the middle portion of the 1950s busily working and continuing to build connections with some of the industry's most important artists. After *The King and I,* Mitchell was the stage manager for *Pipe Dream* (1955) directed by Harold Clurman, also with Rodgers and Hammerstein, on which Klotz worked as the assistant costume designer. Next, Mitchell worked on *Bells Are Ringing* (1956), a musical with music by Jule Styne and a libretto and lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green that was directed and choreographed by Jerome Robbins (with co-choreography by Bob Fosse). Shortly thereafter, Mitchell once again worked with Robbins on the musical that paved the way for the rest of her career, *West Side Story* in 1957.

"Something's Coming:" *West Side Story* as a Turning Point

West Side Story was a watershed moment in Ruth Mitchell's life primarily because it marked the beginning of her collaboration with Hal Prince. It was also the first time she worked as production stage manager, a higher rank than stage manager.[38] It was likewise a crucial turning point in Prince's own career. Born in 1928 to an affluent Manhattan family, Prince spent the beginnings of his theatrical career working as an assistant stage manager for the legendary producer and director George Abbott. Beginning with *The Pajama Game* in 1954, Prince ventured into the field of producing, partnering with Robert E. (Bobby) Griffith and Frederick Brisson.[39] With Griffith, Brisson and Abbott, he produced *Damn Yankees* (1955) and *New Girl in*

[38] A production stage manager is the person who oversees the stage management team. Though they are not a constant presence during rehearsals, they oversee a production's technical (or "tech") period when all of the design elements come together.

[39] Robert E. Griffith was a producer who, like Prince, had been mentored by George Abbott. Interestingly enough, Griffith was an actor in the original stage play of *Merrily We Roll Along* in 1934, the musical adaptation of which Prince would later produce and direct in 1981.

Town (1957) before *West Side Story,* when he and Griffith created a producing partnership of their own after Brisson moved to California, where his wife Rosalind Russell's career was centered.[40]

The initial development process of *West Side Story,* as is true of the vast majority of musicals, was a drawn-out and complicated endeavor. The property of *West Side Story* was initially owned by the producer Cheryl Crawford, in association with Roger Stevens.[41] The creative teams consisted of librettist Arthur Laurents, director and choreographer Jerome Robbins, composer Leonard Bernstein, and a newcomer lyricist, the 25-year-old Stephen Sondheim. Sondheim had previously been Broadway-bound in 1954 with an original musical called *Saturday Night,* but the production fell through when its producer, Lemuel Ayers, died. At a party, Sondheim reconnected with Arthur Laurents, the playwright and director, who had seen one of Sondheim's backer's auditions of *Saturday Night.*[42] Impressed with the young writer's lyrics, but less so with his music, Laurents invited Sondheim to audition as a lyricist for Laurent's latest project: a musical adaptation of Romeo and Juliet with music by Leonard Bernstein. Sondheim got the job, and *West Side Story* was proceeding as planned until producer Cheryl Crawford decided to withdraw from the production on the grounds that "the script hadn't sufficiently explored the causes of juvenile delinquency."[43]

After Crawford's departure, and with the beginning of rehearsals just around the corner, the production was in desperate need of producers. Sondheim phoned Hal Prince, who was likewise having theatrical troubles on his production of *New Girl in Town.* The two were good friends, having met in 1949 at the opening night of *South Pacific.* With Sondheim the protege of

[40] Harold Prince. *Sense of Occasion.* pp. 33.
[41] Cheryl Crawford was a lesbian whose partners included actress Dorothy Patten and chef Ruth Norman.
[42] A backer's audition is when the team behind a new work "auditions" their work for investors, or financial backers, to secure funding.
[43] Stephen Sondheim. *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes*. New York: Knopf, 2010. pp. 29.

Oscar Hammerstein, and Prince that of George Abbott (and a good friend of the Richard Rodgers family), the two figured themselves "the natural inheritors of the theatre [they] were entering."[44] Youthful cockiness aside, this prediction proved true for the two men and their subsequent successes. Not only did they inherit the theatre, they would transform it. Prince and Griffith, who had originally been approached to produce *West Side Story* but were dismissed as too green, now had a second chance, which they took. The void created by Cheryl Crawford's departure had been filled, and the creative partnership between Prince and Sondheim cemented. All that was missing was a production stage manager, and to fill that post, Jerome Robbins selected Ruth Mitchell, his previous collaborator.

Figure 3: Mitchell and co-choreographer, Peter Gennaro, during a rehearsal for *West Side Story,* 1957.[45]

Hal Prince recalled: "Some years later, Ruth Mitchell was introduced to me by Jerome Robbins and became the production stage manager of *West Side Story.* She stayed on for the next

[44] Harold Prince. *Sense of Occasion.* pp. 33.
[45] Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Ruth Mitchell with Peter Gennaro" New York Public Library Digital Collections.

forty-plus years, earning an 'in association with' billing on most of my shows."[46] *West Side Story* was a smash hit, and forever altered the musical form primarily through Jerome Robbins's use of dance as a fully integrated storytelling device.

The Prince of Broadway: Ruth Mitchell as Hal Prince's Production Stage Manager

The late 1950s marked a busy period of success for Hal Prince, who quickly grew reliant on Ruth Mitchell as a stage manager. At the same time, Mitchell found herself in high demand elsewhere. Riding high from their success on *West Side Story,* Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurents, and Stephen Sondheim reunited to create *Gypsy* (1959). It marked another reunion, too, between Ruth Mitchell and her childhood hero and onetime castmate, Ethel Merman. Merman's performance in the starring role of "Mama Rose" Hovick – which was written for her – is remembered as one of the most iconic in her long and storied career. Hal Prince and Bobby Griffith were otherwise occupied developing *Fiorello!,* which opened later the same year, and *Gypsy* was instead produced by David Merrick and Leland Hayward. *Fiorello!,* about the life of the former Mayor of New York City, Fiorello LaGuardia, featured a book by Jerome Weidman and George Abbott (who also directed), music by Jerry Bock and lyrics by Sheldon Harnick. Ruth Mitchell worked as the production stage manager of both shows, and *Gypsy* was the last full-scale Broadway production she worked on without Prince.[47]

[46] Harold Prince. *Sense of Occasion.* pp. 10.
[47] *Maurice Chevalier at 77*, which will be discussed later, was a concert installment, not a full-scale production.

Figure 4: Patricia Wilson, Ellen Hanley, Eleanor Roosevelt, Tom Bosley, Ruth Mitchell, and Pat Stanley backstage after a performance of *Fiorello!,* 1959.[48]

Prince's ventures in the early 1960s were somewhat less successful. Ruth Mitchell again worked as the production stage manager on Prince and Griffith's next endeavor: *Tenderloin* – a musical comedy about sex workers in a Manhattan red-light district – in 1960. The musical, also written by Bock and Harnick and directed by George Abbott, was a flop, and Prince's luck had seemingly broken. As if in proof, *A Call On Kuprin* was next in 1961. It had the unfortunate timing to be a play about the Russian efforts to put a man in space and had its Philadelphia opening night upstaged by a launch of a Russian mission Prince erroneously recounts in his memoir as the launch of the Sputnik satellite. Sputnik had been sent aloft four years previously in 1957, so the mission that tanked *Kuprin* must have been Yuri Gagarin's orbit of Earth on April 12, 1961.[49] The play, directed by Abbott, opened in New York on May 25, and in any event, as

[48] Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Patricia Wilson, Ellen Hanley, Eleanor Roosevelt, Tom Bosley, Ruth Mitchell, and Pat Stanley" New York Public Library Digital Collections.
[49] The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. “Yuri Gagarin.” *Encyclopædia Britannica.* Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.

Prince writes, they "had lost a race with the headlines."[50] Of his experience dealing with this intense period of failure, Prince muses:

> I read somewhere that one of the reasons for my success has been an ability to accept the failures. Not true. The truth is that Ruth and Carl [Fisher, general manager[51]], Annette [Meyers, secretary] and the rest have always been able to close ranks around me, cushion me, buffering the world outside.[52]

Mitchell's role as Prince's emotional support system is emphasized here, and it was part of her job that remained crucial through the rest of their collaboration. One personally positive thing to come out of *Kuprin's* failure for Mitchell is that Florence Klotz had designed the costumes, which set her up to continue working on Prince productions over the next three decades. She became a crucial member of the Hal Prince theatrical family, a position that allowed her and Mitchell to work side by side over the next several decades.

Kuprin ran from May 25 to June third, 1961, and on June seventh, Robert Griffith died of a heart attack. Prince describes the effects of Griffith's death on him to have been quite severe; the two had worked inseparably and obsessively for years. It was Griffith's death which, five years later in 1966, ultimately led to changes in the production office: "[I knew] that I could never take another partner. Instead, I restructured the office, making Ruth Mitchell an associate."[53] After a visit to Europe – during which he met his wife-to-be, Judy Chaplin – Prince returned to New York to produce *and* direct (a turning point in his artistic career) *Take Her, She's Mine.*[54] Phoebe and Henry Ephron's play, inspired by their daughter Nora's college-age adventures, opened in December of 1961. Florence Klotz designed costumes, working side by side with Ruthie yet again.

