
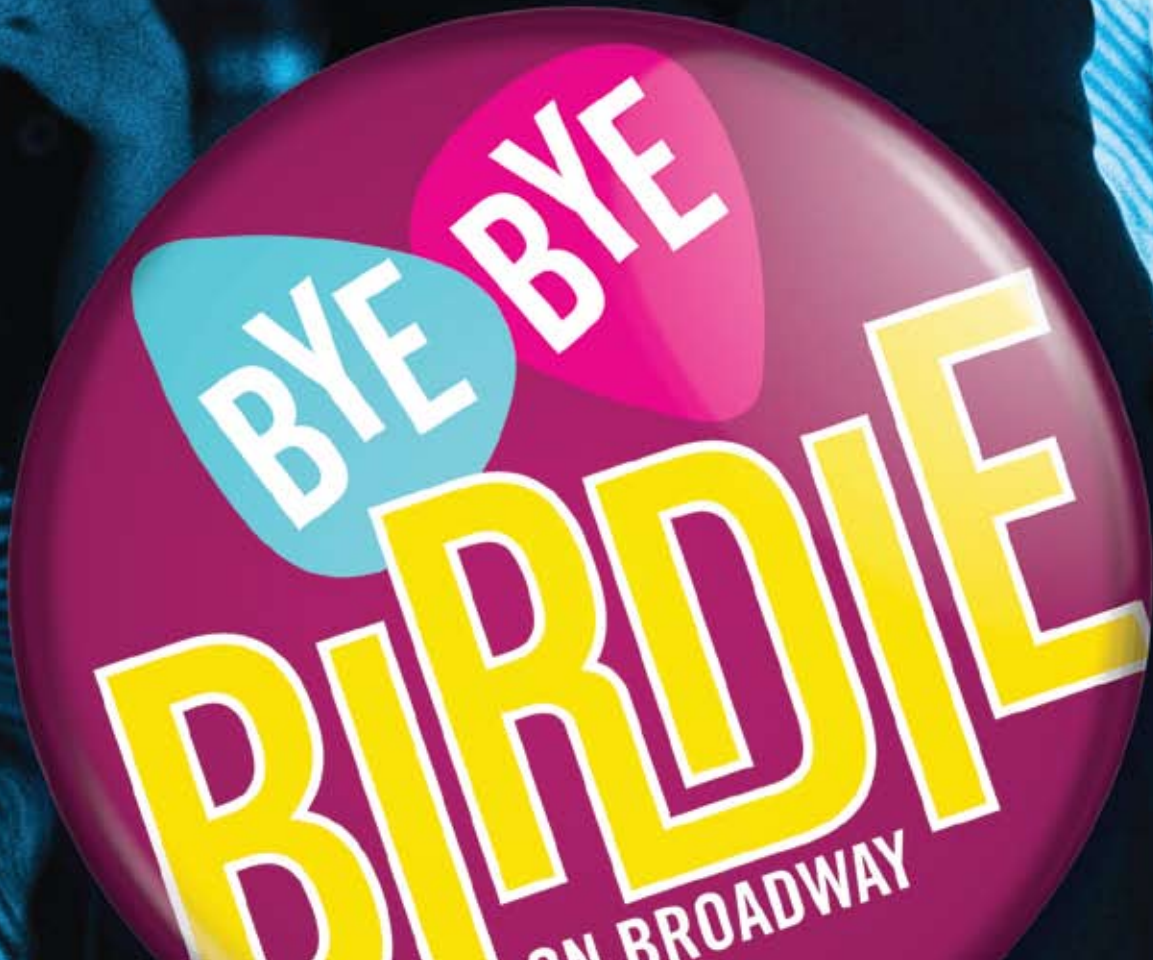




UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AT [ROUNDABOUTTHEATRECOMPANY](http://roundabouttheatrecompany.org)  FALL 2009

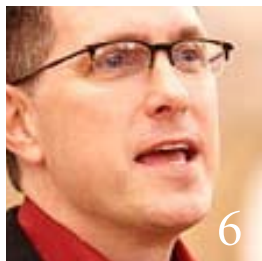


HOW DO WE **DEFINE** OURSELVES?

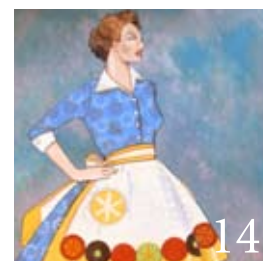
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BYE BYE BIRDIE



WE LOVE YOU,
CONRAD!
OH, YES WE DO!
WE LOVE YOU, CONRAD!
AND WE'LL BE TRUE
WHEN YOU'RE NOT
NEAR US, WE'RE BLUE!
OH, CONRAD,
WE LOVE YOU!



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ROUNDABOUTTHEATRECOMPANY

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INTERVIEW WITH

THE ACTOR: NOLAN FUNK

UPSTAGE SAT DOWN WITH OUR VERY OWN CONRAD BIRDIE, NOLAN FUNK, TO DISCUSS HIS ROLE AS THE TEENAGE HEARTTHROB.

What is your take so far on the character of Birdie?

He's someone who has been given a gift, and he's come from somewhat of a shady past. But through talent and appeal, he's been able to surpass the circumstances he was born into and now he's become this great star. There's a lot of humor in the part, but I want him to be a real human being. I don't want to lose the element of fun in him or get too heavy about it, but I want him to be a whole person. The challenge in playing this role is you want to retain his likeability. The role really teeters on the brink of unlikeability and it's a hard balance to play. I think he initially started out his career with the attitude: "Well, I don't have that much to lose, because I don't have that much anyway." It's even referenced in the play—they found him in reform school. Then, Rosie calls him a car thief. That's why he was able to swivel his hips more than the other guys on television and maybe scream a little harder. He has no social etiquette. So there is a kind of freedom to playing him. It's certainly relatable to me in terms of my life, being highly unaware of certain social practices. I took this role not knowing the musical. I just read the script like I was auditioning for anything else. And I based my interpretation of who he was on that.

How do you feel about being on Broadway eight times a week?

I've been on a mission to do a Broadway show. I want to do something live. As grateful as I am to have played as many roles as I have in film and television, I've been trying to get on Broadway for a while. Since I was a kid, I remember thinking, "I really want to do this." I grew up in Canada, but *Les Miserables* came to town, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. One of the first things I ever watched on television, if not the first thing, was a video recording we had of *Into the Woods* with Bernadette Peters. And I loved mythology and fairy tales growing up. I love going into something that I'm not an expert in. I understand that there's a Broadway community, an audience that will be looking at me with a more critical eye than most performers have to deal with. I'm very aware that I'm coming from Nickelodeon. They may not realize that I've done a lot of other work. Maybe they're going to see me as this Nickelodeon kid who got the role because the producers thought some teenage girls will want to come and see him. That's Birdie's audience. But it's a limited run, it's the Roundabout Theatre Company, one of the most prolific theatre companies with one of

the highest subscription rates, and they don't need me to sell tickets.

Did you look at the movie, or do any research on it?

