

PROGRAM NOTES

BY JOSHUA S. RITTER

A personal artistic triumph and arguably the most ambitious project of his career, Frank Loesser's *The Most Happy Fella*, like Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, built bridges between the world of opera and musical comedy. Both shows and a number of other productions in the musical theatre canon employ techniques traditionally used in the world of opera. When asked to weigh in on how to categorize his piece, Loesser steadfastly described *The Most Happy Fella* as "a musical comedy—with a lot of music!" More importantly, *The Most Happy Fella*'s lavish score and moving love story continues to delight audiences regionally, at opera houses, and on Broadway.

Project Three, later entitled *The Most Happy Fella*, began as a concept soon after Loesser's monumental success with *Guys and Dolls*. Playwright Samuel Taylor suggested to Loesser that he musicalize Sidney Howard's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *They Knew What They Wanted*. Taylor intended to write the book, but later changed his mind and suggested that Loesser try to write the score, lyrics, and libretto. It would be Loesser's first time adapting a play, but after some friendly words of advice from Taylor—"Any time you have doubts about what you're doing, write a song"—Loesser began work on the project.

The play was rather controversial when the Theatre Guild produced it in 1924. It reflected the changing mores of the decade, dealing with serious subjects such as infidelity, forgiveness, and compromise between male and female characters. Thirty years later, however, these subjects seemed tame, and the play had fallen into disregard. But, to Loesser's credit, he re-imagined the story by toning down or removing tragic, political, and religious elements, leaving "a warm simple love story, happy ending and all, and dying to be sung and danced." Loesser added new characters to shape the piece dramatically and to allow for more comedy. He included Cleo, Rosabella's coworker friend from Dallas; Herman, a farmhand also from "Big D;" Tony's sister, Marie; and three chefs named Pasquale, Giuseppe, and Ciccio.

Loesser spent five years adapting the piece and composing songs that ranged in style from traditional Broadway tunes to amorous duets, operatic arias, canons, trios, choral episodes, quartets, parodies, and orchestral interludes. Opening in 1956 during the competitive Broadway season that gave us *My Fair Lady*, *Bells Are Ringing*, and *Candide*, *The Most Happy Fella* was lauded as an outstanding and unique musical drama. It not only differed from Loesser's previous shows and the other musicals that season, it was unlike most musical hits of the past twenty years.

Thirty-five years after its first appearance on Broadway, the 1991 Goodspeed Musicals season began with Gerald Gutierrez's brilliant reinterpretation of *The Most Happy Fella*. The production realized Loesser's dream of using duo-pianos instead of a full orchestra. Not since *The Fantasticks* (in Goodspeed's premiere 1963 season) had so few instruments been employed in the Opera House pit for a fully staged musical. To offset the lack of musicians, over 26 people were cast in the show, the largest cast that had ever been assembled on the Goodspeed stage.



Bill Nabel, Mark Lotito and Buddy Crutchfield in Goodspeed's 1991 production of *The Most Happy Fella*. ©Diane Sobolewski.

After receiving unprecedented reviews by virtually every Connecticut newspaper plus *The New York Times* and *Boston Globe*, the show was picked up by an amalgam of producers with the intention of ushering it to New York. The production would become Goodspeed's thirteenth Broadway transfer, opening at the Booth Theatre in 1992. It was later recorded on a single disc by RCA Victor with Spiro Malas as Tony, Sophie Hayden as Rosabella, Liz Larsen as Cleo, Charles Pistone as Joe, and Scott Waara as Herman.

Rob Ruggiero is at the helm of Goodspeed's current production of *The Most Happy Fella*. Ruggiero recently directed *Carousel* and *Show Boat* at the Goodspeed Opera House, and this will be his seventh time directing a Goodspeed production. After careful consideration, Ruggiero decided to set the piece in the 1950s and, with Goodspeed Musical Director Michael O'Flaherty, chose to offer a chamber ensemble approach to the orchestration, with a predominantly acoustic sound built off of the piano. Ruggiero focused his vision for the production on the timeless story of love and forgiveness. He believes that most of us can relate to these themes as we continue to strive to find our "somebody, somewhere." *The Most Happy Fella* is a musical of enormous emotional intensity with soaring romantic melodies. We hope you enjoy this "Abbondanza" for the senses.