

HELLO, DOLLY!

PROGRAM NOTES

By Joshua S. Ritter

Goodspeed Education & Library Director

When *Hello, Dolly!* opened on Broadway in January of 1964, the nation was still reeling from the shock of President Kennedy's assassination and apprehensive about the worsening situation in Vietnam. The Beatles invasion had just begun; a youthful fervor for change and rock 'n' roll was palpable. David Merrick, a preternaturally gifted producer, could sense the longing of another American generation. He undoubtedly knew the time was right to provide the comfort and nostalgia of a good old-fashioned Broadway musical. After all, he was in possession of a successful theatrical property that was screaming to be set to music. It could also serve as a star vehicle for Ethel Merman, and it contained a 1890's period flavor that would offer much-needed diversion from current events. Merrick began assembling a team of future Broadway legends to give music and new life to Thornton Wilder's highly-successful play *The Matchmaker*. The title would quickly change to *Dolly! A Damned Exasperating Woman*; *Call on Dolly*; and finally to *Hello, Dolly!*

Merrick hired Gower Champion and Michael Stewart, with whom he had previously worked on *Carnival!*, to stage and adapt the book for what would later be called *Hello, Dolly!*. Merrick hired the young Jerry Herman to compose the music soon after his success penning the score for his first Broadway musical, *Milk and Honey*. Champion, Stewart, and Herman worked together to anchor the show to the title song and "Put on your Sunday Clothes." These became massive production numbers, the former involving whirling waiters, trays of food, and Dolly Levi's grand descent down a flight of stairs. The latter was comprised of vibrant costumes, characters promenading in front of the Yonkers Depot, and a railroad engine car with a functioning smokestack. Both numbers built to a climax and then pushed beyond the limits of audience expectation. Unfailingly, the combined sensory and emotional effect of these scenes resulted in audiences erupting into applause.

Since these numbers were not essential or fully explained by the book, some considered them provocative. One of the reasons Hal Prince turned down an offer to direct *Hello, Dolly!* was because the book does not explain why the waiters are overjoyed to welcome Dolly Gallagher Levi back to the Harmonia Gardens. On the other hand, Champion, Stewart, and Herman were not afraid to divorce from the plot and literally manufacture the most show-stopping moments in the production. Their efforts worked brilliantly in this case, leaving us with some of the most iconic moments in Broadway history.

The success of the show also grew from Carol Channing's luminosity, hilarity, and personality in the defining role of her career as Dolly Levi. Channing was followed by a series of well-known stars in the title role, beginning with Ginger Rogers, then Martha Raye, Betty Grable, Bibi Osterwald (standby and replacement), Pearl Bailey as part of an all-black version with Cab Calloway, Phyllis Diller, and, finally, Ethel Merman in 1970. Although Ethel Merman was Merrick's first choice to play Dolly Levi, she did not accept the role until many years later because she was considering other offers and recovering

from her long run in *Gypsy*. As the eighth and final Dolly Levi in *Hello, Dolly!*, a part that was written for her, Merman said farewell to Broadway.

In addition to the star power described above, serendipity, source material, and inspiration helped propel *Hello, Dolly!*'s monumental success. *Hello, Dolly!* makes use of tested theatrical conventions such as archetypal characters that have delighted audiences since the time of Plautus; for example, the show includes the familiar miserly curmudgeon, heroine, dull servant, and ingénue.

The source material for *Hello, Dolly!* has been deftly refined and improved since John Oxenford first penned it in 1835 as a one-act English farce entitled *A Day Well Spent*. In 1842, Johann Nestroy, "the Austrian Shakespeare", attempted to improve upon Oxenford's play by writing a German version entitled *Einen Jux will er sich machen*. The Vienna Brucktheatre brought Nestroy's edition to New York and it peaked the interest of celebrated playwright Thornton Wilder. He adapted the German version of the play as *The Merchant of Yonkers*, which was produced in 1938. Despite the show's box office failure, distinguished director Tyrone Guthrie expressed interest in mounting a revival for the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland in 1954. Fortunately, at Guthrie's urgings, Wilder revised the script and changed the title to *The Matchmaker*. The hit show starred Ruth Gordon in the expanded role of Dolly Levi. Merrick moved *The Matchmaker* to London, then to New York where it was transformed into a beloved musical phenomenon.

Hello, Dolly! is one of the most lauded, enduring, melodious, and visually stunning musicals in history. It played for an unprecedented 2,844 performances on Broadway at the St. James Theatre. It also earned ten Tony Awards, a record that remained unbroken for 37 years. Thanks to a masterful combination of spectacle and storytelling, *Hello, Dolly!* continues to entertain us while affirming a fundamental human truth. It reminds us that we all need companionship, despite the (sometimes hilarious) challenge of finding and connecting with others.

Goodspeed's *Hello, Dolly!* will be directed by Daniel Goldstein, who directed the recent Broadway revival of *Godspell* and Goodspeed's *The Unauthorized Autobiography of Samantha Brown* at The Norma Terris Theatre. Goldstein can relate to the period of transition and uncertainty that the characters face at the top of the show. Goldstein states "I know that I've experienced those moments when my entire life seemed to hinge on a single day, when jumping off a precipice into an uncertain future is not only the most difficult thing to do, it's the only thing to do." *Hello, Dolly!* is a call to action; it urges us to leap into the unknown, to find love, to infuse our lives with the same spirit and bravery that drives Dolly Levi to overcome her grief "before the parade passes by." Thank you for choosing to adventure with us from quaint East Haddam to the rollicking streets and establishments of 1890s New York City. "It's so nice to have you back where you belong!"

