

November 6, 2023

**Harmony Comes to Broadway, Nearly 30 Years in the Making**

By: Jessica Derschowitz



*“We never gave up,” Barry Manilow said of the show he cocreated with Bruce Sussman, because “we knew what we had.”*

When rehearsals started for *Harmony* in the still-sweltering days of early September, it marked the start of something new and also the culmination of decades of waiting and hope for its creators, pop icon **Barry Manilow** and writer and lyricist **Bruce Sussman**. The flurry of activity over that week, which also included the musical's marquee going up and the box office opening, had Manilow—certainly no stranger to accolades and fanfare—feeling a level of shell shock.

“It’s coming at us,” he shared, sitting in a midtown restaurant during an escape from the heat. “We’ve gone through so many years of believing in this show, and this is a [moment of], ‘hang in there long enough, this is what you get.’”

Sussman, his collaborator of 50 years, couldn’t contain his emotions during that first day in the rehearsal room. When he said, “Welcome to *Harmony* on Broadway,” he forced the last word out with a crack in his voice.

It was a “catharsis,” he said, seated next to Manilow, adding later that he hoped the duo would be able to take these milestones in as they kept coming. Because when *Harmony*—which boasts original music from Manilow (read: not a jukebox musical) and book and lyrics from Sussman—officially opens at New York’s Ethel Barrymore Theatre on November 13, it will be a Broadway bow nearly 30 years in the making.

*Harmony* is based on the true story of the Comedian Harmonists, a German sextet that rose to fame in the late 1920s and early '30s with their musical and comedic stylings, but because three of those members were Jewish, the group was all but erased from history once Hitler came to power. At the height of their fame, the Harmonists were international sensations, selling millions of albums, making movies, and performing with the likes of Marlene Dietrich and Josephine Baker. But under the Nazi regime, possessing their music at all was considered a crime.

Director-choreographer **Warren Carlyle** (*The Music Man*), who is directing the Broadway production and also helmed *Harmony*'s 2022 off-Broadway run, put it in a more modern context: “They were the most famous boy band in the world—and we never heard of them.”

Sussman first learned of the Harmonists via a German documentary about the group. After watching the film, he rushed to a downtown Manhattan pay phone (this was the '90s, after all) to call Manilow; they’d been looking for something to write a musical about, and this could be it.

“It was clear to me that this was a show about the quest for harmony in what turned out to be the most discordant chapter in human history,” said Sussman. “Why we didn’t know them was the story, and that was fascinating.” Manilow emphasized the point: “They’re the Manhattan Transfer, they’re the Marx Brothers. So how come we don’t know these men?”

Both set forth immersing themselves in researching the group, who have also been depicted in the 1997 film *The Harmonists* and a short-lived 1999 musical, *Band in Berlin*. “It was illegal to sell their records or play them, so people hid them under their mattresses,” said Sussman. “After the war, these old 78s came out and were turned into 33 1/3s, and then CDs and all that. So we have a recorded history of what they sounded like. There’s a couple of minutes of film from two of their movies, but the rest of it’s gone.” Manilow, who was touring in Germany around that time, encountered an entire wall of their albums in Tower Records and came home with a suitcase filled with CDs.

*Harmony* premiered in 1997 at the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego, six years after Sussman first saw that documentary. “The reviews were great, the word of mouth was great,” Manilow recalled, but producers weren’t able to get it to New York. Again and again, their Broadway hopes hit roadblocks: a 2003 production [fell apart due to lack of funds](#), then the duo had to go to arbitration to win back the rights. Other stagings followed in Atlanta in 2013 and Los Angeles in 2014, but the Great White Way still eluded them.

It was when producer **Ken Davenport** stepped in that *Harmony* finally made its way to New York, but even that hit a familiar stumble: a 2020 production at the National Yiddish Theatre was postponed due to the pandemic. The delay was fortuitous, though, because it allowed Manilow, Sussman, and Carlyle to look at *Harmony* anew before the production went forward in 2022. Over the course of twice-weekly Zooms, the trio dove deep into every page, every song. And then Sussman had an idea: What if they added an older incarnation of one Harmonist, the man nicknamed Rabbi, to serve as a narrator and anchor for the piece?

