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Review: 'Guys and Dolls' at Bucks County Playhouse



Alysa Finnegan, Lesli Margherita (as Miss Adelaide), Isabel Stein, and Alyssa Gardner.
Photo by Joan Marcus.

By Steve Cohen

Guys and Dolls is a paragon of American musical theater. Considering its blend of interesting characters, clever story and glorious songs by Frank Loesser, it deserves more frequent revivals on Broadway and in regional theater.

Based on a series of short stories by Damon Runyon, the book by Abe Burrows and Jo Swerling added a logical through-story to Runyon's vignettes. *Guys and Dolls* has had only one Broadway revival in this century, in 2009, which ran only three months.

That circumstance makes this new production especially welcome. Bucks County Playhouse's staging boasts some outstanding performances. Hunter Foster, best known as an actor, has directed it with brisk pace, and Jeremy Dumont designed the exceptional choreography.

Lesli Margherita is spectacular as Adelaide, the nightclub singer who's been engaged to gambler Nathan Detroit for fourteen years. Brassy yet endearing, she impressively belts "A Bushel and a Peck," "Take Back Your Mink," as well as "Adelaide's Lament," in which she describes her psychosomatic illness due to resentment over her fiancé's refusal to set a wedding date. She sings "a person can develop a cold" when "she's getting a kind of name for herself and the name ain't his."

Steve Rosen is endearing as Nathan, more charming and less grumpy than the Nathans in some other productions. The chemistry between Rosen and Margherita is heartwarming.

Elena Shaddow impresses as Sarah Brown, the icy and puritanical missionary who falls for the notorious gambler Sky Masterson. She excels with pure high notes (representing her character's purity) in the romantic "I'll Know" and "I've Never Been in Love Before."



Elena Shaddow and Clarke Thorell. Photo by Joan Marcus.

In those two ballads, though, her voice overshadows the baritone of Clarke Thorell as Sky Masterson. Sky should be the guy whom every other character looks up to, and whom Sarah falls for at their first meeting, and ideally he should have the richest voice in the cast. (If you're only familiar with Marlon Brando's performance from the movie, you don't know what you've missed and I refer you to Robert Alda from the 1950 cast and Peter Gallagher from 1992.) Thorell's most effective scene comes when he sings "Luck Be a Lady" during a fateful crap game. Otherwise, though, Thorell's Sky needs to be stronger and more aggressive, both dramatically and vocally.

The beloved character actor Lenny Wolpe is exceptional as Sarah's grandfather, and Ruth Gottschall impresses as the Salvation Army General Matilda B. Cartwright. Wolpe got a deserved ovation for his

crooning of “More I Cannot Wish You” and Gottschall surprised the audience with an astonishing high note in “Sit Down, You’re Rockin’ the Boat.”

Runyon invented an unusual dialect for his characters. To endow his hoodlums with dignity, he had them say lines such as “It is a sure thing” instead of “It’s a sure thing.” The assorted gamblers and thugs are well-played by Darius de Haas as Nicely-Nicely Johnson, Blakely Slaybaugh as Benny Southstreet, Brendan Averett as Big Jule, Evan Mayer as Rusty Charlie, Eric Greengold as Harry the Horse, and Adam Vanek as Angie the Ox. Victor Hernandez is a sturdy Lieutenant Brannigan.

Guys and Dolls centers on Nathan Detroit’s efforts to find a location for his illegal crap game. The high-rolling Sky Masterson bets Nathan that he can take even the most unlikely “doll” – in this case, Sarah Brown – on a date to Havana, Cuba. When he succeeds, he finds himself falling in love with Sarah, so he pays Nathan and says that he failed to get that date, thus preserving Sarah’s good reputation. In another bet, Masterson wins the attendance of a crowd of gamblers at Sarah’s Save-a-Soul Mission. Having lost Sarah’s affections, his aim with this bet is to win her back.

Foster’s staging is at its best in the second act: a climactic crap game in an underground sewer, and a final meeting at the mission where the ensemble sings “Sit Down, You’re Rockin’ the Boat.” Even the bookies and touts displayed their dancing abilities in those numbers.

Guys and Dolls becomes an even more rewarding experience if you know its references to the sporting and gambling world of its era. For instance, when one of the bookies in “Fugue for Tinhorns” – the opening number, a song about horse racing – sings “His great grandfather was Equipoise,” it helps to know that Equipoise was the name of a famed racehorse of the 1930s who went on to a career at stud. And when Adelaide tells Nathan she’d like to get married and live in a white home with a green fence, he responds “Like Whitney Farms,” referring to the colors of the famous horse racing stable.

In the song “Sue Me,” when Nathan wails, “Alright already, it’s true, so *nu*,” he’s using a short Yiddish word which was used by many New Yorkers, regardless of ethnic background. It means “so what?” or “you know?” For it to make sense, it should be said or sung with an upward inflection.

One small blemish in the production is Shaddow’s glamorous facial makeup, including eye liner and lashes. As a missionary, Sarah should appear very plain, thus making her progression into romance more dramatic. And Costume Designer Nicole V. Moody should have nixed those earrings too – they’re also out of place.

Anna Louizos’ sets are minimal, but they work: a newsstand adequately represents Times Square, and a painted flat suffices for the underground sewer where the big crap game takes place. William Shuler leads a six-piece band.

Running Time: Two hours and 20 minutes, including an intermission.



Darius de Haas and ensemble. Photo by Joan Marcus.

Guys and Dolls plays through August 12, 2017, at the Bucks County Playhouse — 70 S. Main Street, in New Hope, PA. For tickets, call the box office at (215) 862-2121, or purchase them online.