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Musical Theatre History: 1786 - 2018

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“Look at the old girl now, fellas!” *Hello, Dolly!* And Gay Male Culture

In three iconic moments of musical theatre, individual women are celebrated by a multitude of adoring men: Reno Sweeney tapping up a storm aboard the S.S. American, Evita commanding crowds on the balcony of the Casa Rosada, and Dolly Gallagher Levi dramatically descending the steps of the Harmonia Gardens restaurant. Each of these instances, as they originally appeared on Broadway, featured theatrical legends in the making with intoxicating power over their male ensembles onstage. What followed was consistent: each of these “legends,” Ethel Merman, Patti LuPone, and Carol Channing, earned themselves “Diva” status throughout the Broadway community, and became especially distinguished in the gay male culture of New York City and America. A strong relationship exists between gay male culture and musical theatre; this bond is especially strong with the musical *Hello, Dolly!* and the many women who have played the starring role Dolly Gallagher Levi. This can be demonstrated by exploring the innate relationship between gay men and musical theatre, and by extension, *Hello, Dolly!*. To support the presented claim this paper will examine three notable women who have played Dolly Levi and the significance of their characterizations to gay men, and will conclude with a demonstration of Dolly’s own “coming out” over the course of the musical.

### I. *Hello, Dolly!* Background

*Hello, Dolly!* premiered on Broadway at the St. James Theatre on January 16th, 1964.

Based on Thornton Wilder’s *The Matchmaker*, *Hello, Dolly!* features a book by Michael Stewart,

now known for his work on *42nd Street* and *Bye Bye Birdie* (“Hello, Dolly! - Broadway Musical - Original”; “Michael Stewart - Broadway Cast & Staff”). Jerry Herman, known for *La Cage Aux Folles*, *Mack and Mabel* and *Milk and Honey*, wrote the score and lyrics (“Jerry Herman - Broadway Cast & Staff”). The production ran for an impressive seven years, produced by “the abominable showman” David Merrick and staged by director-choreographer Gower Champion (“Hello, Dolly! - Broadway Musical - Original”; “Putting It Together (1980-2004)”).

At the 1964 Tony Awards, *Dolly* took home eleven awards, including Best Musical, Best Composer and Lyricist to Jerry Herman, Best Direction and Best Choreography to Gower Champion, and Best Actress in a Musical to Carol Channing as the quick-witted matchmaker Dolly Gallagher Levi (“Hello, Dolly! - Broadway Musical - Original”). Although the musical had been written with Ethel Merman in mind, Merman was unwilling to commit. Gower Champion suggested Carol Channing, known for her stage performances in *Wonderful Town* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, because she qualified as “bigger than life,” essential for the role of Dolly (Showtune, 70; “Ethel Merman - Broadway Cast & Staff”; “Carol Channing - Broadway Cast & Staff”).

Following an out-of-town run in Detroit, Carol Channing opened *Hello, Dolly!* on Broadway and played Dolly for over 5,000 performances in the original production, countless touring houses, and two short-lived Broadway revivals in 1978 and 1995 (Herman, 78; Shapiro, 21; “Carol Channing - Broadway Cast & Staff”). As the show ran, “Channing was followed by a parade of musical theatre legends in the title role,” including Ginger Rogers, Martha Raye, and Betty Grable (Kirle, 33). Pearl Bailey led an all-black cast on Broadway in 1967 (Citron, 112). Rodgers’ and Hammerstein’s muse Mary Martin toured as Dolly Levi internationally, “who brought the show to Vietnam to entertain American troops” during the Vietnam War (“Tradition (1957-1979)”; Skipper, Richard. “Mary Martin - Call on Dolly!”). Barbra Streisand took on the role

in the 1969 Twentieth Century-Fox film adaptation of *Hello, Dolly!* (Canby). As *Hello, Dolly!* neared the end of its run on Broadway in 1970, Ethel Merman finally took the stage in the role originally written for her (Nachman, 211). Another parade of legends descended the steps of the Harmonia Gardens when Bette Midler, Donna Murphy, and Bernadette Peters each headlined the hugely successful Champion-inspired 2017 Broadway revival (Green).

Historically, the role of Dolly Levi has been played exclusively by musical theatre legends, and for good reason. The role requires impressive talent from actresses who can command the stage and make the role their own. Musical theatre lecturer Bruce Kirle argues early in his book, *Unfinished Show Business*, that every piece of theatre is a “work in progress” and will be impacted by its authors - and not only those who are transcribing notes and lyrics (Kirle, 1). In a tradition spanning back centuries, musical theatre writers and composers tend to accommodate their work to the voices and talents of different star performers. Beginning with virtuoso singers in Opera Seria and continuing with early 20th century musical comedy stars, Kirle considers these performers “authors” because of the ways pre-existing material was shaped around their talents. Famously, “First Lady” Ethel Merman “took no prisoners when it came to fitting the material to suit her style” (Kirle, 27-32; Criscitiello).

