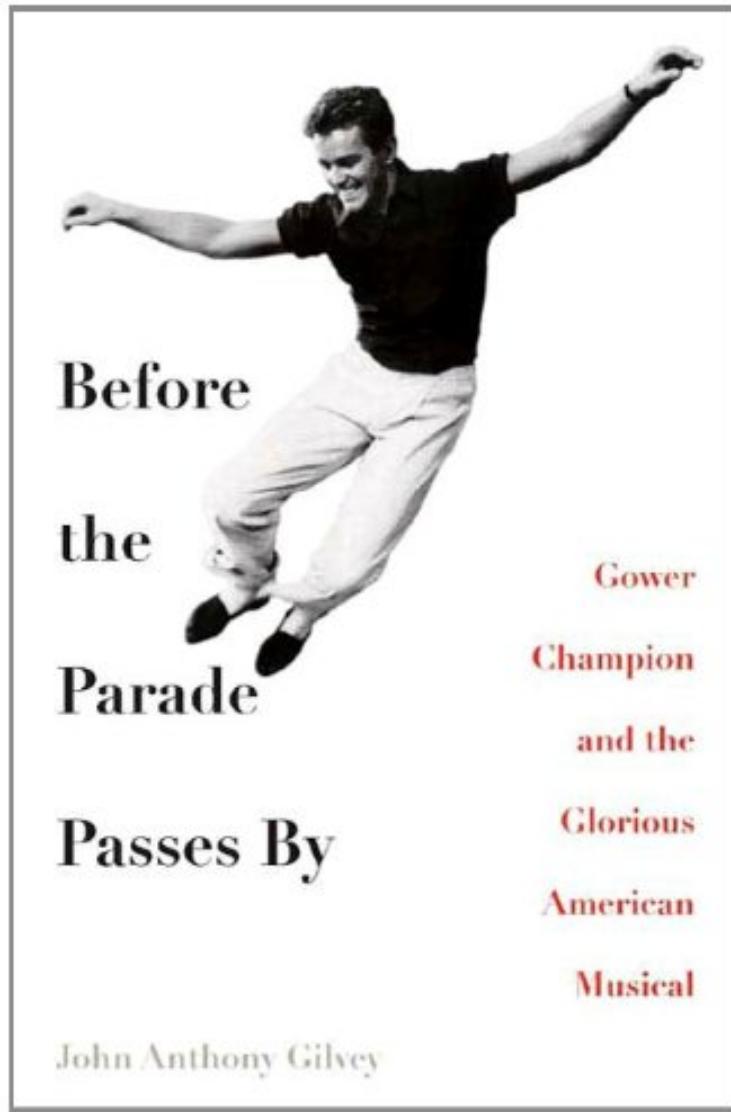


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## Before the Parade Passes By: Gower Champion and the Glorious American Musical

*John Anthony Gilvey*  
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**John Anthony Gilvey : Before the Parade Passes By: Gower Champion and the Glorious American Musical**  
before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Before the Parade Passes By: Gower Champion and the Glorious American Musical:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. "I use dancing to embellish, extend or enlarge upon an existing emotion." said Gower Champion. When *42nd Street* debuted as an original Broadway Musical on August 25, 1980, they had twelve curtain calls. The celebration was short-lived when the show's producer, David

