

education

ROUNABOUTTHEATRECOMPANY

Bye Bye Birdie Lecture Series

On November 21st, 2009 at the Henry Miller's Theater, John Gilvey, author of *Before the Parade Passes By: Gower Champion and the Glorious American Musical* spoke with Ted Sod, Roundabout Theatre Company's Education Dept. dramaturge, about the original staging of *Bye, Bye Birdie* and that production's director/choreographer, Gower Champion.

Ted Sod: How did Gower Champion get involved with the original production of *Bye, Bye Birdie*?

John Gilvey: One of the things Gower wanted to do at the time was break into directing and choreographing musicals. He left Hollywood when the musical film was starting to decline and also he was hitting 40 years of age and, as any dancer will tell you, you start to lose jobs as you get older. He was offered the script of *Birdie* by Edward Padula, the producer of *Birdie*, and this was a first for Padula as well. It took sometime to convince Gower that this was the thing to do. Padula had offered the script to Fred Astaire, who turned it down because it did not resemble anything like what we think of as *Birdie* today. Morton Da Costa, who also directed *The Music Man*, turned it down and Gower also turned it down 2 or 3 times until he said, "Ok, you've improved it enough at this point that I can do something with it."

Ted Sod: Charles Strouse told me a great story about the title. They didn't have a title and the press office kept saying "We need a title!" and someone just blurted out *Bye, Bye Birdie* and that was it.

John Gilvey: *Let's Go Steady* was one of the early titles. It had so many titles. *Let's Go Steady*, *Love and Kisses*, *The Day They Took Birdie Away*, *Going Steady*, *Goodbye, Birdie*, *Goodbye* and then finally *Bye, Bye Birdie*. The story initially was quite different from the way we know it today. One of the big plot elements in it was a teenaged boy and girl trying to get parents back together, to fall back in love again.

Ted Sod: Like *The Parent Trap*

John Gilvey: Yes, very much like it. Gower wasn't interested in directing that at all. The character of Conrad Birdie, who was originally called Elsworth Birdie I believe, and then became Conrad Birdie, was based on Elvis Presley and Conway Twitty, who was a popular singer at the time. That character was very shallow and was hardly in the script at all until Mike Stewart, the librettist, and one of the greatest librettists in the American musical theatre, rewrote the script. He also wrote *Carnival*, *Hello Dolly!*...

Ted Sod: Didn't he work on *42nd Street* as well?

John Gilvey: He worked on *42nd Street*, yes, that was his last show with Gower.

Ted Sod: He also did *Mack and Mable*, I think.

John Gilvey: Yes, he wrote the book for *Mack and Mabel* and *Barnum*. Stewart got his start with Strouse and Adams up in a summer camp in the Adirondacks called Green Mansions. They did revues. Everyone associated with Birdie came out of the musical revue, including Gower Champion who had directed and choreographed two revues prior to this but never a full-blown Broadway musical like Birdie. Strouse, Adams and Stewart all started there. Stewart also worked for *Your Show of Shows* early on. All of these people are coming out of this revue format. When Gower finally got the version of the script that he started to work on, there were two different storylines, which is very unusual for a musical. You have subplots sometimes, but the two storylines – one being the Albert-Rose story and the other being the effect of this rock 'n roll star on Sweet Apple Ohio and the pandemonium that creates -- had to be sewn together in such a way that you couldn't rely on the conventional organization of the numbers. In a book musical the singing and the dancing are all driven by the story, the story propels those forward. One of the things that Bobby Longbottom, the director of this Birdie, did that was so great was that he made things move throughout. There was a lot of continuous choreographed motion. A lot of what we take for granted as a modern audience was because of Gower. That is one of the great things about this production – it doesn't stop moving. Gower was the master of that form. Used to be audiences would sit, the curtain would go down at the end of the scene, the orchestra would play madly, they would try and get things changed backstage as quickly as they could and then the next scene would start. Gower eliminated a lot of that; he streamlined the American musical. As a result, today we expect that when we go to the theatre we will see the same kind of transitions as we see in movies. Gower made those cinematic transitions happen very early on – that's really the legacy that he left us. Plus he was able to fill the stage with various levels of activity simultaneously. He was really a master of creating marvelous stage pictures and I think Bobby Longbottom has really picked up on that. This production really captures the spirit of the original vision of *Bye, Bye Birdie*.

