

‘Bathtubs Over Broadway’ Revives a Forgotten Art Form

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – There are cultural heroes, and then there is comedy writer Steve Young. Through sheer happenstance, he began a journey that ended up with a rediscovery of an art form that without Young’s intervention would have died. The U.S. corporation Broadway-style “industrial musical,” which highlighted products or sales meetings in a song and dance presentation, were at its peak popularity from the 1950s through the ‘70s. “Bathtubs Over Broadway” is Young’s documentary of appreciation for those shows and his intervention to revive them.

To experience “Bathtubs...” is to witness a miracle. What began as a minor comedy bit on “Late Night with David Letterman,” where Steve Young was a writer, morphed into a bit of an obsession for the low-keyed jokester. His delving into the corporate show culture began with the souvenir records from these shows, done in very limited runs (the records were usually given to the insider audience and participants, then thrown in a back closet, if they were kept at all). After seeing the names associated with these shows... like Florence Henderson and Martin Short, plus Broadway stars like Chita Rivera and lyricist Sheldon Harnick, Young’s curiosity was peaked, and soon he began to seek out the people who both wrote and performed in these strange masterpieces. The shows themselves are amazing in their context, and director Dava Whisenant creates a breezy tribute to them, as well as giving proper due to Steve Young himself. Not only is the subject matter fun, but an original tribute to them at the conclusion of the film will make you happy to be alive.

Steve Young is a comedy writer that worked with David Letterman on both his NBC and CBS talk shows. One of his assignments was to populate the Letterman routine called “Dave’s Record Collection,” which consisted of the worst of the record vinyl era. One of the albums that Young found was the recording of a corporate Broadway-style show touting the important of insurance. An obsession was born.



The Man and His Mission: Steve Young in “Bathtubs Over Broadway”

Photo credit: Focus Features

According to Young, there are only five legitimate collectors of corporate show recordings in the whole world, and one of them oddly is Jello Biafra from the band Dead Kennedys. Young’s collection grew, and then he started reading the credits for the shows. There were names like Florence Henderson, Chita Rivera, Martin Short and Sheldon Harnick, the lyricist for “Fiddler on the Roof.” It was time to take a journey to rediscover this truly American art form.

Steve Young has the look of a middle aged middle manager, so his pursuit is that much funnier... it’s as if he saw one when he was a sales rep for Alcoa in the ‘70s and had to track down the source. And there were other no-name Broadway babies who talk about making a living between shows doing these corporate gigs, and Young celebrates them and gets some amazing footlight tales. The songs are both professional and hilarious, with the Sgt. Pepper of them all being “The Bathrooms are Coming!” from American Standard fixtures.

In the background during the doc is the last days of “Late Night with David Letterman” before Stephen Colbert took over, and Young packing up his years and wondering what will come next... which makes his pursuit all the more interesting and poignant, because it does flower into the “next thing,” and will most likely define the second half of Young’s career. There also was a bittersweetness to the end of the Letterman era, spanning close to 35 years and many laughs.

Meeting the past performers was also a grand highlight in the film. Here were the foot soldiers of this art form, names all but forgotten except for their revived connection to the industrial musical. Steve finds Hank Beebe, the composer who was the “king of the industrial musical,” now an old man who is astonished that anyone would have an appreciation for what he had done so long ago. Their interaction is one of the many joys of this film, but the best is saved for last as Young and Beebe write “Take That Step,” the concluding song in the film, fully staged and featuring a number of the interviewees.

“Bathtubs Over Broadway” has a limited run at the Music Box Theatre, 3733 North Southport Avenue in Chicago. For details and ticket info, [click here](#). [24] See local listings for other theaters and show times. Featuring Steve Young, David Letterman, Martin Short, Chita Rivera, Susan Stroman, Florence Henderson, Sheldon Harnick and Jello Biafra. Directed by Dava Whisenant. Rated “PG-13”



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