Merrick, announced that Gower Champion had died early that day. The cast, crew, audience and public learned about his death. This biography is long overdue for Gower Champion. He had been one of the most successful directors, choreographers and dancers in theatre history. Gower's life began in Geneva, Illinois where his mother, Betty, moved her sons to Los Angeles, California. Ironically, Gower felt more at home in Southern California than on Broadway in New York City. The book chronicles his life from the beginning to the end. Gower would marry his dance partner, Marge, and have two sons with her. Gower and Marge Champion had led a successful career as dancers before Gower decided to focus on directing for the stage especially musicals. He was awarded a 1949 Tony Award for Best Choreography for the musical, "Lend an Ear. He was awarded two 1961 Tony Awards for Best Choreography and Best Direction of a Musical for "Bye Bye Birdie." He was nominated for a 1962 Tony Award for Best Direction of a Musical for "Carnival!." He was awarded two 1964 Tony Awards for Best Choreography and Best Direction of a Musical for "Hello, Dolly!" He was nominated for a 1967 Tony Award for Best Direction of a Musical for "I Do! I Do!" He was awarded two 1968 Tony Award for Best Choreography and Best Direction of a Musical for "The Happy Time." He was nominated twice for a 1973 Tony Award for Best Choreography and Best Direction of a Musical for "Sugar." He was nominated twice for 1975 Tony Award for Best Choreography and Best Direction of a Musical for "Mack Mabel." After his death, he was awarded the 1981 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Choreography and 1981 Tony Award for Best Choreography for "42nd Street." He was also nominated for 1981 Tony Award for Best Direction of a Musical for "42nd Street." It is hard to imagine where Broadway would be without the likes of Gower Champion, a reluctant New Yorker. If you want to see his influence, you should see Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean's ice dance routine "Mack Mabel Overture" where they won the World Championship. Listening to Barbara Cook's tribute in the cabaret CD, you can't help feel the loss of man who died so young. Gower was a complicated man but a genius who knew how to set the stage perfectly by adding elements slowly to the stage. He had his share of flops too. He wasn't always perfect and shows even with wonderful scores like "Mack Mabel" have failed to lure audiences. He directed stars like Debbie Reynolds "Irene" and "Annie Get Your Gun!;" Jerry Orbach, Carole Cook, Tammy Grimes and Lee Roy Reams in "42nd Street;" Mary Martin and Robert Preston in "I Do! I Do!;" Robert Preston and Bernadette Peters in "Mack Mabel;" Carol Channing in "Hello, Dolly!;" Dick Van Dyke and Chita Rivera in "Bye Bye Birdie" and "Carnival." There was no doubt that Gower was a genius for the stage. He died the way he lived on his own terms. Even the announcement of his death still shocked the opening night audience and everybody else. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. The Quintessential American Dance Choreographer/Dance Director: Gower Champion By David F. McBride Review of Before the Parade Passes By: Gower Champion and the Glorious American Musical by John Anthony Gilvey. This biography of the legendary Gower Champion, a dance pioneer and exemplar of a unique American choreographic style, is every bit a magnum opus befitting the singular stature of its subject. Gilvey accurately yet concisely describes the individually themed story dances that Champion immortalized. Gilvey cites that Champion won an unprecedented total of 5 Tony Awards and that his best-loved Broadway masterpieces include Hello, Dolly!, Bye Bye, Birdie, and 42nd Street, the musical highlights of the 1960-1980 period which Gilvey styles the glorious Golden Age of Broadway. These outstanding Champion works were just a few of the numerous musical productions that he either directed or choreographed throughout his storied career. The reader is continually impressed with Gilvey's copious, comprehensive and detailed preparation and review of pages and pages of each and every one of Gower's scripts, notes and directions for the dances we have no visual record of. The U.S. theatre historian and the American dance aficionado are forever in his debt. Gilvey is to be lauded for emphasizing the singular artistry of Champion and his professional and personal long-term relationship with his wife, Marge Champion. Gilvey stresses the importance of Marge's influence on Gower as a dance partner, especially in his early career on television, in Hollywood films and in New York's best night clubs. Regarding Champion's signature legacy as choreographic director of countless shows, Gilvey emphasizes that all his shows featured continuously choreographed staging from beginning to end without interruption even through transitions between numbers. Gilvey also points out that each and every Champion show had a unique identifiable theme symbolized both in movement and in music. All Champion shows featured high off the floor vertical dance numbers and horizontal use of the whole front of the stage as close as possible to the audience. These traits were present in all of Champion's works, even in 42nd Street in which the majority of dance numbers were tap dance performances. Many consider the latter Broadway triumph as his crowning professional achievement. This show won resounding critical acclaim but disappointingly lacked Gower's opening night presence due to his death the same day. This review must conclude with these ultimate compliments from none other than Gower Champion's twenty-five year spouse and dance partner, Marge. She writes: "John Gilvey's God-given talent for accuracy, sensitivity and objectivity over the past thirteen years has surely filled a serious gap in the musical theatre libraries of the world." Five stars seems an insufficient appraisal in itself of Gilvey's indispensable contribution to the scholarship of American theatre biography. BRAVO, John Anthony Gilvey!!! 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The Marge and Gower Champion Love Story. I was led to this book after ... By MSPeabody This book and any book about the life and times of Gower Champion could be titled: The Marge and Gower Champion Love Story. I was led to this book after being reunited with their work just recently. I was very young during the glory days of their career, and when Gower went to Broadway, I did not have any opportunities to

