

Director's Vision

BY JENN THOMPSON

It may have taken Meredith Willson six years and more than forty drafts to finish *The Music Man*, but clearly it was worth the wait. Indeed, from the very first blast of the train whistle, catapulting us along that dusty Midwestern track, those grouching traveling salesman spittin' and hollerin' in rhythmic rhapsody, our hearts were captured and our collective imaginations set ablaze. And here we are, over 60 years later, and I can tell you first-hand the fire still burns bright.



There is no doubt, to any devotee of the genre, that Willson's personal portrait of his quirky Iowa roots remains one of the most beloved musicals of all time. After taking Broadway by storm in its December 1957 premiere, earning 5 Tony-Awards (including Best Musical) and the first-ever Grammy for Best Musical Theater Album, this home-spun, tender trip down memory lane spent a whopping 245 weeks atop the Billboard charts. Even The Beatles were not immune to its charms; covering one of its signature songs—"Till There Was You." The only show tune the mega-group ever recorded.

But what is it about Willson's world that continues to touch and delight us, consistently landing this stalwart staple on everyone's perennial, "feel-good" list? How can a show written in 1957, set in a small, spiky Iowa town in 1912, continue to move and spark us so in 2019?

Well, the craft is certainly superb. It's armed with a faultless and innovative score, featuring everything from lilting Barbershop harmonies to soaring ballads, ebullient dance breaks and Willson's wildly creative "speak-singing"—his own inventive, charac-

ter-driven methodology used to bridge the spoken word to song and back again with dazzling detail and rapid-fire delivery.

The story is authentic. Willson introduces his "folks" to us with more than just a nod to novelty and nostalgia. He's detailed these characters with such fluency of time and place, it's impossible not to recognize them, whether you hail from Iowa or not. Their flaws, their habits, their humor and frailty steer us clear of mawkish sentimentality, instead exposing something beyond, what might

otherwise be just an exuberant celebration of small-town Americana.

But ultimately, Willson knew and understood the awesome power of music as a transformational art form. It catches us in our softest places. Melting our reserve, breaking down our toughest walls, exposing our humanity. Here we witness music as both healer and a catalyst for change. But it's not just the stubborn inhabitants of River City who are affected. All of us watching, leaning in and listening are transported to a place where we can be our best and most generous selves. That's why this show still feels so good and why we need it more than ever. It's a tonic for a fractured, often ugly world. A reminder that there is beauty and salvation in community and art.

It seems impossible that Goodspeed has never produced *The Music Man* before now. What could be a better match than America's favorite musical—on America's favorite musical stage? Two classic, timeless titans meeting for the very first time.

Well worth the wait, I'd say.

MEREDITH WILLSON'S
The Music Man