I did a lot of research on the period. I watched some parts of the movie and some clips, but I saw what the original guy had done and it didn't feel like what I wanted to do with it. I just had a different take.

In this video clip, "Bye, Bye Birdie" director Robert (Bobby) Longbottom: says something like, "We're reexamining this role for a new generation." What do you think he means by that?

What he means is that in the original cast of the Broadway production as well as in the movie, the actor playing *Birdie* was a lot older than me—I'm 22. One thing I love about Bobby's approach is that everything comes from an acting standpoint. I can't tell you how creatively fulfilling and gratifying it's already been. I do know that there is sincerity to the way I want to play Birdie. Even though there's part of him that's really pissed off, there is still that love of music. When Birdie gets up there and sings, it's coming from his gut. Every molecule in his body has got to be in it. For him to appeal to the audience as he does, it's got to be more than just having a catchy song and being attractive. I want to make "Honestly Sincere" have so much pent-up feeling that we can understand why it would have been the No. 1 song in America for six months. I want to play Birdie with a raw quality.

In previous productions, the joke of "Honestly Sincere" was that he isn't sincere. But you're saying you have to see how committed he is to performing.

It's totally a different take on it. I know that the way I'm choosing to take on this role is risky. But I'm all about taking on a challenge. It's maybe because I read the script the way that I did, not bringing any preconceptions to it. I can only speak as the type of artist I am, but personally, I keep coming back to: This is a living, breathing, emotional human being. The only way to do that is exploring Birdie's back story, so that I'm not out there saying empty lines. I want to know everything about him. I don't know what kind of choices ultimately will be made and what they're going to let me get away with, but there are really some key things that he says. Obviously he is someone who is singing about sizzling steaks and shiny Cadillacs,



things that he didn't really know, and now he's gotten to a place where he can afford them. He's been so busy and wrapped up in touring and the life of being a star that he's trying to escape and finally enjoy those things. Ultimately, I think Birdie is a mask, but he's a talented mask.

You've got a background in gymnastics—will you get to use any of that in this part?

You know, we talked about it, and in *Spectacular!* I did a flip and things like that. But I'm kind of steering away from that, because I don't think it makes sense for Birdie.

Here are some internet clips from *Spectacular!* of you dancing. Where did you learn to dance?

My father actually dances the tango and I grew up always loving to dance. But doing a movie like *Spectacular!* was an education. I don't have a lot of formal dance training. Again, it's the character—I don't want Birdie to move like he's been on Broadway all his life. He has this innate feeling, this spark inside of him that gets him to move. I don't want him to seem slick and sleazy. I don't want him to feel polished. I want him to seem raw and genuine and greatly flawed.

In some of the press about you, they're always calling you "the next Zac Efron." Is that flattering or annoying or both?

It really doesn't bother me at all. I'm my own type of artist, and I'm quite particular and independent in my thinking, and I'm not trying to brand myself as Zac per se. But it's fun. Why wouldn't I want to be compared to such a popular actor? I was not the popular kid in high school, so if you want to compare me to the popular people, go ahead. **UP**

THE DIRECTOR: ROBERT LONGBOTTOM

UPSTAGE RECENTLY SPOKE WITH *BYE BYE BIRDIE* DIRECTOR-CHOREOGRAPHER ROBERT LONGBOTTOM ABOUT THE CHALLENGES OF REVIVING THIS ICONIC MUSICAL FOR THE FIRST TIME ON BROADWAY.

Why did you want to direct *Bye, Bye Birdie*?

Because it's never been revived on Broadway. There are very few shows that can make that claim. Everyone seems to have performed in *Bye, Bye Birdie*, either in high school or in community theater or college. It was the portal through which a lot of people fell in love with musicals. No one else has done it but Gower Champion, and aside from the movie, people don't really remember that production, which is always good for a director because I get to reinvent it.

Is there anything Gower did that you are aware of being an influence for you, or is this going to be a complete departure?

Any director-choreographer who has had a hand in shaping a musical—which clearly Gower did—has his DNA is all over it, so you never really remove that nor do you want to. But in terms of those iconic numbers—“The Telephone Hour,” “Put on a Happy Face”—I never saw the original. I am going to make it my own without departing from the story and the intention of the scene.

Do you feel like you are working on a family show?

Yes and no. I think I'm working on something that's not just for families, but for people in general. It's a good time and its altogether without irony, and there's little of that to be found anymore on Broadway. We put the experience of going to musical comedy in italics, and everything is sort of taken with a ‘wink, wink’ to the audience. *Bye Bye Birdie* takes itself seriously, as one of the better numbers in the first act, Conrad Birdie's “Honestly Sincere,” says, - You really have to play the show straight ahead and not make fun of these people's values. My inspiration for this production was Disney and Kodak's installation at the World's Fair in 1964, called the Carousel of Progress. It was a time when Americans and the world at large were truly optimistic about what could happen, where we could go, what life could be like. And all the fear we have now about obvious things just didn't exist. It's a fantasy to imagine what it would have been like to live in that time and I'm hoping to capture that for everybody.

Do you feel the show is about the Generation Gap?

The great parent-child divide of adolescence hasn't changed. It grows wider if anything. And I think that's why the piece is relevant. Everybody goes through a period where you antagonize or infuriate your parents, and it helps identify who you are. Whether it's what you do to your bedroom or what's inside your locker,

there's that defiance that you need to become you, and I think that's a pivotal moment for everybody. You can also look to Conrad Birdie as an *American Idol* type. I do think Conrad came up from somewhere—he's a very unsuspecting kid who this happened to, a kid with some trouble about him. He's not a golden boy—he's in trouble with the law, in trouble with women, probably with drugs. He had some issues, and I think when he sings “I've Got A Lot of Livin' To Do,” it's not that he's ready for an evening out. I think he's actually asking himself, “What's happened to my adolescence? I've just become this thing that people trot around and bring out for signings. And where's my life?”

How did you prepare to direct and choreograph this show? Will you talk about your process?

I'm leery of artists who talk about their process. I don't know that I have a process—I just sort of do it. I jump into it and I do it. Either my instincts lead me down the right path or they don't. I can usually see something fully formed in my head before I start to go at it. But in terms of research, I put my hands on a lot of 1960's family things, like the early Tupperware campaigns, like the Carousel of Progress, the World's Fair, the very early days of Disney and Epcot and their space installments and attractions. There was just something very sincere and genuine about it. There's a time when that crossed over into camp, and this was long before that. I knew I wanted to be true to the period, and I knew I wanted to find a way to create a very stylish show that could have been at the World's Fair. I just keep coming back to the Carousel of Progress because I just love how that represented the American family. It was going to improve everything about home and the family. The technology was going to allow the toaster to work faster so mom could have more time with you. I think all that stuff was, and is, very sweet.

What were you looking for when you cast the adult and the teen ensembles?