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[50] Harold Prince. *Sense of Occasion.* pp. 67.
[51] Carl Fisher was a nephew of George Abbott.
[52] Harold Prince. *Sense of Occasion.* pp. 81.
[53] Harold Prince. *Sense of Occasion.* pp. 81.
[54] Judy's father was Saul Chaplin, the composer, arranger, music supervisor and producer who worked on such movie musicals as *An American in Paris, The Sound of Music,* and *West Side Story.*

In the early 1960s, Prince began to more seriously consider the possibility of becoming a director. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* opened in 1962*,* and was Stephen Sondheim's debut writing lyrics *and* music. Though officially directed by George Abbott, Jerome Robbins had a hand in staging a few things here and there, while Prince was growing restless in Abbott's shadow after getting his own glimpse into the world of directing. *She Loves Me* followed in 1963*,* with Bock and Harnick once more. Prince directed the musical, and it became his first critically successful effort, earning him a Tony nomination for direction in 1964. There again was Mitchell, his loyal production stage manager. Her New York *Times* obituary recounts a story from the opening night of *She Loves Me* when the curtain got stuck while rising during the overture: "Ms. Mitchell, who was sitting in the audience in formal wear, climbed onstage to unhitch the curtain. She did, and the show, as they say, went on."[55] However, this anecdote is disputed in Prince's memoir. As he described it, it was not until halfway through the second act that the "scrim traveler refused to open" and the show "stopped dead in its tracks." It was not Mitchell, but "a stagehand" who "risk[ed] his life, tightrope-walked across the batten above and finally untangled it from its lines."[56] Though I am inclined to trust Prince's account, an element of mystery remains. Even if apocryphal, the *Times*'s account that it fell to Mitchell to fix this particular kind of production problem speaks volumes about her behind-the-scenes importance and influence.

The Prince-produced *Fiddler on the Roof,* which opened in 1964, introduced Prince to many important future collaborators and represented a massive financial success. When Prince was working with Bock and Harnick on *She Loves Me,* they had initially presented him with a different musical, an adaptation of Sholem Aleichem's series of short stories, *Tevye and His*

[55] Jesse Mckinley. "Ruth Mitchell, 81, Producer Who Energized Broadway." The *New York Times*. 2000.
[56] Harold Prince. *Sense of Occasion.* pp. 101.

Daughters. Prince passed on the property, arguing that only Jerome Robbins – who was otherwise occupied at the time – could sufficiently stage it. The next year, when Robbins became available, the team moved forward with the project that soon became *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964). Though Prince did not direct *Fiddler,* the production once again shaped his artistic future by introducing him to Boris Aronson, the set designer who quickly became his go-to collaborator. The numerous sets Aronson designed for Prince's productions over the years were influential for the next generation of Broadway set designers: his structures emphasized symbolism over realism, eschewing conventions like doors and furniture in order to comment on larger themes of a work. This shift reflected the kind of musical theatre that Prince helped pioneer: bold, conceptual, and concerned with an increasingly epic sense of scale.

Figure 5: A rendering for Boris Aronson's Chagall-inspired set design for *Fiddler on the Roof,* 1964.[57]

[57] Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Tevye's house" New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Aronson relied heavily on another woman whose story has for too long gone untold: his wife, Lisa Jalowetz.[58] She had begun her career as an assistant to the scenic designer Jo Mielziner, who was responsible for the sets of *The King and I* and *Gypsy,* among scores of other top plays and musicals. After marrying Aronson in 1945, she worked as his assistant on countless design projects, a professional and romantic relationship that was of paramount importance to Aronson's success. The collaboration between Mitchell and Aronson was likewise crucial, as her job was to ensure a smooth presentation of his sets, both on a logistical level as production stage manager, and later, as producer, on a financial one. Though not a producer on *Fiddler,* Mitchell was initially an investor. However, when the show's out of town opening in Detroit was met with lukewarm reception, she pulled her investment out, a decision she came to regret immensely.[59] Another future Prince collaborator was instrumental to *Fiddler:* a cast member of the original production Joanna Merlin, who played Tzeitel, Tevye's eldest daughter, transitioned away from acting and into casting. Beginning with *Company* in 1970, she worked with Prince and Mitchell to cast many of their shows.

Prince's philosophy was always to start work on the next production just after the current one opened, creating a tight (and sometimes overlapping) timeline within his – and, by extension, Mitchell's – career. *Baker Street,* a musical based on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*, was next for Prince as producer and director in 1965. It featured a book by Jerome Coopersmith and music and lyrics by Marian Grudeff and Raymond Jessel, with additional songs by Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick. *Baker Street* was also an early stage appearance of Christopher Walken, who played a minor role as one of the killers. *Maurice Chevalier at 77* in 1965 was a one-off production for Ruth Mitchell, who served as the

[58] Robert Simonson, "Lisa Jalowetz Aronson, Designer and Wife of Boris Aronson, Dies at 93," Playbill, May 16, 2013.
[59] Sal Mistretta, actor. Interview with the author. February 2022.

production manager for this month-long Broadway installment of Maurice Chevalier's world tour.[60] Prince had no involvement. She worked on *Chevalier* during the Broadway run of *Baker Street,* multitasking in true theatrical fashion.

"You've Got Possibilities:" *Superman* and Mitchell's New Venture

It's a Bird… It's a Plane… It's Superman opened in 1966 and marked the beginning of Mitchell's time as a producer. Prince wrote that with *Superman,* Mitchell, his "right hand," became "an associate producer, in charge of all technical elements of the productions, and [he] never worried about them again. Almost imperceptibly, she also moved into the role of an assistant director."[61] The musical, which ran for a little under three months, featured music by Charles Strouse, lyrics by Lee Adams, and a book by David Newman and Robert Benton.[62] Mitchell did double duty as associate producer and production stage manager, and Florence Klotz designed the costumes. As Prince described in the excerpt above, during *Superman*, Mitchell's job shifted in two ways: she took on the role of producer, and she moved towards assistant directing. As a stage manager, she had already worked as an assistant *to* the director, a role much more managerial than creative.[63]

By the accounts of production members who observed Mitchell and Prince's dynamic in rehearsals, though theirs was not necessarily an explicitly creative partnership, it was certainly

[60] A production manager is part technical director, part logistical (rather than financial) producer. They are in charge of the production process, managing budgets and coordinating the physical aspects of a production.
[61] Harold Prince. *Sense of Occasion.* pp. 124.
[62] Robert Benton went on to write the screenplays for such films as *Kramer vs. Kramer, Chinatown,* and *Bonnie and Clyde* (with David Newman).
[63] An assistant director often helps a director with both creative and logistical tasks. In Mitchell's case, the role was closer to an assistant *to* the director, and her job would have been very similar to what it was as a stage manager: helping record blocking, making sure Prince was organized and prepared for rehearsal, and helping drill actors in scenes that Prince had already staged if he was otherwise occupied.

collaborative in that Mitchell was allowed and encouraged to make creative contributions. Prince writes of another facet of Mitchell in this role:

> Ruth Mitchell had spent much of her career preparing scripts for publication. [...] Ruth resented that these published versions contained my director's notes, and about this time [*Superman*], unnoticed by me, she erased all my stage directions from the published editions of my shows.[64]

The cause of Mitchell's resentment here – or rather, Prince's interpretation of her behavior as such – is unknown, and somewhat confusing, as Mitchell in no way possessed directorial aims. In future collaborations with Prince, particularly on revivals or touring productions, Mitchell was asked to reproduce Prince's original staging, a task she undertook with the utmost attention to detail. Perhaps the interpretation here is that Mitchell was aiming to protect her own position as the foremost recreator of Prince's staging, and feared that were his blocking directions to be published, her presence would become vestigial. In any event, like Clark Kent changing in a telephone booth, Mitchell's career took on a new level of importance with *Superman* and beyond.

[64] Harold Prince. *Sense of Occasion.* pp. 127.

