

*Guys and Dolls* is an extraordinary musical theatre masterwork of indisputable artistic integrity, sidesplitting hilarity, and immense appeal. What's more, it captures the spirit and energy of Alfred Damon Runyon, a prolific writer who played a profound role in shaping American popular culture. Runyon developed his own colorful literary style known as "Runyonesque" while penning over seventy short stories between 1929 and his death in 1946. *Guys and Dolls* is chiefly based on two of those stories, "The Idyll of Sarah Brown" and "Blood Pressure."

Runyon was born in Manhattan, Kansas, but he moved to Manhattan in 1910 following service in the Spanish-American War and positions as a journalist in Colorado. He was enchanted by the opportunity, ambition, and unique mentality of New York City. While pursuing work as a staff writer for the Hearst press, he became much more than an observer of urban life. Partly due to a serious coffee addiction, he gradually immersed himself in the nocturnal seamy side of the Big Apple. His popularity as a writer soared and his writing thrived thanks to the eclectic characters that frequented the Great White Way, often finding his inspiration while seated at local hangouts like Lindy's and the Stork Club. During his nightly sedentary sessions, Runyon encountered the real-life Broadway figures he described in his stories. He consorted with gangsters, cops, gamblers, hoofers, and notable personalities of the day. But who could be capable of bringing the authentic Runyonesque spirit and syntax to the stage?

In 1950, producers Cy Feuer and Ernest Martin were basking in the glory of their first Broadway success, *Where's Charley?*, but they could not idle for long; they were intent on adding a second box office hit to their sterling record. They had already optioned the rights to "The Idyll of Sarah Brown," among other Runyon stories, and recruited Jo Swerling to pen the book for *Guys and Dolls*. Being unsatisfied with Swerling's work, Feuer and Martin brought in numerous other writers to make improvements until they gambled on hiring comic and radio personality Abe Burrows to doctor the book. Burrows faced a daunting challenge: he had never written a word for Broadway prior to 1950 and composer-lyricist Frank Loesser had already written much of his ingenious score. Burrows took over writing the script for *Guys and Dolls* and worked to adapt the book to Loesser's tunes. Fortunately, director and comic writer George S. Kaufman took Burrows under his wing and provided an introduction to writing for the theatre.

The final libretto was a magnificent achievement, but it was Loesser's ingenious score and lyrics that eventually propelled the show to phenomenal success. Despite it being his second show on Broadway, Loesser's warmth, versatility, and use of brilliant pastiche of formerly popular musical styles left audiences nostalgic and floating on air. Loesser's towering musical talent enabled him to give heart to Runyon's

somewhat two dimensional characters, while simultaneously fully capturing the Runyonesque spirit and rhythms of the source material. Loesser's collaboration with a celebrated director like Kaufman brought a fluidity of staging, story, and music that is rarely achieved to this day.

Don Stephenson, husband of Loesser's daughter, Emily Loesser, is the director for Goodspeed's production of *Guys and Dolls*. Stephenson was recently at the helm of the Avery Fisher Hall Concert of *Titanic* and he has appeared in numerous Broadway productions such as *The Producers*, *Rock of Ages*, *Dracula*, *Parade*, *Titanic*, and Goodspeed's *By Jeeves*. Stephenson aims to gracefully bring the grand world of midtown Manhattan to the Goodspeed Opera House stage through creative scenic design in a smooth and believable way. The characters will strike a balance between realism and the style that the show demands requiring an enhanced "innocence, romanticism, and largesse." Stephenson states that "audiences can expect to laugh at Burrows' hilarious book, be carried away by the romance of the story, transported by the glorious Loesser score, and excited by choreography that is dynamic and character/story-driven."



Peter Gennaro (second from right) and the original Broadway cast of *Guys and Dolls*.

Finally, this show holds a special place in the heart of Goodspeed Musicals' new Executive Director, Michael Gennaro. His father, Peter Gennaro, danced in the original production on Broadway. Michael was born during the run of the show. On that day, one of the dancers went around to the dressing rooms with a paper bag. Each of the performers put whatever money they could spare into the bag for the new parents. The cast assembled on stage right before the curtain went up and presented the bag to Michael's father. And so, that was his introduction to the world of musical theatre—as a newborn he was given a brown bag full of cash during a show about gambling!