

The Most Happy Fella

Director's Vision

Rob Ruggiero

The world of musical theater and opera magically blend in Frank Loesser's 1956 musical treatment of the play *They Knew What They Wanted* by Sidney Howard. According to Jo Sullivan Loesser (Frank's widow and the original "Rosabella"), *The Most Happy Fella* was perhaps his most favorite and finest work before his untimely death in 1969. Audiences have connected deeply with this very moving and unusual love story for decades, perhaps because it is framed in a unique May-December romance.

When I first began my work on the play, two things consistently struck a chord with me: trust and forgiveness, and the impact they have on relationship. Arguably the two most critical elements in a strong love relationship, these issues are challenged and ultimately conquered by the two central characters in *The Most Happy Fella*...in powerful and very *unexpected* ways. Both the aging grape farmer Tony Esposito and the jaded waitress Rosabella have long given up on the possibility of love until that fateful meeting in a diner in San Francisco. Fear and insecurity trigger a series of events that potently challenge each character's ability to trust and forgive one another before they can experience true joy and unconditional, enduring love.

As an individual who personally is experiencing my own middle age, I feel a profound connection with both the fear of being without love in the final years of life, but also equally reminded of how one can become jaded on the possibility of love so easily. That vulnerability is key to understanding this story. In addition, my Italian-American heritage connects me to the unique sensibility of this world. All this strongly informed my approach to the storytelling of this rarely-produced musical play.

One of the major differences that will define this production is the moving of the time period from 1927 to the early 1950s. This decision was made after months of processing and questioning in collaboration with my creative team. We felt an instinctual impulse that the piece spoke to that period in history. The musical motives/styles, the articulation of the lead women, and the overall voice of the piece "felt like" it belonged in the 1950s. It was exciting and even a bit shocking to see how easy that move ultimately was. It just fits – and somehow it feels even more accessible living in this time period.

Another exciting distinction is our choice to orchestrate the show with a more intimate, acoustic orchestration. The production will not have the huge sound typically associated with a Goodspeed show, nor will it be reduced to the spare two-piano approach of the last revival. Instead, it will embrace the intimacy and the emotional colors of a chamber orchestra. Hopefully, this will allow the characters to lift and the musicality to serve the story in new ways.

With the support and approval of Jo Sullivan Loesser, I have also made some edits to make this production unique and accessible. On the strong advice of Jo, we have restored Marie's (Tony's controlling sister) signature song "Eyes Like A Stranger" in Act One. This has proven pivotal in clarifying the relationship between Tony and his sister. As it is often done, we have combined Acts Two and Three into one act. There are also a number of economical and streamlined choices that help focus the story. This all, hopefully, adds up to an experience that *enhances the story and the characters* in new, efficient, and interesting ways. I am certain Goodspeed audiences will experience the same authenticity and specificity they have come to expect from my team over the years. Interestingly, the contrast from the urban reality of San Francisco and rural Napa is equally effective in this later time period. This is another great story that speaks to all eras. The overall experience is surprisingly honest, funny, touching, and incredibly moving.

Our set designer Michael Schweikardt and our costume designer Thomas LeGalley have designed a physical production that—although framed in the metaphor of a wine vineyard—beautifully articulates two worlds: the dingy, cold, urban world of the city contrasted with the color, warmth, and fertile world of Napa. The metaphor of the vineyard also subtly mirrors the story. Our choreographer Parker Esse has worked hard to erase seams between the life of the characters and the moments of dance—so it all feels organic and inevitable. We felt there must be no boundaries, only the freedom to live freely in this story. The result often feels cinematic and effortless. *The Most Happy Fella* speaks to lovers of all ages, and as in all timeless stories, there is honesty and an articulation of humanity that is entirely accessible. There is a humor and a truth that somehow feels irresistible.

One of the greatest challenges of the play is how to invest fully in the relationship between Tony and Rosabella, who represent two very different generations. This made casting the show so critical. The choice of who would play Tony and Rosabella quickly became two of the most important decisions. We are thrilled to have the brilliantly talented Bill Nolte and Mamie Parris lead our wonderful cast. Playing the charismatic and complicated foreman Joe is Doug Carpenter. The critical and challenging role of Tony's younger sister Marie is the delightful Ann Arvia. The comic leads, Cleo and Herman, are the vividly unique duo of Natalie Hill and Kevin Vortmann. And the charming and lovable Italian chefs are Martín Solá, Greg Roderick, and Daniel Berryman. Finishing off the cast is an amazingly talented ensemble of singers and dancers.

This musical was first produced on the Goodspeed stage over 20 years ago. I did not see this production (which moved to Broadway in 1992), nor have I ever seen a production of the musical anywhere. Hopefully, this will ensure I bring a fresh and original perspective to the piece. I am very grateful to have the opportunity to tell this story here at Goodspeed, and I continue to feel very fortunate to be able to collaborate with the extraordinary talent here. Together, we bring a very special passion to this unique version of *The Most Happy Fella*.



Director Rob Ruggiero at the first read-thru of *The Most Happy Fella* in the Goodspeed rehearsal studios