Chapter 2
Hal Prince's Right Hand: Ruth Mitchell's Career as a Producer and Beyond (1966-2000)

Ruth Mitchell's transition from stage manager to associate producer – and later, assistant director and executive producer – enabled Hal Prince to grow more fully into his own role as director and expand his creative horizons after 1966. Together, the pair was responsible for some of the most important musicals of the twentieth century, as well as some of the most disastrous flops. Towards the end of her life, Mitchell gave Prince a massive roulette wheel emblazoned with the names of the shows they had worked on as a tongue-in-cheek reminder of the gamble of producing. Not even the most surefire property is a hit, the wheel warns, and even the worst flops might have one or two good songs.[65]

Figure 6: The roulette wheel given to Hal Prince by Ruth Mitchell, c. 1999-2000.[66]

Cabaret in 1966 represented a shift in Prince's directorial career toward darker, edgier material. Adapted from John Van Druten's play, "I am a Camera" (itself based on stories by

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[65] Doug Reside. "8 Highlights from the New Hal Prince Exhibition at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts." Playbill, September 26, 2019.
[66] Jonathan Blanc. The New York Public Library. "The Roulette Wheel." 2019.

Christopher Isherwood), the new musical was Prince's second collaboration with the lyricist Fred Ebb and composer John Kander, a duo with whom he produced several more shows during the decade that followed. In 1965, he had produced their musical *Flora, The Red Menace,* starring an 18-year-old Liza Minnelli in her Broadway debut. Ruth Mitchell was uninvolved in *Flora,* ostensibly due to her busy schedule for the majority of 1965. For *Cabaret,* which starred Joel Grey and Lotte Lenya, Mitchell held two positions: production stage manager and associate producer. She also played an instrumental role in the conception of the show. George Abbott, when consulted by Prince on his opinion of the musical, deemed its initial three-act structure too long. Per Prince, "Ruth Mitchell solved the problem easily. Put acts 1 and 2 together and act 3 would be our second act. We did that and it worked."[67] Though her roles on *Cabaret* and other ventures were not explicitly creative, Mitchell often offered insight that shaped Prince's creative projects. It is not uncommon for stage managers, who are often omnipresent during rehearsals, to see solutions to problems more easily than directors, actors, choreographers, or anyone similarly mired in the mud of creative work. Mitchell's degree of separation from the immediate creative process likely enabled her to weigh in with a fresh, logical perspective.

The Sondheim Seventies

The 1970s was the decade during which Prince was producing and directing the work for which he became best known, much of it in collaboration with Stephen Sondheim. *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), and *Sweeney Todd* (1979) were the shows Prince and Sondheim created together during that window, each uniquely innovative in their pursuit of pushing the musical theatre genre ever onward. For each of these productions, Mitchell served as an associate producer, with the exception of *Sweeney Todd* which

[67] Harold Prince. *Sense of Occasion.* pp. 138.

Prince did not himself produce. For *Company, Follies,* and *A Little Night Music,* Mitchell was no longer the production stage manager, but now the production supervisor, a rank one step above but removed from the kind of direct oversight she had previously had.[68]

Company (1970) was first in this decade of boundary-pushing theatre and represented a bold formal innovation on the parts of all members of the creative team. Based on a collection of one-act plays by George Furth – who adapted them into the musical's libretto – *Company* was a contemporary examination of changing attitudes around marriage and its role in society. Set designer Boris Aronson crafted a stark, modern set which worked to underpin the minimalist, existential world of the musical. His "breathtaking" design included two working elevators and featured over 600 slide projections, which now reside in Ruth Mitchell's archives at the Library for the Performing Arts.[69]

Figure 7: Three of the slides from Boris Aronson's set design for *Company,* 1970.[70]

Mitchell's contributions to *Company* were in fact so crucial that Prince split half of his producer's management fee with her, writing:

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[68] A production supervisor is a job not entirely dissimilar from production manager, with the added layer of distance brought by "supervision," rather than "management," as the key task. As production supervisor, Mitchell was the liaison between the production office and those more directly involved in the rehearsal and production process.
[69] Mel Gussow. “Sondheim Scores with 'Company'.” *The New York Times.* The New York Times, April 28, 1970.
[70] Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Slides projected onto set of original Broadway production" New York Public Library Digital Collections.

> Since you have assumed a great deal more responsibility on *Company* than we had at first contemplated, it seems only fair that you should share in the management fee. Accordingly, I propose that commencing with the week beginning April 27, 1970, we divide the producer's management fee on the New York company one-half to you and one-half to me.[71]

This fee did not include the royalties Prince would receive for *Company,* but his letter did enclose a stipulation that Mitchell would be entitled to half of the same producer's management fee on any touring productions of the musical. When *Company* won best musical at the 1971 Tony awards, Prince had Mitchell do the talking. Her speech was short and sweet: "I just want to thank a marvelous company and a wonderful crew that I've had all these years, and Hal for making it possible."[72]

Figure 8: Michael Bennett, Ruth Mitchell, and Hal Prince during rehearsals for *Company.* 1970.[73]

[71] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.
[72] 1971 Tony Awards. YouTube. YouTube, 2013. 1:49:00.
[73] Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Michael Bennett, Ruth Mitchell and Harold Prince during rehearsals for the stage production Company" New York Public Library Digital Collections.

"Beautiful Girls:" Ruth Mitchell's work on *Follies*

In 1971, the long-gestating *Follies* finally sprang to life. It was a project Stephen Sondheim had initiated after the failure of his 1965 musical, *Do I Hear a Waltz,* for which he wrote lyrics to Richard Rodgers's music. Sondheim teamed up with playwright James Goldman to write a musical inspired in part by a New York *Times* article about a reunion of former Ziegfeld Follies showgirls. It was originally meant to be produced in 1967, but the plans fell through. Sondheim and Prince then made a deal: Sondheim would write the score for *Company,* a project Prince was spearheading, and in exchange, Prince would produce and direct Sondheim's newest musical *Follies*, then titled *The Girls Upstairs.* Ruth Mitchell joined the *Follies* team as an associate producer and the production supervisor. Michael Bennett, who choreographed *Company,* was brought on to *Follies* as choreographer and Prince's co-director.

Ted Chapin, the former president of the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, began his career as a go-fer – working partly as Mitchell's assistant – on *Follies.*[74] He kept detailed journals during this time, the contents of which he eventually turned into a book, *Everything Was Possible: The Birth of the Musical "Follies."* This volume contains a detailed minute-to-minute account of Mitchell and her professional process. Chapin describes her constant presence as "[Prince's] calming influence [who] had worked with Hal for years and knew him better than anyone."[75] Prince "lean[ed] on" Mitchell in the rehearsal room, relying on her to complete a range of tasks from reading stage directions aloud during early rehearsals, approving and coordinating the production's budget, or even sometimes standing in for actors in rehearsal.[76] Once, Chapin overheard Mitchell say to actress Dorothy Collins that Prince " actually hadn't

[74] A go-fer is a theatrical assistant whose primary duties consist of going out "fer" things (coffee, scripts, etc.), hence the name.
[75] Theodore S. Chapin. *Everything Was Possible: The Birth of the Musical Follies*. New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2005. pp. 7.
[76] Ibid. pp. 5.

been such a great stage manager but that he sure was impressive as a producer and director."[77] Mitchell's oversight of the budget was emphasized by another anecdote of Chapin's: "One day I brought down a sheet of expenses from Carl [Fisher] for [Prince] to okay. It totaled over $200,000. [Prince] glanced at it, handed it back to me, and said, 'Give this to Ruthie. I don't have the strength to look at it and get mad.'"[78] This budgetary role Mitchell took on as producer is particularly fascinating to explore in the context of shows she worked on with Florence Klotz.

Figure 9: One of the thousands of sketches Klotz made for *Follies.* Pictured here is one of the showgirl costumes, which were the most elaborate in the show. 1971.[79]

At the time of its production, *Follies* was the most expensive musical ever produced on Broadway, costing more than $800,000, a figure which, Prince estimates, would be more than $20 million today.[80] Florence Klotz costume designed *Follies,* a massive undertaking which won her the first of her six Tony awards. Klotz was a "seemingly unlikely candidate" for the job, as

[77] Ibid. pp. 88.
[78] Ibid. pp. 44.
[79] Florence Klotz papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.
[80] Harold Prince. *Sense of Occasion.* pp. 170.

she was not yet considered as iconic a costume designer as the likes of her mentors, Irene Sharaf and Lucinda Ballard.[81] Klotz's work on *Follies* would skyrocket her firmly into that class of artist. Annette Meyers posited that her being hired, despite some team members' initial reservations, had something to do with Mitchell's role as a producer and her ability to advocate that Klotz be hired. Klotz was "scared shitless," Prince noted, at the prospect of designing *Follies,* knowing she had to both pay homage to the rich history of Ziegfeld Follies costumes and create a world of her own.[82] Of her designs Prince remarked that they were "the best [he'd] ever had for any of [his] shows," but they were elaborate, expensive, and a large reason that the show was nearly $100,000 over budget.[83]

Mitchell's job also required her to work closely with the other designers, including scenic designer Boris Aronson. In his book, Chapin recounts one particular instance in which Prince and Aronson got into a heated dispute over a set-related matter, and Prince put Mitchell on the phone to solve it. This was a role she resented, and when the call ended with the slam of the receiver, "she emerged, heading for Hal, fuming: 'Why do you do that to me?'"[84] This anecdote emphasizes not only Prince's reliance on Mitchell as a problem solver, but his own difficulty juggling the dual roles of producer and director. Prince in this instance had gotten into the dispute with Aronson against his better judgment as producer because of something he wanted as the director, a recurring problem that made *Follies* not only confusing and frustrating for production staff like Mitchell, but also – as in the case of the costumes – more expensive than anticipated. Another crucial designer involved in *Follies* was lighting designer Tharon Musser, a massively accomplished artist and, again, a rare woman in the male-dominated field of lighting

[81] Theodore S. Chapin. *Everything Was Possible: The Birth of the Musical Follies*. pp. 19
[82] Ibid. pp. 314.
[83] Ibid. pp. 19.
[84] Ibid. pp. 43.

design. She worked with Prince and Mitchell on several subsequent productions. Her presence on these productions, often alongside Klotz and Mitchell, represents the fact that "the tide of prejudice" mentioned by Oscar Hammerstein in his 1950 letter to Mitchell had begun to turn, and the presence of women on production teams was more commonplace than ever before.

