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The Elegance of Gower Champion: An Analysis of His Style of Direction in the Musical Hello Dolly!

Mary Ann Snow Kabaker

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THE ELEGANCE OF GOWER CHAMPION:
AN ANALYSIS OF HIS STYLE OF DIRECTION
IN THE MUSICAL *HELLO DOLLY!*

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1953

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

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2005

This thesis, submitted by Mary Ann Snow Kabaker in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This thesis meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

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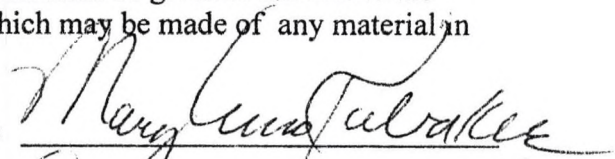
Title The Elegance of Gower Champion: An Analysis of His Style of Direction
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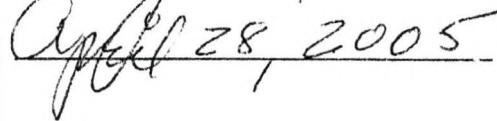


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To Kathleen McLennan

ABSTRACT

After early success as a performer and choreographer in night clubs, vaudeville road shows, theatre, film and television, Gower Champion launched a career as a director of Broadway musicals. In 1960, he began his Broadway career with the musical *Bye Bye Birdie*, and at once, proved himself capable of employing every element of production to fashion his unique work of art. In the works that followed (*Carnival* 1961 and *Hello, Dolly!* 1964, *I Do, I Do*. 1966, and *Happy Time*, 1968) he streamlined the American musical.

This thesis will focus on characteristics of his directing technique and rehearsal style. In directing, he promoted the application of an overriding idea uniting all the disparate elements of production, added continuous choreography to create a connection between scene changes, and invented unobtrusive transitions from dialogue into music. His rehearsal technique may be described as focused, disciplined and very well-prepared. Though his rehearsal allowed no time for nonsense, he treated actors and dancers with the ultimate respect.

This study analyzes Champion's directing and choreography and his rehearsal process for *Hello, Dolly!* Sources for the research include dissertations, critical reviews, relevant scholarly and commercial publications, and the personal experience of the author as a cast member as well as interviews with members of the cast and production team for the original production of *Hello, Dolly!* The thesis aims to explain why Champion was

the most critically acclaimed and commercially successful musical theatre director-choreographer on the Broadway stage during the 1960's.

CHAPTER I

GOWER CHAMPION: THE ROAD TO BROADWAY

Gower Champion was dancing professionally with his first dance partner before he was out of high school. When he was twelve years old, his Mother started him on dancing and piano lessons. Over his lifetime he would meet and work with many of the top film and dance choreographers in the United States and Europe. Even in these early years, friends, associates, and audiences were charmed by his natural charismatic stage presence and personal charm (Payne-Carter 1-4). Champion was born on June 33, 1919, the son of John W. and Beatrice (Carlisle) Champion, in Geneva, Illinois, just outside Chicago. He was named after his maternal grandmother, Belle Gower. John Champion was an advertising executive with Munsingwear, the undergarment manufacturer in Chicago. Mrs. Champion's friends thought of her as a carefree bride; those not quite as sympathetic considered her a social climber. She sometimes supplemented the family income by dressmaking, which she not only enjoyed but at which she was quite accomplished. Some customers found her tastes fussy, but others found her garments extremely beautiful and well tailored. She was a meticulous seamstress and nothing escaped her "eagle eye." Gower may have learned his eye for detail from his mother (Gregg Interview).

Sometime in the year 1919, when Gower was not yet a year old, his father John Champion announced that he had fallen in love with his secretary. John and Beatrice were divorced, and Beatrice was awarded custody of Gower and his older brother John Junior. Their father promptly remarried (Gregg Interview). Mrs. Champion was not able to handle living near her former husband and his new wife and began searching for other

possibilities. She finally decided on Los Angeles, a choice which would affect Gower deeply for the remainder of his life. He came to love California and considered it his home. Gower's mother may have been influenced by Aimee Temple McPherson's book, *This and That*. Sister Aimee had extolled not only California's glorious scenery and warm weather, but recounted how God seemed to bless her every move in Los Angeles. Los Angeles in 1920 was experiencing a land boom and the combination of expanding industry along with the eases of the lifestyle and the positive images of California projected by the book had provided Mrs. Champion with enough impetus to make the journey (Gregg Interview).

Beatrice Champion, with John Jr. and Gower in tow, arrived in Southern California early in January 1922. Although feeling abandoned, Mrs. Champion maintained communication with her ex-husband as each month letters arrived with money to supplement her meager income as a dressmaker. Their position was comfortable but she made certain that Gower and John had a poor image of their absent father. They settled in a middle class neighborhood surrounded by the movie industry and a booming economy. Mrs. Champion retreated into her Christian Science religion and even her best friends at times found her overly sanctimonious and suspicious. With a stern disciplinarian as their sole parent, Gower and his older brother grew up in a very protected atmosphere, their every activity closely monitored by their mother (Payne-Carter 1-5).

In the fall of 1931, when Gower was twelve, Mrs. Champion decided that it was time for her sons to begin acquiring the social graces she felt would be necessary in the Los Angeles circles to which she aspired. Gower began taking dancing and piano lessons at the Norma Gould School of Dance on Larchmont Avenue in Los Angeles, within walking distance of the Paramount Motion Picture Studios. There he met his first dancing partner, Jeanne Tyler (Payne-Carter 6).

Dance classes at the Gould School were more etiquette lessons than serious dance training. The boys learned to bow, one hand in front and one in back. The girls were carefully coached to keep their ankles crossed whenever they sat. When couples danced, the boys held handkerchiefs between their right palm and their partner's dresses, so as not to soil the girls' dresses. Gould herself was a very capable ballroom dancer. The beginnings of Gower Champion's personality and character traits stressing good manners, courteous old world charm, gracious demeanor, and elegant style were certainly formed during those early dance classes at the Norma Gould School of Dance in Los Angeles. At the end of the first year, Gould proposed a dance contest for the closing session. The students said they would participate only if Gower and Jeanne, who were the top dance partners, did not. So the other students could perform rather than compete, Gower taught them a simple dance number for the recital. Jeanne, dressed in one of her teacher's old costumes and danced with Gower as he sang, "May I Kiss Your Hand, Madam?" They were the hit of the evening. The dancers from Miss Gould's studio met and worked together as group for several years, performing at local schools, and various events in Southern California. Jeanne and Gower won most of the contests they entered (Payne-Carter 8).

After two years with Gould, Gower and Jeanne were ready for more advanced training. They enrolled as a couple at the Elisa Ryan Studio of Dance in Beverly Hills, famous for its "white gloves cotillions" (*Dance Magazine*, 33, 82) There they were in the company of the Beverly Hills set of child stars and children of stars, including Eric von Stroheim, Jr. and Shirley Temple. The Ryan Studio was far advanced over the polite exercises done at the Norma Gould Dance Studio. Under an expert teacher named Thomas Sheehy, Gower and Jeanne learned rudimentary ballroom steps and the basic variations: the waltz, foxtrot, the quick step (Payne-Carter 8-9).

The Ryan Studio also had a drama department, headed by Ben Bard, and both Gower and Jeanne had a flair for dramatics. On the evening of May 29th, 1933, the "Ben Bard Dramatic Groups" in conjunction with the "Thomas Sheehy Dancers" gave a recital at the Elisa Ryan Auditorium (Elisa Ryan Recital Program, May 29, 1933). One of the offerings was Oscar Wilde's *Birthday of the Infants*, with Gower Champion as the Count of Terra-Nueva. A tango was choreographed for the piece and performed to great acclaim by Gower and Jeanne (Ryan Program 9).

In 1933, Gower was 12 and was attending the Hubert Howe Bancroft Junior High School. According to photos in Marge Champion's Collection, he was somewhat small for his age and slightly spindly and, as was mentioned, a full head shorter than his earlier partner Jeanne Tyler, who never grew much beyond five feet. According to Marge Champion, the lack of a firm father figure intensified by his mother's religious belief and strict moral code made Gower fiercely private and polite to a fault (Marge Champion Sagal Interview.). Some of his classmates found him cold, aloof, and a spoiled brat, and they nicknamed him, "The Young Prince." Mrs. Champion's total commitment to the Christian Science dogma may have been a major influence in the development of Gower Champion's personality and character and ultimately the style and definitive traits of discipline that he brought to his career as a choreographer and director (Gregg Interview).

In history class at Bancroft Junior High School, Gower sat behind a petite, vivacious blonde named Marjorie Belcher, who was later to become his wife (Sagal Interview). She had not noticed much about him until later at the end of the year when Gower and Jeanne performed their customary ballroom turns at a talent show. Marjorie had not even known that Gower was interested in dancing. Marjorie's father was Ernest Belcher, a famed Hollywood silent film choreographer, known as the "Ballet Master to Movieland." Marjorie had been teaching at her father's well-attended dancing school and at the same talent show performed her specialty, a Portuguese Hat Dance. Naturally her

father came to see her and saw Gower and Jeanne perform as they took their “ballroom turns.” Belcher was so impressed with Gower Champion’s innate ability, his boyish charm and his natural stage presence that he offered Gower a full scholarship to the Belcher School of Dance (Payne-Carter 12).

The Ernest Belcher School of Dance was Champion’s first experience with systematic dance training. Belcher had himself started out as a ballroom dancer called “The Celestes.” He and his partner had played musical halls in his native England but he gained his reputation as one of the premiere dancers at the Alhambra Theatre, a music hall in London. Belcher’s fame in the United States came after moving to Hollywood, opening a dance school and subsequently directing dances for film. His success was the result of his track record of usable film takes, meaningless time wasted on poor footage or time filming (Payne-Carter 13).

Belcher’s strength and talent also lay in his ability to analyze the choreographic needs of the camera, plan the work carefully and decide exactly what he as the director wanted. He also preferred to cast only dancers that he had trained himself. He was especially careful to recruit men who looked and “acted like real men” who had been trained in his method and thus could respond immediately to produce camera-ready routines. He was sought after by such luminaries as D.W. Griffith. (Payne-Carter 13).

In her book, *Science and Health - with Key to the Scriptures*, founder Mary Baker Eddy states that all of our reality “is infinite Mind [God] and its infinite manifestation, God is all-in-all. Spirit (God) is immortal Truth (God). (God) is the real and eternal; matter is unreal, temporal and mortal error. Man is not material, he is spiritual. Christian Science disposes of all evil. Light [God] extinguishes darkness and truth destroys falsity and error. Light and darkness cannot dwell together... all is Spirit [God], divine Principle [God] and its idea (Eddy 472-475). Gower Champion’s style and persona were considered extremely “elegant.” Each of his artistic achievements were

graced with the stamp of his romantic and lyrical style. His manner was bright and positive, his style upbeat and intelligent. There was nothing of dark side or the “underbelly” of life as was evident in the sexual overtones in the work of Gower’s contemporary, choreographer Bob Fosse. The Champion traits of discipline, organization and old-fashioned morality stem not so much from the early dance training as from a strong religious morality. His manners were impeccable and his respectful character came straight from the strong religious indoctrination of his Mother and the metaphysical works of Mary Baker Eddy in founding the Christian Science Religion and Theology which was espoused by Mrs. Champion.

During his formative teen-age years, Champion had the benefit of Ernest Belcher’s highly successful choreographic and directorial skills, which certainly provided a major influence in shaping the unique “Champion Style.” Much of Gower Champion’s skill and success as a choreographer and director came from his methodical, repetitious and painstaking preparation. His organizational skills were phenomenal and unique. Gower also preferred to cast dancers that he knew and who understood his technique.

Gower Champion’s personality flourished at the Belcher School of Dance. He was not interested in the formal classic ballet instruction for which the school was famous, and he would fall out of the most elementary ballet positions. To cover his error, he would break up the class by crawling around the piano, climbing on top of it and charming his very famous teacher, wrapping him around his little finger. Everyone had a good laugh (Champion-Sagal Interview).

Champion’s sense of humor as a choreographer/director earned him the respect and love of the dancers he hired. Dancer Nicole Barth who had been hired by Gower for several productions, including *Carnival* and *Hello, Dolly!* comments on Champion’s “sense of fun”:

There was always this sense of fun with Gower, because he was so well prepared he could relax and enjoy himself.... I had a ball with Gower. I'm not sure I knew exactly what I was doing, but I just had a great time (Barth Interview).

Ed Kresley, Dance Assistant to Gower Champion in the original *Hello, Dolly!*

also comments on the Champion charm and sense of humor:

I adored Gower. He was absolutely my mentor, he was responsible for the rest of my whole career. Everything he did had a sense of fun in it. And that's how he worked with all his people. We all loved him,...he rarely raised his voice, and there was this love and sheer respect for what he did. We, the dancers and the company, trusted him so very much. He was a marvelous man. I learned so much from him diplomatically, how to handle people (Kresley Interview).

Gower Champion's professional career really began when in 1936 he and Jeanne Tyler entered and won the *Los Angeles Examiner* "Veloz and Yolanda Waltz to Fame" ballroom contest at the famous Coconut Grove Club in Los Angeles. Among the judges were Val Raset, a talent scout from the Metro Golden Mayer film studio, George Calhoun, the president of the Screen Directors Guild, Dave Gould, creator of such dance crazes as The Carioca and The Continental, Roy Randolph a local dance instructor, and the famous dance team of Veloz and Yolanda. Talent scouts from Music Corporation of America (M.C.A.), one of the largest talent agencies in the country which booked acts into nightclubs and theatres across the country, were also on hand and immediately signed up the young dance team, the youngest of all the participants. (Payne-Carter 19).

With the first prize money of \$150.00 Gower bought his first dinner jacket and Jeanne purchased material to make dancing dresses. The other first place prize was a one week booking at the Coconut Grove Nightclub (Payne-Carter 19). Gower and Jeanne had entered the contest without thinking they might actually win. As a result they were totally unprepared for a week's engagement in a night club. It was their youthful charm that had won over the judges. With no real prepared routine, they asked Tom Sheehy, their dancing teacher at the Ryan Dance Studio to help them with a routine. Gower supplied most of the ideas, while Sheehy coached.

The routine was a success and the week's engagement at the Coconut Grove was extended to a six week run. The Music Corporation of America (M.C.A.) had already booked them into the Mural Room at the Hotel St. Francis in San Francisco , where they danced for nine weeks beginning on July 17th, 1940 (Advertisement in *Variety* 43). Although they were a solid hit, neither Gower nor Jeanne nor Mrs. Champion, who had accompanied them to San Francisco, thought that much more would happen put after next chronological step

The duos dancing during these years was composed entirely of their own dance routines with all the choreography supplied by Gower and coached by Thomas Sheehy or Ernest Belcher. Though technically uncomplicated, it was not the complex dance routines that endeared them to the audience. It was their reaction with each other, their enthusiasm and joy, which caught the audiences in their spell. By the end of the end of the act, the audiences were considered as friends and were overjoyed to see their young friends having so much fun. This aspect of "creating a joyful atmosphere" is part of the Champion legend as well. Although they were a solid hit, neither Gower, Jeanne, nor Mrs. Champion thought that much more would happen (Gilvey 23-27).

The young duo's booking agency M.C.A., however, had big plans for the couple. They had secured a booking in the Gold Coast Room at the Drake Hotel in Chicago for October. The Coconut Grove asked them to return for six weeks, a run which ended in September, 1936. In October, 1936, Gower and Jeanne, with Mrs. Champion chaperoning, set out for Chicago. Their billing was "America's youngest dance team" (*Dance Magazine* 33, 82).

The Chicago run was pivotal in the future of Gower Champion's career. Mrs. Champion, as chaperone had enrolled Gower and Jeanne in ballet and tap classes, filling their days with rehearsals and classes and some sightseeing. The couple would rehearse

in the afternoon and rework each move until a way was found to keep it fresh and spontaneous (Payne-Carter 24).

Champion's later rehearsal habits were visible at this early stage. Since his early dance training had been minimal, he had to find the steps and methods for himself. From his earliest days he had the patience to repeat movements over and over again. It was not unusual for Champion to spend hours working out the choreography to just a few bars of music (Estridge and Sagal Interviews).

Upon concluding a seventeen week run at the Drake Hotel, M.C.A. scheduled the team for a series of tours with some of the leading dance bands of the day. These "road shows" with the Eddie Duchin and Guy Lombardo Orchestras took Gower and Jeanne to Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Pittsburgh and Detroit. Essentially a vaudeville entertainment, the road show was built around a popular dance band or singer, as a "headliner" with lesser acts such as acrobats, ventriloquists, and dance teams comprising the balance of the bill. A "featured act" appeared after these lesser acts and was second in billing only to the headliner. A final "unknown" act would appear before the appearance of the headliner and the finale (Gilvey 27).

By studying the billing structure of these early vaudeville road shows, Gower gained skills in manipulating an audience's attention and expectations. He applied these early lessons in the director's craft to his own act with successful results. A review states:

Gower and Jeanne, mixed team, have the next-to-shut spot. That's a big order for their type of act. Why they are so situated on the bill becomes apparent before they have danced out half their first routine. To say they are distinctive would be an understatement; to mention their refreshing youthfulness, their swell routines, surprise lifts, would only give a sketchy impression of one of the most unique dance duos to come to Boston in many a season (*Variety* 11 Feb, 1937: N. pag.).

