

Bye Bye Birdie Director's Note

Bye Bye Birdie premiered on Broadway in 1960. With music by Charles Strouse, choreography by Gower Champion and stars Dick Van Dyke, Chita Rivera and Paul Lynde, it was destined to be a success. The production ended up winning Tony Awards in 4 of the 8 categories in which it was nominated, including Best Musical.

A show at the tale end of the Golden Age, *Bye Bye Birdie* helped transition musical theatre audiences from the hits of the 40s and 50s into the new age of musicals (that, admittedly, took a while to find their footing). Early hits from the 1960s have a Golden Age feel, even though when they came out, they “felt” new and different. This show is no exception. Featuring rock’n’roll music and a story based on a current event (Elvis Presley being drafted into the army in 1957), the story still features a lot of the classic Golden Age tropes that helped define musical theatre’s most successful era.

I have a special affinity for this musical. It was one of the first shows I was in when I was 9 years old (playing the role of Randolph MacAfee). I have always thought that this is one of the most fun shows from the Golden Age, featuring timeless themes like love, coming of age and family; all against a backdrop of fun, high energy dance numbers, often featuring screaming teenage girls that helped define a generation of rock’n’roll fandom.

What I love about this show is that it still feels relevant today, even 62 years after it’s premiere on Broadway. We gravitate to stories about what we know. This is a story about family and relationships. Love stories are as popular today as they were back then, and good comedy has an evergreen element to it. I think *Bye Bye Birdie* demonstrates both of those concepts clearly. While there are plenty of pop culture references in this show that could limit its shelf life, the other elements of the production and its overall energy are a testament to this show’s continued contemporaneousness.

When we chose this show, we were drawn to its themes, the number of roles for talented female identifying actors and a chance to do an “older” musical, as we have not produced a musical from before the 1980s in a while. Any time you choose a show from an earlier era, I think it’s incumbent upon a director to identify what makes this show noteworthy and decide whether it’s bona fides still resonate with an audience today. And I think this show passes muster.

While this is a show from the past, it is not a show ABOUT the past. It can’t exist in any era other than the one in which it was originally produced. However, we wanted to relieve the audience of any burden they may put on themselves to feel like they must have lived in or studied this era for the show to have meaning for them. So, we tried to design a world that helped the audience let go of that idea. While this show is set in 1960, it’s not set in a 1960s that requires a knowledge of current events or details about the cultural mores of the time.

It's a world best seen through caricature-colored glasses. We treated the world of *Bye Bye Birdie* as an unreliable memory from someone who was there. They are telling us the story, but details about locations and backstory are a little fuzzy to them, as they don't matter as much in the re-telling. Elements of the story are embellished, and people are re-drawn in ways to help better tell the tale. A teen from this era re-telling their story might see her father as a domineering presence, or Conrad Birdie as more of a mythic, larger than life figure. She might see her friends at the peak of their Birdie fandom acting in ways we would consider over-the-top. She might see all adult figures as "square" and behind the times. And while not necessarily fully accurate for the era, this person's story is therefore curated in such a way as to make the re-telling more engaging. And that's what we endeavored to do with this story.

I hope you can get lost in this dream world with us while watching the show. It's a fun slice of Americana through a very specific lens that is more focused on good storytelling than accurate representations of the past. It's a story of a girl who wants to grow up but finds herself clinging to a childhood figure of her past. It's a story about two people who are in love but are struggling to find a way to settle down and be together. It's a story about parents who are having trouble letting go. And it's a story about young people embracing a changing world as they themselves grew from teens to adults. The young teens go on a journey and come out unscathed and wiser for their experience while the more antagonistic characters have less satisfactory endings befitting their perfidy. This musical tells a story of change while representing the very change it helped model coming out of musical theatre's Golden Age.

This should be a lot of fun. I hope you enjoy it as much as we enjoyed getting to work on it. I have been personally lucky to get to come to work with these incredible artists day after day over the last few weeks, and I am so glad you will get to share in their work.

For the incredibly talented cast, crew, and designers, I thank you for coming and hope you enjoy the show!