The Sondheim Seventies, continued

The next Prince and Sondheim collaboration was *A Little Night Music* in 1973, a musical inspired by Ingmar Bergman's 1955 film, *Smiles of a Summer Night*. Hugh Wheeler wrote the libretto. Designers included Boris Aronson, Tharon Musser, and Florence Klotz. Klotz won her second Tony for *Night Music*, and thanked Mitchell and Prince by name in her speech.

Figure 10: Ruth Mitchell, Stephen Sondheim, Hugh Wheeler, Florence Klotz, Patricia Elliot (actress), Hal Prince, and Glynis Johns (actress) backstage at the Tony Awards, 1973.[85]

[85] Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Ruth Mitchell, Stephen Sondheim, Hugh Wheeler, Florence Klotz, Patricia Elliott, Hal Prince and Glynis Johns from A Little Night Music backstage at the Tony Awards." New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Mitchell also worked as Prince's assistant on the film adaptation of *Night Music* starring Elizabeth Taylor. This led to a lasting friendship between Taylor, Klotz, and Mitchell. In 1976, when Taylor married Senator John Warner, she wore a lavender gown designed by Klotz.[86]

Pacific Overtures (1976) was another Prince and Sondheim creation with a book by John Weidman.[87] The musical tells the story of Japan's westernization beginning in 1853 with the arrival of Commodore Matthew C. Perry. A stylistic merging of Eastern and Western musical and theatrical technique, the original production was performed in a style that drew largely from Japanese Kabuki theatre. Mitchell worked as an associate producer – not a production supervisor this time – and as usual, an assistant to Prince. Sets were by Aronson, lighting by Musser, and costumes by Klotz. Klotz won her third Tony for *Pacific Overtures,* and once again thanked both Mitchell and Prince. In an interview with WPIX, Mitchell was asked about the production's reviews, which were mixed and emphasized the way the show seemed in disharmony with itself. She replied that "a sense of not belonging was intentional as that was the very point of the show."[88] This indicates Mitchell's creative entrenchment within the process, and her ability to speak on behalf of the creative team despite her ostensibly logistical role.

Side by Side by Sondheim was a revue of Sondheim songs originally produced in 1976 by Cameron Mackintosh on London's West End. In 1977, Hal Prince produced its Broadway transfer with Mitchell by his side as an associate. The show was a two-act revue of some of Sondheim's most influential songs, and it ran for a little under a year.

The final Sondheim musical of the decade was *Sweeney Todd* in 1979, on which Mitchell worked as Prince's assistant. Hugh Wheeler wrote the libretto for this Grand Guignol musical

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[86] "Florence Klotz Papers." New York Public Library.
[87] John Weidman's father Jerome co-wrote the book for the musical *Fiorello!,* which won the Pulitzer Prize for drama.
[88] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

that satirized the desperate living conditions of the British working class in industrial London. The choreographer was Larry Fuller, a former dancer who had been in the original cast of *Funny Girl* in 1964. The scenic and costume design were done by a married couple: Eugene Lee, the set designer, and Franne Lee, the costumer. Prince directed, but did not produce, *Sweeney.* Instead, the musical was produced by Richard Barr, Charles Woodward, Robert Fryer, Mary Lea Johnson, and Martin Richards.

"Glitter and Be Gay:" The 1970s, continued

To rewind the clock for a moment, there were, of course, numerous productions during the 1970s which Prince and Mitchell did without Stephen Sondheim. In 1972, Mitchell was Prince's assistant director on a revival of Eugene O'Neill's 1926 play, *The Great God Brown.* This was Mitchell's first time being officially credited as an assistant director, though it was a role she had long undertaken in an unofficial capacity. Mitchell also assistant directed the next string of shows in the mid-70s: *The Visit* (1973), another collaboration with John Kander and Fred Ebb, *Candide* (1974), a revisal of a Leonard Bernstein operetta originally produced in 1956, and *Love for Love* (1974), a play by William Congrove with music by Hugh Wheeler and Paul Gemignani, Prince and Sondheim's longtime music director and conductor.[89] On *Candide,* a massive undertaking that employed myriad authors in its rewrite, Mitchell also worked as the production supervisor and was credited as having produced in conjunction with Prince.

One of Mitchell's crucial tasks was to reproduce direction – initially Jerome Robbins's, and later, Prince's – for revivals of musicals they had originally helmed. In 1976, there was a Broadway revival of *Fiddler on the Roof.* Embedded in the licensing agreement to produce *Fiddler,* there was and remains a stipulation that Jerome Robbins's choreography be used, and he

[89] Several writers, including Stephen Sondheim, contributed to the revisions to *Candide.*

be credited. It often follows that productions recreate his original staging as well, and for the 1976 revival, the task of reproducing Robbins's direction fell to Mitchell. She reproduced Robbins's direction once more in 1990 for a subsequent revival of *Fiddler,* and worked as the associate director of the 1981 revival. By choreographer Larry Fuller's recollection, her direction suffered in its reproductive quality: actors were going through the motions, rather than making discoveries as their characters. This simultaneously indicates Mitchell's disinclination to the creative work of directing and her skill for precision and recreation.

In 1978, Prince was approached by lyricists Betty Comden and Adolph Green and composer Cy Coleman to direct their musical adaptation of a play that had been a huge hit for George Abbott, *Twentieth Century.* The musical, choreographed by Larry Fuller, was called *On the Twentieth Century,* and Mitchell worked as the assistant to the director. Florence Klotz designed costumes in beautiful shades of shimmering pastels. It was produced by the same conglomerate behind *Sweeney Todd,* Richard Barr, Charles Woodward, Robert Fryer, Mary Lea Johnson, and Martin Richards.

The final Prince production of the 1970s was *Evita,* a new musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice about Eva and Juan Perón, the fascist leaders of 1940s Argentina. This was the beginning of an important collaboration between Prince and Lloyd Webber. *Evita* began on London's West End, produced by Robert Stigwood, and later transferred to Broadway. Mitchell worked as Prince's assistant, and cast members remember her as a constant and crucial presence. A young woman named Beverley Randolph joined the company of *Evita* as a replacement stage manager, and Mitchell took Randolph under her wing. She later worked on many Prince/Mitchell endeavors, including *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *A Doll's Life* (1982), *Grind* (1985) as the production stage manager, and those who knew her well testify that her

relationship with Mitchell was crucial in her professional development and that the two were close friends.

A Difficult Decade: Flops of the 1980s

Prince's ventures in the early 1980s were almost universally unsuccessful. In 1980, Mitchell was given the title of executive producer – a first for her – on a revival of *West Side Story.* She returned to the rank of associate for the following year's *Merrily We Roll Along,* a musical adaptation of a 1934 play by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart and a reunion of Hal Prince, Stephen Sondheim, and George Furth. Larry Fuller choreographed.

Figure 11: Prince and Mitchell at a rehearsal for *Merrily We Roll Along,* showing the cast the renderings for the costumes which would later be cut at the last minute in favor of T-shirts emblazoned with the names of each character, 1981.[90]

[90] Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Director Harold Prince holding up renderings of costumes that would eventually be scrapped during a rehearsal of the Broadway production of the musical "Merrily We Roll Along"." New York Public Library Digital Collections.