Gower and Jeanne's rise to "featured" status on the road prompted M.C.A. to plan an engagement at one of New York City's top clubs. In preparation, the agency scheduled them to open the new Normandie Roof of the Mount Royal Hotel in Montreal, Canada, on June 17, 1937 (Advertising Poster, Jeanne T. Hoyt Collection).

The critics were united in their praise. Morgan Powell of the *Daily Star* described them as "the apotheosis of carefree youth" and added, ". . . while they are manifestly at home in every form of ballroom routine, they can also introduce a variety of steps and poses . . . with rhythmic grace. They were vociferously and deservedly applauded and recalled again and again." (Powell, "*Montreal Daily Star* 18 June. 1937, N. pag.) *Daily Herald* reporter William D. O'Hara called them "the real hit of the evening", the most expert ballroom team seen here for a long while," and "glib and assured comedians" (William O'Hara, "Mount Royal's Normandie Roof Open Last Night," *Montreal Daily Herald* 18 Jun. 1937: n. page)

Weeks later, Gower and Jeanne continued to impress:

They are certainly well worth seeing, not once but many times for their dancing always seems novel fresh and expressive of the spirit of youth, and put so much of their personalities into it that it seems something beyond the usual clever team exhibition (Morgan Powell, "Normandie Roof Show Continues to Attract Enthusiastic Patrons," *Montreal Daily Star* 20 Jul. 1937: n. page).

In a little more than a year, Gower and Jeanne had succeeded in creating an act at once polished and free of cliches. Most ballroom teams of the era mimicked the slick Latin style of Veloz and Yolanda or the airy sophistication of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, but Gower and Jeanne transcended this norm with "an inexhaustible stock of new and unusual features and routines" (Powell N. pag.)

An article from the *Montreal Daily Star* dated July 27 describes these works as: "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes," a romantic dance; "Calamity Jane," a sprightly, carefree number; "Tango Argentine," a thrilling South American routine; "Japanese Sandman" which brings the lure of the Orient; and "Darktown Strutters Ball," a favorite of veteran dance lovers with the pair stepping around the corner,

they join in a full-fledged cakewalk -- a real Dixie strut but with sensational trimmings (Gilvey 32).

Champion's adaptation of these "story dances" liberated a form of expression previously found only in ballet and challenged the expectations of audiences accustomed to more conventional fare from dance teams (Marge Champion Interview, 10 Dec 1992). In the late Forties and Fifties, similar story-dances would become the trademark of Gower's night club and television performances with Marge Champion. They also prefigured the ballets he would later choreograph for the musical theatre. Champion was becoming a director, applying to the act what he had learned on the road while touring with dance bands. Out of a sizable repertory, he would prepare a series of routines for each engagement which in turn became miniature revues mixing dance and music with drama and ballroom spectacle (Gilvey 33).

Gower and Jeanne were held over at the Normandie roof for eighteen weeks...a record length, since most acts usually play only two to three weeks at the most (Jeanne Hoyt Interview). Following engagements at the Cleveland and Boston Statler Hotels with the Sammy Kaye Orchestra, the team arrived in New York City for the debut at the Waldorf Astoria's Empire Room on New Year's Eve, 1937. Within a week they were moved to the more prestigious Sert Room. Soon they were "the only dance team of the Thirties to play all three top night clubs in New York: The Sert Room at the Waldorf, the Persian Room at the Plaza Hotel and the Rainbow Room atop Radio City Music Hall in the Rockefeller Center on Fifth Avenue," (Payne-Carter 40).

Choreographer Robert Alton had seen the team perform while in Montreal. Gower and Jeanne were invited by Alton to incorporate their act into a Broadway review opening in the summer of 1939. Upon concluding performances at the Palmer House in Chicago and a tour with Wayne King's Orchestra, they joined the cast of Alton's Broadway show *The Streets of Paris* (Gilvey 35).

Gower and Jeanne presented the newest dance craze in the show called "Doin' the Chamberlain," a political satire mocking British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's recent sellout of Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany (Green 183).

The Streets of Paris, which opened on June 19, 1939, concluded an eight month run at the Broadhurst Theatre in February 1940. Next a tour of the United States to the cities of Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh and Chicago, where it closed on May 8, 1940. By the middle of June, Gower and Jeanne were back in New York as featured performers in the stage spectacular at Radio City Music Hall (Gilvey 38).

The team returned to Broadway in January 1942 with the musical *The Lady Comes Across*. British film and music hall star, Jessie Mathews was to have made her American debut in the musical, but during the Boston tryout the stress of not having danced on stage for almost ten years and of being separated from her husband and daughter during the height of the London blitzkrieg overwhelmed her, she attempted suicide by jumping from a window of the rehearsal hall (Jeanne Hoyt Interview). Gower and Jeanne saved her, but she was not able to perform. Though the musical opened and closed in New York on January 10, 1942, it gave Gower and Jeanne the opportunity to work with choreographer George Balanchine, considered one of Broadway's most innovative choreographers. Like Robert Alton, Balanchine was so impressed with Gower and Jeanne that he allowed them to create their own dance sequences for *The Lady Comes Across*. (Payne-Carter 62).

Gower Champion had been given a draft deferment for the military due to his being the sole support of his mother. However, as the war intensified Gower felt the necessity to serve his country and joined the United States Coast Guard in 1942 (Payne-Carter 40). Seaman First Class Champion spent his first year of duty as a platoon leader on Catalina Island off the California coast. In his second year, he was recruited as a dancer for the Coast Guard musical, *Tars and Spars*. Champion toured the United States

with the show and spent his third and final year as a public relations worker aboard a troop transport in the Atlantic and Pacific (41).

Discharged in the fall of 1945, and looking for a job, he decided to establish himself as a solo dancer: "I hated it, but it was the only thing I knew how to do. I could make good money dancing and it was better than working in chop suey joints or grousing around looking for a job" (Gower Champion qtd in Rex Reed 1, 3). He resumed lessons with Ernest Belcher who quickly wrote his daughter Majorie in New York, "Boy is back in town." Belcher's hope was that Marjorie and "Boy," as he fondly referred to Champion, would form a team (Marge Champion Interview).

At the time of Champion's discharge from the Service, Marge Champion was known professionally as Marjorie Bell and was appearing in the Broadway production, *Dark of the Moon*. She invited Gower to New York City, and he accepted and arrived in New York looking for a job. Champion auditioned for several Broadway shows with no results. Harold Rome's *Call Me Mister* and Irving Berlin's *Annie Get Your Gun*. Gower picked up his relationship with Marge only to delay the courtship with a quick trip back to California in 1946 for a film contract with Metro Golden Mayer. The results were disappointing, yielding only "one rotten picture -- *Till the Clouds Roll By* -- in which I danced across the screen in strawberry pink hair with Cyd Charisse"(Champion qtd in Rex Reed 1, 3). Returning to New York, he asked Marjorie to become his new dancing partner (Gilvey 43).

With Marjorie and his boyhood friend, Jess Gregg, Champion moved into a combination living and rehearsal space in Manhattan's Greenwich Village, converting an abandoned church for their use. Marjorie's Broadway show had closed leaving her free to work daily with Champion on a night club act which would further develop and refine the "story dances" introduced by Gower and his former partner. Before long these dances would become the hallmark of their work.

As Champion later explained:

Rather than merely show pretty patterns in our act, which was standard procedure in night clubs, we always based every dance on a story -- comic, romantic or serious. We eliminated the familiar whirls and twirls, and in their place, fixed within a limited range, we substituted two and three-dimensional choreographic movements (Gower Champion, "And How They Dance!," N. pag.).

Champion planned to introduce the new act in Montreal atop the Normandie Roof where he had enjoyed such earlier acclaim. As Christopher Gower and Marjorie Bell -- Gower and Bell for short -- the team was quickly booked for an engagement beginning April 25, 1947. Additional appearances included the Bradford Roof in Boston, the Municipal Opera in St. Louis, and the Palmer House in Chicago. By autumn they would be ready for the Persian Room of the Plaza Hotel in New York.

While in Boston, Marje was asked to audition for Agnes de Mille for the new Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *Allegro*. Gower offered to find another partner for the New York opening, but instead he proposed and she accepted immediately. Between their Palmer House engagement in Chicago and their New York opening at the Persian Room, they flew to Los Angeles to be married on October 5, 1947. Their New York debut as Marge and Gower Champion came on October 8, 1947 as the featured act to headliner Liberace.

Soon the Champions were headliners themselves performing with the most popular orchestras of the day at Washington D.C.'s Mayflower Hotel in November and later the Boston and Statler Hotels in January and February 1948 (Gilvey 48).

Gower Champion wanted very much to choreograph a Broadway show. His chance came rather unexpectedly in 1948, when he was offered a revue entitled *Small Wonder*. Pending the completion of the Midwest tour he eagerly accepted. Circumstances intervened however, and Marge Champion became so sick with an injured right knee that they were forced to cancel remaining engagements because of a cyst on her kneecap which required immediate surgery. Lacking emergency funds, Marge

recuperated at her new father-in-law's home in Chicago, and later drove with Gower to Los Angeles where she spent the remaining time in Gower's mother's care (Gilvey 49). With his wife not able to perform and rehearsals for *Small Wonder* not due to start until late in July of 1948, Champion was unemployed until George Bauer, an old Coast Guard buddy from the *Tars and Spars*, days and then music director for a revue scheduled to open at the Las Palmas Theatre in Los Angeles in mid June, asked Champion to act as a "consultant". Bauer's "consultant" began attending rehearsals, soon advanced to choreographer, and by opening night was responsible for most of the actual direction of *Lend an Ear* (Gilvey 50).

This "intimate revue," with sketches, music and lyrics by Charles Gaynor had been headed for Broadway when the author was drafted. Following the war, Gaynor and actor William Eythe staged a successful revival at a summer theater and Eythe later offered to produce the show on the West Coast. In addition to Eythe, the twenty-one member cast included dancer Gene Nelson and a tall, wide-eyed blonde, named Carol Channing. "*Lend an Ear*," as Channing later recalled, "was Gower's first directing job and my first decent part. It was his wife and then assistant, Marge, who saw me and had me audition for the final role to be performed." (Carol Channing qtd in Hirsch 52) Champion's choreography in *Lend An Ear* showed remarkable versatility and was enthusiastically received by Los Angeles theatre critics. Producers were encouraged to plan a Broadway production.

Meanwhile, Champion's entry into the Broadway choreographer's inner circle was not going to happen with the musical, *Small Wonder*. During rehearsals in the summer of 1948, director Bert Shevelove firmly controlled the proceedings, leaving little opportunity for any creative staging which had distinguished Gower's work in *Lend An Ear*. The more the director edited the dances, the more Champion chafed under Shevelove's direction. Champion won director Shevelove's approval only after a long

battle and though *Small Wonder* received mixed notices for its opening on September 15, 1948, and ran only 134 performances; its choreographer still earned favorable comments. John Chapman reported that “the dance numbers are a credit to Gower Champion, *New York Daily News*, 1948 N. pag.) while George Curry found the choreography “pretty, sophisticated and restrained”) (Curry N. pag.).

After the opening of the musical, *Small Wonder*, the Champions played a return engagement at the Persian Room in New York’s Plaza Hotel. By the end of their run, the Broadway production of *Lend An Ear* was headed for New York, and Champion as director-choreographer prepared for the December 16 opening at the National Theatre. (Gilvey 54).

Lend An Ear was a smash hit. “Gower Champion’s highly original choreography makes fresh windmills of the dance. . . observed William Hawkins of the *World-Telegram* (Hawkins 28). “Was Gower Champion saving his best stuff for Broadway on the choreography line in this show; asked the *Morning Telegraph’s* George Freedley, “or was *Small Wonder* just a second thought which he cared too little about?” (Freedly N. pag.).

The *Herald Tribune’s* Walter Terry concurred:

Champion emerges as a more broadly versatile choreographer. In this, he exhibits greater skill in group direction than in *Small Wonder*. The dances have more substance, while the dynamics and phrasing movements are clearer and sharper. In addition, the patterns are fresh, novel, often complex, yet remain completely in character with the themes (Terry, N. pag.).

Champion had proven that he could efficiently orchestrate an entire evening’s entertainment by tailoring innovative staging and movement to the demands of the material at hand. *Lend An Ear* was the result of the lesson learned from his night club work, especially the story dances. For *Lend An Ear* Champion was honored with the

Antoinette Perry Theatre Wing "Tony Award," the Donaldson and Dance Magazine Awards as the Best Choreographer of the 1948-1949 season (Suskin 383).

Television's first variety show, *The Admiral Broadway Revue*, later known as *Your Show of Shows*, starred comedians Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca in a ninety-minute production sponsored by the Admiral Television Company. The show presented the best in theatrical and night club entertainment in a weekly television show. The producer of the show, Max Liebman, had been an associate of Gower Champion while he was in the military show, *Tars and Spars*, and he offered the Champions a contract which they accepted immediately. They made their television debut on January 28, 1949, with two numbers: "The Night Has A Thousand Eyes," and "Dance With Me," the opening to their night club act (Gilvey 30).

The "new-to-television" format of *The Admiral Broadway Revue* generated extensive press coverage. *Life* magazine sent a crew of photographers and reporters to cover rehearsals. And in April, when the Champion's performed for the very prestigious White House Correspondents Dinner in Washington, D.C., President Truman was in the audience and remained for their performance hailing them as the 'personification of American youth and goodness,' *Life* publisher Henry Luce was also in the audience and noting the high praise from the Truman endorsement, featured the dance team on the March 7, 1949 cover of *Life* magazine (Gilvey 56-57).

In *The Admiral Broadway Revue* television show, Champion once more adapted his work to a new medium, one that demanded a distinctly different approach from night clubs or Broadway shows. Working with *Revue* choreographer, James Starbuck, he soon learned that television showed large groups of dancers best when they moved in unison. Intricate ensemble work was most effective when limited to groups of four, five or six dancers. Dance duets with partners distanced more than five feet were ineffective due to

long camera shots. "Close ups" could capture subtleties of movement often lost in the theatre (Gilvey Diss. p. 58).

Gower began applying these techniques in performances with Marge throughout the 1950's on television programs such as the *Ed Sullivan Show*, *Steve Allen* and *Dinah Shore Shows (Carnival, 1961: 8)*. In time, the networks would call on him to direct musicals, dramas and special presentations. What he learned from these experiences in turn influenced his staging for the musical theatre. In the musical *Carnival*, Champion introduced the small all-dancer corps" of four in "Sword, Rose and Cape," (Mordden 173) and for the title number in *Hello, Dolly!*, "he used both the position of the male chorus and a dramatic shift in lighting to bring the audience in for a 'close-up' of Carol Channing during the verse of the song" (Payne-Carter 128).

When an offer to direct and choreograph the Broadway musical *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* (1949) failed to materialize, Champion resumed his night club performances with Marge:

You danced whenever you could get a job and you went wherever the job happened to be. We finally worked our way West into the Mocambo (Los Angeles), a tiny place about the size of a four-room apartment, full of posts and pillars, it was awful, but we needed the money. Like a B movie, we were an immediate smash and it was New Year's Eve every night. The act had a lot of hokey-pokey stuff in it, but it had class too.... (Gower Champion qtd in Rex Reed N. pag.).

The praise of the Los Angeles critics brought the team numerous offers, one of which was a film for Paramount Studios, *Mr. Music* (1950) in which they appeared with Bing Crosby. Champion also choreographed and directed the dance sequences. But it was s Metro Goldwyn Mayer Studios (MGM) which made the most attractive proposal, a two-year contract for two films per year. First featured in *Show Boat* (1951), the Champions later assumed leading roles for *Everything I Have Is Yours* (1952) *Give a Girl A Break* (1953) and *Jupiter's Darling* (1955) (Gilvey Diss. 59-60).

George Sidney, the director of *Show Boat*, firmly believed in subordinating certain elements of production in favor of the story. Champion who had employed a similar technique in his night club and revue work, had as yet no opportunity to do so with the “book musical”. MGM gave him that chance. Working with Sidney and choreographer Robert Alton on *Show Boat*, director Mervyn le Roy, choreographer Hermes Pan on *Lovely To Look At*, a remake of Jerome Kern’s *Roberta*, validated Champion’s thoughts on book musical staging and prepared him for the plot-allied numbers he later created for the films *Everything I Have Is Yours* and *Give A Girl A Break*. He emerged from these movie production experiences convinced that “a dance number in a musical should advance, or at least enhance, the plot. No matter how cleverly conceived, [a dance number] should never go off by itself and drift away from the mainstream of the show.” (Gower Champion in Gary Paul Gates 87-97).

In addition his relationship with stage and screen director Rouben Mamoulian was most important in the developed of Champion’s career, Master of the “integrated musical,” Mamoulian thought highly of Champion’s work and Championed patterned much of his career on that of Mamoulian (Gilvey Diss. 66).