enjoy his work. This book is so detailed in chronicling his works. I felt like I was viewing these wonderful works by just reading Gilvey's accounts. It was fascinating reading about the formation of ideas to actual productions. From this perspective, it is an education in the production of a Broadway musical during his time. I don't have confidence in the portrait portrayed of him during his Broadway days, but I did find Marge Champion's and Jess Gregg's observations to be authentic and reliable. I will also add realistic and loyal. Not many people, it seems, knew the real Gower Champion towards the end. It was heartbreaking to learn of the unraveling of his marriage to Marge and also of his personal life. I, like many fans, was pained by this. We ask, "Why couldn't they keep the music playing? We saw forever in their eyes." We were convinced of the love they showed. They were convinced. My daughters who were not even alive during this time, upon being introduced to their work, could feel the chemistry and the love they had for each other. The book is not about this; it is about his craft. And he was obviously a master craftsman at everything he did. Ironically, he can thank his Mother. And he did at her Memorial service (p. 194-195). On page 203, Gilvey describes a birthday party that Gower threw for Marge in September, 1969. On this occasion he said that "theirs had been a love affair and was a love affair still". And then things unraveled for him personally. What he left was his legacy wrapped up in his production of "42nd Street". Shortly before he died (the week of), he invited Marge to join him for a sneak preview and for input on the show's trouble spots. (p. 295) Her response capsules his life. She felt that every step echoed their years together. "It was absolutely one of the best things Gower did in his entire life." Kudos to her. He owed her that and more. Thus, Gregg, their oldest son, accepted Gower's Tony for Choreography of "42nd Street" on behalf of his mother Marge, his brother Blake, and his wife Karla, who with her ex-husband, socialized with the Champions during the '60's, was his personal interior decorator, and eventual business partner, and wife of four years, who, according to Karla's quote, was "ostensibly" separated from Gower. They were going through some interesting times (p. 275). And then there was the show girl. That relationship was a musical within a musical within a musical. It was not clear what was real? Or unreal? His personal life after Marge was bizarre. What is real are the body of his work, (which Gilvey explores for us and describes), Marge, and his children. I recommend this book. The Champions were just that - champions!

During the Golden Age of the Broadway musical, few director-choreographers could infuse a new musical with dance and movement in quite the way Gower Champion could. From his earliest Broadway success with *Bye Bye Birdie* to his triumphant and bittersweet valedictory, *42nd Street*, musicals directed by Champion filled the proscenium with life. At their best, they touched the heart and stirred the soul with a skillful blend of elegance and American showmanship. He began his career as one-half of "America's Youngest Dance Team" with Jeanne Tyler and later teamed with his wife, dance partner, and longtime collaborator, Marge Champion. This romantic ballroom duo danced across America in the smartest clubs and onto the television screen, performing story dances that captivated the country. They ultimately took their talent to Hollywood, where they starred in the 1951 remake of *Show Boat*, *Lovely to Look At*, and other films. But Broadway always called to Champion, and in 1959 he was tapped to direct *Bye Bye Birdie*. The rest is history. In shows like *Birdie*, *Carnival*, *Hello, Dolly!*, *I Do! I Do!*, *Sugar*, and *42nd Street*, luminaries such as Chita Rivera, Dick Van Dyke, Carol Channing, Mary Martin, Robert Preston, Tony Roberts, Robert Morse, Tammy Grimes, and Jerry Orbach brought Champion's creative vision to life. Working with composers and writers like Jerry Herman, Michael Stewart, Charles Strouse, Lee Adams, and Bob Merrill, he streamlined the musical making it flow effortlessly with song and dance from start to finish. John Gilvey has spoken with many of the people who worked with Champion, and in *Before the Parade Passes By* he tells the life story of this most American of Broadway musical director-choreographers from his early days dancing with Marge to his final days spent meticulously honing the visual magic of *42nd Street*. *Before the Parade Passes By* is the life story of one man who personified the glory of the Broadway musical right up until the moment of his untimely death. When the curtain fell to thunderous applause on the opening night of *42nd Street*, August 25, 1980, legendary impresario David Merrick came forward, silenced the audience, and announced that Champion had died that morning. As eminent theatre critic Ethan Mordden has firmly put it, "the Golden Age was over." Though the Golden Age of the Broadway musical is over, John Gilvey brings it to life again by telling the story of Gower Champion, one of its most passionate and creative legends.