The show was a passion project for both Prince and Sondheim, who were both deeply fond of Kaufman and Hart's play about the loss of idealism that coincides with growing up. The play moved, as the musical did, in reverse order, moving from cynicism to youthful optimism instead of the other way around. To achieve this poignant element of the storytelling, Prince cast young people roughly age 16 to 25, including his teenage daughter Daisy. For many of these young performers in *Merrily,* Ruth Mitchell was an important and formative presence. Kind but firm, she was nicknamed – darkly and humorously – the "Angel of Death," as it was often her job to break the hard news of firings and demotions in the company. Conversely, however, she also had the joyous task to deliver positive news on several occasions. Mana Allen, an actor in the original production, recalled that it was "Ruthie" who called to tell her she had been cast, a moment that changed Allen's life forever.[91] The musical opened cold in New York, meaning it had no out of town tryout, a decision which many on the creative team blame in part for the show's intense failure. *Merrily* played only 16 performances on Broadway. Its bitter and public failure led Prince and Sondheim to part ways, ending their decades-long professional collaboration, a decision that was neither easy nor ultimately detrimental to their friendship. The two men remained close until Prince's death in 2019. The show, though panned at the time, has become a cult favorite among musical theatre aficionados, despite its problematic book, and has been revived off-Broadway and around the country countless times.

For Prince, at least, *Merrily* must have been some kind of omen, since the next half-decade of shows he directed were likewise unsuccessful. His next venture, *A Doll's Life* (1982), was a musical that picks up where Ibsen's *A Doll's House* ends, with Nora Helmer slamming the door on Torvald and her family. The book and lyrics were by Comden and Green,

[91] Mana Allen, teacher and former actress. Interview with the author. February 2022.

with music by Larry Grossman. Mitchell was the associate producer, and Fuller again choreographed. It ran for three days.

Figure 12: Left to right: Beverly Randolph, Ruth Mitchell, Hal Prince, Larry Fuller, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green at a rehearsal of *A Doll's Life,* 1982.[92]

Next was *Play Memory* in 1984, a play by Joanna M. Glass with music by Larry Grossman, on which Mitchell was Prince's assistant. This production likewise ran for three days. In 1984, Prince directed, with Mitchell his assistant yet again, a production of *End of the World,* a play by Arthur Kopit, with incidental music again by Grossman. This did slightly better, running nearly a month.

The next in this string of mid-eighties flops was *Grind* in 1985. With a book by Fay Kanin, music by Larry Grossman, and lyrics by Ellen Fitzhugh, *Grind* was a musical set in a Chicago burlesque house in 1933. Mitchell was again the executive producer. When asked during an American Theatre Wing panel broadcast on CUNY TV about her splashy title, she replied:

[92] Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "(L-R) Stage manager Beverly Randolph, associate producer Ruth Mitchell, director Harold Prince, choreographer Larry Fuller & lyricists Betty Comden & Adolph Green at the first rehearsal of the Broadway musical "A Doll's Life." (New York)" New York Public Library Digital Collections.

> I think [executive producer] is a title I made up. Well, it's somebody who really takes care of seeing that the production is handled. That is, everything that goes on mainly from backstage, from the curtain back. I'm terrible at raising money, so I don't like to do any of that. I'm not good at it. On this one, I was doing the casting, and seeing that all the elements of making the director happy and seeing that the production goes together – that's the costumes, the scenery, the lighting, the crew, everybody that has anything to do with backstage.[93]

At long last, Mitchell's title – and monetary share – matched the kind of crucial oversight she had long had over Prince's productions. As far back as *Superman,* she was described by Prince as doing exactly the things she lists above, with the exception of casting. It is unfortunate that, for the most part, the productions on which Mitchell was credited as an executive producer were unsuccessful.

Figure 13: Ruth Mitchell discusses *Grind* on a panel for the American Theatre Wing, broadcast on CUNY TV. 1985.[94]

Though *Grind* received generally negative reviews and ran for little more than three months, it received seven Tony nominations, including best costumes for Florence Klotz. The production

[93] *ATW's Working in the Theatre #97- Production: "Grind" (Winter 1985)*. *YouTube*. CUNY, 1985. 47:00.
[94] *ATW's Working in the Theatre #97- Production: "Grind" (Winter 1985)*. *YouTube*. CUNY, 1985.

lost its entire $4.75 million investment, a disgrace which was compounded by the fact that Prince and three other members of the creative team were "suspended by the Dramatists Guild for signing a 'substandard contact.'"[95] Prince resigned from the League of American Theaters and Producers, a trade group, claiming to be "frustrated by rising ticket prices, labor costs, and 'producing by committee.'"[96] This began his 17-year-long hiatus from producing. Also in 1987, Mitchell assistant directed a revival of Cabaret, starring Joel Grey once more in the role he had originated twenty years earlier.

Mitchell was the executive producer for 1987's *Roza,* the final flop of the period. Klotz also did costumes for this production, a musical adaptation of *The Life Before Us* by Romain Gary with music by Gilbert Bécaud and lyrics and book by Julian More. It played for ten days.

Ruthie's Final Act: *Phantom* and Beyond

In 1986, *The Phantom of the Opera* marked a reunion of Prince and Lloyd Webber following the success of *Evita*. This newest project, a musical adaptation of the novel by Gaston Leroux, became Prince's – and, in fact, the musical theatre's – longest running, highest grossing, international smash hit. Mitchell was his assistant yet again. She was so instrumental to the process that the famous chandelier, a crucial element of the musical's set and plot, was fondly named for her: "Ruthie I" in London, and "Ruthie II" on Broadway.[97] The production opened on London's West End, produced by Cameron Mackintosh, and in 1988, arrived on Broadway to immediate success.

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[95] Jesse Mckinley. “On Stage and Off.” *The New York Times.* The New York Times, May 17, 2002.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Michael Paulson and Justin J Wee, “Bringing Broadway Spectacle Back to Life,” The New York Times (The New York Times, September 16, 2021).

In 1993, Mitchell was Prince's assistant on the pair's final collaboration with Kander and Ebb, *Kiss of the Spiderwoman,* a musical based on Manuel Puig's 1976 novel of the same name. The story of the musical deals with underground queer behaviors and relationships, so it is only fitting that Florence Klotz designed the costumes, working side by side with Mitchell for the pentultimate time. She won yet another Tony for her work, and in her speech thanked her assistants, Prince, but not Mitchell. It is unclear why Klotz thanked Mitchell in her earlier speeches and not her later ones, as it seems contrary to the tide of acceptance of gay relationships that was swiftly turning in American culture during these few decades. However, Mitchell's absence from Klotz's later speeches seems to reflect no change in the pair's dynamic: Clayton Phillips, the stage manager on *Spiderwoman,* recalled Mitchell and Klotz's close working relationship, describing them as an effectively married couple whom everyone knew were together and treated with the utmost respect. He remarked that they behaved like two halves of a whole, and that they were funny, kind, and beloved.[98] Others have compared them to doting aunts, and everyone who knew them during this period had only the sweetest things to say about the couple. Clearly, in contrast to Meyers's accounts of their early years, by this point in time, Klotz and Mitchell's relationship had both mellowed and matured, settling into a stable partnership. Presumably, this also had something to do with the fact that, by the 1990s, there was much less pressure on Mitchell in the workplace as a new generation of frontline assistants emerged. Though Prince still relied on her, as he always had – Phillips referred to Mitchell as Prince's best friend and protector – because of her diminishing role in the daily nitty gritty of producing and technical coordination, she had less on her plate than in years past.

Mitchell's last official credit was as Prince's assistant on his groundbreaking 1994 revival of Oscar Hammerstein and Jerome Kern's 1927 musical, *Show Boat.* Klotz designed the

[98] Clayton Phillips, (Stage Manager), Interview with the author. March 2022.

costumes, which earned her her sixth and final Tony award, each one having been won on a Prince-directed show involving Mitchell. The last theatrical production Mitchell touched was Prince's 1999 production of Jason Robert Brown and Alfred Uhry's *Parade,* a new musical about the trial and lynching of Leo Frank. She was around only in the very beginning of the process, before "failing health prevented her from working on the Broadway production."[99]

Ruth Mitchell died of a lingering illness on November 3, 2000 at the age of 81 after a lifetime of work in the theatre. In lieu of flowers, she requested that contributions in her memory be made to The Actors Fund.[100] In her will, she bequeathed nearly everything to Klotz, whom she listed in the document simply as her "friend."[101]

[99] "Ruth Mitchell Papers." New York Public Library.
[100] "Paid Notice: Deaths - Mitchell, Ruth." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, November 5, 2000.
[101] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

Chapter 3
"The Duties Cry for the Influence of a 'She:'"
The Gendered Labor of Stage Management[102]

As described by the media and those who knew her, Ruth Mitchell's work as a stage manager and as Prince's assistant were dictated by her gender. Mitchell's care work-heavy role as a stage manager, and later, as Prince's assistant, served to replicate heterosexual household norms and stuctures within a creative process. Mitchell was treated as a mother- and/or wife-like figure by many of her colleagues, something which represented her importance to the emotional – as well as technical – well-being of the production process.