Following the filming of *Show Boat*, Champion returned to New York in January, 1961 as choreographer of *Make A Wish*, a musical starring Nanette Fabray. Champion’s choreography was enthusiastically received. James McClain of the *New York Journal American*, found the ballet ‘Students Ball’ “truly one of the exciting interludes in this season’s theatre” and another number ‘The Sale’ “...alone - worth the price of admission” (McClain N. pag.).

The *New York Post*’s Richard Watts, Jr. compared it with the best of Jerome Robbins’ ballets: “. . . it seems to me by all odds the most hilarious one I have seen since the ‘Keystone Kops’ number in *High Button Shoes* and the most imaginative since the ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ episode in *The King and I*” (Watts, Jr., N. pag.).

Steven Suskin, in his book *Opening Night On Broadway* remarks that “given the overwhelmingly enthusiastic reaction to the choreography, it’s indeed surprising that Gower Champion didn’t try another full-scale musical until *Bye Bye Birdie* (Suskin 1960).”

Make A Wish (1951) was a significant step in Champion’s evolution as a choreographer-director. In this show, he conquered the choreographic demands of the book musical with expanded and more animated versions of his story dances tailored to character and plot. Finding the humor within narrative situations, he exploited this in staging the numbers. Comic dances in *Make A Wish* would inspire future works such as the ‘Waiters’ Gallop in *Hello, Dolly!* (Gilvey 70).

In addition, Champion began refining his creation of numbers that rose out of narrative situations and build to a rousing climax. “Before the Parade Passes By from *Hello, Dolly!* is a good example and later the resolution of dramatic conflict through dance as in the ‘Dancing’ number from the same production where the conflict gradually diminishes through the dancing. (71)

By 1953, the Champions two year contract with Metro Goldwyn Mayer Studios was due for renewal, but because the studio was unwilling to accommodate their television performance rights, they let the agreement expire on April 1. They returned to Hollywood however, in 1955 for the films *Jupiter’s Darling* with Esther Williams and *Three for the Show* with Betty Grable. “Suddenly we were famous,” Gower later mused:

...but movie musicals were over. We finished off Esther Williams in her last film, then we finished off Betty Grable in her last film and it was back to the closet for the old act again. We didn’t care, because we never thought of ourselves as movie stars, anyway (Champion in Rex Reed).

In 1955, after the Hollywood filming for the two movies mentioned were over, the Champions’ night club and television engagements flourished unhampered by any further film studio commitments. New offers emerged. One of them was from the Music

Corporation of America's producer Paul Gregory and his partner, actor Charles Laughton, which would take them on a rigorous seventy-two-week tour of sixty cities and culminate in their one and only Broadway stage appearance together (Olga Curtis, N. pag.). The producers invited Gower to direct and choreograph their "diversion in song and dance" as they called *3 for Tonight*.

3 for Tonight was unusual. A hybrid of elements of both concert and revue, it was so named because of its three principal components: the dancing of the Champions, the singing of Harry Belafonte and the harmonizing of a vocal group known as "The Voices of Walter Schumann." (Gilvey 74)

This unusual event was staged at the wishes of the producers Gregory and Laughton without the use of conventional stage scenery or props and substituted stage drapery as scenery and stools for the performers. Earlier they had staged successful readings of three dramas --*Don Juan in Hell* (1952) *John Brown's Body* (1953) *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial* (1954) (Gilvey 75).

As a side note the author saw the production of *Don Juan in Hell* in 1952, on a bare gymnasium stage in Fargo, North Dakota. Seated on a balcony overlooking the stage I was thrilled by handsome Tyrone Power, resplendent in black tux and tails, along with Anne Baxter, gorgeous in a long black velvet gown and Charles Laughton reading from stands that were set before them with stools behind them on which they never sat. The stage was entirely empty except for background drapes. It was a stunning performance.

Champion was instinctively drawn to this novel form of entertainment which shunned the common spectacle and comic sketches of revues in favor of unadorned reliance on the actor's craft and, in the case of *3 for Tonight*, pure song and dance. This would be the first time that Champion would actually be billed as director. (75.) He had not been given directorial credit for *Lend An Ear* only acknowledgement of his staging.

For each of the performers in *3 for Tonight*, Harry Belafonte, the Walter Schuman Voices as well as for himself and Marge Champion would discover a cache of musical

narratives which evoked various moods. For each of these stories, whether sung or danced he created a specific setting with light and music. Harry Belafonte was seated on a stool with his head and shoulders bathed in light and only the silhouette of the guitarist. The stage would have been bare.

Imagination, the theme relating the various musical vignettes, was illustrated in the opening sequence through a simple piece of stage business Champion devised for master of ceremonies Hiram Sherman, Walter Kerr described it as follows:

When storyteller Hiram Sherman fishes a pencil out of his pocket, holds it up under a strong light, and blithely announces that it is a lilac twig, you are perfectly willing to call it a lilac twig -- the game seems worth your cooperation. When a pretty chorus girl strolls on the stage and demurely accepts the dubious posy as a small gift, even the sense of a game disappears: from now on it's a lilac twig and nothing else (Kerr, "Belafonte and his Supersongs," N. Pag.).

The master of ceremonies also often became part of the action and like the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, a drama also dependent upon minimal staging, he facilitated the imaginative exchange between performers and audience by establishing the setting for each narrative (Gilvey 78)

Glowing critical recognition greeted the performers upon their arrival at New York's Plymouth Theatre on April 6, 1955: "Mr. Belafonte proceeds to demonstrate what it means to alter the shape, the color, the whole character of a stage with nothing more than a song" (Kerr). Brooks Atkinson described the entertainer as a "singer with incandescent singleness of purpose. He is not interested in anything except reducing a song to its essential meaning, and singing it clearly and passionately." (Atkinson N. pag.) Richard Watts, Jr. dubbed him "a brilliant performer." (Watts, "Bright Evening of Song and Dance," *New York Post* 7 April 1955: N. pag.).

As for the Champions, "verve and invention flow from their every light-hearted tour of the floorboards," wrote Walter Kerr, adding:

This dancing couple let us know at once that there is to be as much humor as buoyance in their knowing work. They begin by guiding Walter Schumann's impeccably trained "voices" through some delightfully cartoon calisthenics. Marge Champion's last feeble flicker of life, as Gower Champion attempts to put a stop to the nonsense is wonderfully engaging improvisation (Kerr, N. pag.).

Brooks Atkinson called them "effortless dancers," and also "people of intelligence who hate the hackneyed and despise the pretentious. *3 for Tonight* is ideal for them and vice versa" (Atkinson, "Theatre: Song and Dance Diversion," *New York Times* 7 Apr 1955: N. pag.) The 'Voices of Walter Schuman,' received rave reviews as well.

But the newly-arrived director received tremendous accolade. "Gower has directed the show most inventively" remarked Howard Hawkins of the *New York World Telegram and Sun*, "making gala parades of the chorus exits and entrances" (Hawkins). Roland Field of the *Newark Evening News* concurred, "The production is staged with impeccable artistry and imagination by Gower Champion" (Field, N. pag.). He was further praised for creating a disciplined production which effectively supported the very talented cast.

"This new format" *Saturday Review* noted, "totals up to a kind of theatre eupepsia. This it achieves through practicing the strictest artistic economy. It is not a book show" says Howard Dash:

...yet the integral divertissements are so adroitly pieced together and so deftly narrated by the story-teller master-of-ceremonies, that the show has more unity and cohesion than most musicals. ...the production numbers are magnificent even though the only props are chairs and the only decorations are drapes. But the common denominator of *3 for Tonight* is talent which sparkles in abundance. (N. pag.).

A live television broadcast of *3 for Tonight* survives as a kinescope and was broadcast on June 22, 1955. Though an abbreviated version of the original stage performance, it is an authentic facsimile of the performers work and especially of Champion's staging and direction (Marge Champion Interview)

As such, it reflects not only the approval of the majority of newspaper columnists, but also that of television critic Jack Gould who wrote in the *New York Times*:

Wednesday night was not an hour of TV: it was an hour of theatre brought to TV. In each number, there was a sublime crispness, competence and sureness of movement that could come only from painstaking rehearsal and an extended run. Each number was a gem; a viewer could take his pick (Gould, N. pag.)

“It was a hit, “Champion later explained, “but unfortunately Belafonte’s management was more interested in having him go back to Las Vegas where he made \$11, 000 a week, than in continuing the show. That was the kind of show we could have taken all over the world” (Champion qtd in Hedda Hopper 16)

3 for Tonight was not only an artistic success, but also a financial one for Marge and Gower Champion. It allowed them to move from the old house near MGM studios to a more spacious one built by Ronald Reagan for Jane Wyman on Cordell Drive in Beverly Hills. The timing was perfect for on November 27, 1957, Marge gave birth to their first child, Gregg Ernest Champion, named after family friend, Jess Gregg, and her father, Ernest Belcher. A second son, Blake Gower Champion, namesake of film director Blake Edwards and of father Gower, was born on February 14, 1962 (Gilvey 85). And even at this early point in his career, Gower was sensitive to the team’s strongest asset, their freshness...the appearance that they simply enjoyed dancing. Whenever a move became stale, that moment was rehearsed and reworked until a way was found to make it seem spontaneous again. Rehearsal habits were forecast here, for even though his dance training was minimal and because he had to working methods to follow, he had to find them himself.

From his earliest performing days, Gower Champion had the patience to repeat movements over and over again. It was not unusual for Champion to spend hours working out the choreography to just a few bars of music (Champion-Sagal Interview).

In the aftermath of *3 for Tonight*, Gower found himself at the crossroads of his professional life. At age 36, he was becoming disenchanted with juggling the combined duties of performer, choreographer and director. “Producer Paul Gregory had mentioned to him at one point that he was trying to be a whore and a madam at the same time. I decided to be a madam. I turned down the choreographer’s job on *My Fair Lady*, (1956) to become a director” (Champion qtd in Reed D3). The decision was the first step toward realizing a long-time ambition: “All during the years that my wife and I danced as Marge and Gower Champion’, I was more interested in staging our acts and setting up routines we used than in their eventual execution.” (Champion qtd in Charles Chilton 52). Even with a reputable dancing career, Champion had difficulty breaking into the director’s profession. He accepted any offer that would advance his goal – directing, and choreographing the musical sequences for the film, *The Girl Most Likely* (1957) with Jane Powell and Kaye Ballard, staging William Mercer’s play *Hemingway and All Those People* (1957) in Indianapolis, and even doing “an industrial film for Bell Telephone, sometimes using his performing ability as bargaining and trading bait to get a chance to direct (Champion qtd in Murray Frymer 3A). Despite success as a theatre and film performer and choreographer, it would be the medium of television in which his directing career would mature and flourish.

Show Boat movie director George Sidney, then producer of the half-hour television series *Screen Directors Playhouse* asked Champion to direct an expansion of the finale to his night club act with Marge, “Happy Clown”, one of the last story dances he created for the dancing team, it began with a couple seated at makeup tables preparing for a performance. He later adapted this idea to age the characters of Mary Martin and Robert Preston in the musical *I Do! I Do!* (1966) (Gilvey Diss., p. 86). The televised version of the piece told the story of two battling clowns via three numbers – “Yankee

Doodle Dandy, “Mary’s a Grand Old Name,” and “When You’re a Clown,” from the Champion’s night club act. (Payne-Carter 186).

Following its broadcast on June 5, 1956, directing opportunities increased. In the short lived *Marge and Gower Champion Show* (1957) he worked with situation comedy, and soon gathered a list of television directing credits which included *Forty Five Minutes from Broadway* (1959), an adaptation of George M. Cohan’s 1906 musical starring Tammy Grimes and Larry Blyden: *Accent On Love* (1959), a musical revue with Louis Jourdan, Ginger Rogers, the Champions, Mike Nichols and Elaine May: *The Datchet Diamonds* (1959), with Rex Harrison: and *Cindy’s Fella* (1959), a romantic comedy with Jimmy Stewart (*Carnival* 1961).

About these television-directing experiences, Champion modestly remarked:

For the most part, much of that phase of my career went unnoticed and that probably was a blessing! Nobody was really watching what I was doing – and if anyone did see it, he didn’t know I had done it – So I worked experimentally, finding a personal style I liked. In the back of my mind was an idea about taking on a New York musical,” (Gower Champion qtd in Louis Jerial Summers, Jr. 108).

Still at the height of their popularity, the Champions continued to play the most prestigious supper clubs in the nation: the Coconut Grove, the Fairmont in San Francisco, the Fontainebleau in Miami, and on opening in the New Frontier in Las Vegas, *Billboard* designated them as “the only dance team a casino would dare to headline (“Marge and Gower Champs at Vegas 1955).

An admirer of Gower Champion’s work in his early days as a newspaper columnist, Ed Sullivan was taken with Marge and Gower’s work when he became the host of his popular Sunday evening variety series. On June 7, 1953, he devoted the entire program to the Champions during which they performed four numbers from their night club act, “County Fair”, “The Clock”, “Great Day” and “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”, which were interspersed with film segments from their films *Show Boat* “Life Upon the

Wicked Stage” “I Might Fall Back on You” “Lovely to Look At,” and “I Won’t Dance”. Only three other artists had been similarly honored prior to this televised Champion special: playwright Robert E. Sherwood, composer Richard Rodgers and director Joshua Logan. (Gilvey 89-90). “Marge and Gower Champion Story, “Sullivan in *Toast of the Town*, CBS TV June, 1953. Video recording. Personal library Marge Champion.

In August 1959, still performing together in their night club act, the Champion’s accepted an invitation from Ed Sullivan to join the company touring Russia with Sullivan’s popular Sunday weekly variety series. The Champion’s appearance in Leningrad and Moscow with *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the summer of 1959 would be their final ones together. Prior to the tour, they had announced the dissolution of their act. Marge would devote herself more to their home and children now that Gower had accepted a script from producer Edward Padula for a rock and roll musical about teenagers called *Lets Go Steady*. Though unimpressed by the subject matter, Champion agreed to direct and choreograph what in time would be his first Broadway musical, *Bye Bye Birdie* (1960) (Gilvey 90).

On August 8, 1959, the press reported that Gower Champion would direct and choreograph *The Day They Took Birdie Away*. The musical would be renamed *Going Steady* and later *Goodbye Birdie Goodbye* before receiving its final name *Bye Bye Birdie*. (Nan Robertson N. pag.).

Because the creators of *Bye Bye Birdie* were basically new in the realm of creating a book musical, critics underestimated the show from the beginning. While the satire content of the show would focus on the new “rock and roll phenomemon that was captivating teens, producer Edward Padula, formerly a stage manager, was presenting his first Broadway musical and librettist Michael Stewart, composer Charles Strouse and lyricist Lee Adams had previously written only for night clubs and off-Broadway revues

(*Bye Bye Birdie*, souvenir programme: 7-8.) Champion whose sole stage directing credits were revues and similarly inexperienced (Gilvey 93-94).

Critics were skeptical of all the principal performers as well. Chita Rivera, Dick Van Dyke, Kay Medford and Paul Lynde, were generally unknown to the general public at that time (Gilvey 94).

In the final analysis, these all emerged as the chief strengths of the production. As *New York Daily News* reporter John Chapman noted in his review following the opening of *Bye Bye Birdie* at the Martin Beck Theatre on April 14, 1960:

Bye Bye Birdie is the funniest, most captivating and most expert musical comedy one could hope to see in several seasons of showgoing. And one of the best things about it is that practically nobody (well known) is connected with it (Chapman "Funny, Fresh and Captivating Musical Show," N. pag.).

Richard Watts, Jr. of the *New York Post* agreed:

"Forgive me for having been skeptical about the possibilities of a musical comedy bearing the title of *Bye Bye Birdie*...I am happy to say that I was wrong in questioning the creative powers of imagination, freshness and talent. *Bye Bye Birdie*...is bright and delightful." (Watts, Jr. "Fresh and Humorous Musical Show" 16).

Champion's work was immediately recognized as the mainstay of the production. "Staged with exuberance by Gower Champion, who is the real hero of the evening, *Birdie* has the special crazy zip of a bowling ball on the loose, of rifle shots...overturning the target," wrote the critic for *Time* magazine. ("New Openings on Broadway 50). The *New York Herald-Tribune's* Walter Kerr expressed similar thoughts: "I do mean to suggest that Mr. Champion has been very much responsible for the gayety, the winsomeness and the exuberant zing of the occasion." (Kerr, "*Bye Bye Birdie*" N. pag.). In the newspaper *The Christian Science Monitor*, John Beaufort wrote, "Mr. Champion's principal achievement lies in deftly blending his own silken style with a counterforce of comic elements...as far as I could determine, *Bye Bye Birdie* never misses a beat, a step

or a gag. It is full of sound and fancy, signifying nothing but expert teamwork resourcefully commanded.” (Beaufort N. pag.). Richard Watts, Jr. of the *New York Post*, however, explained why he felt Champion’s contribution had merited the greatest acclaim:

“Not only has he staged the dances and chorus numbers with brilliant comic imagination but he has likewise thought up no end of wonderfully inventive touches throughout the evening and given a sense of unity to a book that actually consists of two stories. Then, too, he has done something else of enormous importance. To a narrative dealing with the potentially tasteless matter of the foolish swooning over an idiotic singer, he has brought not only perfect taste, but also the appeal of warm-heartedness (Watts, Jr., “Kind Words for the American Girl” N. pag.).