I knew I wanted real people. I wanted genuine children. When this first appeared on Broadway, I'm sure there was a lot of the teen chorus who were 26 and 27 year old, very talented men and women, but they were playing teenagers. I knew that wouldn't fly today. We need to get real kids with braces and pimples and all those issues, and I didn't want a lot of young people who had been in a dozen Broadway shows. I didn't want that jaded quality, which is there whether you like it or not. So freshness was the word of the day. I think the



same thing applied to the parents—I wanted one of every sort of look and color we could possibly get our hands on to make that neighborhood, that community, not just a WASP, white, sanitized community in Ohio, but something that’s a little more reflective of our society today.

When you audition actors, is there a quality that makes you think, “I want to be in the rehearsal room with you?”

It’s like dating. You are either attracted to that talent or you are not. There are so many people that are valid and could be in this part. It’s instinctual, and you think, ‘I just have a feeling you’re the one.’ And once that person has come in for you two or three times, you form a contract with that actor—unspoken—that you’ve come in here and done the hardest thing possible. You’ve proven to me that you are going to uphold your end of the bargain. It does come down to do I want to spend six days a week, eight hours a day with this person? For *Bye Bye Birdie* I was looking for people who could be sincere and genuinely open. I wanted them all to be nice people.

You are doing a little something different with casting *Birdie* this time around— correct?

I wanted to find somebody who I could actually believe these teenage girls would go crazy over. I don’t think that’s a man in his early 30s. I think that has to be someone who is not too far from them. So we are going with a boy, Nolan Funk. I don’t how old he is exactly, but he is a very young man. He is actually a bit of a teen idol himself, and he starred in a show on Nickelodeon. Anyway, he was great in it and very charismatic. This boy will most likely be a big deal one day. I love the fact that he is on that curve of up and coming, and he’s the

real deal. He’s not someone pretending to be another icon. We are creating our own resume, if you will, for this Conrad Birdie.


I want to talk to you a little about the movie and TV versions. Were they of any use to you or did you just ignore them?

I looked at each of them, but I left them then. I think it was important to go, “Ok, this was that person’s take on this, and it was valid at the time, but I’m not doing that, and I don’t want to borrow things from that.” The exception is the song *Bye Bye Birdie*, which was written for the movie— Ann Margret opened the movie with it, and it’s such a great song. When I first asked about it, I wasn’t even sure that Strouse and Adams had written it. They had, in fact, and it’s a dandy little tune, so we’re using it at the end of the show for our finale. That’s the one thing that we took from the movie.

How did this production come together? Did you approach Roundabout Theatre Company’s Artistic Director Todd Haimes or did he approach you?

Todd and I had been talking about what we might do together. He said, “Do you like *Birdie*?” It didn’t ever occur to me that it could be an interesting fit for me. At first I wasn’t sure that it was. I’m attracted to darker material and like to look at the underbelly of stories, and there is none here. We did a workshop two years ago in this very building, which was very successful, and I think I was as surprised as anybody at how funny and just charming it was. You needed to just let it be and not try to weigh it down with too much relevance or political thought about what was going on in the country at that time.

What advice would you give a young person who wants to choreograph and direct musicals?

Don’t take no for an answer. You’ve got to want to do it more than anything in the world because so many other people want to do it too. And it is helpful if you know the business from the other side of the table. Before you decide to be a choreographer-director, be a performer, be an actor, know what it feels like to be in the skin of those people. Most choreographers were dancers. It is unusual that someone just leaves college and becomes a choreographer without ever performing. A lot of the greats we’ve looked up to over the years all started out in the chorus. And if you can, develop your own show. If you have an idea for something, go with that because we are in such need of new material. If you have something that hasn’t been done before in your head—direct it. The first show I did off-Broadway was the show *Pageant*. That was something I developed and created. I don’t know that anyone would have hired me at that point in my career to direct that, but it was mine and I knew how to do it. 

WORLD OF THE PLAY

THE ED SULLIVAN SHOW



Just as the 21st century phenomenon *American Idol* has all but taken over Tuesday and Wednesday nights, the 20th century TV landmark called *The Ed Sullivan Show* owned Sunday nights. *The Ed Sullivan Show* premiered in 1948 and brought talents, both high brow and low brow, to the American people every Sunday night for twenty- three years. Sullivan showcased over 10,000 acts in his more than two decades on the air, including some of music's biggest legends. Elvis Presley, The Beatles, and later the Jackson 5 all truly burst onto the American pop culture scene with their appearances on Sullivan's show. In *Bye Bye Birdie*, an appearance on Sullivan's show temporarily unites the older and younger McAfees; in real life America, Sullivan's variety



hour also brought generations together— even justifying rock as “real music” to skeptical parents in the 1950s and 1960s. Sullivan invited artists and performers of all kinds on his program, with a bill that ran the cultural gamut nearly every week. Opera singers like Beverly Sills, comedians like Jackie Mason and George Carlin, rock legends like The Rolling Stones and The Who, and Broadway stars like Julie Andrews and Richard Burton all mingled on Sullivan's program. He even invited the cast of *Bye Bye Birdie* onto his show to sing none other than the song “Ode to Ed Sullivan!”

Even today, Sullivan's legacy lives on in ways that we might not even notice. Every weekday David Letterman films his *Late Night with David Letterman* on the same stage on 54th and Broadway that Sullivan used for his broadcasts. The venue is the same, but it has now been renamed in honor of a great TV legend— in 1993 it was christened the Ed Sullivan Theater.

THE DRAFT



Although *Bye Bye Birdie's* heartthrob Conrad Birdie claimed to have volunteered to join the army, he had, in fact, like thousands of others in the 1950s and 60s, been drafted into the United States Army. Our country no longer utilizes the draft today, but in the 1950s and 60s, conscription, which allowed the government to compel any young man to serve in the army, was very much in action and causing all kinds of unrest. Despite deferments and exemptions for college students, the youth of the 1960s demonstrated, resisted conscription and burned their draft cards on street corners and college campuses across the nation as more than 2 million men were forced into military service.

The U.S. first instituted the draft during the Civil War, following the Confederacy's lead, to help fill out the Union ranks. This new lottery system, as well as a provision for buying one's way out of service, caused massive riots. The largest instance of draft- related violence was the 1863 Draft Riot in New York City during which tens of thousands of people, many of them poor Irish from the Lower East Side, took to the streets, burning and looting dozens of stores in the process. The draft was also used during both World Wars and, in a limited way, during the peacetime that followed the end of WWII.

Once the full draft was reinstated, widespread draft dodging soon followed. Boxing legend Muhammad Ali became the most famous accused draft dodger when, in 1967, after being drafted, he refused to serve, saying that his new religion, Islam, did not allow him to fight. Ali was convicted of draft evasion, stripped of his titles and banned from the sport of boxing.

Perhaps the most famous man to be drafted and to actually serve in the U.S. military was Elvis Presley, who later became the inspiration for *Bye Bye Birdie's* story of teen idol Conrad Birdie's conscription into the armed forces.