"[A] Thankless Profession:" Stage Management as Care Work[103]

There are aspects of stage management that have long been dismissed as women's work, even when women were largely dissuaded from holding the job. Jennifer Leigh Sears Sheier writes about the increase of stage management handbooks in the 1930s and 40s which emphasize the organizational skills and general disposition the position required. These facets of the labor, then, became intensely gendered: "In *Scenery Simplified* (1934), Glenn R. Webster and William Wetzel describe the assistant stage manager as a 'she, for the duties cry for the influence of a "she"' (pg. 119)."[104] These duties, overlapping with the skills a secretary might be expected to have, included note taking, scheduling, and general errand-running. Note, also, that the job described here is an *assistant* stage manager, a role subordinate to the stage manager.

The traditionally feminized duties that go along with stage management were particularly emphasized in the vast majority of media coverage on Mitchell. In her obituary in the New York

[102] Jennifer Leigh Sears Scheier. "Women in Stage Management: Revolutionizing History with Inclusion." *Stage Directions*. 2017.
[103] Jesse Mckinley. “Ruth Mitchell, 81, Producer Who Energized Broadway.” The *New York Times*. 2000.
[104] Jennifer Leigh Sears Scheier. "Women in Stage Management: Revolutionizing History with Inclusion." *Stage Directions*. 2017.

Times, Jesse Mckinley described stage management as:

> [A] thankless profession whose duties include everything from making sure that the actors' coffee is hot to untangling chorus girls involved in a dressing room brawl. In her own words, the only things Ms. Mitchell didn't have to worry about were "singing the hit song or selling orange drink in the lobby."[105]

This quotation is especially interesting given the layers of sexist assumptions it presents: the depiction of chorus girls involved in juvenile and petty squabbles represents one layer of sexism, and the necessity of a stage manager to break up such a squabble is entirely another. Mckinley's phrasing here takes on a different dimension with a female stage manager than it would with a (more typical for the period) male one. Furthermore, this quotation as a whole deals with relatively unimportant aspects of stage management. Even more important to the profession than fixing coffee or breaking up spats would be dealing with technical elements of scenery or coordinating the backstage crew, but those elements of the profession are only ever mentioned when they serve as a contrast to Mitchell's gender. One such article reads: "Ruth Mitchell is one stage manager who doesn't have to move her own sets. What happens to a show when she turns up as the female boss of an all male crew? It's a smash."[106] Here, her ability to do her job is directly juxtaposed against her gender, positioning her as some sort of biological anomaly.

As a hands-on occupation, the human interaction sides of the stage management can become buried. But, as anyone who has ever encountered a good stage manager knows, they are often the emotional backbone of a production process, keeping schedules and tempers balanced with seeming ease as they mitigate myriad disasters at any given time. It is not wrong, then, for these journalists to touch on those elements of Mitchell's work. However, the frequency with which her tasks are emphasized through the lens of her gender is problematic. Another quote from Mitchell's *Times* obituary emphasizes a different element of her approach to stage

[105] Jesse Mckinley. "Ruth Mitchell, 81, Producer Who Energized Broadway." The *New York Times.* 2000.
[106] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

management: "Her dedication and care for detail quickly became legendary on Broadway. She kept, for example, a complete list of the best doctors in every major city on the East Coast in case actors got sick on the road, as well as a list of popular bars and restaurants."[107] This is an example of the ways in which Mitchell went above and beyond to ensure the comfort, wellbeing, and happiness of her colleagues. Of her time working with the mostly-newcomer cast of young people in *West Side Story,* Ruth Mitchell remarked that she had to be "a policeman, schoolteacher, psychologist, and nurse."[108] This example begins to reveal the dimensions of care work ensconced within the labor of stage management.

Though not typically examined through the care-as-labor lens that these quotes depict, stage management – particularly as exemplified in the gendered writing about Ruth Mitchell's approach to the job – arguably falls under the umbrella of care work. Feminist scholars describe care work as "a process or practice that has a strong emotional dimension and is based on human connection in relationship."[109] Others describe care work as labor that addresses an "array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people both on a daily basis and intergenerationally."[110] The roles that Mitchell describes taking on, especially schoolteacher and nurse, are not only care work positions, but explicitly gendered ones. Both of these roles, and stage management as Mitchell experienced it, serve to replicate maternal or otherwise feminized domestic labor. However, she does refer to herself as a policeman, too, something which contrasts the feminized associations of her work and represents her ultimate power. Despite the challenges posed by her gender, she was able to command authority and earn respect.

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[107] Jesse Mckinley. "Ruth Mitchell, 81, Producer Who Energized Broadway." The *New York Times.* 2000.
[108] Pat Krochmal, "All of Her World is A Stage," *Chicago American*, n.d.
[109] Mignon Duffy. "Reproducing Labor Inequalities: Challenges for Feminists Conceptualizing Care at the Intersections of Gender, Race, and Class." *Gender and Society* 19, no. 1 (2005), pp. 68
[110] Jessica Wilkerson. "To Live Here, You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice." (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), pp. 5.

"As a Mother would Treat her Family:" Mitchell's Maternalism

The maternal sides of the stage managerial profession are particularly highlighted in any coverage of a woman on the job, something indicative of both reception and approach to the phenomenon of female stage managers. In her 1948 autobiography *See the Players,* stage manager Maud Gill writes that she was told: "A woman ought not to be put in charge of stagehands because 'working men' would not take orders from her," but resolved that, "since mothers had been keeping order in the home since the beginning of time, the way to go about it was to treat them as a mother would treat her family."[111] Mitchell, it would seem, was less intentionally maternal in her relationship to the work she did, but that the role of mother-figure was certainly thrust upon her by her circumstances. An article about Mitchell's time with *The King and I* claims that "she spent a good bit of her time shepherding 26 children and their eager mamas."[112] As with the unpaid labor of mothers in the domestic sphere, Mitchell's work dealt with so-called "reproductive labor," something defined by scholars as "work that is necessary to ensure the daily maintenance and ongoing reproduction of the labor force."[113] This included not only the more literal maternal duties Mitchell was saddled with (like wrangling child actors), but the more figurative work of labor force reproduction, like training assistants and managing a large company of actors, technicians, and designers to ensure the success of the theatrical household. The mentoring that Mitchell did in her training of assistants, stage managers, and others under her supervision was invaluable. She paid special attention to women who were interested in stage management and made an extra effort to nurture their careers, most notably, Beverley Randolph.

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[111] David Ayliff. 2001. "Letters: The Late Rita Hunter and the Late Peggy Dear." *The Guardian.* Guardian News and Media.
[112] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.
[113] Mignon Duffy. "Reproducing Labor Inequalities: Challenges for Feminists Conceptualizing Care at the Intersections of Gender, Race, and Class." *Gender and Society* 19, no. 1 (2005), 70.

Another aspect of the emotional labor the job demanded of her was her management of Prince's sometimes-explosive temper. After her many years of working alongside Jerome Robbins, an artist even more temperamental and volatile than Prince, she would have been familiar with the requirements of such emotional work. Often it was Mitchell alone who had the power to calm the turbulent seas that could arise within Prince's directorial process. She quietly solved the seemingly infinite challenges he threw at her, very rarely talking back or openly challenging his authority. She was described by actors who knew them both as "Hal's whipping boy" on more than one occasion. Many went on to clarify the dramatic use of metaphor: this is not to say she was subservient. Rather, the two had a very specific collaborative dynamic which in many ways gave her the upper hand in managerial and production tasks. If Prince could take his frustrations out on Mitchell, those feelings were less likely to boil over in ways that would negatively impact actors or other members of the creative team. She had to be the levelheaded, rational counterpart to his creative genius, a role she grew increasingly comfortable playing. Though she never explicitly commented on this dynamic while alive, and it seems unfair, there is no evidence to suggest Mitchell felt resentful towards Prince on the whole.

Prince's reliance on Mitchell was well known, and frequently joked about. Stephen Sondheim, who had a penchant for writing clever songs for his friends as presents, penned one such gift to Prince on his 55th birthday. It was ironically titled "I am Content" and poked fun at Prince's demanding temperament.

> As I sit here gazing at my
> Full rich life
> I am content …
> (Screams into outer office)
> Ruthie![114]

[114] Stephen Sondheim. *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes*. pp. 412.

The song progresses for several more verses, each one implicating another member of Prince's family or production staff, including Klotz:

> FLOSSIE! I said PINK!
> Do you really call that PINK?
> Jesus Christ![115]

Mitchell is mentioned several times in the song which emphasizes her importance to Prince as well as the frequency with which she was needed. Ronald S. Lee, who had worked with Mitchell as a dancer in both *The King and I* and *West Side Story* over 30 years previously, referred to her as “One of the, if not the foremost stage technicians in the world, both in Great Britain and here" during a 1985 CUNY TV panel about *Grind*. He went on to say, "When somebody says, ‘Where’s Ruthie?,’ it’s because Ruthie will know where everything is or should be.”[116] This omnipotent competence is only part of what made her invaluable to Hal Prince.