Watts had pinpointed the characteristics, which would define Champion’s stagecraft in the twenty years to come—a brilliant comic imagination fused with endless inventive touches and tempered with perfect taste and warm-heartedness to unify production. Quick moving action, broad humor and impeccable pacing helped make *Birdie* “a solid example of the simple-minded but energetic, muscular kind of musical comedy that was popular as the Sixties got underway.” (Gottfried 140).

At the conclusion of the 1960-1961 season, *Bye Bye Birdie* won the American Theatre Wing’s Antionette Perry “Tony” award for best musical and Champion was doubly honored for best direction and choreography. (Morrow, 228). With the critical and popular success of *Bye Bye Birdie*, Gower Champion could take his place in the line of choreographer-directors of that era and proceed in his new profession confident of not having to return to the performer’s life of which he had grown tired. That life, however, had made a substantial contribution to his directing career—one which he readily acknowledged: “Since Marge and I have hung up our professional dancing shoes as a

team, I see just how important and vital were the years we spent on the night club circuit now that I'm concentrating on directing." ("And How They Dance!" N. pag.).

In his book *David Merrick: The Abominable Showman*, Howard Kissel reports that on the morning following *Birdie's* opening, Michael Shurtleff, Mr. Merrick's casting director steered his employer's attention to the musical's rave notices. Mr. Shurtleff, who had been pressing Merrick to hire Champion, was told: "Yes, I see. We let other people take the chance. Then we hire them. (Kissel, 286). Now that Edward Padula had taken the chance producing Champion's first Broadway musical as a director, Merrick would take over. Merrick subsequently offered Champion the script for a musical adaptation of the MGM film, *Lili* (1953). From it, Champion would have his second successful Broadway musical, *Carnival* (1961) and the first in a series of seven musicals he would direct for producer David Merrick: *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), *I Do! I Do!* (1966), *The Happy Time* (1968), *Sugar* (1971), *Mack and Mabel* (1974) and *42nd Street* (1980).

CHAPTER II

A CONCEPT FOR A CHAMPION: DEVELOPMENT AND REHEARSAL

Author Martin Gottfried in his book *Broadway Musicals* suggests that the idea of a musical adaptation of *The Matchmaker* was a brainstorm to begin with. The play is a stylized work and has an elevated reality, harmonious with that of song and dance (Gottfried 22).

Thornton Wilder's play *The Matchmaker* has a strong book and demonstrates his unique skill as a dramatist. In his essay titled, "Some Thoughts on Playwriting," he lists four fundamental conditions that separate the work of the dramatist from the other "arts".

They are:

1) the theatre is a collaborative art, utilizing the skills of many to the advantage of the production, 2) the group mind expectancy of the theatre brings high drama, power and energy to any given show, 3) theatrical drama is basically pretentious--with many pretenses at its disposal and 4) the action of any drama takes place in present time due to the "suspension of disbelief" that occurs in any theatrical production (Wilder).

Beginning in this chapter with the historical background of Wilder's play, *The Matchmaker*, the origins of the musical comedy *Hello, Dolly!* can be traced through the eyes of director-producer, Gower Champion with his creative genius at work. Insight into the work of librettist Michael Stewart and the collaborative process at work will show further that Thornton Wilder must have been thinking of musical theatre when he penned the "four fundamental conditions of the drama." Collaborative, addressed to group mind, pretentious and in perpetual present time all address the concepts utilized in

the modern American musical theatre and most especially in the creation of the musical comedy, *Hello, Dolly!*

Background to Hello Dolly!

A long forgotten one-act farce, *A Day Well Spent in Three Adventures*, composed by British playwright John Oxenford in 1836 is the earliest literary antecedent of the musical comedy, *Hello, Dolly!* It recounts the zany exploits of the mischievous clerk, Bolt, and his naive apprentice, Mizzle, who take a day's romp in the city of London encountering various ladies, as well as their employer, Mr. Cotton. Six years later, in 1842 Austrian playwright and comic actor Johann Nestroy tailored the comedy to Viennese tastes in his four-act adaptation, *He Wants To Have A Lark*. Though the two clerks remained the pivotal characters, Nestroy made them more sympathetic by portraying their employer as a peevish malcontent (Gilvey 230-31).

Stanley Green has suggested that *Hello, Dolly!* shares certain plot and character similarities with the 1891 musical-farce *A Trip To Chinatown* by Charles Hoyt (Green 5). Like "*Dolly!*," *A Trip to Chinatown* was the longest running musical of its day with a record of 657 performances. Its score included songs that are still heard today, "The Bowery" and "After the Ball" (Bordman 115).

The characters of the Oxenford Nestroy and Wilder plays, including that of Dolly herself, can even be traced to "types" popularized by the Italian *Commedia dell'arte* troupes of the sixteenth century. According to Brockett's *History of the Theatre*, these included the 'innamorato,' a young man often opposed by an older man (Cornelius in *Hello Dolly!* by Vandergelder), the "innamorata" or a young lady courted by young and old (Irene Malloy by Cornelius and Vandergelder) and Pantalone, a "middle aged merchant with a credulous nature easily deceived by others (Vandergelder). At the center of every intrigue was Harlequin, a clever but foolish servant, who kept the plot moving

by interfering, which either helped or hindered his master's agenda (Brockett 131). Dolly Levi could be seen to have much in common with Harlequin.

Nearly a hundred years later, Thornton Wilder, acting on a suggestion from Austrian director Max Reinhardt (Laufe 342) wrote *The Merchant of Yonkers* -- an American adaptation of Nestroy's play and set in early 1880's New York. As the title indicates, the four-act farce concentrated on employer Horace Vandergelder rather than on the clerks, Cornelius Hackl and Barnaby Tucker. But Wilder's most inspired addition was that of an original character, Mrs. Dolly Gallagher Levi, a widowed matchmaker whose cagey but magnanimous nature charmingly disarms her adversaries. Produced by Herman Shumlin and directed by Max Reinhardt, *The Merchant of Yonkers* made its Broadway debut at the Guild Theatre (later the ANTA) on December 28, 1938, with a cast that included Percy Waram as Vandergelder, Tom Ewell as Cornelius, John Call as Barnaby and Jane Cowl as Mrs. Levi (Morrison N. pag.). It closed after 39 performances (Gilvey 233).

The failure did not deter Wilder from revising the play to prominently feature the one character who had most intrigued *Merchant* audiences. The result was *The Matchmaker*, first performed on August 23, 1954, at the Royal Lyceum Theatre as part of the city of Edinburgh's International Festival of Music and Drama (Wilder 252). Under Tyrone Guthrie's rapid-fire direction, Ruth Gordon played the indomitable Dolly Levi; Sam Leven, the cantankerous Vandergelder; Arthur Hill and Alec McCowen, the city neophytes Cornelius and Barnaby; Eileen Herlie, hat shopkeeper Irene Malloy; Roasmund Greenwood, Malloy's assistant, Minnie Fay (Morrison N. pag.)

As an interesting side note, Ruth Gordon reportedly expected to be approached to reprise the role for the musical and even took singing lessons to prepare for it. One evening shortly after *Hello, Dolly!* opened on Broadway, she sat in the center of the first

row wearing a long black dress with long white gloves which parodied Dolly's Harmonia Gardens costume. Throughout the performance, according to a telephone interview with cast member Charles Nelson Reilly, she stared coldly at the stage, never applauding once (Reilly Interview).

The play's favorable reception led to a London opening at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket on November 4, 1954, where it ran a full season before David Merrick and the Theatre Guild co-produced it for the American stage (Wilder N. pag.) (Laufe, 342).

The Matchmaker made its Broadway debut on December 5, 1955, with Ruth Gordon and most of the Edinburgh cast repeating their original roles, except for Loring Smith played Vandergelder and Robert Morse played Barnaby (Wilder 252). With critical acclaim equaling that of London, the farce accumulated 486 performances before undertaking an extensive national tour (Morrison).

In spring, 1961, David Merrick acquired the rights for a musical adaptation -- an idea, which Martin Gottfried had observed,

...was a brainstorm to begin with. *The Matchmaker* is a stylized work with an elevated reality. The story is set in turn-of-the-century New York a time and place with musical associations. The comedy and romance of the story are playful, the mood whimsical, qualities with dance connotations. These characteristics are rare in the sources usually chosen for musicals, though they are the ones that should be looked at first. (Gottfried 22)

To insure success, Merrick planned to reunite the creative team of the Merrick-Champion musical *Carnival*. As early as the morning following *Carnival's* opening, Merrick met with Michael Stewart and in the course of their breakfast in the Oak Room of the Plaza Hotel, invited him to write the book for the new musical. Stewart accepted at once, and began composing a first draft of a musical based on *The Matchmaker* (Payne-Carter 266).

Michael Stewart was "a true professional", says Martin Gottfried, "who was among a new generation of librettists applying [Oscar] Hammerstein's seriousness of

approach to the writing of funny musicals. His book for...*Hello, Dolly!* is one of the best our musical theatre has ever produced" (Gottfried 22). Gottfried assesses this claim on the fact that the show

...marked a sharp break with Broadway's musical comedies. Demanding more of a book, Stewart made it much more classical in its style of farce, less direct in its sequences, and generally classier. Most of its songs are related to the story and also to its style, and few of their cues are arbitrary. (Gottfried 27)

Other strengths of the book include its unconventional storyline, characterizations and manner of presentation:

The central plot deals not with a romance between a standard hero and heroine, but rather, with an anti-romance between a conniver and an object of ridicule. The basis of Stewart's libretto is actually *style* and in that respect *Hello, Dolly!*'s story is consonant with its stage production. (Gottfried 28)

Gottfried's concludes, "As the book of a comic musical, it deserves more thorough study (Gottfried 22).

Through the stages of pre-production, rehearsal and pre-Broadway tour, Stewart continuously revised the libretto, abandoning old scenes and creating new ones -- often overnight -- as needed. The scope of these revisions, as well as the evolution of the musical itself, can be determined by comparing the three different versions of the director's scripts found in the Special Collections Department of the Research Library of the University of California at Los Angeles. Appended to the script for *Dolly! A Damned Exasperating Woman*, the first of three, is a note from the director himself inviting just such a comparison. It reads, "The work done on *Dolly* on the road (Detroit, Washington, D.C.) is best shown by the difference in these three scripts--before and after." (Champion Memo N. pag).

The three versions may be distinguished as follows:

Book One -- *Dolly! A Damned Exasperating Woman*, used during the New York rehearsals and the Detroit debut performances;

Book Two -- *Hello, Dolly!*, the interim script used throughout the remainder of the Detroit and Washington tryouts;

Book Three -- *Hello, Dolly!*, the final script as it appears today.

Specific differences in these scripts are found as part of specific production changes undertaken during out of town try-outs in Detroit and Washington, D.C.

Generally speaking, Stewart's libretto for *Hello, Dolly!* differs from Wilder's play in several respects. In *The Matchmaker*, the persona of Mrs. Levi is frequently eclipsed by an array of charming, yet extraneous characters used by the author for comic effect. These include Vandergelder's tactless housekeeper, Gertrude; his frustrated barber, Joe Scanlon; and his parasitical clerk, Malachi Stack. Others are Stack's crony, the Cabman; the absent-minded spinster, Flora Van Huysen; and her foil, the Cook. By eliminating these characters and stressing Wilder's main plot -- the matchmaker's conniving courtship of the merchant -- Stewart was able to give Dolly preeminence. He further amplified the character by omitting all of Wilder's soliloquies except those spoken by Dolly (Gilvey 270).

Other changes included the elimination of the sequence in which Cornelius and Barnaby disguise themselves as women to escape their infuriated employer (though it appeared initially in *Dolly! A Damned Exasperating Woman*) and the addition of would-be heiress Ernestina Money -- the corpulent "blind date" Dolly arranges for Vandergelder. In *The Matchmaker*, Dolly refers to a similar character, Ernestina Simple, who never materializes (Gilvey 270-71). As Abe Laufe has written, "In spite of the changes, Stewart retained the flavor and the spirit of Wilder's comedy" (Laufe 343).

Discussing the director's initial response to the musical score by Jerry Herman, the composer remembers that

Gower wanted to go with the farcical quality of Thornton Wilder's work; therefore, he was delighted and told me so, that my work was simple, melodic and easy to retain. He said that would make his job so much easier, because they were flat-out musical comedy numbers. There's no apologizing for them and that's

what he wanted the show to be...we became instant friends because we *saw* the same show. (Herman Interview)

According to the director's notes and script for *Dolly! A Damned Exasperating Woman*, (Champion notes), the score consisted of 14 songs at the time of pre-production in September 1963. In coming months, Herman would eventually replace more than half of this score with new material, sometimes writing several versions of a particular number before finding one that worked. Concerning this, Champion himself later reflected, "I never remember lyrics,... but the songs I cut out of that show are the one's that haunt me.... Almost everything was rewritten before we opened in New York" (Champion qtd in Rex Reed D1, 3).

Among the numbers to remain was one which in time would become the musical's signature number. Upon first hearing it, Champion remarked to his wife, "If I can't make a showstopper out of "Hello Dolly!", I better get out of show business (Marge Champion Interview).

Initially, director Champion was uncertain as to whether he would approach *Hello, Dolly!* as a broad farce or a straight musical. Composer Jerry Herman explains what eventually emerged as the director's guiding concept:

When he got the idea, he said, "I'm going to open the show all in bright cartoon colors with the two girls in a horse costume pulling a carriage with our star in it. At that moment, the audience will have been told that this is a farce and anything we do from now on is okay. He was telling them by that crazy device that he was doing a cartoon and a farce. ...than any silly thing, any crazy dialogue, any conceit is "fair game" because that's what the evening is about. (Herman Interview)

Farce and the Musical

The type of comedy known as farce is one of the most ancient and popular forms of drama. It has also played a distinctive role in the development of the American musical when the American fascination with the farce-musical began in the 1870's. As Gerald Bordman explains:

London musical comedies were caviar for an elite as far as many Americans were concerned. Besides Americans had been evolving musical comedies of their own, musical comedies that reflected their own more democratic social evolution. These grew out of farce-comedy, out of Edward Harrigan and his imitators, and out of the vaudeville sketches from which all had sprouted. Naturally, they were Yankee through and through and as such, they had a much broader appeal to Americans (Bordman 37, 41).

Librettist Edward Harrigan, of Harrigan and Hart fame, was one of the first to exploit the union of farce with popular song in such shows as *The Mulligan Guard's Picnic* (1878) and its sequel *The Mulligan Guards Ball* (1879). These works sparked a series of similar musicals by other librettists, most notably, Charles H. Hoyt. His *A Trip to Chinatown* (1891, held the record as Broadway's longest running musical until surpassed by *Irene* (1919) (Bordman 56). Farce reigned over musical comedy during this time period.

As American operetta rose to prominence during the 1890's and 1900's, farce was often interpolated into the plot as a means of comic relief. An example would be Victor Herbert's *The Red Mill* (1906). Romantic musical comedies employed farcical characters and situations as in *Irene* (1919), in which comedian Bobbie Watson portrayed a flamboyant male couturier named Madame Lucy (Green 32).

Farce also explains the appeal of some of the most successful and enduring shows of the century including *The Boys From Syracuse* (1938), *Where's Charley* (1948), *Li'l Abner* (1956), *A Funny Thing happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962) *Little Me* (1962), *The Producers* (2001), as well as *Hello, Dolly!* (1964). The revival of the 1935 British musical, *Me and My Girl* (1986) is another example of farce and musical theatre.

Champion's elegant employment of the cartoon-farce concept is what gives *Hello, Dolly!* its unique style -- a style which thoroughly pervades each element and gives it a distinct character among musicals. As Martin Gottfried has commented, "there was not a moment when he lost track of the elegant style he set for it" (Gottfried 140). For some the idea of an elegant cartoon-farce musical may seem a contradiction in terms. Elegance

denotes a dignified richness and grace and a tasteful opulence while a cartoon is perceived as one dimensional and flat with farce perceived as a steady barrage of physical nonsense. Champion's concept, however, followed the lines of the more graceful Disney animated films. They are graceful and innovative--*Snow White and Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* -- come to mind as recent examples. As far as farce is concerned, *Hello, Dolly!* does not resemble a Marx Brothers movie with many physical gags although there may be similarities. For although *Hello, Dolly!* has many "sight gags" there also remains a sentimental story with a heart -- one which Thornton Wilder put there himself in *The Matchmaker*. Gower Champion, in collaboration with librettist Michael Stewart and composer Jerry Herman, made certain that the same "heart" of *The Matchmaker* received due emphasis in the musical adaptation. Composer Jerry Herman recalls Champion's allegiance to the creative concept: "I will always remember...that he had one vision, and he never veered from it. He knew what he wanted the total result to be...what he wanted it to look like and sound like" (Herman Interview).

