

# Broadway's Gypsy Robe

by Nancy Groce

Luck is a fickle thing. For the past 40 years, no musical has opened on Broadway without the blessings of a magical garment called the Gypsy Robe. It brings with it luck, tradition, and a sense of community. In 1959, Bill Bradley, a dancer in the musical *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, borrowed a tacky dressing robe from a chorus girl or “gypsy” — as the singers and/or dancers in Broadway choruses call themselves. On opening night, he paraded through backstage bestowing blessings on the production. The musical was a major hit. A few nights later, Bradley sent the robe to his friend, another chorus gypsy. He also attached a ready-made legend — the outrageous claim that it had been worn for luck on opening night throughout the 1920s by the beautiful stars of the *Ziegfeld Follies*.

His friend's musical, *Call Me Madam* with Ethel Merman, was a phenomenal success. The friend sewed a rose from Merman's costume onto the robe and sent it to a chorus member on the opening night of another show, where the lucky robe was decorated by *those* chorus members and sent on to the next. Soon it became traditional for the robe to be presented from one chorus to another just before the curtain went up on opening night.

During the early 1960s, as it was handed along, official rules on how it was to be presented, worn, and paraded gradually evolved. Today, the presentation of the Gypsy Robe has become a formal ceremony, one that is taken seriously, if not somberly, by members of Broadway's gypsy community. On opening night, half-hour before curtain time, the stage manager gives the cue, “On stage for the Gypsy Robe” and all the members of the chorus assemble in a circle at center stage. Principals, directors, and stage hands stand nearby, but only chorus members are allowed in the circle. Representatives from Actors' Equity Association and the previous winner of the Gypsy Robe appear bearing the garment. After a short speech about the history of the robe and its importance to the gypsy community, an individual chorus member — by custom the one with the most seniority in past Broadway productions — is crowned as the new king or queen of the gypsies. Amidst cheers and congratulations, the new winner dons the robe and walks counterclockwise around the circle three times as cast members reach out and touch the garment for good luck. Still wearing the robe, the winner then visits each dressing room to disperse good luck throughout the cast to chorus members and principals alike.

Actually, there are now about ten Gypsy Robes. When one is filled with mementos, a new one is substituted and the old one retired for safekeeping to an office at Actors' Equity on Times Square where Terry Marone, from the union's Advisory Committee on Chorus Affairs, keeps it safe until the next opening night. Marone began her career as a Broadway gypsy and claims to “have been in the business 20,000 years.” She appeared as a chorus member in 26 musicals and knows just about everyone on Broadway from stage doorman to directors. She feels passionately about the Robe's importance to the gypsy community. “It has to go to a chorus person. No principals. We always say ‘Sorry folks. You've got the Tonys, Circle Award, and all these different things, but you don't have this one. This is just chorus.’”



Martha Cooper

Gypsy robe presentation on opening night of *Fascinating Rhythms*.

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

Folklorist and author Nancy Groce interviewed Broadway's Gypsies as fieldwork for the Washington D.C. Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where she is directing the effort to present a New York City component for the first time in June 2001. In collaboration with City Lore and the Center for Traditional Music and Dance, the Smithsonian will transport the best of New York City culture to the National Mall. Over a hundred New Yorkers, numerous pavilions, and music and storytelling stages will showcase the city's diverse cultures to the more than one million visitors who attend the annual festival. For City Lore staff, this is a marvelous opportunity to do new fieldwork on our favorite topic — New York. Nancy's most recent book is *New York: Songs of the City* published by Billboard Books, 1999.