From Publishers Weekly When Gower Champion died in 1980 at age 59, the lights on Broadway dimmed. It was a fitting tribute to the visionary director/choreographer responsible for *Mame*; *Bye, Bye, Birdie*; and *42nd Street*. Enrolled in dance classes as a child, Champion turned pro as a teen and by age 27 had teamed with wife Marge to great acclaim. Champion's distinctive style used "story dances," or narratives told through dance and pantomime. Smart and stylish, they became the trademark of the team's nightclub and film work in the 1940s and '50s. When Champion's dancing career ended, he expanded his repertoire as a director and choreographer. His specialty was "two- and three-dimensional choreographic movements" that integrated song, dance, theme and props to dazzling effect. Though Champion directed early TV specials and did innovative work for MGM, his biggest coup was electrifying Broadway. Hypersensitive to criticism, he found his defeats, such as *Prettybelle*, crushing, but his successes were

legendary. (*Hello, Dolly!* was the first Broadway musical to receive 10 Tony Awards.) Gilvey, a theater professor at St. Joseph's College, has written an exhaustive biography. Though the book suffers occasionally from detail overkill (there's too much information on failed musicals), it reveals the grit behind Broadway's glamour. Photos. Copyright copy; Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. "Packed with detail, anecdotes and insight, this look at director-choreographer Champion's work leaves no step unturned. In case anyone wonders, Gilvey (Theater/St. Joseph's College) makes clear that Gower Champion ranks next to giants Jerome Robbins, Bob Fosse, Agnes DeMille, et al., as one of the great talents of Broadway's golden age. And in case anyone forgets, or wasn't on the scene, Gilvey's vivid descriptions recall the look and sound of a Champion show taking off. The author begins with Champion's early dance work in clubs with partner Jeanne Tyler, later replaced by Marge Belcher, whom he partnered in marriage and movies (notably 1951's *Show Boat*). From the start, Gilvey shows, Champion's dances always made a pointmdash;told a story, illuminated a character, celebrated a moment. Eventually, the choreographer aimed to direct on Broadway. He hit with *Bye Bye Birdie*, topping that with *Carnival!* and then *Hello, Dolly!* Gilvey provides a full, illuminating account of how Champion turned *Dolly* from an initially unfocused, battle-scarred show into one of Broadway's most critically acclaimed, longest-running musicals. The second act of Champion's career was less successful. *I Do! I Do!* did well, but *The Happy Time* wasn't, and *Rockabye Hamlet*, his attempt to wed the Bard and rock music, flopped, as did *Prettybelle* and *Mack and Mabel*. Tastes and styles were changing, and, Gilvey suggests, Champion's problems with drugs, affairs and divorce marred his work. About to hang it up, Champion returned to Broadway with *42nd Street*, an all-out dance musical that summed up and topped off career. In one of the most dramatic finales in Broadway history, Champion, 61, died the day the show opened. Gilvey reaches the top shelf of high-kicking Broadway biographies."--Kirkus s, STARRED