

INTERVIEW WITH

THE LYRICIST: LEE ADAMS

UPSTAGE RECENTLY INTERVIEWED BYE 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?

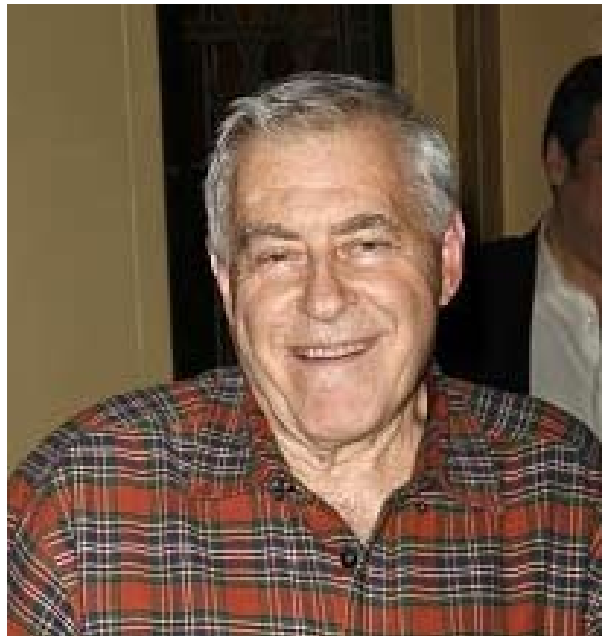
After 49 years the show is pretty set. But, yes, there are changes. I made some changes just the other day to accommodate our wonderful director/choreographer Robert Longbottom, who has to tailor the show to the stars we now have. He had some ideas, for example, about a song called "Spanish Rose", which 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. 