

OLO revives 'A Connecticut Yankee'

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WOOSTER -- Ohio Light Opera dusts off a highly successful but lesser-known Broadway comedy with its spirited production of "A Connecticut Yankee," which opened June 23 at The College of Wooster's Freedlander Theatre.

Featuring music by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Lorenz

Hart, and a storyline by Herbert Fields, "A Connecticut Yankee" -- based loosely on Mark Twain's 1889 novel -- opened in 1927 and was revived in 1943. Considered a masterpiece of American musical theater, it is often overlooked, in part, because Rodgers and his subsequent lyrical associate, Oscar Hammerstein, debuted their epic work "Oklahoma" that same year.

The story centers on U.S. Navy Lieutenant Martin Barrett, whose bachelor party is crashed by the woman he is set to marry (but really doesn't love), Lieutenant Fay Merrill. Upon arriving at the party, Merrill, accompanied by several fellow WAVES, finds her groom-to-be in a loving embrace with his former girlfriend, Alice Courtleigh. After an angry exchange of words, Merrill grabs an empty wine bottle and breaks it over Martin's head, knocking him unconscious. When he finally comes to, he finds himself in Camelot 1400 years earlier, and that's where the adventure begins.

After a brief encounter with Sir Kay from King Arthur's Court, Martin meets Alisande, the beautiful lady-in-waiting to Queen Guinevere, who happens to look a lot like Alice. Martin is smitten and lovingly calls her "Sandy." Meanwhile, Queen Morgan Le Fay, who bears a strong resemblance to Martin's fiancé, informs King Arthur that she intends to marry the noblest of the knights. All signs point to the dashing Sir Galahad, despite his committed relationship to Evelyn. In the meantime, Morgan meets Martin and takes an immediate liking to him, but Martin has other things to worry about after disclosing a romance between Lancelot and Guinevere, which causes Arthur to order that Martin be burned at the stake. Fortunately, the quick-thinking lieutenant, knowing that a solar eclipse was coming, threatens to make the sky go dark and frightens everyone in Camelot when it does. He promises to bring the sun back if he can assume the role of King Arthur's right-hand man, a.k.a. "The Boss."

Act II picks up several months later after Martin introduces Camelot to "modern technology" complete with clocks, radios, hardhats, airplanes, social security, pensions, and even a hint of equal rights for women. Morgan, increasingly obsessed with Martin, solicits the help of Merlin the Magician, who joins forces with Sir Kay to abduct Sandy, but Martin rescues her with help from a yet-to-be-invented weapon of warfare -- the handgun. Eventually Martin comes to, and discovers a form of Camelot in real life.

Nathan Brian, fresh off his impressive debut as Sky Masterson in "Guys and Dolls" is equally dashing as Martin



Merlin (far right), played by Jacob Allen, makes magic in the Ohio Light Opera production of "A Connecticut Yankee." Matt Dilyard photo

Barrett, while Danielle McCormick Knox, who starred with Brian as Miss Sarah in "Guys and Dolls," is dynamic in her multiple roles as Alice and Alisande (Sandy). Together, the two are particularly charming, especially in such duets as "My Heart Stood Still."

Ted Christopher is a hit in the role of King Arthur, which he played when the company presented Camelot last year. The always-animated Christopher demonstrates his mastery of operetta with his wonderful voice, his subtle body language, and his perfectly timed punch lines.

Adam Fieldson, as Sir Galahad, and Natalie Ballenger, as Evelyn, take advantage of some extended stage time to strut their stuff, particularly in "On a Desert Island with Thee" and "I Feel at Home with You."

Jacob Allen is enchanting as the mystical, magical Merlin, and Sarah Best is downright devilish as the villainous Lieutenant Fay Merrill/ Queen Morgan Le Fay, particularly her wicked laugh, her comedic flair, and her rapport with the audience, personified when she glides through the isles singing "To Keep My Love Alive."

Artistic Director Steven Daigle skillfully brings this work back to life as the director, while Steven Byess conducts the rich and spirited orchestra. Kirk Domer's sets are finely crafted and exquisitely lit by Erich Keil. Charlene Gross triumphs again with a remarkable range of costumes, and Carol Hageman keeps the cast moving in step with her dazzling choreography, highlighted by the lively "Camelot Samba."

"A Connecticut Yankee" will be presented 10 more times this season, including a matinee on Friday. For ticket information, or to order tickets, call 330-263-2345 or visit OhioLightOpera.org.