Several former collaborators jokingly referred to Mitchell as Prince's "work wife." As Annette Meyers put it, "she covered for him, and he trusted her with secrets."[117] This dynamic, which replicated heterosexual marriage, with Mitchell also serving as the mother figure in many instances, is particularly fascinating in the context of Mitchell's sexual identity. As a gay woman, there would have been no real threat posed by her and Prince's relationship. With the question of sex removed from the equation, the two were free to curate a kind of marital closeness without the fear of things going too far. In this way, her queerness, as well as her gender, was instrumental to her ability to meet and exceed the challenges she faced as a stage manager and assistant.

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[115] Ibid.
[116] *ATW's Working in the Theatre #97- Production: "Grind" (Winter 1985)*. *YouTube*. CUNY, 1985. 48:00.
[117] Annette Meyers, Hal Prince's former assistant. Interview with the author. November 2021.

Figure 14: Prince and Mitchell during the mid-1960s.[118]

Mitchell's case study serves to illuminate the ways in which female stage managers were expected to go above and beyond the basic requirements of the job, supplementing their managerial labor with care work and crisis management. For Mitchell, this manifested in a workplace role that served to replicate the undervalued labor of the domestic sphere, taking on the role of a pseudo-mother or wife without additional recognition or compensation.

[118] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

Chapter 4
All Her World Was Stage Managed: Reflections on Mitchell's Life and Gender

Mitchell was a gay woman who, due to the caregiving demands of her role as a female stage manager – and later producer – in a male-dominated field, maintained a long-running performance of controlled femininity. In an article in the *Chicago American* titled "All of Her World is A Stage," Pat Krochmal declared that "Ruth Mitchell lives and works in a man's world and gets along just fine."[119] Due to her chosen profession in an industry made difficult and dangerous for women, the stakes of her success – or even merely "get[ing] along" – were high, something that demanded she behave in a prescribed and feminized way. The theatre industry presented Mitchell with a strict set of rules for her participation therein: rules about gender, about sexuality, and about the ways in which the two informed the caregiving labor required of her. Playing by these rules to ensure a successful career, both professionally and personally, Ruth Mitchell lived a carefully managed life.

"Professional Prowess and Personal Flair:" Performing Femininity and Success[120]

Hal Prince once called Mitchell "the chic-est stage manager on Broadway."[121] Her appearance and fashion sense were subjects which newspapers seized upon. An article about the opening of *West Side Story* at Washington D.C.'s National Theater, of which Mitchell was the production stage manager, described her as "a pretty girl."[122] Yet another piece called her "one of the most feminine packages of authority to cross a stage,"[123] and remarked that she was one of two women in the business. A particularly revealing example of the kinds of sexist coverage Mitchell had to live with – and overcame – is as follows:

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[119] Pat Krochmal, "All of Her World is A Stage," *Chicago American*, n.d.
[120] Jesse Mckinley. “Ruth Mitchell, 81, Producer Who Energized Broadway.” The *New York Times.* 2000.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.
[123] Ibid.

> The blue-eyed brunette's svelte 116-pound figure is reason enough for cooperation from the male half of stagedom. But how do some of the most notable actresses beneath the lights feel about a female manager? "I think it's easier for them to work with another woman, if she has some understanding."[124]

The objectification exemplified in this and other excerpts indicates the treacherous position she occupied, something that likely served as a disincentive for other women to join her in the field.

Yet Ruth Mitchell, by many accounts, *was* quite well dressed, always outfitted in the latest designs. Apparently, this was partly because her role as producer gave her access to friends in high places constantly in need of favors in the form of last-minute theatre tickets. In exchange for some high-end fashion designer or their models being able to score orchestra seats to the provocative new musical *Company,* say, Mitchell would take compensation in the form of wearables.[125] This was something that was frequently remarked upon about Mitchell, as it certainly set her fashion choices apart from both the typical work clothes of a stagehand, and from the butch stereotype sometimes applied to lesbians. Many who knew her suspect that perhaps this personal sense of fashion was a form of self-protection, a sort of feminine armor to keep from being stereotyped and therefore losing respect over her sexuality. While Mitchell left no record of her personal motivations to dress in the way she did, it stands to reason that concerns about professionalism, passing as feminine (and therefore, not butch), and the constant barage of commentary on her appearance were all factors. The relentless fuss about her appearance must have compounded the already high-pressure position of being one of so few women in her profession. In the journalistic eye, she was successful in her performance: though her colleagues in the theatre industry were largely aware of her relationship with Florence Klotz, she was often referred to as a bachelorette in publications.

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[124] Ibid.

[125] Annette Meyers, Hal Prince's former assistant. Interview with the author. November 2021.

Mitchell described frustrations at not always being able to express the difficulties of her work, something exacerbated by her gender. That, too, was reported through a lens now clearly seen as sexist: "'You can't cry on anyone's shoulder, but once in a while you can yell,' the chic boss-lady of Broadway says of her sweeping, sometimes outlandish, duties."[126] This quote reveals the lonely position she occupied, and yet, William Glover, the author of the article in which it appeared, chose to focus on her chic appearance over the confession that she felt the need to keep her emotions private while working. Likely, this aversion to emotion was due to fears of being regarded as hysterical or being otherwise undermined by "feminine" traits such as crying. In a different interview, she spoke briefly about the gender stereotypes of her job, saying: "People used to think the stage manager had to be a big tough man who yelled a lot, and I do yell once in a while."[127] Yelling aside, Ruth Mitchell was certainly tough, a product of her experiences as a woman in the theatre and the way she was able to survive and succeed.

A Blessing and a Curse: The Barbed End of Femininity

Mitchell's survival as a woman in the theatre was certainly more difficult than her polished air would have let on. In 1948, when Mitchell was working on *Mister Roberts,* the general manager was Herman Bernstein. He worked with Mitchell again on *Bells Are Ringing* (1956).[128] Bernstein was the right hand man of producer Leland Hayward. According to Annette Meyers, Mitchell had been having an affair with Bernstein, not out of any emotional or physical connection, but for financial compensation. Meyers described Bernstein as a crooked manager who was pocketing the so-called "ice" from productions and keeping it in a safety deposit box.[129]

[126] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.
[127] Ibid.
[128] The general manager is the person in charge of budgeting and hiring for a theatrical production.
[129] Ice here refers to the money from a theatrical production budget that shady producers and managers in this era would skim off the top of the profits and keep for themselves, thus "melting away."

His obituary confirms at least the sloppiness of his accounting methods: "He was described as a walking office: his files were in his head and pockets."[130] Meyers claimed that at Bernstein's funeral in November of 1963, his widow, Nancy Hendrick Bernstein, stood up and announced to the assembled crowd that she had gone to the safety deposit box and found it empty. Very shortly thereafter, Mitchell bought herself a Jaguar and an apartment on Park Avenue, or so the story goes. Whether or not this anecdote from Meyers is true, it speaks to the speculation with which Mitchell's success was met, as well as the high sexual stakes to which she was subjected, autonomously or otherwise. The story of Herman and Ruthie is included, though disguised, in Meyers's mystery novel, *Murder: The Musical*.[131]

Annette Meyers also shared a particularly disturbing memory of Mitchell and herself: The two women were standing at the back of the house of some theatre or another and were approached by Bernard (Bernie) Jacobs, one of the two men – along with Gerald Schoenfeld, together known as "The Shuberts" – responsible for running the Shubert theatrical empire. Jacobs, without hesitation, reached his hand into Mitchell's blouse, and per Meyers' recollection, Mitchell had no reaction. When Meyers' husband, an actor, spotted the scene from across the room and hurried over to chase Jacobs away, Meyers asked Mitchell why she had allowed Jacobs to do such a thing. Mitchell merely shrugged.[132] This anecdote portrays a woman weary from decades of being treated as a commodity by men both peers and superiors, in roles both onstage and off. It begs larger questions about Mitchell's relationship to her gender in this regard, and what kind of sexual behavior she might have been coerced into partaking in to ascend the ranks in the way she did, which harkens back to Meyers's story about Mitchell and Herman Bernstein.