It is easy to understand why Gower Champion was attracted to the concept of a cartoon. The characters in an animated cartoon move in a world where nothing is impossible, flirting with danger that often provokes laughter and generally emerging unscathed from their adventure. Although the characters are generally one dimensional, they are funny because they are caricatures of human behavior. In addition, the color, pacing and action are very compatible with that of a farce. Even the characterizations are similar. Drama theorist Hatlen states:

Farce usually deals with simple stock characters, often from ordinary walks of life. The romantic aspects of the story are frequently carried by pasteboard figures who have a talent for stumbling into awkward situations. The main burden of the comedy is in the hands of two kinds of characters -- crafty manipulators, who keep the action going, and awkward unlearned or unsuspecting characters, who are the targets of laughter. The manipulators are often tricky...living by their wits; those preyed upon are rustics, foreigners or foolish old men, hypocrites and poseurs of all kinds (Hatlen 54).

In both the play and the musical, Dolly is a crafty manipulator and the driving force of the action. Neither truly conniving or someone who preys on unsuspecting innocents, Thornton Wilder's characterization of Dolly Levi is that of a charming and vivacious woman of substance, not some caricature: uncertain age; mass of sandy hair; impoverished elegance; large, shrewd by generous nature, as assumption of worldly cynicism conceals a tireless amused enjoyment of life (Wilder 273).

Mrs. Levi also flaunts social convention, especially those conventions which keep people from realizing their heart's desire. Of Irish extraction, born Gallagher, her late husband Ephraim Levi was a Jewish man with whom she clearly shared a warm and loving relationship. Seen in this light, her matchmaking expertise makes sense. Dolly understands the need to love and be loved and wants others to experience the same thing she has known. That is the generous nature that Wilder describes. Her manipulation is playful, joyous and without malice. It arises out of her desire to see others take on the adventure which can fulfill their needs and in her own inimitable manner, she courts whatever dangers necessary to achieve this end. Dolly's moment of truth arrives at the end of the play when she decides to "rejoin the human race" and enjoy the same romantic adventure she wishes for others (Wilder 396).

Librettist Michael Stewart further enhanced the personal of Dolly Levi by introducing her at the start of the musical, rather than half-way through the first act as in Wilder's play. But the librettist scored his most effective and revealing stroke for Dolly immediately prior to the Act I finale and the song "Before the Parade Passes By" placing this direct address to the audience from Act IV of *The Matchmaker* as it becomes an appeal to her late husband Ephraim Levi for a blessing on the adventure needed to reaffirm her own life. As Dolly exclaims:

Ephraim, let me go! It's been long enough Ephraim! Every evening for all these years I've put out the cat, I've locked the door, I've made myself a little rum toddy and before I went to bed I said a prayer thanking God that I was

independent, that no one else's life was mixed up with mine. Then one night an oak leaf fell out of my Bible. I placed it there when you asked me to marry you, Ephraim. A perfectly good oak leaf but no color and without life. And I suddenly realized that I was like that leaf. For years I had not shed one tear nor had I been filled with the wonderful hope that something or other would turn out well. And so I've decided to rejoin the human race! I'm going to marry Horace Vandergelder and Ephraim I want you to give me away!

And Dolly sings as the Deserted Store Olio slowly rolls out of sight...

BEFORE THE PARADE PASSES BY I'M GONNA GET IN STEP WHILE
THERE'S STILL TIME LEFT BEFORE THE PARADE PASSES BY...(HELLO,
DOLLY! 1964)

Michael Stewart's placement of Dolly's 'Ephraim Address' serves to clarify her motivation and lends more substance to her character. It also provides a perfect segue into Jerry Herman's stirring Act I "Parade" finale number. So, as a result of the Stewart - Herman libretto, the Dolly character takes on greater dimension, a dimension that Champion seized upon and emphasized as part of his overall concept of the production. The collaboration tended to intensify and highlight the energy of the original *Matchmaker* drama.

Although the cartoon-farce had appeared in modern American musical theatre prior to *Hello Dolly!*, Champion's approach was distinguished by the elegant and eclectic manner in which he blended the elements of the two with the humanity of the characters. He borrowed the colors and settings of the cartoon and the conventions of farce while avoiding the caricatures common to both. It was a style which emerged gradually and as late as the show's pre-Broadway try-out:

In Detroit, "Dolly" was a bright, if uneven, musical cartoon rooted in the vaudeville tradition with no depth of characterization, a throw-back to the days when Broadway musicals were big and brassy but bereft of subtle ideas. "It was a sort of failure," Mr. Merrick said. "It was re-manufactured out of town in nine weeks" in Detroit and Washington, D.C. By the time it got to New York, its style and timing had been so perfected that it became the hottest ticket in town. (Phillips 44)

To convey his concept throughout the production, Champion would have to carefully temper the cartoon-farce aspects with elegance and tremendous style. The rigors of farce are enough to challenge the most proficient actor;

The distinctive essence of farce can be realized only in performance by accomplished comedians before a live audience. The gags, tricks, and devices that seem absurd and flat...in the hands of talented performers, move an audience to gales of laughter from which even the most sophisticated theatre goer cannot remain aloof.... (Hatlen 52)

For a production such as Champion envisioned, casting the right person was absolutely essential. It could mean the difference between success and failure of a production. Champion's preferences for talent is humorously expressed by Horace Vandergelder's understudy and the "Judge" in the original Broadway cast, Gordon Connell:

He cast people who were CRAZY! CRAZY! but very knowledgeable so...([they were]) a collection...truly a tapestry! They all belonged together. It was right for them. They were all the same -- from the same moon or similar moons. Gower trusted them or he wouldn't have cast them. They were enormously capable of delivering, and indeed they did.... He had such a gift for casting, close to perfect pitch, let's say. (Connell Interview)

Gower Champion's performance-oriented, "perfect pitch" casting included Carol Channing as matchmaker Dolly Levi, David Burns as Yonkers merchant Horace Vandergelder, Charles Nelson Reilly as his adventure-hungry clerk Cornelius Hackl, and Jerry Dodge as Hackl's comrade-in-trade Barnaby Tucker. Eileen Brennan portrayed the milliner-widow, Irene Malloy, and Sondra Lee, Malloy's punky assistant, Minnie Fay, rounded out the lead characters. Impossible to imagine, but Carol Channing nearly lost the lead as a result of her originally recommending Gower Champion to David Merrick the producer. Initially, Champion wanted to cast his old friend Nanette Fabray as Dolly Levi. Jerry Herman confirms this, adding, "Nanette Fabray was a big favorite of ours.

We thought she had spirit. If you watch her in the film *The Bandwagon* (1953),...you see why she wouldn't have been a bad choice" (Herman Interview).

The choice of Nanette Fabray made sense for other reasons, Champion had worked with her previously when choreographing the 1951 stage musical, *Make a Wish* (Green 69, 270) in which she had starred, and in 1953 both she and the Champions were employees of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. David Merrick, however, had promised the role to Carol Channing pending his obtaining Gower Champion as director. Channing, however, had to convince Gower Champion that she was the right one for the character of Dolly Levi. In her private reading he "began to see something happening...whereupon he called David Merrick and told him to meet us at the Imperial Theatre the next day. Channing read for him and that was it" (Wilson 3).

On August 5, 1963, *The New York Times* reported that "Carol Channing, the blonde that gentlemen and firemen preferred, will return to the musical stage as *Dolly, A Damned Exasperating Woman*" (Musical for Carol Channing).

Regarding Carol Channing as the choice for the role Dolly Levi, Jerry Herman has this to say:

...it was sheer genius to put this woman in that part. And I'm going to tell you right now,...it would *never* have been the legendary show it was without Carol Channing. She took it...over the top because of her personal style.... Think how close we were to Ethel Merman, then Nanette Fabray, and then finally, the woman who was *made* to play this part. She was *born* to do this role. Nobody would argue with that. (Herman Interview)

What was it that finally convinced Gower to cast Carol Channing as Dolly Levi?

Cast member Gordon Connell's description of Channing as a practiced and committed professional sheds some light:

Carol is someone who works off a strange combination of preparation and the present moment...truly a visitor from another planet, whose feet are cannily rooted in the here and now, she....has it covered. It's true her performance is calculated.... She's learned it. She's practiced it. She does it so much that she's

never at a loss. She is never totally unaware. She has danger in her -- in her presence and her approach...which makes us ask, "What is she going to do next?" (Connell Interview)

Channing had a sense of spontaneity -- like that of danger. Whoever played Vandergelder would have to counter that with something equally dangerous. Walter Slezak was considered, but it was never confirmed by Champion. It is unknown whether Slezak was ever offered the role, but Gordon Connell mentions another actor whom Champion did consider:

...he went after Paul Lynde for Vandergelder. That was the original choice. ...Gower trusted him from the work he'd done for him in *Bye Bye Birdie* which he took by storm. Whether it was Gower's ultimate decision or Paul's.... I don't know why he was not involved (in *Dolly!*)... (Connell Interview)

In time, Champion selected "the grand old man of supporting actors" (Morrow 50) David Burns, for Vandergelder. A master comic, Burns created such memorable roles as the bumbling Mayor Shinn of *The Music Man* which won him a Tony Award in 1958, and the impotent lecher, Senex, in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* which gave him another Tony in 1963 (Morrow 50). As understudy to Burns, Gordon Connell comments on Burns as Champion's ultimate choice:

David Burns was again one of the truly possessed -- demonically possessed -- and one of the funniest human beings ever.... And DANGEROUS! D-A-N-G-E-R-O-U-S! ...because he would go off, and do this kind of thing to convention, rules and propriety..." I must behave in a certain way? No" A rule breaker to begin with,...he was always thinking in those Marx Brothers ways. So he was clearly a match for Carol. (Connell Interview)

Champion's choices for Hay and Feed Store clerk Cornelius Hackl and the widowed Hat Shop proprietress, Irene Malloy are equally intriguing. Hatlen had described the romantic aspects of farce being: "frequently carried by pasteboard figures" (Hatlen 54). Such is the conventional casting in farce. "Gower wanted this to be a cartoon", says Jerry Herman, "and so, he didn't want to go with a typical baritone

and...soprano.” (Herman Interview). Gordon Connell reflects on Champion’s casting of Charles Nelson Reilly as Cornelius and Eileen Brennan as Mrs. Malloy:

Those two matching? ...conventional behavior here? Orthodox? That they are a part of the social structure of the times? Possibly, they could play that, but they were from the same loony bin -- both of them -- down there with Carol and David (Connell Interview).

By pairing the comic talents of Reilly with those of Brennan, Champion not only avoided the romantic stereotypes of farce, but also infused ordinary innocuous roles with a “dangerous spontaneity” he so admired in performers. Both players brought unique experience to their parts. Reilly was an established character actor with a record of twenty-two off-Broadway credits, including the following:

Jerry Herman’s *Parade* as well as the opportunity to understudy Dick Van Dyke and Paul Lynde in Champion’s *Bye Bye Birdie*...which led to a featured role in *How To Succeed in Business without Really Trying* which won him the Tony award and Variety Poll of New York’s Critics for his portrayal (*Hello, Dolly! Playbill*).

Like Reilly, Eileen Brennan was an acclaimed comic performer. She rose to prominence in Rick Besoyan’s operatic spoof, *Little Mary Sunshine* (1959), winning an “Obie” and the Newspaper Guild’s Page One Award for her title role (*Hello, Dolly! Playbill*). An accomplished dramatic actress as well, she had starred as Annie Sullivan in the National Company of *The Miracle Worker*. (*Hello, Dolly! Playbill*).

In Reilly and Brennan, Champion found accomplished farceurs whose dramatic skills would prevent their characters from falling into caricature. Ultimately some critics would disagree with Champion’s treatment of these characters. Champion, however, initially preferred to let “dangerous spontaneity” rule by casting a “wild pair of comedians” who were “truly possessed”(Connell Interviewer).

Petite Sondra Lee was a Jerome Robbins discovery who made her debut in *High Button Shoes* and later made her mark as Tiger Lily in Robbins’ *Peter Pan* with Mary

Martin (*Hello, Dolly! Playbill*). Lee commanded a remarkable stage presence as recalled by Gordon Connell:

She's just compressed dynamite -- absolute dynamite because...she's only 4 feet, 5 or 6 inches. You can't really take your eyes off her. The presence...and the sense of wickedness that she's capable of commanding. The humor that's always positive, never off course. And fast! So swift! (Connell Interview).

Jerry Dodge was the last of the principals to join the cast, replacing Glen Walken after the Detroit opening (*Hello, Dolly!, Variety*). With the exception of Dodge, all the principals were noted performers who had created memorable roles for the musical theatre.

Champion's elegant cartoon-farce concept is visually expressed in Freddy Wittop's boisteriously-colored costumes contrasted against Oliver Smith's rotogravure-like drops set against Jean Rosenthal's lighting. The concept is heard in dialogue, music and lyrics which invited us to experience a marvelous adventure. Such was Gower Champion's stylistic concept for *Hello, Dolly!* a collaborative event of cast and crew so aptly assembled in the concept he envisioned that Walter Kerr could write in *The New York Times*:

Hello, Dolly! is a musical comedy dream, with Carol Channing as the girl of it. Almost literally, it's a dream, a drunken carnival, a happy nightmare, a wayward circus in which the mistress of ceremonies opens wide her big-as-millstones eyes, spreads white-gloved arms in ecstatic abandon, trots out onto a circular runway that surrounds the orchestra and proceeds to dance rings around the conductor. Personally, I think the whole paw-pointing, hoof-pounding, proud and prancing show is really performed by circus ponies as people" (Kerr).

Hello, Dolly! is Thornton Wilder's playwriting conditions come to life.

Collaborative beyond his wildest imagination, dramatic and powerful with the added energy of music, pretentious beyond any adaptations of *The Matchmaker* prior to this production and happily taking place in the timeless setting of turn-of-the-century Manhattan.

CHAPTER III

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON CREATING *HELLO, DOLLY!* AUGUST 1963 - JANUARY 1964

Manhattan, summer 1963: New York is in the midst of a blistering heat wave; Broadway shows are in pre-production and major musicals are auditioning. I audition for any and all shows looking for MY TYPE, such as *A Girl To Remember*, with Carol Burnett, *Funny Girl* with Barbara Streisand, along with *Hello, Dolly!* which was the last to audition. I am gorgeous with my new Natalie Wood look-alike nose, courtesy of the brilliant show business plastic surgeon, Dr. Samuel Scher. My Mother has arrived from North Dakota, and we are ensconced on the upper East Side - 345 East 52nd Street, just off 1st Avenue and down the street from the East River and the famous River House, residence in later years of such luminaries as Dr. Henry Kissinger and across the street - Greta Garbo. David Hartman, a beau during the *My Fair Lady* touring years just ended, and he had moved several blocks away close to the 345 E. 52nd Street address. The Big Apple was mine for the taking. David Hartman and I visit my old friend Frank Egan for whom I had worked while in school at the Theatre Wing before touring with *My Fair Lady*. Mr. Egan is Mr. Show Business himself, knows everyone and everything about New York and the theatre. He produces the very jazzy Oldsmobile Industrial Show/A Detroit GM extravaganza, which at the time was quite popular. Mr. Egan didn't recognize me with the new nose and subsequently hired me that spring for the 1963 Oldsmobile Production starring Florence Henderson and Bill Hayes. It was to be the finale for beau David Hartman, and the beginning of the Frank Egan inspiration and of the Dick Perry (Broadway "musician extraordinaire," boyfriend) toured with the

Oldsmobile Show. It was a very glamorous and sexy. *Hello, Dolly!* remains several auditions and heartaches away, and politics was nowhere in my agenda of important considerations, except that I adored our handsome President and his glamorous wife Jacqueline. The Martin Luther King March on Washington in August 1963 and his “I Have a Dream” speech were lost on me as well. Priorities demanded that I find employment as quickly as possible. Unemployment was not much fun, although it was manageable in 1963 Manhattan. East 52 Street to Times Square by subway or bus - Broadway and the theatre was my cozy insular little world!

According to Gower Champion’s pre-production notebook, early in September, 1963, the Champions moved into the Dorset Hotel in New York. While Marge searched for an apartment, Monday morning, September 16, 1963, Gower began pre-rehearsal meetings in earnest (Champion Archive Notes).

The next two weeks Champion had meetings with his staff. Ed Kresley who had worked in the chorus of the musical *Bye Bye Birdie*, was hired as Champion’s personal assistant. He must have had a terrific audition because by his name in the Champion staff notebook Gower has penned the word “Wow.” Champion also had meetings with the MUSIC staff, Jerry Herman and Phil Lang (music orchestrator) as well as other music assistants and rehearsal pianists. Among them was also Peter Howard, who was to become an important Broadway conductor. Champion met with his designers, Freddy Wittop, costume designer with Champion for *Carnival* and the famous scenic designer and producer Oliver Smith. Smith’s assistant on the show was Robin Wagner, who was later to design the musicals, *Sugar* and *42nd Street* for Champion. And he auditioned countless “gypsies” for the chorus (Champion Notes for *Hello Dolly!*)

The first of Gower Champion’s notebooks from the UCLA Archives, is titled --- “Original Title --- *Dolly: A Damned Exasperating Woman*”. This is the notebook with lists of casting prospects, principal staff and various schedules. On the first page

conductor is listed as Milton Rosenstock. This was my connection to the *Hello, Dolly!* experience. Dick Perry, my beau, knew the Broadway scene as well as our conductor. Conductor Rosenstock was also famous with many shows to his credit. Initially, Rosenstock was scheduled to do *Hello, Dolly!* and of course had worked with my beau many times. Dick Perry called Milt Rosenstock and told him that I was terrific and sang great and looked even better. The *My Fair Lady* credits certainly helped; I was, after all, the understudy to Eliza Doolittle on tour!