Eventually, this author-star writing process fell out of style with Rodgers and Hammerstein in the 1940’s and the Golden Age, as they wrote material “to suit character, not stars” (Kirle, 32). However, as star replaced star in *Hello, Dolly!*, Merrick and Champion returned to the author-star model. As Bruce Kirle writes, “The clout in a show such as *Hello, Dolly!* lies with the leading lady. Cannily, producer David Merrick and director-choreographer Gower Champion kept altering the text and score to suit each new Dolly” (Kirle, 33) He describes, “Martha Raye, a broad physical comic, collided with a horse during the opening number, knocking herself to the ground. Extended dance sequences were added for Ginger Rogers and

Betty Grable” (Kirle, 33). When Ethel Merman closed the show in 1970, composer Jerry Herman reinstated two cut songs, “World Take Me Back” and “Love Look in My Window” (Kirle, 33). Many actresses, and notably Bette Midler and Bernadette Peters, had the keys to their songs raised and lowered to accommodate their vocal ranges (Herman, Jerry, and Bette Midler; Herman, Jerry, and Bernadette Peters). Well into the 21st century, the spirited leading ladies of *Hello, Dolly!* continue to resonate with audiences.

## II. Gay Male Culture and Musical Theatre

Musical theatre has always enjoyed an undeniable gay male presence. Theatre historian David Savran affirms, “Musical theatre...has in popular mythology been adjudged a sacred preserve of gay men” (Savran, 59). Historians George E. Haggerty and Matthew Bell identify two key players in this relationship: the creators, and the audience (Bell, 621).

As creators, gay men have been a major force in the development of musical theatre. “Even a short list of gay and bisexual contributors reveals the extraordinary impact they have had: Lorenz Hart (lyricist), Cole Porter (composer/lyricist), Leonard Bernstein (composer), Arthur Laurents (director), Michael Bennett (choreographer/director)...” (Bell, 622). These artists have had legendary influences on musical theatre. As examples, Bernstein composed *On the Town* and *West Side Story*, while Bennett conceived, directed, and choreographed *A Chorus Line* (“Leonard Bernstein - Broadway Cast & Staff”; “Michael Bennett - Broadway Cast & Staff”). Under *Hello, Dolly!*'s jurisdiction, the list of gay creators is immense. Composer and lyricist Jerry Herman has publicly owned his homosexuality (Herman, 47; Citron, 31-33). Openly gay actors, including Charles Nelson Reilly, Danny Lockin, Gavin Creel, Taylor Trensch, David Hyde Pierce, Victor Garber, and Tommy Tune have appeared in the musical either onstage or on screen (Brand; Creel; “What Went on Backstage at Hello, Dolly!...”; McIntyre; Wong. “In His New Act,

Tommy Tune Vows...”). Countless gay “chorus boys” filled the ensemble roles. The prevalence of gay creators, including writers and performers, allowed gay men “to create more affirmative conceptions of themselves” by providing a “fascinating secret brotherhood that...included some of the admired actors, artists, writers and dancers of the present and the past” (Chauncey, 283, 285). Their successes lent legitimacy to the gay community, who historically had otherwise been demonized and ostracized.

Haggerty and Bell have identified several ways in which gay male audiences respond to and identify with musical theatre. First, musical theatre “offers the spectator seemingly endless ‘eye candy,’” offering an “erotized body... [of a] whole corps of dancers” (Bell, 622). In the case of *Hello, Dolly!*, this eroticization is applicable to both “The Waiter’s Gallop” and the title number. The former demonstrates the male wait and kitchen staff of the Harmonia Gardens restaurant serving expensive dinners amid battements and hitch kicks. The latter finds Dolly surrounded by dozens of these same handsome waiters singing and dancing her praises.

Haggerty and Bell also define the homosexual-spectator relationship as an “‘escapist’ function of the musical... Gay desire... may require no [homosexual] thematization on the stage for it to be present during the show; desires instead... [are] engendered by the visual delights enclosed by the proscenium” (Bell, 622). During the Golden Age of musical theatre, gay-themed love stories may not have literally appeared onstage, but gay men certainly saw them as such. In the context of *Hello, Dolly!*, this is expressed in a number of ways. Primarily, Cornelius Hackl and Barnaby Tucker, two square, boyish, awkward (twink-ish) young men find loving companions in widow Irene Molloy and talkative Minnie Fay over the course of the story. Even the gruff and antiquated Horace Vandergelder finds love with Dolly Levi at the end of the musical (Herman and Stewart Libretto). These examples, also prominently embellished in other musicals, prove that all characters hold the capacity to find love, despite their status as an

“Other.” Additionally, Dolly’s journey towards self possession simulates gay men coming out of the closet, which will be analyzed in detail in Section IV.

The pièce de résistance, however, is the gay male audience’s relationship with female stars onstage, the iconic “Broadway Diva.” John M. Clum, author of *Something For the Boys*, describes the “Diva” phenomenon in great detail. Perhaps the most empirical example of this relationship is Judy Garland, star of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and *A Star is Born* on film (Clum, 149-153). Garland’s gay-appeal has been thoroughly analyzed by historians; she was a relatable misfit who projected emotional intensity in her performances (Taubeneck).