ROCK MUSIC AND THE GENERATION GAP

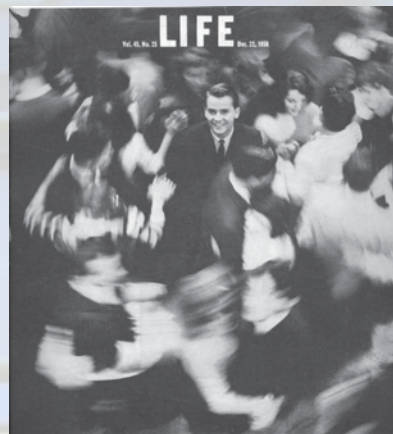


Before the late 1950s, the popular music of Middle America was pretty mellow— there was the synchronized finger snapping of Doo-Wop groups and the crooning of singers like Frank Sinatra. Then, in the late 50s, came the rock revolution. Teenagers now had their own music, with its own new sound. Rock was aggressive, loud and blatantly sexual— the antithesis of mainstream adult culture. It absolutely flummoxed and outraged parents, who, like the adults in *Bye Bye Birdie*, asked, “What’s the matter with kids today?”

When Elvis Presley, a Tennessee truck driver who had become rock n’ roll’s first real superstar, hit national TV, he was quickly shot from the waist up only; his suggestive pelvis shaking was simply too much for the older generation to handle. Shortly after, the shaggy-haired Beatles and prancing Mick Jagger along with the

Rolling Stones burst onto the music scene. Besides *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *American Bandstand*, hosted by Dick Clark, was the most popular portal through which teens got their fix of rock. On the show, popular musicians stopped by to perform, Clark played the latest rock songs to make the top of the charts, and a cast of teens danced along with the music, showing off the latest dance steps.

Rock ‘n roll was perhaps the leading element in the creation of the generation gap. Kids had, for the first time, a popular culture entirely their own, and became fanatical worshipers of teen idols like Elvis and Conway Twitty (from whom Conrad Birdie gets his name). Parents like *Birdie*’s ready-to-pull-his-hair-out Mr. MacAfee, simply didn’t know what to make of “those crazy kids.” The teenagers, for their part, didn’t put much stock in their parents’ way of life either— by the 1960s young people declared, “Don’t trust anyone over thirty!”



Check out these videos:

[Elvis Presley](#)

[Conway Twitty](#)

[Frank Sinatra](#)



INTERVIEW WITH

THE COMPOSER: CHARLES STROUSE

UPSTAGE DISCUSSED THE SCORE OF *BYE BYE BIRDIE* WITH COMPOSER CHARLES STROUSE

When did you first realize you wanted to compose for the theatre?

When I got out of music school, I went to the Eastern School for music and then studied for a year at Tanglewood and then in Paris. I was going to be “a composer.” On my way there, out of college, I had to make a living and I started playing piano for singers, for classes, and rehearsals of shows. I played in strip clubs, I played in joints in the east Bronx. I was making a living. I’ve always had a feeling for jazz, but the Broadway musical caught me. It wasn’t my background, I was good at jazz, which was really the rock of its day.

Can you tell me a little bit about the inspiration for *Bye Bye Birdie*? How did that all come about?

First of all, there was a producer by the name of Ed Padula. He had seen some pieces that Lee Adams and I wrote in a show called “The Shoestring Revue.” We were very close friends with Mike Stewart, who wrote the libretto for *Bye, Bye Birdie*. We all worked up in a place called Green Mansions, where we did a revue every week. He had an idea about doing a show about teenagers, and it was a totally different idea than it turned out, because we added the rock ‘n’ roll singer. I added the rock ‘n’ roll music because Presley was in the ascendancy then, although he wasn’t really rock ‘n’ roll. I listened to a great deal of that music. It was a time when this teenage bubble was floating, and once we invented a rock ‘n’ roll singer, and Mike Stewart wrote this funny, funny plot (in my opinion), the rest came together. Lee and I like to think of *Bye Bye Birdie* as being the first rock musical, and I have no idea why people don’t mention it as that. We satirized it, we understood and absorbed it and we used it.

Do you remember who came up with the name *Conrad Birdie*?

Oh, yes, very easily. The first name that Michael wrote was Conway Birdie, and Conway Twitty’s lawyer called whomever and said that they would sue. There was a rock star by the name of Conway Twitty. Believe it or not, there was. I forget whose idea it was, but one of us changed the name to Conrad Birdie. The title *Bye Bye Birdie* was a great embarrassment to me at the time. I remember this distinctly because I thought it was a silly title, and for the first week for what were our first auditions for Broadway, everybody came in and sang “Bye, Bye Blackbird,” since no one had any idea of a rock show on Broadway. I mean at the beginning people wouldn’t even listen to it. We had years and years of playing it, and no one who liked Broadway liked the meaningful drumbeat that was rock ‘n’ roll.

You went through a number of different titles, is that true?

Yes, it was called, at one point, “The Day They Took Birdie Away,” “One Last Kiss.” “Going Steady” was another title. And for a reason that I guess was determined by the gods, the advertising agency said, “The posters are coming out, this is what it’s going to be.”

Can you talk a little bit about the changes you made to the show on its way to New York?

Well, it was my first Broadway show, so everything about it was precious and unnerving, but in retrospect, we made very few changes. I was desperate to throw out the song “Put On a Happy Face” because we wrote it for a place in the show on *The Ed Sullivan Show* where Dick Van Dyke, who has a very plastic face, was setting up the Sullivan show. The lighting people were flashing different colored lights on his face and the technicians were dancing and singing. It was wonderful, except the audience didn’t like it at all, and they didn’t like Dick in it. It was Marge Champion, Gower Champion’s wife, who suggested putting it into the first act where Van Dyke sang it to two sad girls and did a tap dance. That was a great source of embarrassment for me, too, because I was recently out of the school of music where I was writing fugues and sonatas and things. The idea that the first music my friends would see would be to a tap dance felt humiliating, but, of course, as soon as Dick did it, it stopped the show, so to speak. Dick became well loved at that moment and the song has gone on to become a standard.

What do you look for in a director?

Well, I would say someone who has an imagination of how a space can physically move and how the actors move around in that space. Gower was such a person and Bobby, our director for this revival, is too. The stage moves differently today. I would also say what I admire in a director is the ability to hear the spoken word for more than the just the literary meaning. Of course, Jerry Robbins was that type director. That’s what I look for. It has to do with rhythm and feeling. I’ve worked with a lot of book writers or librettists and a lot of them do not realize that it’s the rhythm, the music and the spirit that the music brings that are telling the story. There is kind of fluid undertone which I think directors like Robbins captured and, for me, that’s very meaningful.

Will there be new orchestrations for this version?