But one has to look and sound a certain way in order to be considered for a Broadway show. Luckily I had the look that Gower Champion wanted. After the lengthy ensemble auditions, I was one of a dozen or so finalists.

The Final audition -- the day remains clear in my mind -- was a hot day in September...I wore my favorite red wool suit with the right shoes, the right haircut and the right makeup. Standing in a single line across the stage, there were possibly eight of us as I see in the Champion notebook,...I recall one spotlight center stage as well as the working stage light. The Mark Hellinger Theatre was cool, dark and quiet. Walking back and forth on the stage in front of us, Gower Champion quietly surveyed us with great courtesy and gentle kidding. Handsome and elegant, he literally floated around the stage with his movie star class! An intoxicating moment for me.

Gower was sizing us up. He was looking for hair color, height, stage presence, among other things and he was thinking analyzing, comparing types, sizes and coloring that would suit his vision for *Hello, Dolly!* By my name under the page "Singers" in his notebook I saw eight girls' names listed who were separated by coloring and character types. Marilyn Mason is "blond;" she is chosen. By Else Olaffson is the word "pretty," but she was not chosen. By my name Mary Ann Snow, "Red coloring." I am a tall redhead resembling Nanette Fabray, his original choice for Dolly. One of the reasons Gower Champion was taken with me as a performer at the singer's audition in the

summer of 1963, I resembled Nanette Fabray! With my red hair and statuesque slender dancer's demeanor. I was originally considered for the understudy to Carol Channing! However, I am no comedienne - so that went out the window. Yet Gower likes my look. I am chosen.

And what stays in my mind is Gower Champion bending - crouching down at center stage, using his hands to make a frame, as a movie director would do -- to frame my face. He actually framed each of our faces under that spotlight as a director might experiment. He was engaging and delightful. It was one of the most pleasant auditions I ever experienced. Obviously it wasn't my voice he was concerned about, it was HOW I LOOKED ON STAGE!! Milton Rosenstock had gone by this time, and a new conductor was on board. Shep Coleman, husband of Gretchen Wyler, who had been in Champion's *Bye Bye Birdie*, was now the conductor and he relied on Rosenstock's choice of singers.

There were five female singers chosen from Champion's list that day--chosen for coloring and for type. Several other singers he had worked with before in *Carnival or Bye Bye Birdie*. Eight female singers in all made the final cut.

Many years later in the mid 1980's, I saw Nanette Fabray on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. I think it was my nose that Champion found familiar. Nanette Fabray had, and probably still has, this funny nose, as a result of a bad plastic surgery job I read somewhere. My nose at the time of the audition in the fall of 1963 gave me a reasonable Nanette Fabray look alike, but it hadn't quite adjusted to my face just yet. In other words. I looked VERY Hollywood, which was OK, for show business!!!! So the casting seemed to be "who I knew" and "how I looked" that got me my first Broadway show--*Hello, Dolly!*

Veteran actress and musical theatre performer Alice Playten was the original Ermengarde, a role created for her by Gower Champion. Alice tells the story of her audition:

Hello, Dolly! was my third show in a row for producer David Merrick; I was in *Gypsy* with Ethel Merman and then I was in *Oliver*. I was given a month off to do a movie and the movie took a month and a day and Merrick put me up for Actor's Equity charges and also put me in *Hello, Dolly!* Merrick wanted me in the show and I met Gower in the theatre. I remember that I was standing on the stage and Gower came up on stage, this tall, lean, handsome man and just literally walked around me. I don't remember singing for him, I don't remember dancing for him...maybe it was because he was so beautiful! I think Merrick had the idea to put me in the show and Gower thought this was a good idea. No one who played the part afterwards was as little or as young as I was because I was only 16 and I looked like about 12! (Alice was less than 4 feet tall and very tiny in every respect) She was a type! (Alice Playten Interview, Nov. 2000)

Nicole Barth, one of the original dancers in *Hello, Dolly!* had many personal memories of working with Gower Champion, as she seemed to be one of his very favorite dancers. Nicole had gorgeous long red hair, and had worked with Champion in the musical, *Carnival*. Like several other female dancers "hair" became an important issue. Monica Carter another one of the original dancers also had "long" hair but it was blond. Nicole remembered that "hair" was very important and "you couldn't cut it or change it or anything" (Nicole Barth Interview, Nov. 2000).

Because she had already worked with Champion, Nicole was asked to come to the dancer's final audition only. She relates an incident that shows how carefully Champion picked "his people" as Dance Captain Joel Craig later explained to me. Nicole stated:

Two things happened that week. My back went out for the first time in my life, - might have been the audition - I was doing the Jimmy Dean TV show and I was called to come and dance for the "Dolly" finals. We were to bring toe shoes, tap shoes and ordinary...plain old character shoes. At that time he was looking at the number "Dancing" as a tap dance. We had to do a soft shoe...and pointe...it was a pretty thorough final call. I remember he gave one step that I loved going down the floor turning...I don't think he used it...it was a pretty audition. He picked eight girls. A friend of mine. He had wanted to take, she had been in *Carnival*. He didn't take her and I remember he came to me later, very upset about it and said "I just couldn't take her"...she had long, gorgeous hair...I think he had fallen in love with her hair, the whole look. He knew she was a friend of mine. (Barth Interview)

Just a note in passing, having auditioned for and actually been accepted by the several Broadway shows for which I was the right "type" on the advice of then boyfriend,

I was on pins and needles as to what to do. WHICH SHOW TO PICK? Perry advised me to go out with the first show in production. then if it failed out of town, I could join another...the first show out was *Hello, Dolly!*

Another interesting bit of personal folklore, my previous boyfriend David Hartman, with whom it seems I was no longer involved, had also auditioned for *Hello, Dolly!* and been cast to play the character Rudolf, the head waiter at the Harmonia Gardens. David was also hired as an assistant stage manager. At the time David and I were no longer on speaking terms. This lasted for the entire out of town tryout period as well as into the lengthy run of *Hello, Dolly!* on Broadway. Nearly three years. Ah! Show business! David and I had been a very hot item while on tour with National touring company of *My Fair Lady* in the early 1960's. David, of course, went on to semi-star status with his contract at Universal Studios, and later became better known as a host of ABC's *Good Morning America*. We only spoke years later when I was a Press Aide in the Nixon White House and David came to visit with some Hollywood types. He was most interested in my boss, Herb Klein with whom David made a lasting friendship concerning all the journalism questions Hartman faced as an actor on television. Mr. Klein suggested, as a friendly boss might, that I probably had a more exciting life style now than I would have had I stayed with Mr. Hartman. Trying to help me over -come the thought in hindsight that I might have made a mistake in letting Mr. Hartman out of my grasp!

In pre-production planning, Champion searched for a unifying technique to combine a wide variety of entertainment styles in *Hello, Dolly!* He found this by focusing on a central concept, by using a type of "cinematic dissolve" and pan shots from the set of Yonkers into New York. He not only conceptualized Yonkers and New York, but he created a seamless transition between the locales, and his concern was that these transitions would have a "lift and style" of their own (Lucia Victor Interview, 1984).

Champion was not only concerned with the scenes and the musical numbers, but to those theatrical moments which are usually dead time going from scene to scene. Champion recognized those moments for what they were: small, sometimes tiny, theatrical crises. And like most crises they offered not only problems and danger, but opportunity. The plot of *Dolly* was filled with such moments and Champion seized on them to give the story his own style (Lucia Victor Interview, 1984).

Ron Young's story, one of the original dancers in the *Hello, Dolly!* ensemble, gives us another glimpse into Gower Champion's personality and style:

I was the new kid on the block, it was my first audition! I arrived from Oklahoma on Friday, auditioned on Monday when the singers were called and the dancers were called back on Tuesday. I wore the same outfit, and no one ever went to a dancing call with a shirt and tie on and I did. And Gower said, "Did I ask you to come back?" and I said "Oh, no, Mr. Champion, I just came back." And I waited past his dancer's call and came to the singer's final and the dancer's final and was hired as a dancer/singer. And this being my first show, to say I was a little green is an understatement, ... a naive understatement, but I had watched Marge and Gower in all those MGM musicals, and you know. I thought I had just died and gone to heaven. (Ron Young Interview, Nov 2000)

Champion's pre-production notes for *Hello, Dolly!* indicate that the overall concept of this production was well established before rehearsals began. Evidence of this are Champion's comments in his personal notes concerning the function that each number should perform in terms of overall concept. In his notes for the number "I Put My Hand In" the opening number, he wrote "*MOST IMPORTANT*. This number and its staging and the whole approach must set the tone and style for the entire show. Must be far out -- for one thing, the 'people' painted on the traveler a good device. But who else -- And what else -- And *how*" (Champion notes).

On Wednesday, October 2, 1963, on the stage of the Mark Hellinger theatre, he began to block the waiters for the title number, "Hello, Dolly! (Champion notes). Champion wanted both the opening number, "Call on Dolly" and the "Hello, Dolly" number, which he felt would be the highlight of the show finished before working the rest

of the choreography. He was establishing his “style” and the rest of the production would feature the style set in those first few weeks of rehearsal! (Lucia Victor Interview 1983-84).

Ed Kresley, Champion's Dance Assistant comments on the “Hello, Dolly” number and the first rehearsals.

Before he got into the official rehearsals for the show, Gower always had a signature number, -- it might be called a “concept number”--the one that was sure to stop the show...that was the case with the “Hello, Dolly” number. It was the first number staged in rehearsals and was finished up until the last 16 bars. (Kresley Interview, Nov. 2000)

Joel Craig, original dancer for *Hello, Dolly!* and later Dance Captain gives this insight into Champion’s pre-production rehearsals:

He was very well prepared. When we worked on the “Waiters Gallop”, he started on the count of one and just worked eight counts until those eight counts were good. And we never went back to them. He just said “Okay, that’s in the bank. We’ll do it in three weeks” And that is what we did the first two weeks of rehearsal. He never left eight counts until he had them. The Waiter’s Gallop in the “Hello, Dolly” number that we finished on the second Sunday of rehearsals never changed. The “Hello, Dolly” number that was finished at the end of the second week of rehearsals is the same one that we opened with. He never changed a step until the last day before we opened in Detroit. (Joel Craig Interview, Nov. 2000)

Regarding the “Hello, Dolly” choreography, Champion had conceived of the “ramp” built out from the apron of the stage around the orchestra pit, ringed with footlights to give a turn-of-the-century feel to the scenery. During early rehearsals he thought the “pass around” on the ramp could only be used once during the “Hello Dolly” number (Lucia Victor Interview 1983-84). For the next three weeks Champion worked on the number every day for approximately two to three hours per day. He discovered that the simpler he made the steps the more emotion the number was able to contain...as he had done with the script, he explored many possibilities...walks, kicks, struts -- all in the search for the “perfect step” (Interviews with dancers). When the number was set

the search for the” perfect step” (Interviews with dancers). When the number was set enough to begin working with Carol Channing, she was called for rehearsal.

When Carol stood at the top of the makeshift stairway into the Harmonia Gardens set, ready to descend, Jerry Herman realized he had not written any entrance music, Herman asked Peter Howard, the rehearsal pianist, to improvise something. As Channing descended the staircase, Howard broke into burlesque music...the racy music accompanying the middle-aged widow descending the stairs into an elegant restaurant added a new dimension Champion hadn't thought of. The idea was kept and orchestrated and accompanied Channing down the stairs on opening night (Herman, Victor Interviews).

As rehearsals progressed in this first signature number, the choreography became an exercise in *group movement* and *dynamics*. Champion used unison movement for the waiters, having them move as a unit in the opposite direction from Mrs. Dolly Levi and then reverse themselves. The counterpoint created the dramatic edge that Champion wanted. The waiters surrounded Dolly, and she would pass among them, greeting each one. Then she was centered, the single red-dressed figure moving amidst the black and white suited waiters, with the waiters swaying. Then there was a gentle soft shoe dance and then a kick line, and finally Dolly led them onto the “pass around” on the ramp and back to the stage proper. Dolly was left alone at center stage with the waiters lined up in back on the stage behind her. He had choreographed nearly all the number up to this point and here he was stumped. According to Dance Assistant Ed Kresley: “Each day he would run the number up to this point and sit in the theatre, musing. The finale would not come to him.” (Kresley Interview). Finally he arrived at a solution, the waiters would leap from the stage right over the orchestra onto the ramp, surrounding Dolly and lead a final high-kick line passing around the ramp. For Champion it expressed the *emotion* of the moment, Mrs. Dolly Levi taking a leap to rejoin life at the Harmonia Garden with the

waiters leaping to join her, welcoming her back to life. It was dramatic, unexpected and very theatrical.

Champion had spent approximately thirty-five hours working on the staging of “*Hello, Dolly!*” (Champion’s notes). Members of the company not directly involved with the staging had not been permitted to observe any of the rehearsals up to this point.

When it was finished the cast was invited to see it.

Ed Kresley, Champion’s dance assistant, who was hired late, and was the first to see the “Hello Dolly” number at the Mark Hellinger Theatre tells the story of his first view of the number:

I had auditioned for the show and had said I was interested in production. I guess I was working somewhere and hadn’t been home to check my call service and I’m walking uptown, Central Park South, and this cab stops, and Gower jumps out and yells at me: “Where the****.have you been? I’ve been trying to get in touch with you! I want you to assist me on “*Dolly.*” Come to the Mark Hellinger Theatre.” So I appeared that night and he shows me the “Hello Dolly” number up until the last 32 bars and I was just mesmerized and tears came to my eyes, and I went to work immediately. I had my script the next morning and was there at 9:00 AM, and we were rehearsing. The next thing he started was the “Waiters Gallop” because that was with all the guys, so he could get that much out of the way and concentrate on directing. That was how he did most of his shows. (Kresley interview)

The cast was not invited to view these numbers until the entire sequence was finished. Alice Playten added her own thoughts:

I remember coming to rehearsals at the Mark Hellinger Theatre and seeing the “Waiters Gallop” with the male dancers and thinking that this was the most astonishing thing I’d ever seen people do. The dancers and the excitement of the music and thinking “Okay Gower, what are you going to follow this with,” and then, of course he did “*Hello, Dolly!*” It had all this heart and all this energy and it was a phenomenal one-two punch--all these guys just flinging themselves across the stage, so devoted just performing full out. We all cried. (Playten Interview)

During the early rehearsals, all of the actors, including singers and dancers followed the various “stage” patterns given to them by Champion. He would often gather

the ensemble and describe the overall picture of a number in choreographic terms. Champion would assemble numbers person by person, movement by movement, working like a painter who applies first one color and then stands back, looks at his work, and applies another color. While he was “staging” these numbers, other “colors” simply had to stand around and wait (Lucia Victor Interview).

The cast, of course, would be restless and start to talk. But Champion demanded complete silence whenever he worked. When noise would start, he would make a clicking sound with his tongue. “Tch Tch Tch” which became the signal for order. The room would fall silent and the work would go on (Lucia Victor Interview).

At times, Champion’s mania for silence could reach comic proportions. During rehearsals, Marge Champion would often observe from afar and knit. Following her lead, many women in the chorus also took up knitting and when they were not being utilized in a number, they would sit in the wings and knit. During one particularly long silence the clatter of knitting needles filled the stage. Champion exploded and turned in the direction of the noise. Realizing he had gone a little too far, Champion agreed to the knitting but only if the chorus used plastic needles (Pat Trott Interview).

Rehearsals were always a time of particular concentration for Champion. Dancer Joel Craig recalls the disciplined atmosphere that had to exist in order for Champion to maintain complete concentration:

We were in the Mark Hellinger Theatre, *My Fair Lady* had just closed. Gower had Rex Harrison’s dressing room and Carol had Julie Andrews. These were the two dressing rooms on the main floor. Gower would sometimes say “Take Five” and walk off the stage and into that dressing room and he would come out like ten minutes later and as he was walking back he’d say, “five, six, seven...” and boy, we were in our places and picked up on that pianist, Peter Howard was standing by, picked up on the dance music right away. There was never a question of anybody saying, “Where were we?” You were on your toes all the time, but he never lost his temper. He was never really angry, but he had a number of rules. You couldn’t sit behind him, so if he were standing on the stage you couldn’t sit in the audience and watch rehearsal. You could sit on the stage. There were rows

of chairs in the old wings, no drops or anything, it was all open--there were rows of chairs where you could sit. But if you sat in those chairs you couldn't make any noise. So if you wanted to sit on the side and watch rehearsals, you could as long as you didn't go behind him, or talk or make a sound. (Craig Interview)

Joel Craig offers that the ensemble had their own rooms where we could relax not far from the stage. He continues:

Just off stage in between Harrison's and Andrew's dressing rooms there were two very large rooms that were used in *My Fair Lady* as quick change rooms for the entire ensemble, and they were big, big rooms, and these rooms were ours. We were told that if you wanted to make noise, they always kept the big fire doors to the stage closed so if we needed to make noise we could go in these and make all the noise we wanted. (Craig Interview)

Dancer John Mineo has his own thoughts about the Champion rehearsals:

Yeah, we were at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, and the first day of rehearsal. Literally the *first* day of rehearsal and we start right in on the "Waiter's Gallop." (Mineo Interview)

On the subject of the one-week probationary tryout for the dancers Mineo had this to say:

Gower had his people. He knew who he wanted, and I certainly don't remember him being very generous or patient, or that he had a very easy-going attitude in his shows. That's not what I remember. Gower was extremely focused and he wanted exactly what he wanted. We were in rehearsal that first week and I had to go to him and say, "Listen, I need a couple of days off to get married. I'm not going on a honeymoon. I just want, you know, a couple of days off so I can get married and Gower said, "How old are you?" But I did get married (Mineo Interview).