Curtis M. Wong elaborates that as Dorothy Gale in *The Wizard of Oz*, the contrast between her yearning performance and her off-screen struggles “captivated gay men in the years when their relationships and rights weren’t recognized.” These struggles included failed marriages, drug and alcohol abuse, and financial tribulations (Wong. “Why Judy Garland Still Captivates...”); however, she successfully stumbled through, on-screen if not always off-screen. “Judy was beaten up by life, embattled and ultimately had to become more masculine. She has the power that homosexuals would like to have, and they attempt to attain it by idolizing her” (Kort). Clum concurs, “she sings as if singing brings her her only happiness. But that’s the Garland image that many gay men loved: Judy the emotional wreck” (Clum, 149). Historically ostracized, gay men identified with the tragic elements of Garland’s life but also applauded and longed for the strength she showed in dealing with it (Chauncey, 4; Wong. “Why Judy Garland Still Captivates...”).

While Judy Garland is still the most iconic “Diva,” many other women have been similarly immortalized. Trumpeting “First Lady” Ethel Merman originated many roles onstage, including the dominating Rose Hovick in *Gypsy* and Reno Sweeney in *Anything Goes*. “Volatile” Patti LuPone reprised several of Merman’s roles, igniting herself as a force to contend with both

onstage and off (LuPone; Criscitiello). Other iconic “Diva’s” include Chita Rivera of *West Side Story* fame, and pop icons Barbra Streisand and Cher, both of whom began as “Outsiders” who climbed their way to the top (Feldman, Adam, and David Cote.; Kort; Spada). Though not Broadway stars, PhD sex therapist Joe Kort explains, “Today’s younger gay men will flock to Britney Spears... Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Christina Aguilera” (Kort).

Divas remain important to gay male culture for three primary reasons: the overtly feminine prowess of the characters they portray, their campiness, and the recognition they give to gay rights. First, gay men identify with the feminine strength that “Divas,” or the characters they play onstage, project. Quoting Daniel Harris’s *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, Kort relates that “diva worship ... is a spectator sport in which one watches the triumph of feminine wiles over masculine walls of a voluptuous and presumably helpless damsel in distress single-handedly moving down a lineup of hulking quarterbacks who fall dead at her feet” (Kort). In his article *Diva Worship*, Steve Wiecking also mentions, “Unabashed, self-possessed, triumphant joy is a fey thing. It requires the destruction of thick walls, the parting of great seas of social conditioning, to shed the reserved nature of what is normally considered manliness” (Wiecking). By unabashedly expressing themselves through their work without hesitation, these “Divas” express strength that is irresistible to gay men. This is made obvious in almost any musical theatre piece featuring a “Diva,” be it Ethel Merman’s Mama Rose or even Patti LuPone as the gutsy and fearless Eva Peron in *Evita*. The playfully manipulative and scheming Dolly Levi is no exception, no matter which actress is playing her.

Many actresses playing larger-than-life roles employ a certain element of “camp,” a legendary feature of gay male behavior and culture dating to the 1920s that denotes wittiness through a play on words. Camp is “a style of interaction and display that used irony, incongruity, theatricality, and humor to highlight the artifice of social convention” (Chauncey, 290). Gay men

have used camp to challenge traditional interpretations of gender roles; it has “helped many men mediate the contradictions they had to confront between their status as males socialized to be men and the status ascribed to them by the dominant culture as non- men” (Chancey, 290) Raymond Knapp and Mitchell Morris describe the theatrical use of “camp,” citing Ethel Merman and her “well-known habit of moving to center stage and facing the audience directly whenever she was singing...” Further, Judy Garland was known for incorporating camp into her film performances by offering “opposed emotions” with gestural postures (Knapp, 146-148).

Finally, gay men have idolized “Divas” because many of these women openly advocate for gay rights. Karel of the Huffington Post reports that Barbra Streisand, Liza Minnelli, and Judy Garland all at least acknowledged their gay audiences, if not openly supported them (Karel). The city of San Francisco “proclaimed February 25 to be Carol Channing Day” to commemorate her public support for LGBT rights (“Carol Channing: I’ve Had A Love Affair With The Gay Community”). Additionally, both Streisand and Minnelli publicly expressed support of the LGBT community during the fight for marriage equality and promotion of HIV/AIDS research, along with modern-day “Divas” including Britney Spears and Beyoncé (Streisand; Minnelli; Blistein; Leighton-Dore). Diva worship is an easy and obvious exercise for gay men; they have found congruity, encouragement and support from “Broadway Divas,” including *Hello, Dolly!*’s leading ladies.

