



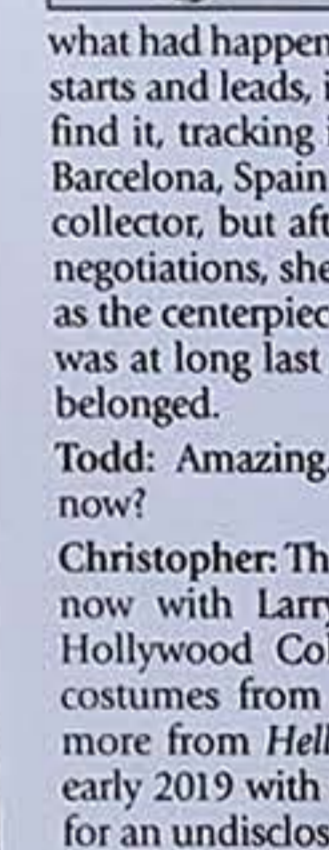
A HAPPENING
IN HYDE PARK
WALLS Special



Christopher Radko (left)
and Todd Sussman
PHOTO BY KEVIN HALL



Costume Designer
Irene Sharaff
original design



A museum-quality Dolly celebration

Full of shine and full of sparkle – and one very elusive Barbra costume – an elaborate *Hello, Dolly!* festival paid tribute to the movie for its 50th anniversary. **Christopher Radko** meticulously organized the events and exhibition. Here, he reflects on this year-long extravaganza.

BY TODD SUSSMAN

Todd: How did you come up with the unique and amazing idea to commemorate the movie, *Hello, Dolly!* by organizing a festival?

Christopher: My love for this film began with my parents taking me to the movie premiere in New York in 1969. The set designs, costumes, uplifting music, fine performances, and of course, the extraordinarily engaging Barbra herself. I asked my parents, "Where's this Yonkers in the movie?" No one knew. So, I kept wondering for more than 40 years.

A few years back, I discovered that Garrison's Landing on the Hudson was where they filmed the movie *Hello, Dolly!* in 1968. As I drove down to the Garrison train station, I felt I was stepping back into time. There was Vandergelder's, and all the other buildings, just as it stood in the movie! Eventually, I moved to Garrison. As a gift to the community, and to share my enthusiasm for the film, I offered to organize a parade to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the filming. Then I thought, we also should have a museum exhibition and an informative book about the behind-the-scenes history of the filming. Eventually it became the community-wide, year-long *Hello Again, Dolly!* Festival, featuring 20 separate events.

Todd: Once you conceived the idea, how did the people of Garrison and the Hudson Highlands region help you realize your vision?

Christopher: As the festival organizer, I imagined events that I thought I myself would like to attend, and then we set about creating

them. I worked with seven non-profits in town, and painstakingly raised all the money needed. We were all unpaid community volunteers. A great many local townspeople helped to make the events extraordinary. The parade recreated the entire "Put on Your Sunday Clothes" scene. I invited Tommy Tune (Ambrose in the film) to reenact what he performed a half century earlier, in the same location, to the same music! At 80 years young, he is still going strong. Close to 1,000 community members turned out for the parade, most dressed in Victorian costumes. We had a choreographer and a live band. We even hosted Victorian hat making classes!

The West Point band performed a rousing *Dolly* concert at West Point, the setting of film's grand finale wedding scene. We also had a riverboat costume cruise up the Hudson River with an authentic Victorian paddle steamer. There were many more events, too...a wonderful tribute to Jerry Herman who created the music and lyrics; a lecture on Gene Kelly and his legacy as a performer and director; a tribute to Barbra, with Broadway singers performing her songs; a historical look at the many previous versions of *Hello, Dolly!*, dating back to an ancient Greek play by Menander; and a live outdoor nighttime screening at Garrison's riverside park.

Todd: In developing and curating the *Hello Again, Dolly!* exhibition, what was the rarest piece you acquired?

Christopher: The Putnam History Museum exhibited many rare pieces, including the

original poster art work by Richard Amsel. I also found one of Gene Kelly's working scripts, Barbra's director's chair with her name still on it, a never-before-released 20-minute 1968 radio recording of Barbra interviewed about the film, rare international *Dolly* posters from Tokyo and Prague, and original set designs by Oscar-winning John DeCuir.

Certainly the rarest piece was Barbra's original dress, her long thought to be lost burgundy paisley and lace ensemble, all hand-sewn and tailored. One just doesn't see this kind of craftsmanship anymore. Barbra wore it in the first 12 minutes of the film, as she sings "Just Leave Everything to Me" and "Put on Your Sunday Clothes." Nobody knew what had happened to it. With many stops and starts and leads, it took me a year and a half to find it, tracking it to a small film museum in Barcelona, Spain. The owner was a very private collector, but after several months of delicate negotiations, she at last allowed me to show it as the centerpiece to the exhibition. The dress was at long last coming home, back where it belonged.