Dancer Ron Young has these thoughts on the rehearsals:

Gower, when he was creating, would pace the front of the stage and you would be standing there waiting to continue, waiting to go on, and he would pace the stage and sort of hunch his shoulders over and look out from his--I call them--his "hooded half closed eyes" and then he would walk around and draw with his fingers the motions in the air, you know, the patterns. (Young Interview)

Rehearsals were always a time of particular concentration for Champion, but before the company left for Detroit, Michigan, where the show was to start its out-of-town tour, he had confided to Lucia Victor, the assistant director, that he felt the

real work on the show would not begin until these out of town performances. Champion had no idea as the company made its way to Detroit, that the show that was to open there would bear little resemblance to the block buster which would finally open in New York, two months later (Payne-Carter 275).

When the production opened at the Fisher Theatre in Detroit on November 18, 1963, as *Dolly -- a Damned Exasperating Woman*, the first act was the major problem, it did not set up the story or characters, and most of all it did not set the show in motion which as a director/choreographer was Champion's strength. Champion thought that "*Dolly*" had "four numbers with pizzazz and the rest of the show died around them" (Rex Reed).

On a personal note, on November, 1963, *Hello, Dolly!* is in its infancy at the Fisher Theatre with winter snow and blizzard like conditions as part of the landscape. I watched television, alone, in my little apartment at the Abington Hotel in Detroit. I was viewing the presidential assassination and the carnage in Dallas. It was late in the day when the news reached us in Michigan. Trudging through the snow to the theatre I wanted, needed to connect with someone. The theatre was dark, empty. Walking around, I heard sounds. It was Gower Champion. Gower was pacing the stage in the darkened theatre. There was only the stage work light, giving its eerie other world fantasy dimensions. The stark outlines of stage 2 x 4s gave the impression of a cathedral or more appropriately a sepulcher. Everywhere was sadness, despair and grief, even backstage at the soon to be monster musical comedy hit, *Hello, Dolly!*

Dancer John Mineo recalls his memories of that day.

We (the male dancers) were in rehearsal that day and we went out to dinner and somebody came and said "Somebody assassinated Kennedy" and I heard it and thought it was a very bad joke. Not a smart joke and Lucia Victor (Asst. Director) got the company together and told us.... very, very spooky. We were dark for three nights I think. Didn't do the show for three nights. (Mineo Interview)

On opening night in Detroit, the first scene in *Hello, Dolly!* was clearly not working. There were 132 slide cues, and Channing's lightning-monologue, that Michael Stewart had written, was a problem for her (Victor Interview). The basic function of the scene introducing Dolly and having the audience loving and interested in her at once were not fulfilled. At least five other opening scenes and devices were tried. At one point Channing, surrounded by the chorus began handing out her business cards while the texts were flashed on three upstage screens. Another had Carol on the runway handing out the cards to the audience. None of them worked (Payne-Carter 280).

Champion began by cutting the entire overture and the first scene. Dolly would enter on a streetcar, reading a newspaper hidden from sight. The chorus, including me cast as the "Tall Girl" sang a chorus of "Call on Dolly" which describes exactly what she does--set the plot and the dramatic action creating the "need" to get to know Dolly Levi. The first verse of the number ends with the words "Call on Dolly, if your eldest daughter needs a friend." The second verse ends with Dolly Levi dropping her newspaper and which opens the show to thunderous applause. It was simple, theatrical and great fun (Payne-Carter 285).

Other additions and changes were also tried in Detroit, namely the use of the ramp out over the orchestra pit, which had been devised by Champion strictly for the number *Hello, Dolly!*. Champion's solution to the first act finale was to have Dolly come forward onto the ramp to deliver her soliloquies asking for advice, seeking approval, of her dead husband, Ephraim Levi, a theatrical device that isolated her from the stage action. There she could step out of the story into another completely different world. Also for the staging of the number "Put on Your Sunday Clothes" the chorus entered out on the runway as an example of another dramatic moment using the lyrics of the song as well as the brilliant costumes to underscore the fact that the citizens of Yonkers were actually changing into their Sunday clothes (Lucia Victor Interview).

The first act finale was successful and did not seem a problem at the time. The song "Penny In Your Pocket" had been a replacement for a song which Jerry Herman had originally written for Ethel Merman, who had been David Merrick's first choice for the role of Dolly Levi. "Penny In Your Pocket" was a huge ensemble number with tons of properties, including tables and many items that were part of the Van Groot Emporium that was going out of business due to a Vandergelder purchase. Dolly followed after him buying furiously and charging everything she purchased to Vandergelder. The number was staged with major movement by the chorus of singers and dancers. There were three levels of the stage, and Champion used many colors and properties to great advantage. The number played beautifully and the audience seemed to love it; this was a perfect first act finale (Victor Interview).

Champion, however, was realizing that "Penny In Your Pocket" did not establish any dramatic movement. It was very static, flashy and theatrical, with very little plot substance. Champion and Herman were in the habit of meeting each morning for breakfast since it was the best time of the day for them to discuss the show. One morning at breakfast Herman inquired whether they needed to deal with "it". Champion knew precisely what he was referring to, and agreed (Herman Interview). But problems involved in cutting this number were enormous. A replacement that worked better than the already successful and expensive "Penny" number would have to be conceived and written. Lucia Victor estimates that "Penny In Your Pocket" had cost about \$100,000 including costumes, orchestrations, props, etc. Victor remembers that the prop list alone was three pages long. (Lucia Victor Interview)

Producer David Merrick, meanwhile, was fully aware of the difficulties the show was undergoing. Earlier he had flown to Detroit and attempted to stir things up. As a result Champion felt that his authority as director was being compromised and had gone through the motions of quitting the show. He had predicted that Merrick would appear

and try to cause “trouble” and had advised everyone to let him play it out (Marge Champion Interview). Champion informed Merrick that he would not tolerate his presence at rehearsals and, until the producer left town, Champion would remain unavailable. Only Marge knew that in reality he had taken a bus to Ypsilanti, Michigan and had gone to a movie (Marge Champion Interview).

When Merrick heard that Champion was throwing out the successful first act finale, he decided that intervention was once again needed. He engaged composer and lyricist, Strouse and Adams, with whom Champion had worked before. Champion at the same time asked composer Bob Merrill to write the number (Michael Stewart Interview). The four went to work separately. Three different versions of a “Parade Finale” were presented, and eventually Herman’s was chosen. There was a controversy as to whose idea the parade motif had been and a lawsuit developed and later settled (Payne-Carter Diss.).

Hello, Dolly! ended its run in Detroit and moved on to the National Theatre in Washington D.C. While the “Detroit” version of the first act finale was played at night, the company rehearsed the new ending during the day. The scene designer Oliver Smith created a new backdrop, but could not oversee the execution because he was sick. Robin Wagner his assistant, flew to Washington and met with Champion, returning to New York to complete the drops. The cast would see neither the scenery nor the costumes before the preview performances in New York City (Robin Wagner Interview).

And while the designs were being built in New York, the wardrobe department in Washington worked on the costumes. Lucia Victor recalls she shopped for red shirts to outfit firemen, while Gene Wilson the wardrobe master created costumes for the rest of the ensemble (Victor Interview). In staging the “Parade” number, Champion once again used the ramp runway, bringing the “Parade” out into the audience, a dramatic first act

finale number. In this rough form, the number was assembled and did not actually play until the very last Washington performance (Lucia Victor Interview).

Alice Playten summarizes these weeks of rehearsal this way:

Several people over the years have asked me when did I know the show was a hit. We were in Detroit when Kennedy was killed and that was about the worst thing that could possibly have happened in the history of America. It was a very strange moment. We did get to Washington, D.C. as our next stop. And by then the show had turned a corner,...the solid numbers and the rewrites. Jerry Herman rewrote things and we went through our various Barnaby's [there were four replacements before Jerry Dodge was finally chosen]. And I remember our New Year's Eve party in Washington, D.C., December 1963. My memory is that Jerry Herman brought in this recording of Louis Armstrong singing "Hello, Dolly" and when I heard that I thought "We're a hit." (Playten Interview)

Gower Champion's magic had prevailed.

CHAPTER IV

GOWER CHAMPION: HIS PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE

Between *Showboat* (1928) and *Oklahoma* (1943), 308 musical productions opened on Broadway, an average of twenty per season. Descendants of musicals of the 1920's, as well as the popular Princess musicals, began working in a format that could no longer be described as sheer entertainment. The musical theatre began to evolve as the libretto, the lyrics, the music, and even the decor would be faithful to the requirements of the plot and the characters. Between *Oklahoma* (1943) and *A Chorus Line* (1975), the art of the American musical theatre grew rapidly. During that time 449 musical productions opened on Broadway, an average of 14 per season. The mainstream American musical -- now a relatively new art form -- came from a variety of uniquely American as well as British and European sources. More than any other technique, the *staging* of a musical expressed the rhythm and drive of this new American art form. The contributions of many directors and choreographers over a span of many years helped influence Gower Champion's own special contribution to our modern American musical theatre (Flinn 279-80). Following are some historical influences with examples of the predecessors and their contributions.

W.S. Gilbert was the first modern stage director of British musical theatre. He insisted on realism, and painstakingly prepared, wrote, rewrote, and staged work well in advance. Gilbert used actors who could sing, chose actors over singers and demanded exact delivery and serious performances. Gilbert and Sullivan together created the most

exacting and entertaining productions the musical theatre had seen up to this time (Flinn 281).

Along with their British counterparts, American directors and choreographers began to equal and in many cases exceed the British influence. The first well-directed musical productions in America were importations of these authentic Gilbert and Sullivan musicals. However, American artists were making their contributions as well. One of the first was Julian Mitchell who directed Ziegfeld's first *Follies*. Mitchell had outstanding visual sense and was nearly deaf but was the first great director-choreographer of the American musical theatre. Ned Wayburn was another early contributor. He worked for the Shuberts and Ziegfeld in early productions and invented the Ziegfeld showgirl walk on steep and narrow stairs a technique which speeded up many ponderous productions.

Busby Berkeley is the most famous of the early director-choreographers. His imagination and ambition led to his becoming the top director of the musicals of the 1920s. He established the choreographer who ran the show when the famous J.J. Shubert gave him a musical, called *The Street Singer* to produce, direct and choreograph. Although the show failed, Berkeley's dances got rave reviews and his chorus girls were "tireless, peppy and pulchritudinous" - unusual during the days of early musical theatre. In Hollywood Samuel Goldwyn staged the musical *Whoopie* starring Eddie Cantor, and signed Berkeley to stage dances. In 1930 Berkeley exited Broadway for Hollywood. He insisted on shooting his own dance and musical sequences, usually shot by the director of the films and "Dances directed by" became Berkeley's trademark. His imaginative use of the camera virtually invented the great movie musical. The all-time backstage movie musical *42nd Street* was to be Gower Champion's final contribution to the American musical theatre which opened on Broadway in 1980--the day he died. *42nd Street* stands as the only financially successful film to stage translation of a movie musical.

Photographs of Berkeley's Broadway productions indicate his spectacular staging ability and imaginative originality that also made his movies famous. Berkeley's staging may have outranked his dancing, as he was not trained as a dancer, but he glorified the dancer and integrated the spectacle with the chorus line -- all creative aspects that Gower Champion integrated in his own choreography during his Broadway career (Flinn 282-284).

Although fragmented, there were other noteworthy choreographer director contributors to the modern American musical that preceded Gower Champion. Dances in the early years of American musical theatre were entirely unrelated to the dramatic material and often prepackaged dance acts were used. Choreographer Robert Alton had seen the Champion's perform at a nightclub in Montreal, Canada. His dances for *Anything Goes* (1934), *The Ziegfeld Follies* (1934, 1936) and *Leave it To Me* (1938) had established him as one of Broadway's premier choreographers. He also revolutionized stage dancing by tailoring specific routines to the skills of solo performers and by breaking the traditional chorus line into small groups to fill the stage with a variety of movement. The result was that he gave old-fashioned hoofing a choreographic integrity comparable to ballet. Similar traits would later characterize Champion's own work as choreographer. When he and Jeanne Tyler (Champion's first dance partner) were invited by Alton to incorporate their act into a Broadway revue in 1939, they readily accepted and joined the cast of the early Broadway production of *Streets of Paris*. This production was considered by some to be "the last important revue of The Great Broadway Period (1920- 1940)" (Gilvey 34-35).

Dance acts graduated from vaudeville to Broadway where they were inserted not just as revues but in book musicals. Among those who helped develop this process were: English born Hassard Short known for his innovative staging; Joe Tiller whose choreography grew from ballet-based dance to the tap and kick line dancing popular on

Broadway; Albertina Rasch, who recognized American talent and looked for beautiful girls and then trained them; Bobby Connolly, noted for his tap dancing choreography, *Ziegfeld Follies*, 1931 and 1934, *Flying High*, *Funny Face* and *Good News*. Seymour Felix was the first choreographer to make certain that dances looked as though they belonged to sets used for special productions. Leroy Prinz broke up the traditional uniformity of dancers by giving different steps to different dancers.

Robert Alton, however, was the first powerhouse choreographer to totally bridge the 1920's musicals into modern choreography. He worked with director Vincente Minnelli and he choreographed the *Ziegfeld Follies* of 1936 with George Balanchine. Alton also worked with Rodgers and Hammerstein and Rodgers and Hart and in the films, *There's No Business Like Show Business* and *You Were Never Lovelier*. Alton was heavy on tap and put the traditional show-biz dancing at the service of the project. *Pal Joey* was director George Abbot's most unusual musical and Robert Alton served as dance director. For *Pal Joey* he created the first *character* chorus in the evolving history of the musical. Chorus girls in that show were leg-kicking, tap-dancing, chorines suitable for the show and this contribution remains significant. Alton as a choreographer was very hard on dancers whom he fired for adding weight or losing their spark. He was the first choreographer to hold brush-up rehearsals (Flinn 287).

In Hollywood, Champion later worked with Alton on *Show Boat* as well as director Mervyn Leroy and choreographer Hermes Pan on *Lovely to Look At*, which developed his creative mindset for book musical staging. Later Champion developed his plot allied numbers created for the films, *Everything I Have Is Yours* and *Give a Girl a Break*. Champion emerged from these experiences convinced that "a dance number in a musical should advance, or at least enhance the plot. No matter how cleverly conceived, a dance number should never go off by itself and drift away from the mainstream of the show" (Gilvey 65).

In 1936 George Balanchine requested “choreography by” rather than “dances by” or “dance director” for the Broadway musical *On Your Toes*. Dances of earlier choreographers were connected to the shows usually through lyrics or costumes but Balanchine with his classic ballet background wanted a plot for his dances. “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue” from *On Your Toes* created an uproar with the audience with its strong storyline (Flinn 288).

Considered a serious innovator of dancing in musical theatre, Balanchine integrated tall showgirls and short ponies and both he and Agnes de Mille temporarily pushed tap and other forms of dance from the stage. Gower and Jeanne as a team returned to Broadway in *The Lady Comes Across*, along with it, came the opportunity to work with Balanchine. Like Alton, Balanchine’s impression of the Champion dance team was so favorable, he permitted Gower to create their dance sequences for *The Lady Comes Across*. Early in his career Champion showed signs of his developing creativity as a choreographer. Champion was influenced by these notable choreographers of the day, who, in turn, deferred to this very young man in his early 20s (Gilvey 38-39).

Rouben Mamoulian, the Moscow drama student who revolutionized the American musical with his productions of *Porgy and Bess* and *Oklahoma*, was deeply admired by Gower Champion. Mamoulian was the master of the integrated musical, able to visualize the entire work in musical terms and give it unity of style (Gilvey 65). He achieved this by demanding total artistic control over the entire production. This was a forerunner of Gower Champion’s insistence on total control of his own productions. Mamoulian’s works brought substance, order and artistic balance to each project. Mamoulian thought highly of Gower Champion’s work, and his recommendation along with director George Sidney enabled Gower to gain admission into the Screen Director’s Guild (Champion Interview). Champion would later pattern his career on the same artistic standards as those of Mamoulian, whose work he admired so much (Gilvey 66). Mamoulian created

beautiful pictures in a theatrically impressionistic style, utilizing larger choruses than the modern theatre could ever afford, together with realistic acting and strong central ideas (Flinn 290). Gower Champion learned his lessons well from the genius of Rouben Mamoulian.

