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## Review: Hanging out with street-smart 'Guys and Dolls' (Bucks County Playhouse)



Steve Rosen as Nathan Detroit (in blue-checked jacket) and some of the the cast of 'Guys and Dolls' at Bucks County Playhouse. (Photo courtesy of Joan Marcus)

### *SHAPIRO ON THEATER* A BLOG BY HOWARD SHAPIRO

I'm not sure there ever was a New York like the one we find in "Guys and Dolls," the musical peopled by cavalier dice throwers and the women they chase or who chase them. But I wouldn't have minded living in it for a couple of hours — which I was nearly able to do, thanks to the exuberant production from Bucks County Playhouse, where the guys shoot craps anywhere they can and the dolls take the real gamble by falling for them.

This "musical fable of Broadway," as the show calls itself in its subtitle, appears to be indestructible — and that assertion is by no means a put-down of Hunter Foster, whose direction of "Guys and Dolls" at the Playhouse shows off the musical's old-fashioned heart with pride. In a modern context, the show is sexist as all get-out. The guys callously use women in any number of ways.

Yet its characters and their story, based on Damon Runyon's work, are undeniably charming — and the show seems to constantly wink at us, as if to say, whoa, none of this could be real. The script by Abe Burrows and Jo Swerling and songs — several of them, no more than quick ditties by Frank Loesser — are light-headed, often clever and now a part of the American songbook.

The show opened on Broadway in 1950, and even though it's essentially about men who avoid the law by organizing craps games late at night in a garage or even a sewer, "Guys and Dolls" is no anachronism. It was the first musical I ever saw, when my parents took me to an Altoona Community Theatre production — I think I was 10, and even then I sensed that the Runyonesque world of this show was somehow unreal but its characters had all the traits of very real people. I've seen the show a couple of times since, and at a Bucks County Playhouse matinee Wednesday I was struck by how pleasant it was to spend time with these folks.

Not just the characters but, in this case, the 19-member cast. The production, backed by a solid six-piece orchestra, is uneven at times; some characters are played like cartoons with an exaggerated, stylized delivery that can work fabulously (Lesli Margherita's over-the-top rendition of the showgirl Miss Adelaide) or just okay (Steve Rosen's effusive delivery of craps-game operator Nathan Detroit, which early on overwhelms some of his laugh lines). Other characters are played as all business and down-to-earth (Clarke Thorell's big-deal gambler Sky Masterson and Elena Shaddow's portrayal of the young mission leader out to clean Broadway of sin).

None of this is wrong for the way the characters are scripted, but it takes some time for the extremes to meld. Once it does, by the middle of the first act, the production pipes along, gliding on songs about never having been in love before and feeling like a bell that goes ding-dong-ding. As much as the guys dominate the show, this production goes to the dolls: Margherita's brassy voice and Shaddow's bold coloratura are knock-outs. So is the dancing, choreographed smartly by Jeremy Dumont; his moves for the crapshooters' dance during a tense dice game is, as it should be, a highlight of the second act.

As the gambler Nicely-Nicely Johnson, Darius de Haas and the ensemble get pulses to quicken with "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat," and the production's sprinkled with other lively moments. Broadway designer Anna Louizos' turntable sets take us easily to action in Manhattan and, briefly, Havana; Nicole V. Moody's costumes are appropriately retro (check out a super wedding dress she's come up with for the last scene), and the musical's all the better for Bart Fasbender's rich sound design.

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*"Guys and Dolls" runs through August 12 at Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main Street in New Hope. 215-862-2121 or [buckscountyplayhouse.org](http://buckscountyplayhouse.org).*