

# MOVIES: 'Bathtubs Over Broadway' Tips Hat to Unsung 'Corporate Musicals'

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**By Peter Jones, 10/31/18** || Comedy writer Steve Young has paid his dues since retiring from the *Late Show with David Letterman*. But it's his own fault. No one is forcing him to listen to *The Bathrooms Are Coming*.

"If you could do a great song about something really strange and arcane, then you're genius-level to Steve," said Dava Whisenant, who worked with Young as an editor on the Letterman show. "He was into any kind of song that would lift things that shouldn't be in a song—like plumbing fixtures."

Push the knob on *The Bathrooms Are Coming*.

This full-on Broadway-style revue about a "revolution" in restroom accoutrement had been produced in 1969 by American Standard, the No. 1—and No. 2, for that matter—manufacturer of plumbing fixtures. *Bathrooms* was one of many so-called "corporate musicals," promotional



Comedy writer Steve Young discovered the long-lost "corporate musical" while scouring used-record stores for David Letterman's comedy bits. The result is *Bathtubs Over Broadway*, which plays the Denver Film Festival this month.~  
Courtesy of Denver Film Festival

shows designed to get a company's employees off the pot—while tapping their feet to the new product line.

“My bathroom is my very special room, where I prim and fuss and groom, where I can get away from all and really feel in bloom,” a female protagonist sings slowly to a lush backing track. Other songs in the score include “The Distributors,” “Ultra Bath Dream” and “Look at this Tub.” Unlike Young, who has collected the remnants of hundreds of such info-musicals, Whisenant had been green around the tile, until recently, when it came to industrial song and dance.

“When I got into it, the songs that were romantic about a dishwasher — I thought, well, that’s amazing,” she said. “The song called ‘My Bathroom’ is like a really beautiful song, but it’s also hilarious and strange. I thought, there’s something to this.”

The flushed-out “something” is *Bathtubs Over Broadway*, the first-time director’s earnest exploration of an intentionally esoteric theater subgenre and the televDision writer who turned the search for decidedly unpopular culture into not just a comedy bit, but a personal passion. The documentary plays the Denver Film Festival at the United Artists Pavilions, Nov. 2 and Nov. 10-11. Whisenant and Dead Kennedys singer Jello Biafra, a record collector with his own interest in corporate musicals, are expected to appear in person.

For Young’s part, his discovery of this world of promotional theater came while the comedy writer was routinely searching used-record shops for campy fodder for Letterman. The personal upshot was his book, *Everything’s Coming Up Profits: The Golden Age of Industrial Musicals*.

Somewhere between LPs of bowling tips and Sebastian Cabot reading Bob Dylan was this mysterious treasure trove of team-building musicals—gathering dust and bearing titles like *Diesel Dazzle* [General Motors], *Fordify Your Future* [Ford], *Raguletto* [Ragu], *Dog Chow Spectacular* [Purina] and *Got to Investigate Silicones* [General Electric].

While some such productions were one-off stage performances that died a natural death, others survived as record albums and filmed musical productions. Most of them were ultra-targeted pep rallies for employees and sometimes even a nonthreatening way to address elephants in the boardroom.

“They’d work their internal problems into the show, and they would diffuse the frustration and anger with a song,” Whisenant said. “You don’t see that happening in a company these days. Companies were much smaller then. This was pre-globalization.”

Young’s passion for industrial way-off-Broadway took on a life of its own when he began seeking out the stories and people behind these bizarre, yet often strangely competent, productions.

As it happened, some of New York’s top talent, including *Fiddler on the Roof* lyricist Sheldon Harnick and composer Jerry Bock, had been called upon as creators, and such talents as Tony Randall and Florence Henderson took the often lucrative contracts to shill — err perform.

“It was not only good money, but was also this songwriting challenge,” Whisenant said, noting how Harnick ventured to continue his corporate work well into his legitimate Broadway success. “It was this songwriting challenge—how do I put these arcane lyrics in?”

The 7-Up shows were the worst, according to Young, though he concedes in the film that terms like “good” and “bad” do not really apply in a world where a company like Johnson & Johnson could produce the world’s first sunscreen musical.

Whisenant’s personal favorite: “I Never Enjoyed My Operation More,” a toe-tapper about the wonders of disposable paper hospital gowns.

One of the surprising things the filmmaker discovered was when she sought permission from the companies to use their proprietary business-to-business song craft.

“The thing that was crazy is they didn’t even know these things had been done,” she said. Whisenant’s even bigger surprise was how poignant her own film became as Young sought out the unsung talent behind the musicals and developed new relationships.

“I didn’t expect any of that when we started. I just thought we’d be having some fun at corporate America’s expense,” she said. “Steve connected so deeply to them. When he would talk about these composers and have this kind of light shown on them so they would feel appreciated, he started to tear up. I never met that guy on the *Late Show*.”

*Bathtubs Over Broadway* closes with a kind of homage to industrial musicals that this world is unlikely to see again when Young and the documentary’s entire “cast,” including many of the shows’ original cast members and writers, and even Jello Biafra, join in for an original Broadway-style musical finale, co-written by Young and 92-year-old New York composer Hank Beebe.

“Steve starts out at a really cynical place at the beginning of the movie, and I thought, what’s the complete 180 of that?” Whisenant said. “Let’s do a *Muppet Movie* kind of ending where we bring everybody together in the least cynical way possible. Steve wanted to give Hank one more opportunity to put the word ‘silicone’ in a musical number.”

Even the movie’s musical finale—like every other musical number in *Bathtubs Over Broadway* — would make little sense outside the context of this documentary, which is kind of the point.

“Everybody laughs about *The Bathrooms Are Coming*, but they were really serious about these plumbing fixtures,” Whisenant said. “[Composer Sid Siegel] hadn’t thought he was writing something comedic. It was just years later when it ended up on the Internet out of context that it just makes no sense.”

For more information and tickets, visit <http://www.denverfilm.org>.

BY PETER JONES

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