### III. Dolly’s Divas

Dolly Gallagher Levi is an especially important “Diva” role in gay male culture because of the character itself and the specific women who have played her. Scholar Stacy Wolf argues that Dolly is an identifiable character, describing her as “malleable” for actors (Wolf, 78). Because the character is so “malleable,” many different women have been able to put their

stamp on the role and create a character that is uniquely theirs. Nearly every “Diva” playing Dolly introduced an element of camp; however, camp was not the only technique employed (LaBolt; Spada, 257-258). Original star Carol Channing, film adaptation star Barbra Streisand, and Bette Midler, who led the hit 2017 Broadway revival, have each left their indelible mark on the role, simultaneously encouraging and enchanting their gay male followers.

Originating the role in 1964, Channing’s characterization of Dolly was very consistent with her natural being. Composer Jerry Herman describes Channing as a campy, “bigger-than-life character and a truly gifted comic” (“Carol Channing - Broadway Cast & Staff”; Herman, 70). In his opening night review, Howard Taubman of the New York Times described her as “shrewdly mischievous” (Taubman). National tour conductor Terry LaBolt recalls, “The things that were more important to her were the eating scene, because it was like the big laughs that were the important thing to her” (LaBolt). John M. Clum describes spending an afternoon with her, “...well, Carol Channing was Carol Channing, always ‘on,’ with that wide-eyed ‘golly gosh’ look and perfectly timed quips” (Clum, 175). Similar to her outlandish personality, Channing’s Dolly was quick-witted, always upbeat and smiling.

Even so, Channing was not all fluff. LaBolt continues, “She was a caricature, and she was very camp... She played these cooky people who had something between their ears” (LaBolt). She grew to be very familiar with the show and strongly appreciated “the gift” of “The Monologue” and “Before The Parade Passes By,” considered to be the emotional heart of *Hello, Dolly!* (LaBolt). Clum concurs, “Channing... introduced the camp diva musical... [which] demanded cartoon women who were survivors” (Clum, 177). Channing’s rendition of “The Monologue” is definitively slow-paced; but however glacial, Channing’s work is meticulously prepared (“Hello, Dolly! (1977 Melbourne...)”). Every breath, blink, and inflection is carefully executed as she emotionally inches through “The Monologue.”

Aside from her outlandish personality, Channing is also known for her low, growling voice. Herman clarifies, "She actually sings in male baritone keys that are several tones lower than any of the keys I have written for other ladies to sing in" (Original Broadway Cast of *Hello, Dolly!*; Herman, 71). In terms of her performance as the exuberant yet reclusive Dolly, it is possible that gay men identified with her performance because of the nature of her singing voice. Gay men have been ostracized throughout the twentieth century, regarded as "sick, perverted, and immoral" (Chauncey, 4). Comparatively, Channing's singing voice was not the conventional sound for a 1960's musical comedy. However, Channing's voice became accepted as the quintessential "Dolly" sound because she became immortally associated with the role. Because of this, gay men were likely attracted to Carol's performance, at least in part, because her voice paralleled their concept of being an "Other."

Additionally, given her historic relationship with the musical, Channing has earned her status as a popular drag persona for decades. Clum describes Dolly's entrance into the Harmonia Gardens as "a drag queen's dream." He also refers to Channing's mannerisms as reminiscent of drag, by combining her "camp" personality with her lack of "face under all of that makeup" (Clum, 175). LaBolt reminisces about escorting Channing to Carol Channing look-alike contests (LaBolt). Channing quips, "I can't remember the last time one of my impersonators didn't have a five o'clock shadow" (Musto). As the original Dolly, Channing's impact on the show and her gay following was undeniable. With her voice, drag following, and supportive relationship, Channing's performance has been immortalized in the minds of theatregoers. "You can feel the audience pulling for her, hoping for her, being protective of her" (Winer).

In 1969, rising star Barbra Streisand played Dolly in the Twentieth Century-Fox film adaptation of *Hello, Dolly!*. While the film was not a financial success for the studio, Streisand proved to be a major force in the film's popularity (Spada, 257). When she accepted the role of

Dolly, she had already established a significant gay following. She qualified as an “Other,” a feature that regularly attracted members of the LGBT community, and she was young, which, despite criticism, proved to be particularly appealing.

Streisand’s career began in New York gay clubs, where she explicitly acknowledged her gay audience (Clum, 142; Spada, 64-66). Further, Streisand’s upbringing and subsequent career had been wrought by criticism of her Jewish heritage and appearance, as her mother “had tried to discourage her from a career in entertainment over worries [that she] didn’t have the looks to be successful;” these sentiments were echoed by industry professionals for her prominent nose (Becker; Karel; “How Streisand turned...”). Spada describes Streisand’s first public performance, singing “A Sleepin’ Bee” at the gay club, “The Lion,” in 1960. “This jaded audience knew immediately that they had just seen someone very special, a girl with a beautiful voice who could bring drama and shading and vibrancy to a lyric” (Spada, 66-67). Despite trepidations, the young yet “homely” Streisand quickly rose to the top with the support of the New York gay community in the 1960s, landing the starring role of Fanny Brice in the 1964 musical *Funny Girl* on Broadway (Clum, 142-43).