Ted Sod: Let's talk about the libretto, because Gower had issues with it and they tried other writers including Elaine May and Mike Nichols. Ultimately it was Strouse and Adams that said, "Get Michael Stewart." Correct?

John Gilvey: Yes, and that was the best thing that happened to the show – Stewart coming in.

Ted Sod: But Gower was ruthless in terms of his requests.

John Gilvey: Yes, if the pace was lagging, he would say, “We need some zingers in here.” The mother-in-law of Rosie, Mae, she is right out of a Jewish mythology. What a brilliant creation from Michael Stewart.

Ted Sod: That role was originally played by Kay Medford?

John Gilvey: Yes, Kay Medford.

Ted Sod: Let’s talk about some of these characters. As you said they come from the revue format and the revue really functions around colorful personalities. Originally the role as Rosie was written to be Polish, right?

John Gilvey: That’s right. She was Polish Rose not Spanish Rose. Some of you may remember the fabulous dancer Carol Haney who was in *Pajama Game* and other musicals, she was slated to play Rose Grant – that’s what the character was named originally. She became ill and was not able to do it. Then they went to Eydie Gorme but she was pregnant and then the role fell to Chita Rivera.

Ted Sod: Casting Chita was suggested Lee and Strouse, right? Because they had worked with her in revues?

John Gilvey: I believe so, but in any case they had some connection to her and that’s why they wanted to work with her.

Ted Sod: When you talk about revues...Paul Lynde played Mr. MacAfee originally and he’s was introduced in a revue called *New Faces of 1952*. What about Dick Van Dyke? What was his history?

John Gilvey: He had been in a show called *Boys Against Girls*, I think it was a revue, the year before. He came to the fore with that show. Audiences instantly liked him. Here’s the thing – we look back in history here at the original production of *Bye Bye Birdie* and no one was a star, they were all relatively unknown. I don’t want to say completely unknown because Chita Rivera had been a smash in the supporting role of Anita in *West Side Story*. But they were all in the beginnings of their careers.

Ted Sod: They did a gypsy run-through for people in the industry, and they loved it. Then they go to Philadelphia and they are constantly making changes.

John Gilvey: The cast really didn’t expect the response they got at the gypsy run-through. That run-through was in an old Yiddish theatre down on Third Avenue and that’s where Gower usually rehearsed. They got such a response from the audience that they just sort of glided right into Philadelphia and when the critics saw it there they went gaga over it. They knew they really had something special. Well, the second night in Philadelphia some of the members of the cast started taking liberties with the show and Gower went through the roof. He called each of them in the backstage room he was

working out of one at a time and read them the riot act and got the level we wanted back. Susan Watson who was the original Kim MacAfee...

Ted Sod: She was 22 at the time.

John Gilvey: Yes...

Ted Sod: And playing Hugo was...

John Gilvey: Michael J. Pollard....

Ted Sod: ...from the Bonnie and Clyde film and he was 23, right?

John Gilvey: Yes. But Susan tells a story about when she first read the script, which was not what it ended up to be. She said, "How are they going to make something out of this drivel?" It was just a mess and every rehearsal Gower came in and knew exactly what he wanted to be and they all just trusted him. They would all be up in his dressing room rehearsing in teams. This was all in Philadelphia, by the way, and the changes are going in night after night. That was the way you could be sure, in those days, of whether a number was going to fly or not – from the audience response.

Ted Sod: I think this is a good segue way into Marge Champion, Gower's wife at the time, and her contribution. This was before she started having children, wasn't it?

John Gilvey: They had two boys and the first of the two boys was already born.