Todd: Amazing. May I ask, where is the dress now?

Christopher: This iconic Dolly Levi costume is now with Larry McQueen, who owns the Hollywood Collection featuring many star costumes from great films, including many more from *Hello, Dolly!* He purchased it in early 2019 with the help of Heritage Auctions, for an undisclosed amount.

Todd: You found many interesting items from producer/screenwriter Ernest Lehman's archives. One was a list of the potential stars being considered for the lead role of Dolly Levi.

Christopher: Yes, Lehman had names of many well-known performers of the day including Elizabeth Taylor, Carol Burnett, Julie Andrews, Lucille Ball, Angela Lansbury, Debora Kerr, Maureen O'Hara and Doris Day. Carol Channing was vying for the role, but the studio felt she would fail to bring in the under 30s audience, which was the majority of goers. The essence of Dolly Levi is timeless. Barbra has said in interviews that there were many young women in the 1960's who, due to the Vietnam War, had loved and lost, and were struggling to figure out how to get on with life again, which is a major theme for Dolly's character. As an actress, Barbra had the chops to bring keen emotional maturity and wisdom to the role. The studio also particularly wanted Barbra because they knew she would sell tickets to the under 30 crowd. Thanks to her, *Hello, Dolly!* was one of the top five movies that year in ticket sales.

Todd: Your compendium book, *Hello Again, Dolly!* is a meticulously researched tome. Did you make any surprising discoveries as you put this book together?

Christopher: Researching the book was a labor of love. I interviewed close to 50 residents who had been here at the time of the filming, many even appearing as child extras in *Dolly!* Some surprising things I learned included that 20th Century Fox had planned to do an all-black

version of the movie at the same time they were filming the Barbra version. Pearl Bailey would play Dolly, as she was already playing the role to critical acclaim, in an all-black cast on Broadway. I also learned that Irene Sharaff had recycled many of the costumes she created for *Meet Me in St Louis* (1944). What a thrill for some of the *Dolly* extras to wear Judy Garland's costumes!

Todd: Your Barbra connection started long before the exhibition, back in the 90s. Your company produced the *Funny Girl* Broadway Cares ornament (2015), but many years before that, Barbra reached out to you, seeking specially themed ornaments.

Christopher: Back in the 90's, I had been told that Barbra purchased about 100 of my ornaments from a department store, as gifts. A few years later, as I was doing a personal appearance at Saks Fifth Avenue, a young man approached me and asked, "My boss is wondering, how come you aren't making any Hanukkah ornaments?" Though I was primarily designing Christmas ornaments at the time, I asked him if I would get into trouble for doing Hanukkah ornaments, since I wasn't Jewish. He replied, "No, if you have any trouble, just let me know. I work for Barbra Streisand." Knowing there were also many mixed faith couples, the next year I created a finely detailed collection of Hanukkah ornaments. These were warmly received, and I will always credit Barbra for the inspiration. It's a wonderful way of including everyone in the holiday celebrations. I ensured that Barbra would receive Hanukkah ornaments when I created new ones. She was very gracious and sent back notes thanking me and expressing her enjoyment of them. I had decorated Vice President Al Gore's tree in Washington, D.C. and one evening, Barbra and James Brolin came over for a surprise visit. They both enjoyed seeing the sparkly tree, and Barbra spent quite a bit of time studying each glass ornament, including the Hanukkah ornaments, several Buddhas, and Kwanzaa ornaments, because the tree was there for everyone to relate to and enjoy.

Todd: You were billed as a special guest this past April for a showing of *Hello, Dolly!* at the TCM Film Festival. What did being a special guest entail?

Christopher: TCM invited me to come out to Hollywood, and introduced me as "America's expert on *Hello, Dolly!*" They heard about my book from the director of the Motion Picture Academy Library and asked me to introduce a live screening of the film at the landmark Grauman's Chinese Theater, where it had premiered in 1969. This was my victory lap after all the work I did last year on the festival. Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn, Joan Crawford, Mae West – all the great movie luminaries – were there in their heyday to introduce their own movies. For this grown up kid from the Bronx, being on that same stage was like walking on hallowed ground.

Todd: The movie is coming back to theaters this summer.

Christopher: Absolutely. Fathom Events is showing it in conjunction with Turner Classic Movies' Big Screen Classics series. I believe it will be showing in as many as 1,000 theaters across the country this year on August 11 and August 14. If you are feeling like you need a pick-me-up, watch *Hello, Dolly!* You cannot help but feel like you are walking on air.

Visit www.HelloAgainDolly.com. To order your copy of the compendium book, *Hello Again, Dolly!*, call the Putnam History Museum in Cold Spring, New York at 845-265-4010. ■