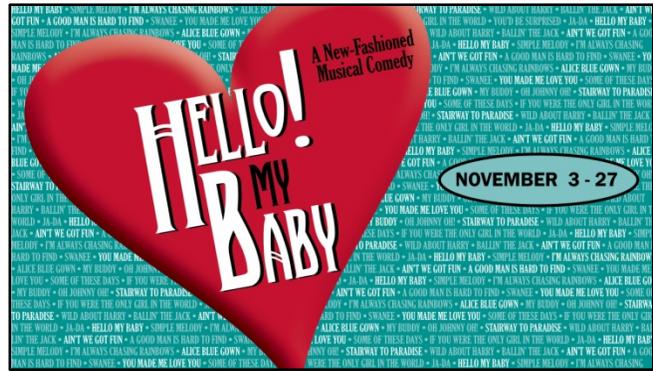


Author's Notes

By Cheri Steinkellner



What is your vision for your show?

If Turner Classics raided the MGM vault to discover a long-lost, brand-new musical filled with some of the greatest songs ever composed by the most beloved American songwriters who ever lived, *and* it felt modern and funny and moved like a locomotive—that would be our vision. Is that too much to ask?

Tell us about your inspirations.

Three years ago, while directing my youngest daughter's junior high production of *Anything Goes*, I fell in love with the alchemy that occurs when young voices meet old tunes. Months later, while writing the book for *Sister Act* and surrounded by disco-nuns, my thoughts kept flipping back to kids singing the classics. On a whim, I jumped online to see which vintage tunes existed in the Public Domain, and was blown away by the treasures. "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows," "Stairway to Paradise," "Oh, Johnny, Oh," "My Buddy," "Ain't We Got Fun," of course "Hello! My Baby"—all the songs my mom's mom taught her and she taught me—just sitting there, waiting to be sung again.

Talk a bit about how the show came about and your collaboration.

Hello! My Baby began with a songbook of memorable-but-forgotten tunes. I scribbled dozens of titles on Post-Its, stuck them to the wall, moved them around, tried to fashion a story around them.

My first instinct was to go straight-up Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland "Hey Kids, let's put on a show": "BABES IN... something". "BABES ON... somewhere". But once I started digging into the songs' origins, it became wildly clear—these Tin Pan Alley tunes told a story of their own.

The seed of that story sprouted with an old-school term: "Song-plugger." Teenage Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Eubie Blake—so many of our great composers began their musical careers as song-pluggers on the Lower East Side, hawking sheet music on the streets, in saloons—wherever people gathered. Popular Music was the all-new all-American art form. And it didn't matter whether you were Jewish or Irish, rich or poor—if you came up with a hit, you could jump the wall, make a million, and write the songs the kids were all singing. And are singing again—a hundred years later!

In my earliest notes, the song-pluggers were modeled after the real-life guys: Mickey was Berlin, the Coots brothers were the Gershwins, Junior Tierney a Yale Whiffenpoof ala Cole Porter. But the story took a surprise turn when I stumbled on a Yiddish Theater troupe from the era. "The Trouser Comedy" took center stage as fictional sweatshop worker Nelly Gold put on the pants she once sewed—to defy her gender, pass as a boy, double her income (to sixteen bucks a week), and succeed in a male-dominated world.

The biggest Oprah "Aha!" moment came with the realization that songs in the Public Domain have no copyright restrictions. This meant we could (with great respect and affection for the original composers and lyricists) get creative! I added character-centric, story-forwarding lyrics in the form of new intros, bridges, additional verses. Georgia composed counter-melodies and dance music, pushed tempos, changed the styles and feels of the songs and built the score to sound fresh to the modern ear. Holding onto the classic refrains people know and love; we've taken this unique opportunity to explore and heighten music and lyrics—transforming simple 16-bar ditties and 32-bar charm-songs into full-scale musical-theater numbers.

What stage of development is the show in now?

It's time to get it on its feet and see it dance! We've had readings (including Goodspeed's Festival of New Artists and the Village Theater Festival of New Musicals), and a wonderful youth production last summer the Rubicon Theatre in Ventura, California. But this is our first professional go—and happily, it's at Goodspeed, where we always imagined it.

What do you hope to accomplish here at Goodspeed?

We're excited to work with Michael Price and Donna Lynn Hilton once again, and to be directed and choreographed by Goodspeed favorites Ray Roderick and Kelli Barclay. Knowing us, we'll keep tweaking and tinkering 'til someone hollers "stop!"—all with an eye toward making *Hello! My Baby* as fresh, fast, and funny as it can be. The hardest part may be cutting songs. It always hurts to kill your darlings—but these tunes are everyone's darlings!