

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.

Especially 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. 

