

## ***Happy Days, A Musical: Reflections on Conversations with Garry Marshall & Paul Williams***

By Will Rhys, Education Director

In writing a musical, inspiration can come from anywhere or anything...a walk in the woods, a conversation overheard on a subway, a painting, a political figure, a gothic novel or surrealistic play, baseball! For inspiration for *Happy Days*, the musical joyously set to grace the Opera House stage for the next several weeks, Garry Marshall only had to look as far as one of the most beloved sit-coms of the mid-70's and early 80's--a series he created and nurtured for an adoring public.

"It seemed the ideal series to turn into a musical," he told me, "because the series had a core of characters the audience cared for. These characters were well-defined and, though a bit bigger than life, they were natural." Such audience identification and comfort can be vital in the development of a new piece of theatre if it is to have any chance of appreciation, let alone support from those who have taken the opportunity to experience it. True, *Happy Days* does come with a solid pedigree, but that does not insure that it will be received to the same degree that the TV legend was. Nor was the journey to this production an "overnight trip."

"We found out quite early on," said Marshall, "that we couldn't just 'do an episode.' We tried, but it didn't work." It was essential, though, to include as many of the familiar characters as possible and to focus on a problem that involved the entire town, that the entire town cared about and, subsequently, allowed Fonzie to *come to the rescue*. "And then," noted Marshall, "we needed to see how this would play out in front of a live audience." Composer and lyricist Paul Williams added that "a musical needs to be shaped. You need real people to know what works and what doesn't work on stage." It's definitely not the same as working in private, and both soon appreciated how long this would take. Marshall was used to creating a show a week; Williams, a couple of months to score a film. "I've worked six years on *Happy Days*," Williams said, but "thanks to *Happy Days*, I've fallen in love with music again, fallen in love with the 'process' of writing. It's a beautiful if unexpected gift."

They forged a successful working relationship, one that led them to discover how potent the musical theatre collaboration is. And how did they do this? "We started out with an outline of Garry's story," said Williams, "because Garry's the bookwriter and creator of the series. That means he's 'master parent' to all the characters. Nobody knows them better than he! So, Garry became 'true North' on my musical compass. Then, I'd go off and write finished songs that dealt with things in the outline--story points--and also things that I thought would be nice 'character pieces.' We began to build a 'musical quilt'... choosing songs to cover story when they worked...discarding songs in favor of dialogue at other times." Marshall confessed that he found himself "too often saying the same thing, repeating myself. I did have a breakthrough, when I found I could tell Paul what I wanted to say, wrote it up to a point, and then let him finish it with a song."

But always, whatever they were doing, they returned to the story and how it would support the characters' actions and, conversely, how everything—characters, music, dance,—had to support the story. As Williams remarked, “while Garry writes the story, and I develop musical numbers around the plot, we have to be true to what we're writing. In some cases it feels more like *it's 'what's writing us'!*”

In this way, they realized that the piece had to celebrate family...home. “Fonzie and Marion’s relationship is very important,” Marshall pointed out. “Fonzie has no parents, and he must be brought into a home, comfortably, completely. This was certainly a strong part of the TV series.” Williams is in agreement. “The heart of the series to me was always 'family'. Marion was the Mom everybody wanted. Howard was the Dad a kid could talk to.”

And then there’s the music, which is part of the environment of the story. Williams gives credit to orchestrator and arranger John McDaniel for being “an amazing musical navigator. His fabulous arrangements steered all the music into a place where they ring true to the [50’s] era. So get ready to rock and roll.” In addition, great attention was paid to make sure that the music helped tell the story and was true to the characters. Successful musical numbers reveal characters in ways that dialogue alone cannot, and, in this way, the audience grows more comfortable with them, roots for them, relates to them...much in the way that all those TV audiences related to Fonzie, Richie, Ralph, Arnold and the others. “People were glad to see these characters,” Marshall said fondly. “They loved them and would, literally, cheer for them.”

For Goodspeed Musicals, we now have something to cheer about...our contribution to the continuing, magical journey of *Happy Days*.