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High-Rolling 'Guys And Dolls' A Winner At Bucks County Playhouse In New Hope



Steve Rosen (Nathan Detroit) and the cast of Guys and Dolls.
(Photo: Joan Marcus)

By John Dwyer and Herb Millman

There are a handful of American musicals that are true classics. "Guys and Dolls" is one of them.

The musical was inspired by the fiction of Damon Runyon, and gives amusing insights into the gangster "guys and dolls" of the New York City underworld. It was thought to be, when it opened in 1950, not just a hit, but a masterpiece. The reviews were universally positive. Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times wrote: "We might as well admit that 'Guys and Dolls' is a work of art. It is spontaneous and has form, style, and spirit."

The overall assessment was that the musical was the perfect blend of book and music. It was going to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1951, but it was pulled due to Abe Burrows, the main writer for the show, having problems with the House on Un-American Activities Committee during the McCarthy scare. As "Guys and Dolls" was the obvious choice for the award, no Pulitzer was given that year by the trustees of Columbia University who administer the award. It was directed then by part-time Bucks County native George S. Kaufman.



L-R) Alysa Finnegan, Lesli Margherita (Miss Adelaide), Isabel Stein, and Alyssa Gardner. (Photo: Joan Marcus)

Bucks County Playhouse has done this classic proud. Hunter Foster, its director, is no mook when it comes to puttin' on a show, understand what I'm sayin'? The sound and the look is all on the money, and it is not just a roll of the dice, but a good eye and an unfailing theatrical sense that allows Foster to commandeer this cast of missionaries, hoods and "little nifties from the fifties."

The story is about Nathan Detroit, who runs the oldest permanent floating crap game in New York, needing a G-note, so he can use the Biltmore Garage for the game. Since he doesn't have the moola, he makes a bet with legendary gambler and ladies' man Sky Masterson: Sky must take a doll of Nathan's choice to dinner in Havana. Sky agrees, and Nathan chooses the pretty but pure preacher lady from the mission, Miss Sarah Brown. Now, the show is off to the races.

A secondary story line is also about love and gambling and that is about Nathan Detroit's 14-year engagement to his doll, Miss Adelaide. She is getting a little more than tired waiting around for this lug to get her to the altar.

In order to make this show work, you have to have very strong female leads. The show seems to be about the Guys. They certainly control the plot line as they initiate the bet and the atmosphere is really about their world. But the show is ultimately a romance and how love is the biggest gamble of all. So, you need to have a doll who can deliver the goods. In the 2009 overproduced Broadway revival, the negative reviews were in part due to the competent but forgettable performances of their Sarah Brown and Miss Adelaide.

Elena Shaddow as Missionary Sarah Brown has the needed voice of an angel as well as acting talent that allows the audience to follow her journey as she opens herself up to the possibility of falling in love. Her performance of the song "If I Were a Bell" is an example of both. And now for a sure bet. The question: "Is it likely that you'll ever see a better Miss Adelaide than Lesli Margherita (original Broadway cast "Matilda, The Musical" Mrs. Wormwood)?" The answer is "no." Her Miss Adelaide is a brilliant creation. She is a squeaky-voiced, New-York accented kewpie doll, with a heart as big as a house but easily broken. Her songs "Bushel and a Peck" and "Adelaide's Lament" are as hilarious as the reprise of "Adelaide's Lament" is heart wrenching.

These irresistible forces are met with the immovable objects of Sky Masterson played with devilish sexiness by Clarke Thorell and Nathan Detroit who Steve Rosen has made the most likeable, huggable ne'er-do-well east of the Hudson. The relationships between the main characters really work and that

chemistry is what carries the show to its inevitable conclusion. The penultimate song of the night, "Marry the Man Today" has never been sung or staged better. Simple, honest, straight and true.



Elena Shaddow (Sara Brown) and Clarke Thorell (Sky Masterson).
(Photo: Joan Marcus)

Other highlights of the evening are the songs "Luck Be a Lady" and "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat." In "Luck Be a Lady," Thorell builds the song from a smooth, jazzy prayer to an escalating demand for the positive outcome he needs. It is a great song done well. Bucks County Playhouse patrons will fondly remember Darius De Haas from Hunter Foster's production of "Ain't Misbehavin'" in 2014 where he sang a much different song, the sexy and seductive "Viper's Drag." That was a show-stopping moment back then, and his rendition as Nicely-Nicely of the foot-stomping, hand-clapping "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat" is equally show stopping. And finally, Lenny Wolpe brought a touching sincerity to the role of Arvide Abertnathy, Sarah Brown's grandfather and that kind soulfulness is particularly seen in his song to her. "More I Cannot Wish You."

And more you could not wish, as well, from Jeremy Dumont's well-crafted and ably-executed choreography and the orchestra under the direction of William Shuler

Technical aspects of the show were all done well. Kudos to Anna Louizos (scenic designer), Nicole V. Moody (costume designer), Kirk Bookman (lighting) and Bart Fasbender (sound).

Two side notes: The Playhouse has brought back the tradition of the apprentice program, where young university acting students can get professional experience during the summer. Grace Kelly was an apprentice at Bucks County Playhouse a started her career there.

The Playhouse is also honoring veterans giving out 100 free seats to the show on Sunday. July 30 at 2 p.m. After the show, there will be a picnic barbecue hosted by the Logan Inn for the vets. Lead sponsors for the event are Central Bucks Chamber, Doylestown Health, and the Logan Inn with support from the New Hope Chamber and the Delaware River Towns Chamber. This is a wonderful way to say thanks to all the men and women of the Armed Forces.



Ruth Gottschall (General Cartwright), Steve Rosen (Nathan Detroit) and Elena Shaddow (Sara Brown). (Photo: Joan Marcus)

To sum up, here's the skinny, you mugs: Take your guy or take your doll and lay down your marker at the box office at Bucks County Playhouse to have one of the best times seeing one of the greatest musicals of all time done justice by a great gang of actors. It's a sure thing. The show runs through Aug. 12. Tickets are available [online](#), or call (215) 862-2121