

PROGRAM NOTES BY JOSHUA S. RITTER



When *The New Yorker* interviewed *Bye Bye Birdie*'s young producer Edward Padula in May of 1960, he stated, "I felt from the beginning that if I was going to dive off and take a chance, I might as well take a big one." With its hummable hit songs and riotously funny book, *Bye Bye Birdie* is certainly a risk that has paid off for Padula, Broadway, and countless musical theatre fans. Amazingly, when *Bye Bye Birdie* opened on Broadway on April 14, 1960, the producer, librettist, lyricist, composer, and most of the cast were virtually unknown. Chita Rivera landed her first leading role as Rose Alvarez. Leading man Dick Van Dyke made his musical comedy debut as Albert Peterson, and Dick Gautier made his first Broadway appearance as Conrad Birdie. Gower Champion had built up

considerable recognition as a dancer and choreographer, but *Bye Bye Birdie* would be his first experience as a stage director. Despite its unexpected breakout success, *Bye Bye Birdie*'s gestation period was somewhat prolonged and challenging.

Initially, the show's title was *Let's Go Steady*, and Padula announced plans to open in October of 1958. However, he decided to postpone the show due to problems with the book. The team kept hiring and firing librettists in an effort to find someone who could make the show work. Yet, Padula and his songwriters, Charles Strouse and Lee Adams, believed in the project and remained persistent in their efforts to find a book writer who understood their intentions. Finally, they recruited Michael Stewart. Stewart contributed a great deal and was responsible for the *Bye Bye Birdie*

plot as it stands today. Lyricist Lee Adams suggested that they build the story around an Elvis Presley-like rock star's induction into the Army, and Stewart latched on to this key plot element.

Many, including the show's songwriters, consider *Bye Bye Birdie* the first rock 'n' roll musical. Conrad Birdie has two rock numbers, performed as parodies. The style of these numbers closely resembles rockabilly, an early form of rock that blends country music with rhythm and blues. *Bye Bye Birdie* was certainly the first musical to use the nascent rock 'n' roll phenomenon as its primary theme. In fact, Edward Padula had a difficult time raising money for the show, given its revolutionary rock 'n' roll content and Broadway's widespread indifference to the burgeoning genre. To make matters worse, *Bye Bye Birdie*'s advance sales at the box office were abysmal. Nevertheless, *Bye Bye Birdie*'s fresh, ebullient, and satirical portrayal of youth culture won over the critics. Its enduring success paved the way for other rock-based musicals, such as *Hair*, *Tommy*, *Godspell*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *Pippin*.

Bye Bye Birdie's lively score produced such musical theatre favorites as "Put on A Happy Face," "A Lot of Livin' to Do," and "Kids." Composer Charles Strouse paired these classic show tunes with songs that demonstrated his understanding of the new rock 'n' roll sound, such as "One Last Kiss" and "Telephone Hour." Strouse's versatility, impressive musical training, and natural melodic gift positioned him to become one of the most celebrated musical theatre composers in Broadway history. Strouse earned his first of three Tony Awards for his work on *Bye Bye Birdie*. He earned his third Tony Award for the smash hit *Annie*, which had its world premiere at Goodspeed Musicals.

Choreographer and Director Gower Champion also won a Tony Award for his wonderfully imaginative dance routines and direction. His work conveyed an all-inclusive sense of stage movement by incorporating every stage element including set pieces and props. Having made his name working as a dancer

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on films, Champion brought a Hollywood sensibility to his Broadway projects. His unusual approach to stage direction and choreography made his work stand out even more. After Champion directed and choreographed *Bye Bye Birdie*, he never returned to performing.

Bye Bye Birdie won the Tony Award for Best Musical and Dick Van Dyke received a Tony while starring opposite Chita Rivera. The show launched Van Dyke's career and helped lead to a weekly television sitcom bearing his name: *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Although Rivera did not win a Tony for *Bye Bye Birdie*, she was nominated for Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Musical, and her performance established her as a versatile and extremely talented performer. Charles Strouse stated, "Birdie would never have been what it became were it not for Chita." Surprisingly, she did not win her first Tony Award until she starred in *The Rink* in 1984.

Jenn Thompson is making her Goodspeed debut as the director of *Bye Bye Birdie*. Thompson has a deep personal affection for the show, having played Kim and worked with Charles Strouse as Pepper in the Broadway production of *Annie*. Thompson endeavors to reinvest in the characters while tossing out any biased preconceived notions of what the show is expected to become. She would like to "both remind audiences of why they fell in love with *Birdie* to begin with, as well as surprise them with its craft and relevance." Thompson's fresh take on the youthful classic includes two added Strouse and Adams songs: "Bye Bye Birdie" from the 1963 film and "A Mother Doesn't Matter Anymore" from the 1995 television presentation. Her version of the show will also include new dance arrangements by Broadway's David Krane. Please "put on a happy face" and prepare to rediscover this gloriously entertaining musical comedy.



Dick Van Dyke and Chita Rivera in the original Broadway production of *Bye Bye Birdie*.



Charles Strouse and Lee Adams in 1960 at the recording session for the *Birdie* cast album.