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[130] "Herman Bernstein Is Dead at 58." The New York Times. The New York Times, November 4, 1963.
[131] In Meyers's book, the character based on Mitchell is the "hated" stage manager/associate producer, "Killa" Dilla Crosby, whose partner is a woman named Susan. [Annette Meyers, *Murder: The Musical* (Bridgewater, NJ: Replica Books, 1998).]
[132] Annette Meyers, Hal Prince's former assistant. Interview with the author, November 2021

An Open Secret: Mitchell and Klotz's Partnership

As an extreme contrast to the ever-present male threat of the workplace, Mitchell and Klotz's relationship existed in a space of queer home life. The pair blurred their public and private life to create an enclave where their partnership could flourish away from, but not necessarily without the knowledge of, prying eyes. "To queer the home," scholar Sara Ahmed writes, is "to suggest that the intimacy of the home is what connects the home to other, more public, spaces."[133] The intimacy they shared at home was instrumental in solidifying and personalizing their professional collaboration. They brought their home life into their shared work, with workplace overlap the deepest form of intimacy they were able to perform in public. For instance, even to events such as opening nights or theatre award ceremonies, the two women often brought male companions as their "dates."[134] The forum of musical theatre production gave the couple a relatively safe space in which to work together, and their invitation of colleagues and friends to their shared home reveals the levels of secrecy or openness they maintained over the years.

The most surprising instance of this openness was the couple's friendship with New York's charismatic mayor, John Lindsay, who in his heyday as the leader of "Fun City" was a huge Broadway fan. In 1980, then running for the Democratic Senate nomination from New York, Lindsay sent the following letter to Mitchell and Klotz at their Bridgehampton cottage:

> Dear Ruthie and Flossie: Your cocktail party on August 23rd was great. You really collected a wonderful group of friends, old and new, on my behalf. Mary and I appreciate greatly this time and effort that you have so generously given to my campaign. Many thanks for all your help. All the best always, John V. Lindsay.[135]

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[133] Sara Ahmed. "Disorientation and Queer Objects" in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. (Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 168.
[134] Artie Masella, stage manager. Interview with the author, March 2022.
[135] Ruth Mitchell papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

This friendship is chronicled in other letters, always addressed to the two women together, but this one in particular provides a crucial window into the ways in which Mitchell and Klotz connected their home and public lives. An interesting question remains, unanswered by the material in Mitchell's archive, as to the exact extent to which Mitchell allowed for her sexuality to be an open secret among colleagues. Her relationships with peers like Prince, or good friends like Linsday, were potentially different from her relationships to her subordinates, the crews of stagehands whom she oversaw.

Figure 15: Ruth Mitchell playfully kisses Tony Mordente, left, a dancer in *West Side Story* and the new husband of Chita Rivera, right, at the couple's wedding reception as Jerome Robbins, right, looks on. 1957.[136]

Mitchell and Klotz also had friends who were, like them, lesbian couples who worked in the theatre. They were particularly close with Betty Lee Hunt and Maria Cristina Pucci, a couple who also worked as a press duo as "Hunt/Pucci Associates," and later as producers as "BetMar

[136] Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Tony Mordente, Ruth Mitchell, Chita Rivera, and Jerome Robbins" New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Productions."[137] The pair worked with Mitchell on *Candide* (1974) and the 1976 revival of *Fiddler on the Roof,* among other productions. After Mitchell's death, they paid for a condolence notice in the New York *Times:* "Our many years as friends will be cherished. You will be deeply missed. Betty Lee and Maria."[138] Clearly, the friendship was an important one, and understandably so, as open lesbian couples were hard to come by even in the relatively accepting space of the theatre.

Mitchell and Klotz were known by all who worked with them as kind, supportive women – not only of each other, but of their colleagues and collaborators, too. Many actors who had known the pair fondly referred to them as their "old Jewish [or Italian] aunts," an image that is indicative of both the maternal warmth the two exuded, and of the sexless status they curated. This sits in direct contrast to the rumors of assault or sexual exploitation that may have plagued Mitchell in the earlier part of her career.

The assessment that "Mitchell lives and works in a man's world and gets along just fine" proves to be correct, if wildly simplified.[139] For her to survive, and, indeed, thrive, in the world of professional theatre, she was required to maintain a strict balance between her public and private life. It is difficult to ascertain whether her gender was a strength or a weakness in her career. Most likely, it was both an obstacle to be overcome, and something which at times might have given her the upper hand.

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[137] "Betty Lee Hunt." Internet Broadway Database. The Broadway League.
[138]"Paid Notice: Deaths - Mitchell, Ruth." The New York Times. The New York Times, November 5, 2000.
[139] Pat Krochmal, "All of Her World is A Stage," *Chicago American*, n.d.

Conclusion

Histories of women stage managers are hugely lacking, but in the twenty-first century, the profession is majority female.[140] From 2013 to 2018, the League of Professional Theater Women conducted a study which demonstrated that the only two technical theater positions dominated by women were costume designers and stage managers. The League surveyed thirteen different artistic job positions at twenty-two off-Broadway theaters. Over the five year period in question, women represented roughly 72% of all costume design positions and 70% of all stage management positions. Every other category was male-dominated, meaning women represented less than 50% of the field.[141]A chicken-and-egg conundrum arises: did stage management come to be regarded as feminine due to its required skills and temperaments, or did women enter the field to establish the gendered associations of the labor required? Though no concrete histories demarcating the shift to stage management being a female-dominated profession exist, some posit that the histories of women in stage management and secretarial work are intertwined, with both occupations requiring similar skill sets and the change in demographics occurring on similar timelines. Like secretarial work, stage management began as a male-dominated profession, and upon the entry of women into the field, became reputationally devalued.

Women's labor as stage managers is, unsurprisingly, likewise financially undervalued as compared to men's. A recent study by Actor's Equity revealed that out of the 11,632 stage management opportunities between 2013-15, 65.9% of people hired were women, while 34.1% were men. The report also claimed that:

> Though all of our members, through our negotiations, are guaranteed the same minimum salary, the disparity is also found in the wage gap between male and female Equity

[140] Nuckles, Rachael. 2020. "A Backstage History: Reflections on Stage Management and Gendered Labor." *The Revisionist.*
[141] Ibid.

> members. This wage gap is because women are more frequently hired on lower paying, lower minimum contracts.[142]

These two statistics in tandem paint a fascinating picture of the realities of modern stage management. Though it is now a female-dominated field, the women responsible for the majority of the labor remain undercompensated despite equity provisions for minimum salaries. Women in stage management, as Ruth Mitchell was, are still undervalued: despite their prominence, the "tide of prejudice" that Oscar Hammerstein wrote of still exists today, though it has migrated somewhat from the cultural to financial realm.

Was Ruth Mitchell directly responsible for the gradual acceptance of women as stage managers? No definitive answer is possible. However, there is no doubt that she was influential in shifting the gender dynamics of her field, if in no other way than her direct mentorship of fellow female stage managers like Beverly Randolph. As Whitney Bolton wrote in 1959:

> One woman has done so much to break down this idiotic prejudice [against women stage managers] that she has, unwittingly, flung open the doors for other women stage managers and although prejudice still exists, it is not as flint-like as before Ruth Mitchell came along and was so conspicuously, efficiently, calmly good at her exacting job.[143]

Here, Bolton makes the same claims that this thesis does, 63 years previously. This indicates that even during her lifetime, Mitchell's influence was recognized. The scale of this recognition, however, was quite small, and its longevity fleeting. Mitchell's story is unfamiliar to many of even the most ardent theatre fans, despite her involvement in some of the most famous and groundbreaking productions of the twentieth century.

I hesitate to examine Mitchell's life through a feminist, recuperationist lens. I do not know how she herself would have felt about the use of such a lens. Her story is complicated, as human beings are, and her refusal to fit into any particular mode of femininity or identity is part

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[142] "Looking at Hiring Biases by the Numbers: Actors' Equity Association." 2017. Actors' Equity Association.
[143] Whitney Bolton, "Women Are Resented as Theater Stage Managers," *Valley Morning Star*, February 25, 1959.

of what drew me to her in the first place. I am unsure how she would feel about being seen as a trailblazing female stage manager. I believe that she simply saw herself as a person who was doing the job for which she had the most suitable skills. She loved the theatre deeply and devoted her life to it, but she was self-consciously not an artist, which sets her biography apart from those of many of her collaborators. Though most of her career took place in Hal Prince's shadow, I do not believe she resented this fact. During an American Theatre Wing panel on producing, Kenneth Greenblatt remarked: “Hal’s great, but I’d hate to see Hal without Ruthie.” Without missing a beat, Mitchell replied, “Know what? He’d be fine without me.”[144] History, as I have written it here, would contest that statement. Though she may have modestly refused it while alive, she deserves credit now. While any equally capable stage manager might have bolstered Prince's meteoric career, the person who did so was Ruth Mitchell. That, in itself, was her art.

[144] *ATW's Working in the Theatre #97- Production: "Grind" (Winter 1985)*. *YouTube*. CUNY, 1985. 52:45.

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Figure 16: Left to right: Mana Allen, Eliza Ducnuigeen, myself, and Celia Krefter reflected in a replica of the famous mirror from Boris Aronson's set of *Cabaret* at the Hal Prince exhibit at the Library for the Performing Arts. March 10, 2020.[145]

[145] Celia Krefter, photograph. 2020.

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