Streisand has always used her Jewish heritage to her advantage. “Streisand skillfully turned the stigma of her awkward... ‘Jewish’ appearance into a powerful message of acceptance, making her a voice for the marginalized” (“How Streisand turned...”). This is personified in her performance as Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl*, the rags-to-riches story of the Jewish follies star, which mirrored Streisand’s own success story (Spada, 149; Kirle, 49; Strycula). In the musical, Fanny Brice, a Jewish “Outsider,” sings the Act I powerhouse anthem, “Don’t Rain on My Parade.” This song carries emotional weight equal to Dolly’s “Before The Parade Passes By” (“*Funny Girl* - Broadway Musical - Original”; Clum, 177). Additionally, Streisand’s performance as Dolly is comparable to how she played Fanny Brice, with innately

Jewish qualities (Kelly; Spada, 257-258). Consequently, Streisand's characterization of Dolly spoke to "Outsiders" who watched the film, including gay and Jewish fans of Streisand who had been following her since her days in *Funny Girl*.

It is common knowledge that the gay community struggles with ageism, preferring youth to age (Gremore; Espinoza). However, this may have given Streisand an advantage with gay audiences despite the significant criticism she received for being too young to play the role (Skipper, Richard. "Barbra Streisand - Call on Dolly!"). Well known for her youthful but mature and amplified belt voice, Streisand's shattering vocal performance in *Dolly!* is quite remarkable (Spada). Analysis of the 1969 film soundtrack reveals that Streisand's singing voice cuts clear through all accompanying voices, particularly during "Put On Your Sunday Clothes," "Before the Parade Passes By," and "Hello, Dolly." With each riff, suspension, and spin of iconic vibrato, young Streisand forces the listener to hear her. Song after song, Streisand makes her voice heard above all others, with her strong, individual, *iconic* instrument. Just months after the Stonewall Riots in New York City in June 1969, young Streisand's vocal performance in *Hello, Dolly!* reflected the growing presence of the LGBT movement, as they began to make their voices heard as well ("Stonewall Riots - HISTORY"; Herman, Jerry. *Hello, Dolly!* [Original Motion Picture Soundtrack]).

In the spring of 2017, Bette Midler led a hugely successful revival of *Hello, Dolly!* as Dolly Gallagher Levi to massive critical appeal. Similar to each Dolly before her, Midler played Midler, just as Channing played Channing (Oxford). However, Midler's successful performance as Dolly was not that of mighty actress, but of a distinguished star. To that end, Midler's success in the role amongst gay audiences is not entirely original; instead, she uses the power of nostalgia to keep audiences on her side (Brantley). Throughout her performance, Midler is consistently referencing her own career and other divas' characterizations of Dolly. Midler's

jubilant performance also resonated with gay men who were celebrating breakthroughs in gay rights, marriage equality, and medical advances in AIDS treatments.

Midler's Dolly is sassy and flippant, just as in her beginning days at the infamous Continental Bathhouse (Avery; Brantley). Appealing to the gay tradition of "camp," she is brazenly exuberant, cackling ghoulishly, similar to her previous character Winifred Sanderson from *Hocus Pocus* (Ortega). Throughout the evening, Midler works schtick and makes a meal out of individual moments, earning additional applause. Frequently ad-libbing, Midler holds the audience in the palm of her hands for the entirety of the performance, making the crowd cheer at her every whim (Herman, Jerry, and Bette Midler; Brantley). A huge star in her own right, Midler simultaneously redefined her theatrical heritage while also fulfilling the commodity of the "Broadway Diva" in the 21st century. By quoting her own career onstage, Midler reinvigorates the position of the "Broadway Diva." Additionally, Midler quotes other Dolly characterizations, honing in on elements of previous gay-iconic Dolly "Divas." In performance, Midler is comparable to a runaway train, as she barrels through her spoken lines with exuberance and energetic expressions, not unlike Streisand's Brice-esque characterization (Herman, Jerry, and Bette Midler; Kelly). Though polar-opposite to Channing's meticulously slow performance, Midler and Channing do share the characteristic of an unconventionally engaging singing voice (Brantley; Original Broadway Cast of *Hello, Dolly!*).

Midler's Dolly arrived in an era wrought with concern about the Trump administration's potentially anti-gay policies. Despite this, her mega-hit Broadway production celebrates herself and her audience, in an era following the legalization of same-sex marriage and the AIDS crisis. She embraces Dolly's pride, similar to her gay audience's pride. This level of nostalgia allows Midler's characterization to be the historical Dolly incarnate.

With zest, beauty, and nostalgia, Carol Channing, Barbra Streisand and Bette Midler kept gay audiences enraptured by their performances as Dolly Gallagher Levi.

#### IV. Dolly "Rejoins" the Human Race

In addition to their affinity for *Dolly's* "Divas," the gay community strongly relates to the character. In the musical, Dolly's primary desire is to "rejoin the human race," comparable to the gay man's journey towards "coming out of the closet," allowing him to publicly own his sexuality (Herman and Stewart Libretto, 1-3-37).