He wrote two different drafts so they could see which version made for, well, a more harmonious musical. “For me, previously, the show was a six-headed dragon—there were six leading men all trying to tell the story,” Carlyle (who’s known Manilow and Sussman for years, since he was in the original West End cast of their *Copacabana* musical) said. “When I’m directing something, I’ve got to know whose point of view I’m telling the story from. I can’t just tell a story in a wide shot and hope that the audience will know who to follow.” The change cracked things open in an entirely new way. “We read through both versions, and it was very, very clear that was doing something really fantastic for us,” the Tony winner added. “And it just revealed itself.”

The elder Rabbi, portrayed by Broadway veteran **Chip Zien** (*Into the Woods*), begins the play as the last surviving Harmonist, and in sharing their story he also has to confront the parts of it he doesn’t want to remember, ones where he doesn’t like the choices he made. Sussman said, “I realized that it wasn’t only a show about the six guys, it was a show about a character trying to find redemption through remembering.” (He’s not simply a static storyteller, though—Rabbi also pops up in various other roles throughout the telling of it.)

The early parts of the story lean into musical comedy as it follows the group’s rise (they were called the *Comedian* Harmonists for a reason, and Carlyle says his choreography leans into that aspect when depicting the group’s early years), but takes deeper, more dramatic turns as the show goes on.

The full breadth of his role as Rabbi is like nothing the 76-year-old Zien has done before. “I was a history major in college, and I was on my way to law school. The Harmonists lived through one of the most turbulent periods in history—here was a funny, wonderful, world-famous singing group that bumped up against fascism,” he said. “It’s everything I like about theater. And just a thrill to have the chance to do this at my age.” (The creative team has nothing but raves for him too: “He’s branded this character with his name,” said Sussman of Zien. “He’s giving a sensational performance—a gut-wrenching, funny, saucy performance.”)

Zien is reprising his role for the Broadway run, as are all the actors who played the young Harmonists (**Sean Bell**, **Danny Kornfeld**, **Zal Owen**, **Eric Peters**, **Blake Roman**, and **Steven Telsey**) in the National Yiddish Theatre production, and **Sierra Boggess** (*The Little Mermaid*, *Phantom of the Opera*). Newcomers for the transfer include **Julie Benko**, who wowed audiences as the alternate for Fanny Brice in the recent revival of *Funny Girl*.

The Broadway run is an opportunity to deepen the show further, even as Manilow noted the version audiences will see now still feels like the same *Harmony* he and Sussman first premiered all those years ago. It also comes at another turbulent time in history, with antisemitism on the rise in the US and abroad, and in the aftermath of the deadly October 7 Hamas attacks in Israel that precipitated the ongoing war.

In a follow-up email after the conflict began, Carlyle reflected on telling this story in our present moment. “The world around us has changed and the way I’m now hearing dialogue and experiencing moments in the show has also changed. For example: The first lines of [the song] ‘The Wedding’... ‘As you enter the house of Israel, may you find happiness and peace’...these lyrics now land in a completely different way to me. Three Jewish characters huddled

on the edge of the stage saying, 'we can fight this'... feels so sad and so overwhelming to me," he said. "I feel a greater responsibility, now more than ever, to tell this story."

The *Harmony* company [also shared a statement](#), written by the show's Holocaust/antisemitism adviser and consultant Dr. **Irving Berkowitz**, that said, "We the *Harmony* company, are gripped with grief at this time of global disharmony. October 7, 2023 has become the largest single day slaughter of Jews since the Holocaust. This is not only a time for mourning but prayers for the safe liberation of those held captive, for the protection of Israeli soldiers and citizens (Jewish and non-Jewish) as well as innocent Palestinians, and for peace inside and outside the House of Israel."

Speaking in September, both Sussman and Manilow noted how the story of *Harmony* has felt timely every time they've mounted it. The [neo-Nazi protests outside Parade](#), the revival of the musical about a Jewish man who was lynched in Georgia, earlier this year was yet another recent example to point to. "There are lines that get audible responses in the house on some nights—lines that were written in 1998, 2001, 2004," Sussman said of *Harmony*. "And nothing has changed, except what's going on outside the world of the theater."

With *Harmony*'s Broadway opening almost here, Manilow said he and Sussman always held out hope the show would get to this point. "We never gave up," the hitmaker said, despite all the times they had to hit pause or put it away, because "we knew what we had." And Sussman hopes audiences who come to the Barrymore will learn who these six men were, and that Rabbi's journey serves as a reminder of the importance of remembrance—the Harmonists, yes, but also that the very act of remembering "is not only a good thing, it's imperative." A vital hope for greater harmony, and *Harmony* itself.

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