Ted Sod: But she was very much a part of this process. Can you tell them the story about her suggestion for "Put on a Happy Face"?

John Gilvey: Sure. The number "Put on a Happy Face" was originally written for Chita Rivera and Dick Van Dyke – for Albert and Rosie. Gower choreographed it for them and it got a great hand when it was performed, but it was predictable. Marge came up with the idea of having Dick Van Dyke dance with the girls. They did that and it worked like gangbusters; it was terrific and yet it was so unusual. At the time, believe it or not, the producers were not exactly thrilled with Dick Van Dyke's performance, but Gower redid the number for Dick and the girls and he was a smash, just like we saw with John and the girls today. Different choreography, but it's the idea, the concept and it connects.

Ted Sod: Gower was famous for building the shows around the talent that he had, so in many cases it was hard to find a replacement. Isn't that true? It's true of *Carnival* as well – these shows become very difficult to cast.

John Gilvey: Well, a show like *Carnival*, Gower's second show 1961, is difficult today because a lot of the entertainers that were available, the dog acts and things like that, were all part of vaudeville. Remember, Ed Sullivan was a televised vaudeville show, the

variety show that kept vaudeville alive, since it had died at the end of the depression. Ed Sullivan was the champion of vaudeville.

Ted Sod: Gower was an extremely disciplined person in his work and he was meticulous. But he may not have been the warmest person – is that true?

John Gilvey: Strouse tells a story that during rehearsals Gower would come in everyday wearing a different pastel colored sweater. And Strouse made the comment that “when Gower was wearing these sweaters he made the rest of us feel poor.”

Ted Sod: But then an all black outfit became Gower’s standard outfit for every show thereafter. And, actually, I think what you write in the book is what Strouse said was that Gower made everyone feel homeless. I want to talk a little about the fact that they needed \$75,000 right away because if they didn’t get it, they weren’t going to open.

John Gilvey: They were in Philadelphia and were ready to open the pre-Broadway tryout there and they got hit with a \$75,000 bill that was due. \$75,000 today would be kind of laughable but back then that was a big chunk of money. They were almost forced to postpone the opening. So Goddard Lieberson, who was the president of Columbia Records, made good on the \$75,000 if the producer provided Columbia the recording rights to the cast album.

Ted Sod: Goddard was really influential.

John Gilvey: Yes, if you look back at a lot of the original cast albums from Columbia his name is there all the time. We would not have the recording legacy of the original performances if it wasn’t for Goddard.

Ted Sod: Now it’s time for the audience to ask questions.

Audience Member #1: Was the Shriners’ ballet in the original Broadway production and, if so, why was it cut? And are there other changes you can discuss?

John Gilvey: Basically it’s the director’s choice to do that. Gower had two ballets. One was the Shriners’ ballet where the Shriners and Rosie are dancing on top of a long table and eventually they all end up under the table. It was a visual gag that went on for like seven minutes and it was really one of the highlights of the original production with Chita Rivera’s talents as a dancer. He wanted to showcase that, so Gower put two ballets in it for her. There was a ballet in the first act called “How to Kill a Man”, which was kind of a sarcastic take on how Rosie would do away with Albert if she had to. This is before Hugo comes along and says “I’m going to punch this guy out.” There are other instances where she would have an extended dance routine off a number. I think “One Boy” is one of those where she danced with luggage.

Ted Sod: He would build everything around the talents of the cast and again that’s what makes the piece very challenging when you come to do revivals.

John Gilvey: A good director always tailors the material to the cast at hand, just as Robert Longbottom has for this production.

