

Hello Dolly

...full name Mrs Dolly Gallagher Levi, but where does she come from? She is obviously of Irish extraction before her marriage to Ephraim Levi. Different directors and actresses have therefore had a choice about which particular aspect to emphasise. However, she really owes as much to Ancient Rome as Ireland for it was here in about 200BC that a farce was written about two slaves who run away from their master for a day on the town. The farce has been adapted many times since: *A Day Well Spent* by John Oxenford (London, 1835); *He's out for a fling* by John Nestroy (Vienna, 1842) and *On the Razzle* by Tom Stoppard (1981, London), amongst others.

The Wisconsin-born playwright, Thornton Wilder, came by Nestroy's version of the play and adapted it as *The Merchant of Yonkers* (1938) and later, following a complete re-write, called it *The Matchmaker* (first performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1954). Thus, the focus has shifted from the two young slaves/shop employees via the crusty merchant, finally to rest on Dolly Levi in *The Matchmaker* and it is this version on which Michael Stewart and Jerry Herman based their hit musical, *Hello Dolly!* in 1964.

Dolly Levi is a widowed marriage broker who is instructed to find a second wife for Horace Vandergelder, an impossibly cantankerous merchant from Yonkers, New York. Dolly decides, however, that she is going to marry him herself. She must now sabotage the match she's fixed up, (Mrs Molloy, a young widow and milliner from New York), and takes advantage of the fact that Vandergelder's two store clerks, Cornelius and Barnaby, are planning a clandestine day-trip to New York whilst Vandergelder himself is in the City. Meanwhile, Dolly is also hatching a plan to enable Vandergelder's niece, Ermengarde, to marry Ambrose Kemper (a worthless artist in Vandergelder's eyes). The clerks are advised by Dolly to go to Mrs Molloy's shop where they meet Mrs Molloy and her assistant, Minnie Fay.

Act II opens as all the characters are on their way to the lavish Harmonia Gardens restaurant. Only Dolly knows they will all be there. On meeting the boys, his ex "betrothed" and his niece with her betrothed, Vandergelder starts a scuffle and the group is arrested for disturbing the peace. Later, on returning to Yonkers, Dolly enters his shop where he realises that he loves her.

The show was originally written for Ethel Merman, who turned it down (although she did play Dolly in the 1970 revival). So Carol Channing starred in the role when the show opened on Broadway in 1964. Other Dollys on both Broadway and in the West End have included Ginger Rogers, Betty Grable, Dora Bryan and Danny La Rue. The original Broadway run was a phenomenal 2844 performances.

The film version, released in 1969, was extravagant even by Hollywood standards: just witness the 14th Street Parade scene. Directed by Gene Kelly, it starred Barbra Streisand, Walter Matthau and our own Michael Crawford. It flopped.

Streisand, although hopelessly miscast (far too young) gives an exuberant performance; Michael Crawford is wonderfully bashful as Cornelius (but in the whole of the USA, could they not have found an American to play Cornelius); Walter Matthau counts every dance step and can't sing, but is perfect in the role of Vandergelder. The mutual hatred between Streisand and Matthau during the filming and their monumental quarrels on the set have passed into Hollywood folklore. All the stars received tremendous, but largely disregarded, support from the second-tier principals; in particular an amazingly gifted dancer/actor as Barnaby - Danny Lockin.

So what went wrong? There are two generally accepted reasons. Firstly, the contract forbade the film's release before the end of the Broadway run by which time interest in the show was waning. Secondly, the late '60s was generally a bad time for Hollywood musicals; the fashion had past. How many really successful movie musicals can you name from the 1960s after *The Sound of Music*?

Fortunately for us, many of these films are now being "found", restored and re-evaluated. And it was what we suspected all along: they suffered from unfortunate timing as much as anything else. Hello Dolly turns out to be a pretty good film but then, it has a pretty good pedigree.

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