



Ohio Light Opera opens 34th season with two company premieres

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Donald Rosenberg, The Plain Dealer

By

WOOSTER – Audiences have been flocking to the College of Wooster in the summertime since 1979, when the Ohio Light Opera began energizing classic operettas and dusting off obscure and neglected specimens in the genre. For the past decade or so, the company has done similar archeological work in American musical theater, to variable results.

But the stars appear to have aligned as the troupe embarks on its 34th season at the college's Freedlander Theatre. The season has begun with company premieres of Frank Loesser's "Guys and Dolls" and Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart's "A Connecticut Yankee" in smart, vivacious and musically pleasurable productions.

In terms of overlooked gems, the real find is the latter, a 1927 adaptation of Mark Twain's "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" that the celebrated songwriting team and book writer Herbert

Fields revised in 1943. This is the show that gave the world such supreme Rodgers and Hart songs as "Thou Swell," "My Heart Stood Still" and, from the 1943 revival, "To Keep My Love Alive."

What keeps "A Connecticut Yankee" alive, especially as animated by the bright Ohio Light Opera ensemble, is the show's mirthful blend of haunting tunes and antic wit. The tale of a Navy lieutenant who is bonked on the head by his witch-like fiancée and thrust back nine centuries to Camelot manages to juggle elements of operetta and vaudeville with Broadway pizzazz.



Matt Dilyard

Jacob Allen, left, as Merlin and Sarah Best as Morgan Le Fay in the Ohio Light Opera production of "A Connecticut Yankee."

It's a feast of silliness, with ample opportunity for Hart to show his verbal dexterity – "To Keep My Love Alive," sung to the wicked skies by Sarah Best as conniving Morgan Le Fay, is the most fetching example – and for Fields to engage in layers of comedic merriment and anachronism. A reference to "Porgy and Bess" in 543 A.D. Camelot turns out to be a timely nod to the popular 1940s revival of the Gershwin-Heyward opera-turned-musical.

Little of this would register if the production and performers didn't enter the spirit of "A Connecticut Yankee" with an alacrity bordering on theatrical mania. No problem. Steven Daigle has staged the piece for all its giddy and romantic frivolity, and the colorful sets (Kirk Domer), costumes (Charlene Gross) and lighting (Erich R. Keil) provide the right stylish touches both in the 20th and 6th centuries.

"Guys and Dolls" is such a familiar and beloved work that it poses more extreme challenges for a company of trained voices

usually more focused on operetta than Broadway traditions. Yet the production lavishes vitality and atmosphere on Loesser's wondrous conglomeration of gamblers, missionaries and night-club blondes, even if slow scene changes often threaten to grind the action to a halt.

Director Jacob Allen has pumped plenty of chutzpah into the narrative, with each character coming across as an individual personality. This is certainly true of Alexa Devlin's Adelaide, a broad (no pun intended) comic performance that is part Betty Boop and part Ethel Merman. Devlin's timing is impeccable, her voice a penetrating megaphone.

Her fiancé of 14 years is Nathan Detroit, that most endearing of Manhattan con men. The lanky Brad Baron plays him with a thick New Yoik accent and perpetual look of exasperation that suits the guy beautifully.

In the tradition of repertory companies, many cast members do double service in the opening productions. At Saturday's performances, Nathan Brian and Danielle McCormick Knox played leading roles in both shows with vocal and dramatic distinction, savoring the zany encounters in "A Connecticut Yankee" as much as they applied bountiful sexual chemistry to their gambler-missionary duties in "Guys and Dolls."

Among other busy participants was Adam Fieldson, who brought a ringing tenor to Sir Galahad in, well, you-know-what, and to Nicely-Nicely Johnson's "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat." John Callison was another strong presence in both works, and Allen had fun as a beleaguered Merlin and aggravated Lt. Brannigan (subbing for a colleague in "Guys and Dolls").

REVIEW

Ohio Light Opera

What: The company performs seven productions in rotating repertory.

When: Through Saturday, Aug. 11.

Where: College of Wooster's Freedlander Theatre, 329 E. University St., Wooster.

Tickets: \$10-\$48. Go to ohiolightopera.org or call 330-263-2345.

It also was good to see company veteran Ted Christopher serving up a Shakespearian smorgasbord as King Arthur (and adding an in-joke from last season's production of Cole Porter's "Jubilee").

Company members who didn't have principal or secondary roles on this occasion whooped it up in the chorus and gamely negotiated Carol Hageman's choreography, which is better suited to the period dances set in Hartford and Camelot than in the Runyanesque realm of crap games, Cuban cocktails and night clubs.

One of the delights of these productions is the ability to hear the Ohio Light Opera Orchestra bring vibrant detail to each show's original orchestrations. Under conductors Steven Byess for Rodgers and Hart and J. Lynn Thompson for Loesser, the music came across with a lushness that is barely possible in these woeful days of reduced pit bands and electronic simulation.

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Danielle McCormick Knox, left, as Sarah Brown and Nathan Brian as Sky Masterson in Ohio Light Opera's production of "Guys and Dolls" at the College of Wooster.