

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. **UP**