Dolly endears herself to the audience from the show's opening number to its wedding march curtain call. The show is set in 1880s New York City. Dolly is a widow who dearly misses her beloved husband, Ephraim Levi, and their high-spirited, joyful life together. In her opening song and monologue, Dolly establishes herself as a vivacious, irrepressibly optimistic, but lonely woman. As she marches around the stage, offering various business cards to all, she sings "I Put My Hand In," demonstrating her ability to financially support herself "arranging things" like "lives" by utilizing her greatest assets, her positivity and animated personality (Herman and Stewart Libretto, 1-3-3). Presently, she is traveling to Yonkers to arrange gruff widower Horace Vandergelder's marriage to widow Irene Molloy. But before the final refrain, amongst the chaos of the train's departure, Dolly turns to the audience and wistfully pleads with her dead husband. She intends to marry Horace, for his money, so that she can stop scrounging and start living.

Gay men easily admire and identify with Dolly Levi. She has an overtly feminine personality punctuated with bold independence, representing traditionally-appealing female and male qualities. She is publicly vivacious and optimistic but also privately sorrowful and alone, and she reveals each side with depth and passion. This dichotomy parallels the struggles closeted gay men face. In the scene, Dolly busies herself and her companions with tasks to

distract herself and others from her internal struggle. Similarly, closeted gay men repress their homosexuality with distractions, including pursuing a heterosexual lifestyle (Clemons). At the end of the scene, Dolly begins to cast aside her discontent and starts her journey towards personal growth. Though she has not told anyone else of this resolve, she has admitted it to herself and to Ephraim, which is enough to set the dramatic action in motion. Dolly's desire, to marry again, is comparable to the struggle that closeted gay men face. They are forced on the sidelines, and cannot live their lives to the fullest and truest capacities because of the sexual, romantic, social, fiscal, and unfortunately, familial denial they face, whether self or societally imposed.

Later, as she is assisting Ermengarde and Ambrose Kemper in Yonkers, she gives them a laundry list in preparation for their and her dinners at the lavish Harmonia Gardens restaurant that evening, complete with a timely business card. Recalling her husband, Dolly describes, "My late husband Ephraim Levi believed in life and anyplace you could find it! Cafes, ballrooms, yes, even theatres." With finality, she also commands Ambrose to tell the head waiter at the Harmonia Gardens that "Dolly's coming back!" (Herman and Stewart Libretto, 1-2-14, 15).

The ensemble-driven "Put On Your Sunday Clothes" begins, and Dolly leads Ambrose and Ermengarde, and indirectly Cornelius Hackl and Barnaby Tucker, Horace's employees, to New York City. They have all made the same choice: to travel to New York City to pursue something grander than their current lot in life. In one of the most iconic images of the show, the full ensemble promenades around the stage singing the chorus clad in a rainbow of Sunday daywear, and yet, Dolly is nowhere to be seen. After her own verse, Dolly joins the full cast in excitement, singing:

Put on your sunday clothes there's lots of world out there/

Put on your silk cravat and patent shoes/

For I can feel adventure in the evening air/...

This I'm positive of, that we won't come home until we fall in love!

(Herman and Stewart Libretto, 1-2-18)

Throughout her interactions with Horace, Ermengarde, and Ambrose, Dolly has kept up her workaholic appearance while also foreshadowing her plans to marry Horace. With Horace, Dolly maintains the upper hand by misleading him about his possible brides-to-be. She now has power in their relationship, even if he does not know it. In her scene with Ambrose and Ermengarde, Dolly continues to whittle away at her matchmaking business, while also furthering her plans with Horace by taking action in her comeback - or rather, coming out. Dolly has authority and leadership in the sequence and has begun to gain agency in her ability to obtain what she needs. Finally, in the rousing climax of "Sunday Clothes," Dolly sings for the first time of her desire to come out "to feel adventure in the evening air (Herman and Stewart Libretto, 1-2-18)." However, despite her initial monologue with Ephraim through "Sunday Clothes," Dolly still has not spoken of the true nature of her desire; she does not admit this to the audience until the final moments of Act I.

The scene shifts to Irene Molloy's millinery shop in New York City. After a close encounter with Horace, Dolly "flimflams" Cornelius, Barnaby, Irene, and her shopgirl Minnie Fay into dinner at the Harmonia Gardens, where there are dance competitions (Citron, 84-85). Cornelius and Barnaby initially refuse, but as Dolly produces yet another business card offering dance lessons, they accept. In the song "Dancing," Dolly teaches both of the boys how to cordially waltz with a woman. With some encouragement, Dolly sends the two new couples, Irene and Cornelius, and Minnie and Barnaby, on a romantic afternoon dancing through the city. Dolly is left alone to watch to watch endless couples dance through the streets, enjoying life.

