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## Love, Song and Gamblers: The Bucks County Playhouse is bringing 'Guys and Dolls' to New Hope



Steve Rosen's experience with 'Guys and Dolls' includes Broadway and touring productions. Now he's set to play Nathan Detroit when the show is performed at the Bucks County Playhouse.

By Anthony Stoeckert

Steve Rosen's first experience with "Guys and Dolls" came when he was sitting in the audience as his brother played Nicely Nicely Johnson in a high school production of the legendary musical.

Actually, he was a member of several audiences.

"I was a theater-obsessed kid so I went to every single performance, to the point where I could recite the show from the beginning, because I loved it so much," Rosen says.

Rosen went on to become an actor, and appeared in "Guys and Dolls" on Broadway, playing Benny Southstreet in the 2009 revival of the quintessential New York musical. He then played Nathan Detroit in a tour of the show, and now he's preparing to play Nathan again as the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, Pennsylvania, is staging "Guys and Dolls," July 21 through Aug. 12.

"Guys and Dolls" is simply one of the all-time great musicals, opening on Broadway in 1950, running for 1,200 performances and winning five Tony Awards. There were revivals in 1976 (featuring a black cast and Motown-style arrangements), 1992, and 2009. It's also had several runs in London and countless regional and community productions.

Based on stories written by Damon Runyon, "Guys and Dolls" is about love and gamblers in Manhattan. Nathan runs a floating crap game and has chance to make some big money because "there are well-heeled shooters" in town. But the police are cracking down on gambling, and the only place willing to host Nathan's game is charging \$1,000.

Nathan bets Sky Masterson (Clarke Thorell) that Sky can't get the pious Sister Sarah Brown (Elena Shaddow) to go on a date with him. Meanwhile, Nathan is trying to keep Miss Adelaide, his fiancée of 14 years, happy without actually marrying her.

The show is a pure crowd pleaser with legendary songs ("I'll Know," "A Bushel and a Peck," "If I Were a Bell," "Luck Be a Lady" and "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat") and some very funny scenes.

"It's one of the most well written musicals in that the scenes flow effortlessly from one to another," Rosen says. "And Nathan is in a lot of them, relaying a lot of information, so the character has a lot of balls up in the air. And fortunately the people I get to pay catch with are all talented and hilarious in their own right."

The cast includes actors with a lot of Broadway credits. Shaddow was in "The Bridges of Madison County" and "The Visit." Thorell was in the recent revival of "The Front Page" and the 2012 revival of "Annie." Lesli Margherita, who plays Miss Adelaide, was in "Matilda" and "Dames at Sea."

"What's really exciting is that I get to work with many of dear friends on this show," Rosen says. "I've worked with many of the people in the company and the people that I haven't worked with, I'm a huge fan of. So I'm super-excited to get to play this part with these people."

Hunter Foster is directing the production. Foster is a regular at the playhouse, and is helming four shows there this year (he's already directed "Clue" and "Buddy" and is set to direct "The Rocky Horror Show" in the fall). Foster says he's particularly excited about the cast for this production of "Guys and Dolls." "When I tell people about the cast, they say, 'Wow, you could open on Broadway with those people,'" Foster says. "We're blessed to have this talent, and lot of them are friends of mine that I've worked with, so it's actually a joy to be in the room with these people. I don't know how we're going to get anything done because we're going to be laughing and chatting."

Foster says he jumped at the chance to direct "Guys and Dolls" when the opportunity came up.

"It's one of those sort of perfect shows in a lot of ways," he says. "It's so well written and crafted so well, and so funny. That's the thing, some of these lines are brilliantly funny. So it's a treat and it's like you don't have to work too hard because it's all there for you. And it's wonderful, too, to do a classic like this."

This show marks a rare production of a big, old-fashioned musical for the playhouse, which often presents new musicals. "Guys and Dolls" will feature 19 performers, Bucks County Playhouse's largest cast since it opened under its current management in 2012.

"It's a big musical with tons of costumes and lots of actors and a band," Foster says. "So in terms of all of that put together, I think it is definitely the largest production they've done there. It's a challenge but we're excited to make it work."

Staging one of the all-time great shows also presents a challenge in that Foster wants to do it his way while also respecting all the things that make it a classic.

"Every time I direct a show, I want to do my own interpretation of it," he says. "I don't want to do what Jerry Zaks [who directed the smash 1992 revival] did or whoever has done it before. I didn't want to put some concept on it or upset the world that Runyon has already created."

But he does see opportunities within the show's structure to bring his own style to "Guys and Dolls." One thing he wants to do is keep the show moving in cinematic ways.

"It's not like scene, blackout, scene, blackout," he says. "I want everything to move, the action always continues no matter what, which is something I always put in my shows. We also want to explore. Today we have a rehearsal with Sarah and Sky, and we want to find depth for these characters as well. We don't want them to be two-dimensional or to be just sort of stock musical theater [characters]. I don't want this to be a bunch of cartoons on stage, I want them to be real people that have real issues."

"And also explore the idea of love. There's something romantic about 'Guys and Dolls' and there's something about love between Sky and Sarah and Adelaide and Nathan that's real and I want to explore all of those things. In that sort of exploration, these new and wonderful things will come out and it will be our own interpretation of this show."

Foster says he's particularly drawn to the Sky-Sarah story and that those characters' ballads, "My Time of Day" and "I'll Know" are some of his favorites, though they aren't as well known as show stoppers like "Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat."

"Those sort of romantic songs, the lyrics and music are so beautiful," he says. "I just love the exploration of those two characters. I think a lot of times, Nathan and Adelaide become the sort of main focus of the show and I just love the Sky and Sarah story, and I want it to be as prominent."

In addition to the performers, Foster says he's excited to be working with choreographer Jeremy Dumont.

"He's from Forth Worth, Texas," Foster says. "I worked with him in 'Spamalot,' we did it a couple of years ago, he's a really exciting choreographer, I'm really excited about him."

"Guys and Dolls" has been entertaining audiences for so long that it can look effortless, but it takes a lot of work to make it look easy. In addition to singing and dancing, performers in the show have to be adept at comedy, and talk in "Runyon-esque" language.

"The rhythm of that is almost like music, so learning the lines of this show and the themes is like learning the music, it feels so good when you get to say it," Rosen says. "I think because people enjoy it so much, it's deceptively difficult to learn everything, but once the audience is there, enjoying it, it becomes the most fun to do."

*"Guys and Dolls" will be performed at the Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. St., New Hope, Pennsylvania, July 21 through Aug. 12. Tickets cost \$45-\$75; [buckscountyplayhouse.org](http://buckscountyplayhouse.org); 215-862-2121.*