

INTERVIEW WITH

THE COMPOSER: CHARLES STROUSE

UPSTAGE DISCUSSED THE SCORE OF *BYE BYE BIRDIE* WITH COMPOSER CHARLES STROUSE

When did you first realize you wanted to compose for the theatre?

When I got out of music school, I went to the Eastern School for music and then studied for a year at Tanglewood and then in Paris. I was going to be “a composer.” On my way there, out of college, I had to make a living and I started playing piano for singers, for classes, and rehearsals of shows. I played in strip clubs, I played in joints in the east Bronx. I was making a living. I’ve always had a feeling for jazz, but the Broadway musical caught me. It wasn’t my background, I was good at jazz, which was really the rock of its day.

Can you tell me a little bit about the inspiration for *Bye Bye Birdie*? How did that all come about?

First of all, there was a producer by the name of Ed Padula. He had seen some pieces that Lee Adams and I wrote in a show called “The Shoestring Revue.” We were very close friends with Mike Stewart, who wrote the libretto for *Bye, Bye Birdie*. We all worked up in a place called Green Mansions, where we did a revue every week. He had an idea about doing a show about teenagers, and it was a totally different idea than it turned out, because we added the rock ‘n’ roll singer. I added the rock ‘n’ roll music because Presley was in the ascendancy then, although he wasn’t really rock ‘n’ roll. I listened to a great deal of that music. It was a time when this teenage bubble was floating, and once we invented a rock ‘n’ roll singer, and Mike Stewart wrote this funny, funny plot (in my opinion), the rest came together. Lee and I like to think of *Bye Bye Birdie* as being the first rock musical, and I have no idea why people don’t mention it as that. We satirized it, we understood and absorbed it and we used it.

Do you remember who came up with the name *Conrad Birdie*?

Oh, yes, very easily. The first name that Michael wrote was Conway Birdie, and Conway Twitty’s lawyer called whomever and said that they would sue. There was a rock star by the name of Conway Twitty. Believe it or not, there was. I forget whose idea it was, but one of us changed the name to Conrad Birdie. The title *Bye Bye Birdie* was a great embarrassment to me at the time. I remember this distinctly because I thought it was a silly title, and for the first week for what were our first auditions for Broadway, everybody came in and sang “Bye, Bye Blackbird,” since no one had any idea of a rock show on Broadway. I mean at the beginning people wouldn’t even listen to it. We had years and years of playing it, and no one who liked Broadway liked the meaningful drumbeat that was rock ‘n’ roll.

You went through a number of different titles, is that true?

Yes, it was called, at one point, “The Day They Took Birdie Away,” “One Last Kiss.” “Going Steady” was another title. And for a reason that I guess was determined by the gods, the advertising agency said, “The posters are coming out, this is what it’s going to be.”

Can you talk a little bit about the changes you made to the show on its way to New York?

Well, it was my first Broadway show, so everything about it was precious and unnerving, but in retrospect, we made very few changes. I was desperate to throw out the song “Put On a Happy Face” because we wrote it for a place in the show on *The Ed Sullivan Show* where Dick Van Dyke, who has a very plastic face, was setting up the Sullivan show. The lighting people were flashing different colored lights on his face and the technicians were dancing and singing. It was wonderful, except the audience didn’t like it at all, and they didn’t like Dick in it. It was Marge Champion, Gower Champion’s wife, who suggested putting it into the first act where Van Dyke sang it to two sad girls and did a tap dance. That was a great source of embarrassment for me, too, because I was recently out of the school of music where I was writing fugues and sonatas and things. The idea that the first music my friends would see would be to a tap dance felt humiliating, but, of course, as soon as Dick did it, it stopped the show, so to speak. Dick became well loved at that moment and the song has gone on to become a standard.

What do you look for in a director?

Well, I would say someone who has an imagination of how a space can physically move and how the actors move around in that space. Gower was such a person and Bobby, our director for this revival, is too. The stage moves differently today. I would also say what I admire in a director is the ability to hear the spoken word for more than the just the literary meaning. Of course, Jerry Robbins was that type director. That’s what I look for. It has to do with rhythm and feeling. I’ve worked with a lot of book writers or librettists and a lot of them do not realize that it’s the rhythm, the music and the spirit that the music brings that are telling the story. There is kind of fluid undertone which I think directors like Robbins captured and, for me, that’s very meaningful.