Many men have been called “the father of the modern American musical” - Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Oscar Hammerstein as a writer, George Abbot as a director, and Rodgers and Hammerstein and their powerhouse team of writers and producers. George M. Cohan is sometimes credited with this honor. However, historically Oscar Hammerstein II, who thought of himself as a librettist and lyricist, actually launched the American musical as we know it today by virtually inventing and insisting at the idea of continuous action in a musical. Hammerstein’s directing informed his work and makes him the single most influential man in the history of the modern American musical (Flinn 292).

Hammerstein would “stage” his musicals in his head as he wrote them, organizing a fluid, integrated show as he wrote. As a young stage manager, he trained understudies and replacements, directed the actors in book scenes, and taught incoming dancers simple dance steps, all this without formal training. In addition, in later years, he always wrote full stage directions into his texts and carefully constructed the shows, *Allegro* and *South Pacific* to include continuous action, which by many is considered his greatest historical accomplishment (Flinn 292-93). Without this idea, the modern director-choreographer would never be able to create the fluid, cinematic locomotive of a musical that is today’s ideal of great musical theatre.

Gower Champion’s work in *Hello, Dolly!* reflects Hammerstein’s genius. John Mineo, one of the original dancers in that musical, notes:

Two shows stick in my mind as being the most conceptualized shows I’ve ever done, the first one was *Hello, Dolly!* the second was *Pippin* (Fosse) Both Champion and Fosse had this vision of how to make things work. Up until *Hello,*

Dolly! I had never seen a Broadway show done without a blackout. There was one blackout in *Hello, Dolly!*--Dolly's "Wave Your Little Hand and Whisper So Long Dearie". Gower brought the curtain in and she did a vaudeville number right in one take. The man was brilliant, he closed the curtain, he had needed a number to wipe the stage, to get rid of her, and the garden scene and bring on the feed store scene so he brought in the curtain, made her do the number in one and there was not even a blackout for that curtain coming in. The end of the number was the one and only blackout in the show. (Mineo Interview)

Ed Kresley, dance assistant to Gower Champion in the original company of *Hello, Dolly!* remembers very well Champion's mentoring skills.

Every morning he was just impeccably neat, I guess we all remember. He'd have a black T-shirt with ascot and everything. I adored Gower; he was absolutely my mentor. He was responsible for the rest of my life, the rest of my whole career, because of this, the last big thing I did was *Bye Bye Birdie* with Tommy Tune. I staged it all in his honor, because he was just a brilliant man. It all had a sense of fun with it and that's how Gower worked with his people. We all loved him. (Kresley Interview)

Mr. George Abbot was first and foremost a collaborator and musicals became his trademark. Everyone wanted to work with him and his partners and associates became a "Who's Who" of the American theatre from his first production in 1926 to his last in 1983. Abbot put musicals together more efficiently than had ever been done and this efficiency in staging a production led directly to the high-tech directors and choreographers of the succeeding era, i.e. Gower Champion. Abbott's plays and musicals were straightforward, no-nonsense productions, and his large body of work is a crucial link between the early musical comedies of the twenties and thirties, with the modern American musical at its top form. As a writer, Abbott valued the material, and it was this dependence on dramatic content that helped raise the book (music and lyrics of a musical) to a more respectable level (Flinn 294-295).

The Abbott Method of directing was straightforward and demanding. He directed a play by staging it logically and precisely and disallowing anything phony. Acting in musical theatre was the last art form to adopt a more realistic level of reality and truth, and Abbott's influence directly benefited the "new musical theatre" allowing musicals

the freedom to become more serious. This raised their level of reality so that audiences could identify and empathize more with the characters (Flinn 295). Abbott with his quiet, gentlemanly demeanor gave all who worked with him the gift of working with a master craftsman at the highest level of creative experience (Flinn 296).

Gower Champion could have been made in Abbott's image, for Gower also worked with a respectful appreciation of his craft. The difference between Abbott and Champion was that Champion brought immense creative vision and innate musical talent and stamped his work with his own unique style.

With choreographers Jerome Robbins and Michael Bennett, concept over style was their trademark and little of their work translated from show to show. Each musical - in some cases each number in a musical -- was unique and to achieve this, they placed much responsibility on their assistants. Often a choreographer may be limited by his own natural body patterns. Because of this Jerome Robbins used Peter Gennaro and Bob Fosse; and Michael Bennett relied heavily on Bob Avian and Baayork Lee. He often asked his dancers to contribute as well. In the final concept, Robbins and Bennett pulled all the creative aspects together editing, arranging, rearranging, and encouraging (Flinn 297).

Ed Kresley recalls that Gower Champion worked closely with his dancers as well but never blatantly used their material:

Gower handpicked his dancers, he knew what he wanted from each of them and each of them helped him in some way. If someone did something he liked he would use it, but he wouldn't be blatant about this as are a few choreographers who shall go unnamed, who would arrange to take dance steps from their dancers and put them together. He never did that. Once Gower apologized to me, I was working with the little boy, the original shoeshine thing and the horse, and I was sent downstairs to work with this kid and we pulled it together. Gower was very complimentary to me, but he didn't use it. And later he apologized to me. "You know, I've got to apologize to you, you must be very frustrated as a choreographer, because I have to do everything myself." That's the kind of person he was (Kresley Interview).

Choreographers Agnes de Mille, Michael Kidd, Gower Champion and Bob Fosse - created dances out of a personal style that grew and expanded throughout their careers. Each created work that was stamped with their look. Following the astounding success of *Oklahoma* American musical theatre choreographers poured out historic musical dances that were never preserved or recorded. Not until 1978 was choreography considered suitable for copyright purposes yet as early as 1959 Fosse dancer and musical comedy star, Gwen Verdon, is quoted as saying “ A choreographer is never afraid to move you around, while most directors have their mind on keeping you where you will be heard. Choreographers have a greater sense of the visual, the composition of a scene and the look of a scene. You don’t have to depend on words all the time” (Flinn 297).

The musical was becoming a visual medium - Gower Champion and other memorable choreographers were ready and poised to give the American musical theatre this new look. Gower Champion was already famous before becoming director-choreographer on Broadway. He was the *first director-choreographer to demand and receive over-the-title billing: “A Gower Champion Musical”*). David Merrick produced many of Champion’s shows and he called him the “Presbyterian Hitler.” This was a nod to Champion ‘s strong disciplinary style and his meticulous work habits as well as his finesse in dealing with all levels of cast and crew in his productions (Flinn 298).

Joel Craig, original dancer and dance captain, *Hello, Dolly!*, later to become one of Gower Champion’s top assistants, reflected on his famous mentor.

I thought he was just tremendously gracious to the dancers to the people that worked with him. I worked with them all, choreographers Ronnie Field, Jerome Robbins, Michael Kidd, Bob Fosse, Michael Bennett, there’s not a person of those great theatrical--director-choreographers that I haven’t done a show for, and the only one I never saw lose his temper was Gower Champion. We went nine weeks of rehearsals and then another nine weeks we were on the road with the show and he never raised his voice, ever. (Craig Interview)

A more telling description of Gower Champion's respectful work habits is this from Joel Craig:

Working with Gower was hard work. But you know what? It was a different kind of hard work. When we did *West Side Story*, and everybody worked very very hard for Mr. Robbins (Jerome Robbins) and everybody hated him, despised him. There are these famous stories when he fell into the orchestra pit and no one...people just watched him do it, you know? People lived in terror. When you were doing the show, they'd say: "Jerry's coming in over the weekend" and you'd like stop and say "geez... am I doing the steps right?" He was nasty and mean.. unpleasant. Bobbie Fosse was sweet, but a tremendous taskmaster, he would just beat you into the ground to get every pinky right. Ronnie Field was wonderful and a genius but he screamed. He would put you on his B list and if you weren't one of his favorite people, it was just terrible. Michael Bennett was not like that.. Michael Kidd was not like that. He was just very sweet. I did three shows with him, but Gower was just very professional. (Craig 5)

Ed Kresley reflects as well on Gower's professional demeanor and work habits:

There was a good feeling about Gower--that was him. I've worked with alot of them--men like Jerome Robbins and Josh Logan who are tyrannical and they scream and they wave their hands and yell at you. They pull you apart and try to build you up in the part. That's another way of working... that's another director, another style. Gower worked through just sheer respect and love. I think that's how he worked (Kresley Interview).

Nicole Barth, who considers herself "a Gower Champion dancer" from the time she was hired for the musical *Carnival* recalls:

Gower had respect for the people he worked with. I always felt I was an individual. I was never a chorus member. You know it has come to be seen as a loveable tag "show business gypsy" but at that time I wasn't thrilled with the "gypsy" label. Gower never treated me as a "gypsy". You worked hard but while you were dancing you were not treated as just a member of the ensemble. (Barth 4)

Champion's ego was backed up with an eye for the spectacular. He used more dancers, more prop, more costumes and more sets for a single number than any other choreographer of the modern musical (Flinn p. 299). He was a direct descendant of the Busby Berkeley school, and his early shows were filled with dancing. (*Bye Bye Birdie, Carnival, and Hello, Dolly!*)

Champion's patterns often overshadow his steps and his numbers build in an ever-increasing tableaux. This could be seen clearly according to Dance Captain Joel Craig:

He would look at us in the dance rehearsals and particularly in "Waiters Gallop" and later in "Sunday Clothes".. it shows.. you can see it very plainly, the original choreography of his in "Put on Your Sunday Clothes" because it's all about patterns and pictures, stage pictures. Every count eight that Gower Champion choreographed was a stage picture and that's how he looked at it. You know how movie directors used to...make a frame with their hands and look through it? That's how he used to work. He would stop us...[make the clicking sound] and we would all stop and he would crouch over and put his fingers in this frame and he would look at the stage picture in this frame.. and then he'd go..."OK" or he would go on or he would change something. (Craig 2)

Another example was *Carnival* where he constructed an entire carnival in front of the audience, using animals and circus tricks. According to dancer Nicole Barth, Gower also picked dancers at his auditions with this "stage picture" in mind.

About the audition [for *Hello, Dolly!*] he picked...was it 8 girls? A friend of mine, he had wanted to take, and he was very upset because Champion knew she was a friend of mine. She had long gorgeous hair, she had been in *Carnival* and I think he had fallen in love with her hair--that whole look. He was very particular. Each dancer had a different look. It was an ethereal "look"; he had a specific number in mind when he picked us. (Barth Interview)

The 1980 hit, *42nd Street*, applied the Busby Berkeley style to an authentic Busby Berkeley story, reclaiming a place for the tradition of the early musical. This meant long lines of girls, dancers rushing here and there, and props flying in and out. With *Hello, Dolly!* Champion was also an innovator. He integrated sets and choreography as well as properties in a new way in the number "Waiter's Gallop." Dancer Johnny Mineo recalls his memories of choreographing the "Waiter's Gallop" number in *Hello, Dolly!*

Waiter's Gallop was (Busby Berkeley) schtick. He [Champion] took every vaudeville trick and made it work. It came out of his head. He made the stage move. Look... two guys coming across the stage...one guy carries a turkey, the other one skewers it,... you know, as they passed...Bang! He's got the turkey, then he picks up the turkey and throws the turkey as he scoots it under the table...another dancer comes on...takes the top off the table, that guy comes up—

that's vaudeville schtick. I look back and say...that's absolutely brilliant!
(Minneo 21-22)

Hello, Dolly! Dance Captain and dancer Joel Craig recounts the creative genius

that was Gower Champion:

The last thing [dance step] he did in rehearsal was show us those famous jumps, those 16 Russian jump steps that we did. That number "Waiter's Gallop" had been staged for weeks and weeks...and he said..."oh guys"--we're just going to do one thing different. We're going to...here's the new end of "Waiter's Gallop." And he came and they just did it. Lowell Purvis, Ed Kresley or Buddy Schwab [dance assistants], all just stood there and looked at this, because we had been having a great old time doing all the comedy stuff. There was this thing in "Waiter's Gallop" with two different sized big wood trays and we came out behind the trays. I had a big one and John had a small one and I put one foot out in front and Johnnie one foot in back and we did these funny little things, scurried along and stopped, and we said: "wouldn't it be fun to put a phony foot behind the tray and we'd go foot,..foot,..foot... and he (Champion) had them build a whole prop tray for us. It didn't work, but he left the counts in for his own amusement, he would laugh, we would laugh. He thought it was the greatest thing and he just couldn't figure out how to get the trays offstage -- that's where the little mice steps came from... we did the mice where scurried around to get the trays and get them off stage. (Craig Interview)

Visual - the look of a Champion show was distinctive -- sharp, clean, clever steps, intricate staging and build-up from a single dancer to a roaring company in a huge musical sequence. The complex tableaux of dancers all doing different steps from the number "It Takes a Woman in *Hello, Dolly!* is a Champion trademark (Flinn 300).

Gower Champion streamlined the American musical, promoting the application of uniting all the disparate elements of production with the main storyline. He applied continuously choreographed staging which incorporated scenic changes into stage action. He created inconspicuous transitions from dialogue to music. And he devised a stylistic identity specific to each production. Dance Assistant Ed Kresley recalls the first time Gower showed him the *Hello, Dolly!* dance number prior to rehearsals:

Before he got into the official rehearsal for a show, Gower always had a signature number, it might be called a "concept number, one that would be almost sure to stop the show. That was the case with the "Hello, Dolly" dance number. That was

staged up until the last 16 bars. I appeared at the Mark Hellinger theatre where we rehearsed Dolly...he showed me the number --I was just mesmerized..tears came to my eyes, and I went to work immediately. That is how he did most of his shows...he had that signature number that would stop the show. (Kresley 2-4)

Intricate staging, continuous choreography with a specific identity - John Mineo describes the precision of the choreography in the "Waiter's Gallop" dance number.

"Waiter's Gallop" was so precisioned it was choreographed right down to an eighth note, so if you blew something...everything got stacked up behind it. It wasn't the kind of dance that if you messed up a little bit, somebody could catch up to you. Everything was so interwoven like the top of the table coming off, somebody coming out, somebody sliding under the table, somebody jumping or rolling over. It was all right down to the nub of it's toenail (Mineo Interview).

Champion refined the art of musical theatre with his varied, inventive and stunningly attractive productions. *Carnival* was the first to employ a unit set and the continuously choreographed staging which had appeared briefly one year earlier in *Bye Bye Birdie*. *Hello, Dolly!* was distinguished for many reasons ... not the least of which was its style, coordination of production elements, fluid scenic shifts, and smooth transitions from witty dialogue to stunning musical production numbers. The runway around the orchestra pit was a Gower Champion creation and success story - creating an intimacy between the audience and the performer. (Gilvey 551-552)

Gower Champion's creative direction and choreography proved that using all the production elements to stress action over dialogue could create musicals. His was a visual success story, but without the story concept and unifying dramatic elements there could not be a truly brilliant musical such as *Hello, Dolly!* Like his predecessors he furthered the art and craft of musical theatre which helped to bring about the favorable artistic climate for the first generally acknowledged concept musical *Company*. Further evidence of his contribution include the circus in *Barnum* (1980) and the junkyard of *Cats* (1981) which have their origins in Champion's *Carnival* with its curtainless stage, giant midway and tawdry troupe of players. However, there are many others. The horseplay in *Me and My Girl* (1986) and *Crazy for You* (1992) are indebted to the crafted

acing Champion developed for *Hello, Dolly!* Even choreographer Tommy Tune's *The Will Rogers Follies* (1991) used a variation of *Dolly's* famous runway to facilitate scene changes and tell the story of the famous humorist (Gilvey 554-555).

Thus over forty years after his debut as a director-choreographer on Broadway, the staying power of Gower Champion's art and works are still distinguishable and will remain a major contribution to the American musical theatre. Prior to the work of the dancer, director choreographers, Champion as well as Fosse, de Mille, and Michael Kidd, along with George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins and Michael Bennett, dancing in musical theatre was simplistic and seldom dramatic. Gower Champion helped raise the standard of American show dancing and his contribution remains plentiful and extraordinary now more than ever.

Joel Craig, Dance Captain, *Hello, Dolly!* original company and later Champion Dance Assistant relates this vivid story of Champion's creative strength:

While we were in rehearsals for "Dolly", I can remember we were working on some eight counts of something and in comes Oliver Smith [set designer] with a big portfolio of drawings and he comes in with his retinue and imperiously says to Lucia Victor, Champion's Production Manager, "I have the drawings". So Lucia comes over to Gower and says "Oliver Smith is here with the drawings" and Gower says, "Fine, Just have him wait." And Oliver Smith just stood there with his drawings in his hand until Gower finished the eight counts he was working on. (Craig Interview).

Craig goes on to say:

I always thought that the reason "Dolly" was so successful was that one person was responsible. One person took responsibility for the show. If that show was a flop, it was Gower Champion's flop. But if it was a hit, it was his hit, because every decision that was made about the show was his. There was no "who's got the muscle? The star has the muscle, or sometimes the writer of the book has the muscle." We've all been in shows where the wrong person had the muscle (Craig Interview).

Carol Channing, star of the original *Hello, Dolly!*, sums it up this way.

You see, it was all Gower. The whole thing. He carried it around in that brilliant head of his. Not every little detail in every little scene...but the big picture, how the whole show should look. That was Gower (Channing 90).

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