Ted Sod: And every production, whether it's amateur or stock, has to deal with that because Gower's DNA is all over the show. So it is a very interesting dilemma and it is fascinating really. As far as the "*Bye, Bye Birdie*" number, many of you know that the film was made of this in 1963 starring Ann Margret who was 23 playing a 15 year old. And she begins and ends the film on a blue screen singing it. When Bobby Longbottom decided he wanted to use it for the curtain call, he wasn't even sure that Adams and Strouse had written the number because they changed almost everything about the musical for the film. They did keep Dick Van Dyke and Paul Lynde. But they cast Maureen Stapleton in the Kay Medford part and Janet Leigh for the Chita part and put her in Chita drag. She's made to look exactly like Chita and it is pretty bizarre. At any rate, some people love it and some people don't have any patience for it. I think Gower wasn't even remotely involved with it. Was it Onna White that did the choreography?

John Gilvey: I know George Sidney directed it and I think you're right about Onna.

Ted Sod: I think it was Onna White – I don't think Gower had anything to do with it.

John Gilvey: Gower was supposed to direct the film version of *Bye, Bye Birdie* but he developed ulcers. He had this ulcer condition that would come and go. Right after *Bye, Bye Birdie* opened and had been running no more than a few months he landed the contract to do the film. And Chita Rivera had actually done a screen test for the role of Rosie, which I have seen. It was Gower's intention, I think, to reunite as much of the original cast as possible.

Ted Sod: Because he wouldn't have to rehearse that much. It would have been fascinating if he had done it.

John Gilvey: The sad thing is that we don't have any of the choreography for his musicals because they weren't on film.

Ted Sod: Except for possibly some clips from Ed Sullivan.

John Gilvey: In fact, Ed Sullivan dedicated an entire show to Gower and Marge Champion which was unprecedented. But that gives you an idea just how famous they were as dance couple.

Ted Sod: And Marge is still alive. She's 90 years old still dancing.

John Gilvey: She just celebrated her 90th birthday on September 2nd. She still dancing and he partner is Donald Sadler. Many of you know him as one of the premiere ballet dancers and choreographers. He also did the choreography for the rival of *No, No Nanette* back in 1972.

Audience Member #2: Gower Champion and Bob Fosse were at MGM at the same time, both making musicals and then became Broadway director-choreographers. I'm sure they were aware of each other. Was there a rivalry between them? Were they offered the same shows?

John Gilvey: I believe that Bob had his heart attack when he was working on Chicago around 1975. There is a story that the show was offered to Gower but he turned it down. The other thing is that yes, they were together at MGM and they were even in a film together. It starred Debbie Reynolds, Marge and Gower and Bob Fosse. They worked together on the film and Stanley Donen – who we know as the director of *Singin' in the Rain* and so many other hit musicals – did the direction and choreography for that.

Ted Sod: I think there is always a bit of rivalry even though they respect each other's work. But they had really carved niches for themselves. For the longest time Gower was associated with family shows. This was considered a family show. *Carnival, Hello Dolly!, I Do! I Do!* All the way until *Happy Time*.

John Gilvey: Yes, *Happy Time* would be his last venture in family fare in 1968. What you have to remember in is the 1968 we had another show, which also has a revival right now, called *Hair*. And everything turned upside down. So what had been the convention for such a long time in musicals really changed; you couldn't rely on any of it anymore. Gower tried to reflect that change with a show that he took on in 1970 called *Prettybelle*.

Ted Sod: It's a sort of gothic, dark, southern piece that Angela Lansbury signed on to do.

John Gilvey: Which closed in Boston.

Ted Sod: Jule Styne did the music – which was gorgeous.

John Gilvey: Bob Merrill did the lyrics. Gower had worked with Merrill on *Carnival*.

Ted Sod: But Bob Fosse always had a sort of sexuality in his pieces.

John Gilvey: That's true Ted, but what we remember about Fosse's choreography is what we've seen it in the movies of *Cabaret* and *Sweet Charity*. So we know what the choreography looks like. And there have been videos of his work as well – there is one of *Pippin*, for example. His style is very distinctive, it is very unique and when you go see a Bob Fosse show you would expect to see his style of choreography. Gower was more of a chameleon and his choreography changed with the piece that he was directing. Therefore, the choreography for *Bye Bye Birdie* looks nothing like the choreography for *42nd Street* or *Carnival*. He created a unique style for every show that he directed. That is really the difference between the two of them.

