

BY ROBERT HETHERINGTON

ALLEN OV TOWN!

WONDERFUL TOWN is such a joyful, smart and appealing musical – from the story of the two idealistic sisters who are searching for fame and fortune, to the bohemian setting and lively characters of Greenwich Village, from the snap and life of the lyrics to the memorable music of Leonard Bernstein, it is like walking into sunshine! It's hard to believe that such a lighthearted creation came out of anything but an upbeat process – however some of the most illustrious successes only appear after much struggle. Here Robert Hetherington shares with us the fascinating history of how WONDERFUL TOWN came to be. –JM

Ruth and Eileen, the two sisters from Ohio who sought their fortunes in New York's Greenwich Village in the 1930s, share a similar artistic trajectory with characters like Sally Bowles, *The King of Siam*, and Auntie Mame: they all began as fiction and traveled from stage, to screen, to musical and to movie musical. *Wonderful Town* is part of that transformation.

The book based on a series of short stories by Ruth McKenney originally published in *The New Yorker* formed the basis for a successful 1940 play, *My Sister Eileen* (adapted by Joseph Fields and Jerome Chodorov). In all versions of the material the older sister is an aspiring writer and the younger is pursuing acting; Ruth is the bright, wise-cracking old maid and Eileen the pretty

one who always has several men vying for her attention. A three-year Broadway run was directed by George S. Kaufman, and starred Shirley Booth as Ruth. The biggest hit Columbia Pictures had in 1942 was their film *My Sister Eileen*, which starred Rosalind Russell and Janet Blair as Ruth and Eileen (and The Three Stooges in a very funny cameo at the end).

A musical version must have seemed like a relatively obvious proposition. But this was easier said than done. According to her memoirs, *Life Is a Banquet*, Rosalind Russell decided to liven up a dull Hollywood party by stepping up to the piano and singing a few vaudeville songs she had been taught by Cary Grant. Joseph Fields was there and at lunch the next day asked

From Scenic Arts: the beginnings of the New York cityscape for the set of WONDERFUL TOWN, designed by William Schmuck (Photo by Jeff Priest).





WONDERFUL TOWN album cover

her to do the musical. She explained that singing and dancing would “Scare me out of my skull,” and described her voice as “so bass it’s viol.” Then Fields pitched George Abbott as the director. Knowing Mr Abbott to be one of Broadway’s hottest directors (even at age 65), she agreed to consider the proposition. Abbott’s autobiography claims that he was told that Roz Russell had already agreed to do the musical if he would direct it.

The second challenge came when Ms Russell arrived in town, a month or so before the first rehearsal, to hear the Leroy Anderson-Arnold Horwitt score. (Anderson is best remembered for composing the popular song “Sleigh Ride.”) The autobiographies of the principals differ on the details of what happened next, but evidently Ms Russell didn’t like the score and refused to do it. Abbott and the producer agreed, so Mr A. picked up the phone and called Betty Comden and Adolph Green, his lyricist-librettists for *On the Town*. Could they quickly write lyrics for the show – and who should write the music?

They insisted on their friend Leonard Bernstein, who had left Broadway after the success of *On the Town* in 1943, concentrating on his symphonic career. According to Betty Comden, he had promised his classical mentor never to write another show and to focus on more serious work. But when the call came in, around Thanksgiving 1952, Bernstein had a three month-old daughter. Why not take two months out of his schedule – the show was slated to premiere in New Haven in mid-January – with the prospect of a large and unforeseen payday? Chodorov

and Fields saw the story set in the contemporary 1950s, but Bernstein loved the idea of New York in the 1930s (“The excitement! The political awareness! The wonderful fashions! And the songs! What beat!”)

The new title was variously announced as *My Beautiful Sister*, *A Likely Story*, *The Sherwood Girls*, and *Ruth and Eileen*, but the final title came from the movie version of the earlier Bernstein/Comden/Green collaboration “New York, New York, it’s a **wonderful town**.” (The original Broadway lyric was deemed unspeakable in a Hollywood movie at the time – “a hell of a town.”) So Bernstein went to work on what would be the second part of a New York trilogy (*West Side Story* would follow a few years later). With Betty and Adolph he would write a valentine to a New York City that probably never was. Which led to the third – and biggest – challenge.

The nature of the show began to change. Playwright-librettists Jerome Chodorov and Joseph Fields were highly protective of their *Sister Eileen*. They apparently envisioned a sweetly nostalgic look at Greenwich Village. “The Wrong Note Rag” – the eleven o’clock song that the new team came up with – illustrates the problem. It was dissonant, satirical and not at all what the librettists had in mind. Another problem was the first solo for the musically limited Ms. Russell. “The Story of My Life” proved too demanding for her and (according to Adolph Green’s wife, Phyllis Newman) the writers were told that she needed a song that would go “da...da...da...da...da...da...da...da...joke.”



From that note came “100 Easy Ways to Lose a Man.”

On February 25, 1953, at the Winter Garden Theatre, *Wonderful Town* was a blockbuster, but not a happy one. Another clue about relations backstage finds the great choreographer Jerome Robbins – who had been summoned by Abbott to help fix the show during the tryout – going before the House Un-American Activities Committee and naming names, including Chodorov’s – just weeks after working with him. His brother Edward Chodorov, also named by Robbins, later described this as “being stabbed in the back by the wicked fairy.”

When it came time to consider a film of the musical, negotiations bogged down between the creators and Columbia once again. So Columbia went ahead with their own musical film with a new score by Jules Styne, starring Betty Garrett, Janet Leigh, and a balding young dancer/choreographer named Bob Fosse as the soda jerk. Since there was no film of *Wonderful Town*, CBS broadcast a two-hour version in 1958, preserving Rosalind Russell’s performance, and viewable at the Paley Center for Media in NYC. From the infectious joy that comes through it is impossible to believe *Wonderful Town* had such a stressful birth. ❏

Bob Hetherington is Chair and Professor of Theatre & Dance at The University of Memphis. He was Assistant Director on HAPPY END (2005) and his fuller essay on WONDERFUL TOWN will be published in our house programme this season.

Behind-the-scenes preparations for
WONDERFUL TOWN (Photos by Jeff Priest).