I know that Jonathan Tunick called me and he said

that he's on board. The first time on Broadway, we had a 23-piece orchestra and now it's not that size. What Jonathan, I think, is doing is bringing what was four woodwinds down to three or two. It takes a lot of musicianship to do that and still have the harmonies balanced and all. We had a master orchestrator, Robert Ginzler, do the original production. So I can't conceive that it's going to be completely rethought by Jonathan. The one thing I did discuss with Jonathan, and we had a disagreement about it, and I'm not sure whether he is right or not, is that I wanted to speak to the drummer and to the guitarist, and I wanted to use instruments that we didn't use before. We did not use an electrified bass, which has more of a ping to it, and I wanted to talk to the drummer about spiking up the drum parts a little bit. And Jonathan said, "Oh, no, you can't take it out of the 60s." And I said, "I'm talking about polishing it." I reminded him that not everyone listens as closely as he or I do. In "Annie" there were a number of songs, particularly "Tomorrow," that would never have been written in the 30s, and I was very sensitive to that fact and felt that some critic was going to mention it. But nobody mentioned it.

Are you making any musical changes for this production?

There is one brilliant one that Bobby Longbottom put in, which I don't really want to talk about because it surprised me. It delighted me and I'm hoping it will do the same to the audience.

Can you tell me a little about your reaction to the movie and TV versions of your piece?

Well, the movie was totally different from the stage show. But we had the very good dumb luck of having Ann-Margret play Kim. Lee and I both felt she was wrong, but she made it into a hit. Everybody remembers Ann-Margret. But the movie itself was decidedly different from the original version Mike had written. That movie had a different thrust, and it had a star who was no more Spanish than I am.

But they tried to make Janet Leigh look like Chita with the black wig and everything.

They tried. There was no reason in the world that they couldn't come up with a Latina. That's what made that character a success. We didn't even know it then. We wrote it originally for a Polish girl.

I read in the Gower Champion biography that you changed her name to Alvarez once Chita was on board.

Well, we wrote it for Carol Haney, who was going to do it, but she developed some problems right before rehearsal. We didn't know what to do— every joke was about her being Polish. "Polish is not a religion". "Polish is this...Polish is that". Albert's mother made fun of




her. They were going to live in Warsaw and all that. And when Carol declined, and Chita was a very close friend of ours, we said, "What about Chita?" And everyone said, "Wow!" And Mike had to change every joke to a Spanish joke— every one of them -- and they worked exactly the same way. We became more hip, if I may say so, which is an old fashioned word, but we became more "with it" for making her Spanish.

Do you have advice for any young people who want to compose for the theater?

You've got to hang out in or close to the theatrical world; which doesn't seem like good advice, but that's the thing that is going to do it. Hopefully by doing that, you'll catch on to one of the golden rings and pull on it. I do think that there is great difficulty in finding that golden ring or even getting people to read any of your compositions. I founded one of the workshops at ASCAP. It was a musical theater workshop like Lehman Engel did at BMI, and I think there's a kind of oiling of the machinery that happens at those workshops. But I also feel very strongly that it's not building the machinery. The machinery is built by having to sell your work. Lee and Mike and I performed *Bye Bye Birdie* a hundred times for people who could not have been less interested. We did not do a reading. I'm against readings, though I must say the workshop done at the Roundabout was terrific, I really liked it, but that show was done already. I do not believe that getting six disparate actors and getting them to do the script for backers who just came there for a pleasant afternoon is something that works. The only people who can really help you know what you have written is an audience.

I wanted to end by asking you if there was any question about *Bye Bye Birdie* that I should have asked, but didn't?

Well, *Bye Bye Birdie* was obviously a transitional point in my life. I wasn't married at the time and everyone called me Buddy. It was a time when I could finally have some confidence. I didn't have any self-confidence when I was writing serious music. I felt way, way out of it. 

INTERVIEW WITH THE LYRICIST: LEE ADAMS

UPSTAGE RECENTLY INTERVIEWED BY BYE BIRDIE LYRICIST LEE ADAMS.

When did you know you wanted to write lyrics for the theatre?

Well, in my undergraduate days at Ohio State, I wrote a college show--I thought the lyrics were pretty good, which they weren't. I got interested in writing lyrics as a hobby. I came to New York to go to graduate school and met Charles Strouse, who was an aspiring composer. I thought I was a pretty good lyricist and I showed him my lyrics. He didn't think they were so great, but we got along. That was 50 years ago, and we've been working together ever since.

I believe you two worked on summer revues together -- is that true?

Yes, all through the 50's we worked on revues for small theaters. We did revues in New York and London. We wrote for nightclub performers and then tried to get our \$250 fee, which was not always easy. Then we gradually began improving our craft, and, so, in 1959, when a producer asked us if we would like to write a Broadway show, of course, the answer had to be yes.

Was that producer Edward Padula?

Yes, that was Edward Padula, and the show became *Bye Bye Birdie*.

Can you tell me a little about whom or what was the inspiration for *Bye Bye Birdie*? Did it come from Padula?

It came from the writers - Charles Strouse, Mike Stewart, and myself.

So was Elvis Presley your inspiration? The Generation Gap? How did you sense that this would be a good musical?

We were exploring a way to do a show about teenagers in America in 1960, and I think I'm the one who had the idea that we could do a satire based on the adulation kids had for Elvis Presley. He was going into the army about that time. So Mike Stewart, the wonderful book writer, liked the idea and the show developed.

Who came up with the name Conrad Birdie?

Oh, I guess we all did. I don't know -- it's so long ago, it's hard to remember.

I read in a biography of Gower Champion (the original director and choreographer of the show) that you all made a lot of changes on the road to New York in Philadelphia. Can you tell me if that's true and what kinds of things were happening at that point?

Yes, well, in those days a musical could go out of town for a tryout and we could fix the bugs. There was always rewriting to do. We went to Philadelphia and, of course, we did lots of rewriting on the road. You learn so much from the audience when you are putting a show together. Nowadays it's pretty hard to go on the road with a show - economically it's difficult. But we were able to do our rewriting after visiting only one city.

And is it true that the piece had a number of different titles?

Oh, yes. Titles are always a problem. It was called "The Day They Took Birdie Away." It was called...I forget what else.

***Going Steady* - wasn't that another title?**

That's right. "Going Steady" was another title. Then finally out of sheer desperation, somebody said *Bye Bye Birdie*. We said, "That's kind of a stupid title, but let's go with it." And so we did.

Can you tell me a little bit about working with Michael and Charles? How did you go about it?

First of all, we got along famously because we all worked together at a place called Green Mansions in the Adirondack Mountains, which was a camp for New Yorkers to go to in the summer and eat a lot and play tennis and swim and see shows. And we wrote shows there for three summers. As far as the score is concerned, Strouse and I might get an idea for a number based on a scene, based on the character. Maybe I'll get the idea for a lyric. I'll write the lyric and bring it back to Strouse, he'll criticize it, I'll rewrite it and then come back to him. He'll write a tune, I'll criticize it, and so on like that. Seldom do you just sit in a room and write together.

It sounds like sometimes the melody came first and then the lyrics for this, or vice versa. Was there a set pattern of how you worked on the score?

There's no pattern. Composers often have tunes ready in their drawer that are waiting for a lyric. Lyricists don't have that luxury. We write for the character and for the scene. But the composer will say, "Hey, maybe this tune I've got lying around will work for this scene." And if you agree, you work on it. Usually though, in a collaboration like the one with Charles Strouse, the lyric comes first, and that's just the way it is for us. Not always, but usually. There is no set formula for that process.