This scene is an important catalyst in Dolly's journey towards coming out. Dolly is matchmaking once again, this time using Cornelius and Barnaby to disinterest Horace from Irene. Once Horace is out of the picture, she pairs the boys with the girls and sends them on their way. On their way out, Dolly becomes overwhelmed by what she sees on the streets. Recalling an earlier comment to Ambrose, Dolly remembers dancing at the Harmonia Gardens with her now-dead husband, and is reminded of this by the full company waltzing in pairs around her. Donna Murphy, the 2017 revival *Dolly Alternate*, describes this turning point best. In a *Playbill* interview, she said, "During 'Dancing,' when I've got both of the young couples dancing, I'm upstaged, watching them dance. I see the bloom of love and connection, and I feel that Dolly knows that it's possible for her again. She sees that happiness, times two, times four!... I think 'Parade' could not happen if 'Dancing' doesn't happen" (*WATCH: Tony Winner Donna Murphy...*). What is innately true in the character is beautifully interpreted by Murphy. Once Dolly has nudged Cornelius and Barnaby out of their own closets, once Dolly has helped another person come out, she finally realizes that she is ready to come out, herself.

What follows is Dolly's most intimate moment of the show. Dolly meets an old friend on the street and is reminded of how long it has been since she has lived with her husband. Dolly turns to the audience, and for the second time, addresses Ephraim in what has colloquially become known as "The Monologue:"

Ephraim, let me go! It's been long enough, Ephraim! Every evening for all these years I've put out the cat, I've locked the door, I've made myself a little rum toddy and before I went to bed I said a prayer thanking God that I was independent, that no-one else's life was mixed up with mine. Then one night an oak leaf fell out of my Bible. I placed it there when you asked me to marry you, Ephraim. A perfectly good oak leaf but without color and without life. And I suddenly realized that I was like that oak leaf... for years I had not shed one tear, nor had I been filled with the

wonderful hope that something or other would turn out well. And so I've decided to rejoin the human race, and Ephraim... I want *you* to give me away!

(Herman and Stewart Libretto, 1-3-37)

A bell tone chimes, and Dolly wistfully sings the first line of "Before The Parade Passes By": "I'm gonna get in step while there's still time left" (Herman and Stewart Libretto, 1-3-37). In an instrumental reprise of the merry "Dancing" from moments before, Cornelius and Irene waltz across the stage past Dolly. Irene calls out to Dolly to join them watching a nearby parade, and tearfully cries, "Oh Dolly!... The world is full of wonderful things. Come with us, Dolly!" to which Dolly responds, "I will!" (Herman and Stewart Libretto, 1-3-38). Dolly then continues to sing "Parade" with more conviction.

Before the parade passes by, I've got to get some life back into my life/  
 I'm ready to move out in front, I've had enough of just passing by life/  
 With the rest of them, With the best of them/  
 I can hold my head up high/  
 For I've got a goal again, I've got a drive again/  
 I wanna feel my heart coming alive again/  
 Before the parade passes by!

(Herman and Stewart Libretto, 1-3-38)

Dolly goes through a very strong transformation in the final moments of Act I. In "The Monologue," Dolly finally turns to Ephraim and demands of him to "let me go!" - to let her go, out of her closet. Dolly now says what she could not admit to herself until this moment, that she must "rejoin the human race." National tour conductor Terry LaBolt explains, "with respect to

*Dolly* itself, the show... the idea of the story of her ‘joining the human race’” was the emotional heart of the musical (LaBolt). With this emotional center, Dolly’s need to rejoin the human race is emotionally resonant of the non-heterosexual necessity to come out of the closet - to “rejoin the human race” after an event resulting in a loss of innocence. For Dolly, Ephraim’s passing left a daunting hole in her life. Subsequently, Dolly makes the decision to live her life to the fullest again. Similarly, as a gay man discovers his sexuality, he experiences a loss of “heterosexual innocence” and slowly makes the decision to come out of the closet, in order to live his life to the fullest again, as well.

In addition, Dolly’s initial reasoning for choosing to marry Horace is clarified in this monologue. In her first monologue, she tells Ephraim that she wants to marry him “for his money” and because she is “tired of living from hand to mouth” (Herman and Stewart Libretto, 1-1-4) Now, instead of citing exhaustion, Dolly admits that she is ready to live her life with fervor, with the generosity of Horace Vandergelder’s money.

In her encounter with Irene and Cornelius, Dolly is invited to join them in experiencing the world, and all of its “wonderful things.” Dolly openly accepts this invitation, by saying, “I will” for the first time to another character’s beckoning. However, instead of watching the parade from the sidelines, she boldly leads the marchers across the stage, celebrating her decision. Then, during “Before The Parade Passes By,” Dolly sings of “[getting] some life back into my life,” and “having a goal again” (Herman and Stewart Libretto, 1-3-38) These particular passages, including the title phrase “Before The Parade Passes By,” share a particular tinge of readiness to take charge, just as a gay man does as he is coming out.

Throughout Act I, Dolly has only spoken around her discontent, never admitting her true desire to start living her life again until “The Monologue.” She has sung in allusion to this desire during “It Takes a Woman (Reprise)” and “Put On Your Sunday Clothes,” but never directly

about her own ascension. But now, in “Parade,” Dolly openly sings about her decision to come out of her closet, sans business cards or matchmaking, with only the wave of courage and desire to live.