Ted Sod: I think it is interesting that nowadays we don't necessarily have people like Fosse or Gower. The director-choreographers of today have not been given the

opportunity to create a large body of work. The thing about the original *Bye, Bye Birdie* is that David Merrick snapped Gower up. He waited until he had been tested. He had an assistant, Michael Shurtleff, who was a casting and acting guru, who kept pushing Merrick to take on Gower as a director.

John Gilvey: Merrick was the Florenz Ziegfeld of his day.

Ted Sod: His nickname in the business was The Abominable Showman.

John Gilvey: A real tough cookie. He produced scores of hit musicals and dramas and so forth. So within days of Birdie's opening Merrick sent the script for *Carnival* to Gower and, of course, Gower fell in love with it and that was his next project. Michael Shurtleff was supposed to have said to Merrick, "See I've been telling you about Gower Champion all along." And David Merrick said, "Well, we let someone else take the chance first and then we move in." That was the beginning of the collaboration between Merrick and Champion which went through seven shows.

Ted Sod: It wasn't easy, though.

John Gilvey: No. Well they were both control freaks and somebody had to have the upper hand at some point. But a David and Gower show was always something to behold on Broadway.

Audience Member #3: There was a long period of time when Gower did not have success –one flop after another. And then he sort of disappeared until 42nd Street. Can you illuminate what he was doing during those years? Was he working? Was he developing stuff? Because I think he did like a rock version of *Hamlet*.

John Gilvey: Yes, he did a show called *Rockabye Hamlet*.

Ted Sod: It was mostly the 1970s that he was gone.

John Gilvey: Remember his brand of musical theater fell out of favor and didn't fall back into favor until 42nd Street. Along the way, however, there were a few things I need to talk about. In 1972 there was *Sugar*. Not a big hit Broadway musical but it has a very respectable run over 500 performances and that was pretty good.

Ted Sod: We should just tell them that *Sugar* is a musical based on the movie *Some Like it Hot*.

John Gilvey: So that kept the name out there. Also, he did the revival of the 1919 musical *Irene* in 1973. He actually saved that show. He was called in very frequently to doctor shows that were in their out-of-town tryouts.

Ted Sod: Now *Irene* is the show that Carrie Fisher talks about touring in with her mother. If you have seen *Wishful Drinking*, she talks about being in her cabaret act and

then touring a show with her mother, Debbie Reynolds – that was the show. The original director was John Gielgud, if you can imagine. He was let go.

John Gilvey: The producers let him go because *Irene* was playing like *Hamlet* and it's supposed to be this bouncy bauble of a musical. Debbie Reynolds actually called Gower. She was the Champions next door neighbor when she was married to Eddie Fisher and, if I recall correctly, Debbie went to hide out at the Champions when the thing with Eddie Fisher and Liz Taylor broke. This was the first time she had been on Broadway so she called Gower and he came in and helped make it into a big hit.

Ted Sod: He also helped with the Liza Minnelli show *The Act*.

John Gilvey: Yes, in 1977. Martin Scorsese directed that show but behind the scenes was Gower Champion fixing the show because Mr. Scorsese is a film director, a brilliant film director; but not everyone makes the transition from film to stage easily. So Gower came in and doctored the show.

Ted Sod: If you read the published version of *The Act* there is a dedication to Gower. Anything else from the 70s?

John Gilvey: *Mack and Mabel*, we haven't talked about that at all yet. That show was supposed to reunite everyone who had made *Hello Dolly!* such as success ten years before. It was the story of Mack Sennett and Mabel Normand, the silent film actress. But Gower couldn't get the darn thing to work. The first act was happy and joyous and the second act was a downer. It was like two different musicals entirely. And Jerry Herman, the composer-lyricist who had written *Hello Dolly!*, put together a marvelous score, one of the greatest ever. They just couldn't make it work.