Did Champion and Padula have any influence on the creation of the piece?

Well, a good director always has an influence, and our training has been to listen to the director and go with his vision of the show. That's how good shows are made. Good shows are not made with different collaborators going in different directions. You got to have one style, one vision, and usually that's the director's. And if that director is Gower or Hal Prince or any of the great directors we've worked with, you go with his vision and he guides you along the way. But, of course, the work is yours.

Will there be any changes to this version that you're aware of, in terms of the lyrics or the book or anything?

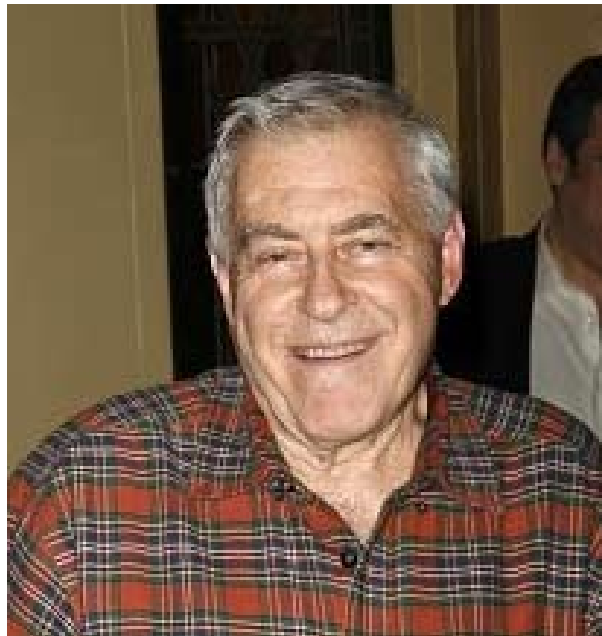
After 49 years the show is pretty set. But, yes, there are changes. I made some changes just the other day to accommodate our wonderful director/choreographer Robert Longbottom, who has to tailor the show to the stars we now have. He had some ideas, for example, about a song called "Spanish Rose", which Gina Gershon is going to be doing. To incorporate her talent the song is going to be expanded a bit. There are fixes along the way, but generally the show is pretty set.

What did you make of the movie and television versions of *Bye Bye Birdie*? Were you pleased with those?

Well, I never liked the movie too much because it departed too much from the stage show that I liked. It is very rare that a stage show adapts well to the movies. Going from one medium to another doesn't usually work very well. Some shows it works for, but not many. I loved the television version because we worked hard on that, and I thought it was terrific. But I never cared that much for the movie. When you sell a show to the movies, they make *their* movie; you don't have the final say. On Broadway the writers have the say. We own the property, and they can't cast it or do anything without our approval. So you have real control. When you make the movie, you sell the movie and you cash the check. *They* make the movie.

Do you have any advice for a young person who might want to write lyrics for the theater?

That's a hard one. It's a very different theater now than it was when we began in the late 50's. It's much more difficult to get a show on, and so I have no idea really what to tell young writers except that you just have to write and work. Get your show on anywhere you can



and study the great shows of the past. Learn how they are put together, how they are made, and go from there.


Do you use a rhyming dictionary?

It's helpful. It doesn't give you any brilliant rhymes, but it's a guide. Most lyricists I know use one.

Is there a question you felt I should have asked that I didn't?

I don't think so. It's awful hard to talk about this process. Writing a musical is very tricky. One of my mentors, Joshua Logan the great director, said, "Every hit show is a fluke." It's a fluke of the right writers writing the same show together, casting it properly, directing it properly. It's a huge collaborative process, and it's very difficult. When it works it's terrific, but it doesn't always work.

I sense a lot of it has to do with timing. Somehow the theme of the show hits the American psyche at the right time which you obviously did when *Birdie* was first produced.

I guess timing is important, but the main thing is to write an entertaining show that has interesting characters, and that is very hard to do. 

INTERVIEW WITH

THE COSTUME DESIGNER: GREGG BARNES

UPSTAGE RECENTLY SPOKE WITH COSTUME DESIGNER GREGG BARNES ABOUT THE CHOICES HE MADE IN BRINGING THE FASHION OF SWEET APPLE, OHIO TO LIFE.



What kind of research did you have to do to design costumes for *Bye Bye Birdie*?

Bobby Longbottom, the director, wanted to find a heightened reality that could also define the humanity of the people in the piece. So I got a Montgomery Ward catalogue from 1960 and it was just a goldmine. There were all these mother-daughter outfits. You could literally buy these textiles for your wallpaper, your apron and your dress! It was almost like your entire life would be organized around this one taste element. We've really run with that. For example, we're making an apron that has an appliqué of exactly the same pattern as the kitchen wallpaper. We've blown up the scale so it's theatrically interesting. The idea was that in Sweet Apple, Ohio, everyone's identity is formed when that catalogue comes to them every year. Rosie and Albert arrive in Sweet Apple. Obviously they are New Yorkers, and they are made to look like "the other." All the actors playing residents of Sweet Apple are arranged in families. There's the mother and the father and they all have three children, either two daughters and a son or two sons and a daughter. There's a yellow family and a lime green family and a lavender family and an aqua family and an orange family. It's very stylish -- not like a slice of life-- yet it still comes from the reality of this Montgomery Ward catalogue.

Tell me a little bit about the silhouette of the clothes that people wore in 1960. Was it tailored? I'm thinking Jackie Kennedy, but she was ahead of the curve, right?

Yes, exactly. You know it's interesting that you ask that question because in the Montgomery Ward catalogue every single garment looked like it was from 1956. It was like Jackie Kennedy hadn't hit the Midwest. As you said, she was ahead of the curve. So we've tried to make a distinction between the New York sections, and with Rosie, what a modern woman or an urban woman would wear as opposed to what the suburbs would feel like. So most of the design of the piece, because most of it takes place in Sweet Apple, looks like the late 50s. But in the beginning section we see the sleeker 1960s silhouette. The 60's was kind of a big revolution in fashion because all of these things started happening right at this time. Right around 1960 people started to tease their hair, which is a simple idea. But what it meant was that they didn't wear hats anymore. Your hair became your hat and so legions of milliners all went out of business. It was a big transition. Some of the best theatrical milliners were people who had worked in the fashion world and then, because their job was

taken out from under them, they started making period hats. Woody Shelp was the best example. He was the legendary Broadway milliner. He was one of the best milliners in America, and the theater inherited him, which was such an incredible gift. He passed away a few years ago, but I think we all learned a lot at the feet of Woody Shelp.

Does this mean that you will be overseeing a lot of wigs for our production?