Will there be new orchestrations for this version?

I know that Jonathan Tunick called me and he said

that he's on board. The first time on Broadway, we had a 23-piece orchestra and now it's not that size. What Jonathan, I think, is doing is bringing what was four woodwinds down to three or two. It takes a lot of musicianship to do that and still have the harmonies balanced and all. We had a master orchestrator, Robert Ginzler, do the original production. So I can't conceive that it's going to be completely rethought by Jonathan. The one thing I did discuss with Jonathan, and we had a disagreement about it, and I'm not sure whether he is right or not, is that I wanted to speak to the drummer and to the guitarist, and I wanted to use instruments that we didn't use before. We did not use an electrified bass, which has more of a ping to it, and I wanted to talk to the drummer about spiking up the drum parts a little bit. And Jonathan said, "Oh, no, you can't take it out of the 60s." And I said, "I'm talking about polishing it." I reminded him that not everyone listens as closely as he or I do. In "Annie" there were a number of songs, particularly "Tomorrow," that would never have been written in the 30s, and I was very sensitive to that fact and felt that some critic was going to mention it. But nobody mentioned it.

Are you making any musical changes for this production?

There is one brilliant one that Bobby Longbottom put in, which I don't really want to talk about because it surprised me. It delighted me and I'm hoping it will do the same to the audience.

Can you tell me a little about your reaction to the movie and TV versions of your piece?

Well, the movie was totally different from the stage show. But we had the very good dumb luck of having Ann-Margret play Kim. Lee and I both felt she was wrong, but she made it into a hit. Everybody remembers Ann-Margret. But the movie itself was decidedly different from the original version Mike had written. That movie had a different thrust, and it had a star who was no more Spanish than I am.

But they tried to make Janet Leigh look like Chita with the black wig and everything.

They tried. There was no reason in the world that they couldn't come up with a Latina. That's what made that character a success. We didn't even know it then. We wrote it originally for a Polish girl.

I read in the Gower Champion biography that you changed her name to Alvarez once Chita was on board.

Well, we wrote it for Carol Haney, who was going to do it, but she developed some problems right before rehearsal. We didn't know what to do— every joke was about her being Polish. "Polish is not a religion". "Polish is this...Polish is that". Albert's mother made fun of



her. They were going to live in Warsaw and all that. And when Carol declined, and Chita was a very close friend of ours, we said, "What about Chita?" And everyone said, "Wow!" And Mike had to change every joke to a Spanish joke— every one of them -- and they worked exactly the same way. We became more hip, if I may say so, which is an old fashioned word, but we became more "with it" for making her Spanish.

Do you have advice for any young people who want to compose for the theater?

You've got to hang out in or close to the theatrical world; which doesn't seem like good advice, but that's the thing that is going to do it. Hopefully by doing that, you'll catch on to one of the golden rings and pull on it. I do think that there is great difficulty in finding that golden ring or even getting people to read any of your compositions. I founded one of the workshops at ASCAP. It was a musical theater workshop like Lehman Engel did at BMI, and I think there's a kind of oiling of the machinery that happens at those workshops. But I also feel very strongly that it's not building the machinery. The machinery is built by having to sell your work. Lee and Mike and I performed *Bye Bye Birdie* a hundred times for people who could not have been less interested. We did not do a reading. I'm against readings, though I must say the workshop done at the Roundabout was terrific, I really liked it, but that show was done already. I do not believe that getting six disparate actors and getting them to do the script for backers who just came there for a pleasant afternoon is something that works. The only people who can really help you know what you have written is an audience.

I wanted to end by asking you if there was any question about *Bye Bye Birdie* that I should have asked, but didn't?

Well, *Bye Bye Birdie* was obviously a transitional point in my life. I wasn't married at the time and everyone called me Buddy. It was a time when I could finally have some confidence. I didn't have any self-confidence when I was writing serious music. I felt way, way out of it. 