The climax of Dolly’s coming out journey takes place halfway through Act II, in the title song, “Hello, Dolly.” At this moment, all eight pairs of lovers, Cornelius and Irene, Barnaby and Minnie, Ambrose and Ermengarde, and Horace and Ernestina Money, have arrived at the Harmonia Gardens restaurant, as a result of Dolly’s scheming. Ernestina, in a coup with Dolly, irritates Horace to no end, goading Horace to turn to anyone other than her. As the evening carries on, the wait staff grows more and more anxious as rumors spread that Dolly is planning a return to the Harmonia Gardens. As the hubbub grows, waiters gleam at the possibility of her returning, saying, “It’s like old times again,” and “After ten years?” At the height of the excitement, waiter Stanley freezes the action, crying, “Rudy! She’s here!” (Herman and Stewart Libretto, 2-2-10)

The stage directions read, “Music up as every eye goes to the head of the stairs, the portières move and Mrs. Levi steps through” (Herman and Stewart Libretto, 2-2-11). As the horns let out a deafening roar, the curtains part to reveal Dolly Gallagher Levi as she makes her grand entrance into the Harmonia Gardens. “Immaculately coiffed” in an ornate red gown and feathered headdress, Dolly slowly descends the grand staircase and begins singing “Hello, Dolly” (Citron, 88).

Hello, Harry. Well, hello, Louie. It’s so nice to be back home where I belong/

You’re lookin’ swell, Manny. I can tell, Danny,

You’re still glowin’, you’re still crowin’, you’re still goin’ strong/

I feel the room swayin’, for the band’s playin’

One of my old favorite songs from way back when, so/

Here's my hat, fella's, I'm stayin' where I'm at, fella's/

Dolly'll never go away again!

(Herman and Stewart Libretto, 2-2-12).

The waitstaff responds to Dolly with nearly the same text she had addressed them with, now singing "Hello, Dolly" to her. The number grows and grows in energy, repeating itself over and over. Dolly leads the men, and the men lead Dolly, with grandeur and celebrity, parading and dancing throughout the restaurant. In one intimate bridge, Dolly sings,

I went away from the lights of fourteenth street/

And into my personal haze/

But now that I'm back in the lights of fourteenth street/

Tomorrow will be brighter than the good old days!

(Herman and Stewart Libretto, 2-2-12).

The waiters echo her memory of "those good old days," and the number continues to build. Two more choruses pass, and just as the song reaches a peak, one final chorus slows to a snail's pace, and slowly picks up steam. Dolly leads the waiters on one final parade on the pass-around, and with effortless suave, the men repeat and sustain their final line, amid wide smiles and battements galore: "Dolly'll never go away again!" (Herman and Stewart Libretto, 2-2-13)

One of the most iconic moments in musical theatre history, *Hello, Dolly!*'s title song carries significant weight which bears analysis. For the entirety of Act I, Dolly has been pining, working, and matchmaking with a secret agenda. Once she makes her true ambitions clear to Ephraim, she moves forward with her decision to come out, by expressing her desire to him

specifically. Then, in “Hello, Dolly,” she arrives in glamorous splendor. Both physically and figuratively, Dolly comes out. Parting the curtains and descending the grand staircase, Dolly reveals herself to everyone in the restaurant, and the audience - her audience. Additionally, by entering the Harmonia Gardens and simply having fun with the waiters, knowing that her inevitable marriage to Horace lies ahead, Dolly has fulfilled her coming out process, and has now “rejoined” the human race. Composer Jerry Herman says, “What I wanted to capture...was the moment when this lady, who has locked herself away from life, finally gets the guts to put on her old finery and walk down that staircase to face the world again” (Citron, 89). This nostalgia is proportionate to the chutzpah necessary to come out of the closet as homosexual or bisexual, complementing Clum’s statement, “Dolly...was serenaded enthusiastically by an army of singing and dancing waiters who underscored her camp appearance with another brand of gayness... It was a grand, gay moment” (Clum, 175).

## V. Conclusion

The gay male community has enjoyed a long affair with musical theatre. Its appreciation for *Hello, Dolly!* is easy to understand: Dolly, and the divas who have played her, are an embodiment of gay struggles and dreams. Since *Hello Dolly!*'s premiere in 1964, the show's parade of divas has captivated gay men for generations, and it is not likely to end anytime soon. Following the successful Broadway revival, Betty Buckley joined the leagues of Dollys as she led the revival national tour, introducing *Hello, Dolly!* to a new generation of audiences across the United States. Notably, for the first time in a long career seasoned with high-drama roles, Buckley was *playing* onstage, being a goofball, taking in the dancers around her (“Betty Buckley - Broadway Cast & Staff”; Herman, Jerry, and Betty Buckley.). Just as Bette Midler had

performed the role with celebratory zest in 2017, Buckley is now proudly bringing Dolly and her “Motherhood March” across the nation, spreading a little of Horace Vandergelder’s money.

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