Yes. Brian Brown is the hair and wig designer, so he will ultimately be making those design choices. Of course, in the sketches you present a shape and an idea, and then he takes that information to the next level. We worked on *Legally Blonde* and *Flower Drum Song* together, and I think he's brilliant. He always brings something very interesting to the table. So, I have in my head an approach for what the hair and wig design should look like. One thing we're doing, which I think will be really interesting, is we're not wiggging the kids so they have a more natural look, an unaffected kind of look. The mothers we are wiggging so that they really look like they go to the beauty parlor once a week. I said to Brian, I'd really like to set up a world where if you met these women twenty years later, the look from this period in their lives would be so distinctive that they would still be using it. Brian's just beginning his journey with the piece, but I know it will be really interesting. When I met with Bill Irwin the other day, he said, "I hope I get to have a flat top." And I said, "Oh, I hope you do too, that would be so great." Along with the mother-daughter dresses matching the kitchen curtains and all of that, we're trying to do that same generational thing where if the dad has a flat top, the son has a flat top too. There is a feeling that the son is going to grow up to be that father.

In addition to that Montgomery Ward catalogue, was anything like *The Patty Duke Show* or movies from this period valuable to you?

Oh sure, I looked at a lot of it. Bobby Longbottom and I are almost exactly the same age. He grew up on the West Coast and I grew up on the East Coast, but we have a very similar pop culture reference. He'll bring up some fact or a show or a film and I know immediately what he is talking about; we have a bit of a short hand that way. We did use *Father Knows Best* and *The Patty Duke Show* as references. We looked at a lot of teen idols because Conrad Birdie is a teen idol. I believe every time he has been portrayed, (at least by anyone I've ever seen), he's kind of an older hunk, and Bobby had this idea that





Birdie would be very young himself, so that the dynamic between a teenager's crush and the object of her affection is not really her dad, but is somewhere in the middle. So I looked at a lot of teen idols, and we have a heartthrob file. We're trying to look for a different image for Conrad. He's always worn the gold lamé jump suit, that's always how he's been portrayed, and we're not doing that at all. We're finding a new vocabulary for him.

So Elvis Presley's wardrobe is not going to be much help for you in designing for this character?

What's great about Elvis was that he did join the military and go to war, so we did look at him a lot, but in his young days, pre-Ed Sullivan show days. We really looked at his hair and we have a shirt - they called it a jack shirt and it has a blunt bottom - that's based on a picture of Elvis, but he is so young in it you can hardly recognize him.

I remember a lot of tight jeans, right?

Yeah, that's right. In the second act, there's an interesting story-telling component to the design. Conrad takes all the kids out on the town and they are all rebelling against this cookie-cutter image. So Bobby gave me the challenge of exploring different things we can do where it is really clear to the audience that these kids were rebelling against the parents. In the rest of the piece, they very much look interchangeable, but when they get to this scene, they are dressed like young screen starlets the teens might look up to. The clothes are more sensual, with a lot of tight Capri pants. The parents pile into the streets looking for their lost children, and when they come upon them, a couple of them will have a piece of cotton candy-colored clothing that they will try to cover their kids with because they have been rebellious.

It sounds like that's a challenging costume change.

Exactly. We actually have a couple of really challenging costume changes. In the first act, in the change from New York City to Sweet Apple, what happens is that all of the adults are playing reporters interviewing Rosie and Albert and trying to get the dirt on Conrad, and the young ensemble is all a New York City Conrad Birdie fan club. And then we have a 20 second change, and there are 21 people changing. I believe we've only got 7 dressers. So we've really had to create a do-it-yourself quick change for all of these people because when they arrive in Sweet Apple they all come out on this treadmill with these bright colors. You know, the pink puffy skirt, early *Lawrence Welk Show* look.

What are some of the other challenges of clothing so many people?

You make a lot of decisions about the style of the piece and how the piece will look and then often times the actor who is cast comes in and doesn't fit into the mold.



So I think you have to be adaptable, because ultimately it's a very specific actor we're building this story on. There are certain things you have to shift gears with because any good actor is going to bring something very interesting to the table. I want to make sure the actor is completely at ease and knows as much about the clothes as I do by the time they hit the deck. It's interesting, when actors come in for measurements, I try to always be there to meet them, and we take pictures to see what they look like and see ways that we can use qualities of their posture, their body type, their coloring, etc. We have to find that balance between what makes an interesting re-invention of *Bye Bye Birdie* and what is the humanity of the piece. That's a challenge.

Epecially since you have, what, 40 in your ensemble?

Yeah, I know.


I was curious about why you like working with Bobby Longbottom. Could you talk to us a little about what perspective he brings to your process?

I tell you it's a professional pleasure when he calls me to work with him because he has a very unique point of view. This is a funny thing to say; but he knows what he's looking at. When you are describing things, he knows what you are talking about, and he's very visual. He's also a risk taker, which I love. Oftentimes, the work with Bobby isn't what you'd call quiet work because he's a partner in the storytelling, and that was certainly true with *Flower Drum Song* and *Side Show*. Everything I've done with him has been spectacular. We've done quite a few things together, and he's very witty, and I feel like our energies are in tune.

What advice you would give to a young person that would like to be a costume designer?

Well, I guess for me a thing that is important for a kid to do is to go to the theater and see as much as you can and also to be part of the community. If you hear that there's an event, don't miss the flea market, don't miss Broadway Bares. Introduce yourself, say hello. I also always think that you have to be a generous spirit in the theater. I taught at the NYU graduate school for twenty years, and I used to say to my kids, when you go see a show, if you see something that you truly love and that you really respect, write the person a note. Not because you need a job or for a political purpose, but just because it's the right thing to do. I'm not saying I do that myself—I'm terrible about that, but I feel it's an important thing to be a part of the community. And sure enough, those little things you put out come back to you because someday someone will say, "Hey, five years ago you sent me a note and now we're sitting at the table together and we're getting a chance to collaborate." I feel like those things are important in life.

I wanted to end with a question I always ask, which is—is there a question I should have asked that I didn't? Is there any aspect of your process that we didn't discuss? Or maybe you'd like to talk about the theater itself? It's a brand new space.

I've been in the new Henry Miller's Theatre once and I felt honored to go in there. It's very exciting to be part of something where, in essence, everything behind that facade is new. There aren't any memories there yet. It's really kind of a magical thing to be part of the maiden voyage of a new Broadway theater. I thought about that a lot as I was wandering around looking at the dressing room spaces, and I thought, "I can't wait until a month into the run and we get to see how all this work we've done becomes part of this building's history." I know anytime I go into a Broadway house where I have the privilege of working, I just think, "Oh, all the stuff that's gone on here, all the memories." People leave little bits of the history of each production in each theatre. And I'm excited to be part of that. 



