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Place Your Bets on 'Guys and Dolls' at Bucks County Playhouse



Nathan Detroit (played by Steve Rosen, second from right) is determined to set up a high-stakes craps games in "Guys and Dolls."
By Joan Marcus

By Anthony Stoeckert

Standing ovations have become so common that most of them are meaningless. They're usually limp affairs, starting with a handful of people who will stand for anything, followed by a few others, and then a few more, probably out of pressure or even to get a head start on exiting the theater.

But the on-the-feet appreciation given to Lesli Margherita after the opening night performance of "Guys and Dolls" at the Bucks County Playhouse was the real deal. Most audience members stayed in their seats through the curtain call, cheering enthusiastically for the actors who had thoroughly entertained them for two and a half hours. When Margherita came out, everyone jumped out of their seats and a loud ovation became thunderous.



Elena Shaddow and Lesli Margherita as Sarah Brown and Miss Adelaide in "Guys and Dolls."

It was a genuinely exciting moment, and well earned because you're not going to find a better performance on any stage anytime soon. Margherita is brilliant as Miss Adelaide, the frustrated fiancée of Nathan Detroit. She is true to the character but infuses Adelaide with her own personality. Her voice is a powerhouse, soaring at times. Her exaggerated "New Yawk" accent is a hoot, and she brings terrific touches, like impossibly high hiccups to "Bushel and a Peck," and some of the funniest eye twitching you'll ever see.

She's the best reason to see this production, but far from the only one. On stage in New Hope, Pennsylvania, through Aug. 12, this staging, directed by Hunter Foster, is a home run. It's almost perfect.

"Guys and Dolls" premiered on Broadway in 1950. Its book was written by Abe Burrows and Jo Swerling, based on stories by Damon Runyon. Set in New York City around the 1920s and '30s, it's about gamblers and degenerates, and based on this show, those characters made Manhattan one heck of a fun place.

Nathan Detroit (played by Steve Rosen) runs a floating crap game, a fact he hides from Miss Adelaide, his fiancée of 14 years. Nathan has a chance to make a lot of money because some wealthy players from around the country are in town looking for action, but the cops are cracking down on gambling, and the only place that will host Nathan's game is charging \$1,000, paid in advance.

Nathan tries to swindle Sky Masterson (Clarke Thorell) into a bet about the popularity of cheesecake and strudel, but Sky doesn't fall for it. Sky does, however, bet Nathan that he can take any woman of Nathan's choice out to dinner — in Havana. Nathan picks Sarah Brown (Elena Shaddow), the missionary devoted to cleansing Broadway of sinners like Nathan and Sky.

"Guys and Dolls" truly is one of the great shows of all time. Frank Loesser wrote the songs, and each and every one of them is terrific. The uptempo numbers are funny and catchy, and the love songs will touch your heart. And in between those songs are two terrific love stories and lots of laughs.

As good as everyone is, the female leads stand out because Shaddow is nearly as good as Margherita. Her voice fills the room on "I'll Know" when Sarah is resisting Sky (or doing her best to resist him). Then she shows another side of her voice with "If I Were a Bell," which is sweet and sexy at the same time.

Steve Rosen is a fine Nathan Detroit. His singing is solid on "The Oldest Established" but this part really comes down to comedy, and Rosen gets plenty of laughs. He's very funny during such moments as Nathan trying to get Sky to make the bet; his banter with the owner of a local garage; and especially during Nathan's antics with Big Julie (Brendan Averett) when the big game finally takes place. Julie, an intimidating presence to say the least, keeps losing, and to change his luck, he rolls his own dice, which don't have spots — but it's OK, because he remembers where the spots were.

Darius de Haas and Blakely Slaybaugh play Nicely Nicely Johnson and Benny Southstreet, Nathan's sidekicks, and these two, along with Rosen, do a great job with the show's Runyon-esque language. And de Haas brings the house down with "Sit Down You're Rockin' The Boat."

If there's a misstep here it's Thorell as Sky. Thorell's credits are impressive ("The Front Page," "Annie," and "Hairspray" on Broadway), and his voice is superb. But he fumbled some lines throughout the evening, and he didn't bring the suave associated with Sky. But Thorell does sing Sky's biggest number, "Luck Be a Lady Tonight" with gusto.

"Guys and Dolls" likely has more big laughs than other musical, especially between Nathan and Miss Adelaide. Nathan may be lying about not gambling anymore, but then Adelaide has told her mother that she and Nathan have been married for more than a decade. Not only that, but she told her mother she and Nathan have five kids, and a sixth on the way. Margherita and Rosen are a delight as Adelaide tells Nathan all of this.

But the actors also bring heart to these characters. Rosen's Nathan is genuinely touched by a letter written by Adelaide's mother, and on "Sue Me," which starts off funny, we find out that deep down, these two care about each other. Another heartfelt moment comes when Sarah's grandfather Arvide (played by Lenny Wolpe) sings "More I Cannot Wish You" to her.

The sets by Anna Louizos are charming and relatively simple. They feel like a show rather than a realistic depiction of New York, and it works. Nicole V. Moody's costumes are spot-on, and Jeremy Dumont's choreography is perfect. Director Foster stays true to the material, capturing it perfectly, but also bringing some new things, such as a very funny cow and some suggestive butter churning to "Bushel and a Peck."

Toward the end, we're treated to a real gift when Shaddow and Margherita team up for "Marry the Man Today." Seeing these two performers sing together was thrilling. The song starts out funny, especially when Sarah corrects Adelaide's grammar, but by the end, the two voices are soaring and these women are defiant.

The only downside is that after they were done, the show was almost over.

"Guys and Dolls" continues at Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope, through Aug. 12.

Tickets cost \$40-\$85; bcptheater.org; 215-862-2121.