

IRVING BERLIN'S  
**ANNIE GET YOUR GUN**

**Director's Vision**  
by Rob Ruggiero

**What is your vision for *Annie Get Your Gun*?**

Her life was the stuff of legend. A simple backwoods girl from Ohio, Phoebe Ann Moses rose to the heights of renown as the world-famous sharp shooter Annie Oakley and featured performer with Buffalo Bill's Wild West extravaganza. This "rags to riches" tale is one that has been told many times over, but I was particularly drawn to hers because of her extraordinary life and the very unique love story that went along with it. Annie Oakley and Frank Butler's romance is one that can still pull at the heart strings of us all – especially because Frank loved Annie for who she was, and fully embraced her spirit, her spunk, and her non-conformist soul. This match was truly destined, and their partnership lasted a lifetime.

What interested me most when Michael Price and the Goodspeed team invited me to open their season with this production was preserving the wonderful entertainment values present in the show – a great score, delightful characters, lots of humor – along with that great love story. Our production of *Annie Get Your Gun* has been inspired by detailed research and historic photos, period posters of the time and of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show specifically, fully embracing the spirit of our leading lady...Annie Oakley. I hope audiences will see and appreciate our theatrically authentic production of this very memorable show. As I am prone to do, I like to explore the relationships and the truth of any show I direct – and what really excites me about this particular production is embracing that "show within a show" concept dictated in the 1999 revival version we are using here at Goodspeed. Peter Stone (who also wrote the book of *1776*) did an incredible job of re-shaping that revival in a way that highlighted all the wonderful things about the show for more contemporary audiences.

We've kept the design as "simple" as possible – but with *Annie Get Your Gun*, that still means a lot of wonderful, beautiful sets and costumes. **Michael Schweikardt** and **Alejo Vietti** have done an incredible job of articulating our world, and I can't wait to see how **John Lasiter** will light it! My artistic team always feels so supported by the incredible producing and technical Goodspeed artists that make our vision possible. I always feel so lucky to have their support and inspiration. I hope you will be as thrilled as I am with the beautiful and authentic "Wild West Show" approach we have come up with for the show. After all, "There's no people like show people like no people I know!" (okay, I couldn't resist!)

It feels refreshing after last season's very rewarding and poignant production of *Camelot* to explore something totally different and be able to have some real fun doing it. To laugh, to dance, to smile... what can be better? And to be supported by a wonderful team of actors and designers is always a special gift.

**Why do you think Goodspeed audiences will enjoy the show?**

Well, let's start with the musical numbers. There are so many familiar and timeless tunes in *Annie Get Your Gun*. And as I mentioned, I think the show will be beautiful to look at and experience on the Goodspeed stage – a place I have come to love for so many reasons – the intimacy, the history, the spirit that exists here, and (of course) the wonderful and dedicated audiences that come. But that is only the tip of the iceberg...

With *Annie Get Your Gun*, I will be working with a new collaborator: choreographer and Goodspeed favorite **Noah Racey**. He is a very inventive, very talented, and very fun person and it is sure to result in some very fun dancing in the show. Good choreographers understand the value of telling the story, and weaving their work into the fabric of the director's work. Noah understands this and we connect on so many levels.

I am confident our *Annie Get Your Gun* will be a very entertaining show, but I like good cake with my frosting, and I believe that Goodspeed audiences will really appreciate the inspiring story of Annie Oakley and be touched by the love story at the core of it. I hope that this will all add up to a very complete theater experience for them.

**Tell us about the cast – how you chose them and what the audience can expect to see.**

Naturally, the biggest challenge starts with casting the right Annie Oakley. It was a much more difficult job than I ever imagined because she goes through such a transformation, and the show really rides on her shoulders. We found the wonderful and talented Broadway veteran **Jenn Gambatese** for our “sharp shooter.” She brings a very authentic charm and spirit to the role. Physically Jenn is very much like the original Annie, small and spunky, and is a very skilled actor as well. That is very important to me as a director. In fact, the entire cast is filled with really good actors as well as singers. Broadway actor **Kevin Early** will be a very strong and magnetic Frank Butler. Dolly and Charlie are both very experienced classical actors with great musical sensibilities and talents: **Rebecca Watson** and **James Beaman**. The “knife-throwing team of Keeler and Tate” will be the wonderful **Andrew Cao** and Broadway's **Chelsea Morgan Stock**, two very vibrant young artists. Among the big challenges were casting the historically notable Buffalo Bill and Chief Sitting Bull. Another Broadway actor, **David McDonald**, brings a real “showman” energy to the Buffalo Bill, but very accessible. And I really wanted Chief Sitting Bull to represent the Native American world with great integrity. It was very clear that **Michael Nichols** was the man for the job. He's 6'4” and he's hard to miss, and he was actually the first person we cast for the production. We all knew he was who we needed to be our Sitting Bull (and is another Broadway actor!) I've said this before, but I feel very fortunate to be able to collaborate with this level of talent here at Goodspeed. And this cast is no different. A very talented group of actors who I am sure will bring a special truth to our version of *Annie Get Your Gun*.

So as the advertisement says: “Saddle up” for our own special version of *Annie Get Your Gun*!



*Director Rob Ruggiero (on right) with Assistant Director Nick Eilerman (on left) at the first day of Annie Get Your Gun rehearsals at Goodspeed*