VOCABULARY

THEATRICAL TERMS

DANCE MUSIC: Music written specifically to accompany a dance sequence in a musical

11 O' CLOCK NUMBER: A show-stopping, emotional number that comes very near the end of a musical (which used to be right around 11 o' clock). Famous ones include "Rose's Turn" from "Gypsy" and "Memory" from "Cats"

LYRICS: All the words in a musical that have been put to music

OVERTURE: A mixture of songs from a musical which is played before the curtain goes up to give the audience a feel for the story to come

REPRISE: In a musical, when a song is performed again

BOOK: All the non-sung words in a musical

HARMONY: The combination of simultaneous musical notes in a chord structure of music

BACKBEAT: A steady pronounced rhythm stressing the second and fourth beats of a four-beat measure

VOCABULARY FROM *BYE BYE BIRDIE*:

OVALTINE: A famous label of chocolate milk powder that was particularly well-known in the 1950s and 60s

ORGY: A group overindulgence in any kind of pleasure, especially a sexual one

GO STEADY: To go out with someone in an ongoing, serious manner

AMERICANA: Anything concerning distinctly American culture

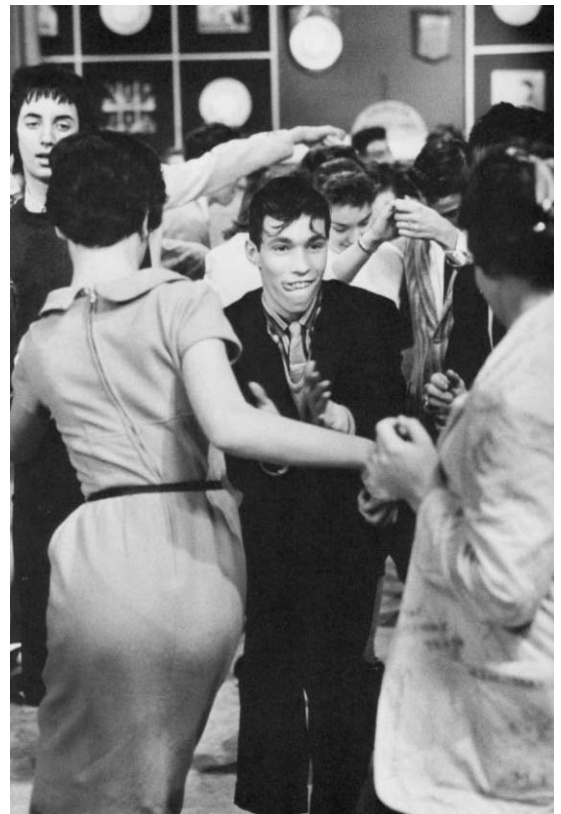
CONSCRIPTION CENTER: Government office where those drafted had to report

SHRINERS: A secret fraternal society called the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine. Members of this society are called Shriners. They are committed to community services projects and supporting the Shriners Hospital for Children.

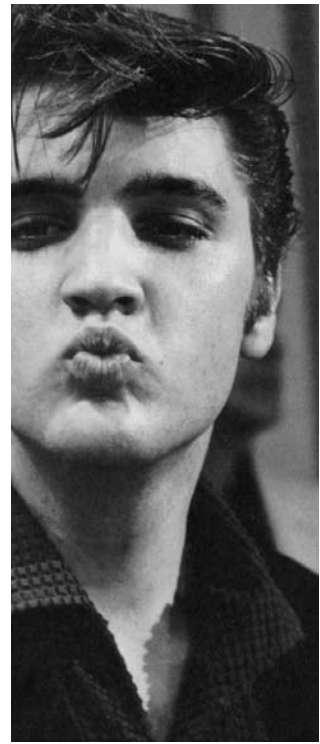
SOFT SHOE: A laidback dance routine performed in soft shoes, like jazz shoes

TO DIG: 1950s slang meaning to really be into something or to like something a lot

TO PIN: To give a girl your high school pin to symbolize that you are now going steady



ACTIVITIES



PRE SHOW ACTIVITIES:

In *Bye Bye Birdie*, Kim receives a call inviting her to be kissed on The Ed Sullivan Show. This phone call ultimately changed her life. Identify a phone call that would change your life. ([click here for activity 1](#))

The song "Spanish Rose" defines aspects of the character Rosie. Identify a song that relates to your life. ([click here for activity 2](#))

Color and pattern are key elements used in defining a particular decade. Describe a color that best represents 2009. ([click here for activity 3](#))

POST SHOW ACTIVITIES:

Having seen *Bye Bye Birdie*, at the end of the play many of the characters make a life decision that will affect their future. Choose a character from *Bye Bye Birdie* and describe how you see him/her 10 years later. ([click here for activity 4](#))

Where do you see yourself in 10 years? ([click here for activity 4](#))

TITLE: RESOURCES

www.ByeByeBirdieonBroadway.com

www.CharlesStrouse.com

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The Best of Ed Sullivan Parts I & II. CBS Video.



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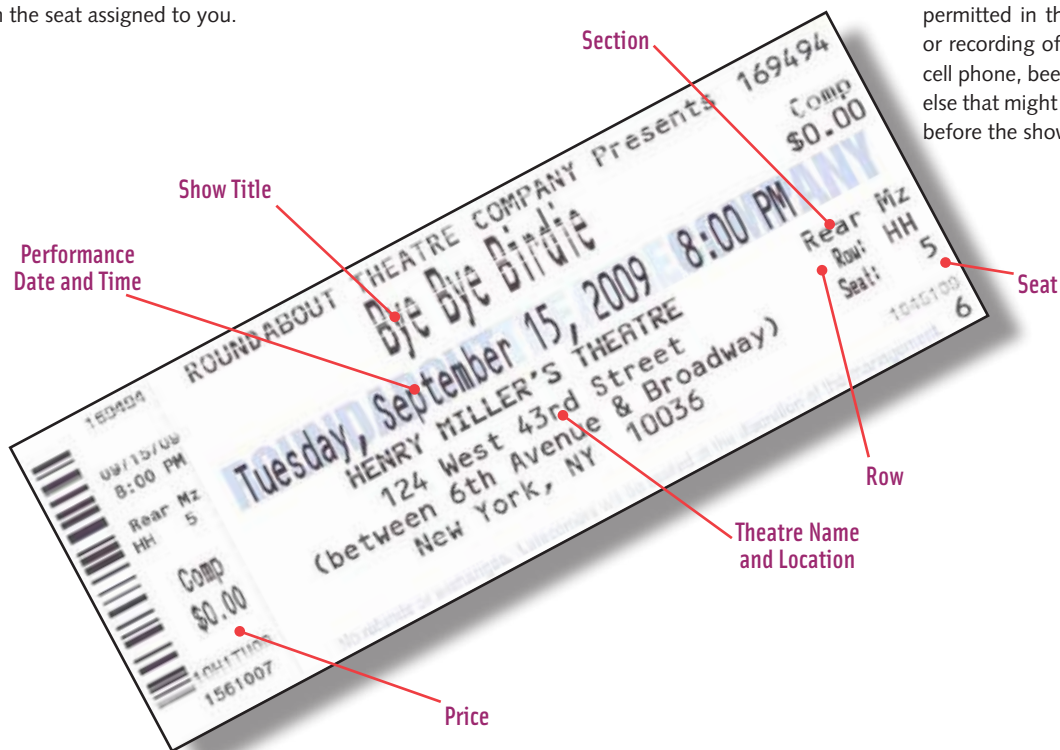
As a student participant in Producing Partners, Page To Stage or Theatre Access, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



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