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# JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

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Steve Rosen Rocks the Comedy Boat in Old Classic and New Show at the Bucks County Playhouse



*Steve Rosen, far right in blue, plays Nathan Detroit in *Guys and Dolls* at the Bucks County Playhouse. | Photo by Joan Marcus*

By **Rachel Kurland**

They say to combat stagefright by imagining the audience in their underwear, but for Steve Rosen at the age of 7, the roles reversed, and in a more literal way.

His first onstage experience took place at French Woods Festival of the Performing Arts summer camp in the Catskills during a production of *The King and I*. The 7-year-old played a servant in the first scene, wearing a grass skirt and no shirt.

Admittedly a pudgy kid — and one who had no prior experience wearing a skirt — Rosen's role in the show was to get on his knees, bow, stand up and walk off the stage.

He did as rehearsed — but his skirt remained around his ankles.

"I was standing onstage in my tighty whities with my belly hanging over, and the audience started to laugh," he recalled. "The other kids froze, and I started doing a little dance. The audience started laughing their heads off — till they turned off the lights and told us to get off the stage."

Rosen was glued to theater and comedy from then on — "like a chubby kid to cake, which, by the way, the cake at camp was also very good," he joked — and he returns to the Bucks County Playhouse for a rendition of *Guys and Dolls*, playing through Aug. 12.

This is his third Playhouse show, following *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Company*.

Rosen characterized *Guys and Dolls* as the epitome of the classic Broadway musical-comedy. He plays Nathan Detroit, the lead gambler, whose life revolves around his 14-year fiancée, Adelaide, though he doesn't admit her influence over him, Rosen said.

"The show is a testament to the power of love and loving relationships in that no matter how busy life gets in the real world, it's what you have going on at home and the people who love you and who you love that make the world go round," he said.

Nearly 70 years since its original run, the show remains contemporary.

"You ask anybody who is in a long-term relationship how they do it, and a lot of it is you love the person and put up with the parts of them that drive you crazy," he explained.

Even after all these years, the musical's comedy still works. Each night, they have to pause for extended laughter from the audience.

"It's not a reflection of myself as a performer. It really is a reflection of the material that we are performing," Rosen said.

Rosen's affinity for comedy began at that Catskills camp, which his parents sent him to while they went on a six-week Mediterranean cruise for their second honeymoon.

"We were at camp eating sloppy Joes, and we would get pictures of them sitting with whipped cream from tartufo on their noses," he laughed.

His parents and family encouraged his love of performing, taking him to classes at the local JCC or theaters.

His older brother was the real actor in the family, Rosen said. He remembers watching him play Nicely-Nicely Johnson in a high school production of *Guys and Dolls*.

“That was the first show that I remember seeing over and over again to the point where, on the last viewing, I could tell where everybody made mistakes,” he said.

But Rosen is no stranger to the big stage himself. His Broadway debut was in 2005’s coconut-clomping *Spamalot*, in which he played a handful of roles, including Sir Bedevere, The Strangely

Flatulent; Concorde, Lancelot’s trusty servant/steed; and Mrs. Galahad, Sir Dennis’ mother.

“It was a thrill every night,” he remembered. “It was like a comedy rock concert.” He said people still have a warm place in their hearts for that show, as is often the case with comedies.

“Comedy means the most when you’re having a hard time or when things feel dark,” he said. “When *Spamalot* came out, there was a feeling of doom and gloom in the world. ... Right now, that same sort of feeling is permeating the air. There’s a sense of foreboding, of not knowing what’s coming next. And because of that, shows like *Guys and Dolls* are so necessary because people really need to laugh right now.”

The Rochester, N.Y., native will return to the Playhouse again this winter as he takes a modern-day Irving Berlin approach with his new show, *Ebenezer Scrooge’s BIG Playhouse Christmas Show*, which he co-wrote with Gordon Greenberg.

The show retells *A Christmas Carol* with a sketch comedy, *Saturday Night Live*-inspired twist. The story is set in the New Hope area 100 years ago, intersecting with the Playhouse community and its values.

Although Rosen and Greenberg are two Jews writing about Christmas, Rosen said he grew up watching *A Christmas Carol* on TV, admittedly “because nothing is open on Christmas.”

“We can use our MOT sense of humor to inform the story in a way that emphasizes the heart of the story,” he said.

In the meantime, he’ll make an appearance in Amazon’s [The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel](#), about a Jewish woman trying to make it as a stand-up comic in the 1950s. (He also shared a few bars of “She Loves Me” with creator Amy Sherman-Palladino on set.)

Rosen got his sense of humor from a household filled with laughter, he said.

Although his parents’ and grandparents’ generations had endured a lot culturally as Jews, he said comedy helped “laugh through the pain.”

“Jewish people are known for their sense of humor because they’re willing to tell it like it is,” he said. He recalled some advice *Spamalot* director Mike Nichols gave him: “Talk like people talk.”

“Because I am a Jewish person, I talk how I talk. And so when there are characters that have similar rhythms,” he continued, “it’s obviously easier.”

So Rosen is excited to return to a historical and meaningful place like the Playhouse.

“It’s really fun to come and work in a beautiful town. It feels like you’re on summer vacation. Actually, it feels like I’m back at summer camp” — though the costume department is an upgrade from wearing your brother’s hand-me-down Bar Mitzvah suit.

“I feel like I’m back at French Woods.”