

Wonderful Town

Book by Joseph Fields and Jerome Chodorov, music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green
Based on the play *My Sister Eileen* by Joseph Fields and Jerome Chodorov and the stories by Ruth McKenney
Directed by Roger Hodgman, Musical Direction by Paul Sportelli

**“Why, oh why, oh why, oh,
Why did I ever leave Ohio?”**

This story of two sisters packing up everything they’ve got and moving from Columbus, Ohio to the bright lights of New York City, has been a long enduring classic. It began life as a series of short stories published in *The New Yorker* in the 1930s. Ruth McKenney, an Ohio journalist, had moved to New York with her sister to be a serious writer. But it was her funny stories about life with her beautiful sister and their adventures in Greenwich Village for which she became famous. They were eventually collected as a book in 1938, *My Sister Eileen*, and it became a best-seller. The popularity of these stories went on to spawn a play, a movie, a television show and, in 1953, the musical *Wonderful Town*.

The play opens on a group of tourists making their way through Greenwich Village, New York. The Tour Guide describes the area: “Ever since 1870, Greenwich Village has been the Bohemian cradle of painters, writers, actors etc., who’ve gone on to fame and fortune. Today in 1935, who knows what future greats live in these twisting alleys.” We’re introduced to the local artists and general ‘village types’, including the painter and landlord Mr Appopolous, “The Wreck”, an unemployed football player, and various dancers, radicals and free-spirited characters who exclaim, “Life is mad! Life is sweet!”

And into this chaos run Ruth and Eileen Sherwood – they’re running because a kid has just stolen Ruth’s beloved typewriter and she’s not giving up on it. They meet Mr Appopolous who not only rescues her typewriter, but offers them a place to live – he calls it the apartment of their dreams but the stage directions describe it as “a cross between a cell in solitary confinement and an iron lung.” They reluctantly agree to rent it, only to find out that a new subway line is being blasted out right below them! As they try to go to sleep under the glare of the streetlamps above and the blasts below, they begin to wonder why, oh why, oh why, oh, why did they ever leave Ohio for this?

But the next day brings new determination as the girls set out to conquer New York. Ruth is a writer, Eileen is an actress and both struggle to find their way. But to Ruth, things always seem a bit easier for the beautiful and charming Eileen. Men just can’t help themselves around her and seem eager to help her in any way they can, including Frank Lippencott, the manager of the Walgreen drugstore who gives her free lunches. Ruth tries to make a good impression on Robert Baker, the editor of the magazine *The Manhattaner*, but he tells her to go back home, she’ll never make it. But these women are determined to make it – and their determination leads them into a series of adventures, including an encounter with a ship full of Brazilian cadets, a giant Conga line and a trip to the police station.

Musical director Paul Sportelli on the score:

“*Wonderful Town* has a very tuneful score that is full of life – it perfectly captures the ‘buzz’ of 1930s New York. In it, one can also hear hints of what was to come in composer Leonard Bernstein’s next ‘New York’ musical, *West Side Story*; Bernstein crafts a score based on dance forms (in numbers like “Conga”, “Swing,” and “The Wrong Note Rag”) that crackles with rhythmic muscularity and kinetic energy.

The lyricists Betty Comden and Adolph Green are in top form with lyrics that are at times supremely witty and playful (as in “One Hundred Easy Ways to Lose a Man” and “Pass the Football”), at times beautifully and simply heartfelt (as in “A Little Bit in Love” and “A Quiet Girl”). Bernstein complements these heartfelt lyrics with music that is achingly emotional. A song like the familiar and popular duet “Ohio” successfully pulls the listener inside the song instantly, through its perfect lyrics and perfectly appropriate tune.

This is a great score full of great lyrics that go so far in telling the story and illuminating the story’s characters through music.”