Ted Sod: Didn't Michael Stewart's sister try and make the book work?

John Gilvey: Yes, Francine Pascal did a revision but the book just weighs the whole thing down.

Audience Member #4: This isn't a question actually. At a concert at Lincoln Center last year Marge was dancing and she was amazing.

John Gilvey: As she did on September 2nd when I was at her 90th birthday party. I think she danced every number. One of the nice things about Marge's career is that she never stops. She is currently working on a documentary the title of which is something like *Never Stop Dancing* that should be coming out in the next 6th months.

Ted Sod: It has sort of become a cliché, the woman behind the man, but it is very true in the case of Marge and Gower and true in many other cases.

John Gilvey: He relied very heavily on her. The story of *Before the Parade Passes By: Gower Champion and the American Musical* is just as much about Marge as it is about Gower. They were together for twenty-five years.

Ted Sod: But he did slowly push her away from the collaborative process, right?

John Gilvey: He wanted to use his own ingenuity and his own creativity.

Audience Member #5: Was *Birdie* a success in its original production? And why did it take 50 years for *Bye Bye Birdie* to be revived?

John Gilvey: *Bye Bye Birdie* was the Best Musical of 1960-61 season and Gower received not only the Best Director Tony but also Best Choreography, too. So yes, it did handsomely at the box office.

Ted Sod: It ran for 607 performances. Then in 1981 the creative team tried to do a sequel, *Bring Back Birdie*, which was not successful. It ran for four performances. So they tried to capitalize on the popularity of this piece. If you turn to the person next to you, I can guarantee that many of them will say: "I was in it in high school".

John Gilvey: Well, it's the quintessential high school musical. I don't know any high school that hasn't done *Bye, Bye Birdie*. It brings back the era of the early 1960s. It looks at a time of American innocence before the assassination of Kennedy and celebrates that. Edward Padula was disturbed by *West Side Story*...

Ted Sod: It was a response to *West Side Story*.

John Gilvey: Exactly. He wanted a feel-good musical that would celebrate the goodness of the American teenager. He didn't want juvenile delinquents in his show. *West Side Story* was in 1957 and he really begins work on *Birdie* in 1958 as a response to that.

Ted Sod: And, of course, Elvis Presley going into the army was a big inspiration even though the name Conrad Birdie comes from Conway Twitty. Lee Adams or Charles Strouse, told me that he was called Conway at one point but Conway Twitty's manager said if you don't change it, we'll sue you. As far why it took so long to revive it is concerned, that's a great question. Again, finding the right personalities is always a challenge. There was a production in 1990 or so that went on an extensive tour with Tommy Tune, Ann Reinking and Marylyn Cooper who played Mae. And Marc Kudisch played Conrad. There was an attempt to bring it into New York at one point. Then in 1995 they made a TV movie that actually doesn't change everything like the Ann Margret version. That was with Vanessa Williams and Jason Alexander. Tyne Daly played the mom in that one. So there have been attempts to bring it back but timing was...

John Gilvey: The timing was right for this now. I think we do want to feel better about ourselves and I think this is the kind musical that allows us to do that.

Ted Sod: Escapism –they’re saying it’s all about escapism now.

John Gilvey: So the stock market goes down and *Bye Bye Birdie* goes up.

Ted Sod: Tell them what you are working on now, John.

John Gilvey: Right now I am working on a biography of Jerry Orbach. He has always been one of my favorite performers. When I was at NYU studying musical theater and writing my dissertation on Gower Champion’s musicals, I contacted Jerry to ask him if he would do an interview. The response was just so gratifying; he gave me his number and told me to give him a call when he was back in New York. Happily during the process of the interview when we were talking about *Carnival*, he said, “Let me take you twenty years ahead to 42nd Street. Sometimes these dissertations become books and you need this stuff.” Well, what a great thing for him to do. Applause Books is going to publish what we think will be called *Jerry Orbach: Prince of the City*, and it’s about his journey from *The Fantasticks* to *Law and Order*.

