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Bucks County Playhouse presents 'Guys and Dolls'

Making 'Guys and Dolls' great again

Cameron Kelsall

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Oh, the joy of watching a classic musical from Broadway's Golden Age performed by a crackerjack cast of veteran belters and hoofers, in a production that honors the show's history without treating it like a museum piece! Few pleasures compare — even for people (like me) who tend to prefer weirder and wilder theater. Such a treat awaits audiences at Bucks County Playhouse's superlative revival of Frank Loesser, Jo Swerling, and Abe Burrows's *Guys and Dolls*.



Darius de Haas (Nicely-Nicely Johnson) and the cast of 'Guys and Dolls.' (Photo by Joan Marcus.)

Meeting the material

The 1950 blockbuster works best in a production that meets the material where it lives, without getting too clever or forcing too many directorial flourishes. (The most recent Broadway revival, from 2009, included an unnecessary metanarrative framing device of writer Damon Runyon creating the characters as the audience watched.) Director Hunter Foster — an intelligent musical-theater performer in his own right — teamed with a top-flight group of designers to recreate Manhattan as the denizens of Runyonland knew it.

Anna Louizos's painted sets perfectly capture the flashy world of old Broadway, and Nicole V. Moody's costumes accentuate even flashier dames. Moody also supplies convincingly conservative clothing for the prayer warriors intent on saving the souls of Times Square's inveterate gamblers and showgirls.

The blurry lines between saints and sinners sets *Guys and Dolls* apart from other romantic musical comedies of its time. As characterized by Swerling and Burrows in their still-sharp libretto, even the toughest gangsters are really teddy bears at heart; conversely, the Salvation Army soldiers possess a world-weariness that suggests they're wise to the futility of their mission.

Thus, the romance between Sky Masterson and Sarah Brown rises above the caricature of a fast guy corrupting a good girl; they both have things to teach each other. It also explains why Miss Adelaide never falls into the hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold trope; there's steel and determination in her dogged pursuit of Nathan Detroit.



Elena Shaddow (Sara Brown) and Clarke Thorell (Sky Masterson) share a musical moment. (Photo by Joan Marcus.)

"Unadulterated thrills"

Adelaide takes center stage (and nabs the final bow) in this production, largely due to Lesli Margherita's finely tuned comedic performance. Decked out in waist-cinching dresses and platinum curls, she calls to mind Judy Holliday in appearance and manner.

Just like Holliday, Margherita proves expert at locating the pathos beneath a funny line, as when she infuses Adelaide's quip of being "tired of getting the fish-eye from the hotel clerk" with a palpable desire to be considered respectable. She pairs perfectly with Steve Rosen's nebbishy Nathan; their tête-à-tête in "Sue Me" is notable not just for its humor but for the sense of longstanding affection and exasperation they convey.

Clarke Thorell and Elena Shaddow give more restrained performances as Sky and Sarah, although Shaddow manages to come across as convincingly (and hilariously) drunk in "If I Were a Bell." His sturdy baritone and her fluttery soprano blend beautifully, and their staid romance provides an ideal complement to Nathan and Adelaide's zanier foibles. Loesser had a lifelong fascination with operetta, and his use of two couples who mirror each other's antics comes straight from that genre's playbook.

The strong supporting cast features several standouts. Lenny Wolpe does moving work as Arvide Abernathy, bringing sweet sincerity to the slightly corny "More I Cannot Wish You." (Has anyone ever figured out what a "lickerish tooth" is?) Darius de Haas bumbles humorously as Nicely-Nicely Johnson, before leading the show-stopping "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat" with rousing energy. The entire ensemble performs Jeremy Dumont's complicated choreography with spirited enthusiasm.

Guys and Dolls shows up on stages around the country fairly often, from community theater to the main stem, but few productions I've seen have offered as many unadulterated thrills as this one. I can't think of a better way to beat the summer heat than by spending a few hours with these crapshooters, chorines, and holy rollers.