

THE  
ROSE  
BOWL  
AWARDS  
FOR AMATEUR  
DRAMA & MUSIC

Frank Loesser's  
Guys and Dolls  
Presented by  
Exeter Musical Society

This classic musical, and indeed it does deserve that description of being a 'classic', had such a mixed up beginning it is a theatrical miracle that it ever reached Broadway and London's West End never alone become such an enormous hit. The history of its writing, going through at least eleven pairs of hands before being changed from the original idea of presenting it as a serious dramatic musical and turning it into a comedy based show, would make a good plot for a musical in its own right.

The man responsible for this transformation was former Radio scriptwriter Abe Burrows, who could list Danny Kaye, Joan Davis, and George Jessel amongst those to whom he had supplied Radio scripts. He was also the main writer of one of the most popular comedy shows on American Radio during the 1940's 'Duffy's Tavern'.

Although best known at this time as a 'Gag' writer as he was to prove eleven years after the opening night of 'Guys and Dolls' when he joined Frank Loesser as part of the writing team for Loesser's 'How to succeed in business without really trying' his writing had a little more depth to it than that, the script for 'How to succeed' won a Pulitzer Prize.

Not surprisingly then Burrows had the right ear to pick up the unique dialogue to be found in the short stories of Damon Runyon. Two of Runyon's many stories about the characters he knew so well from his time as a Broadway reporter, 'The Idyll of Sarah Brown', and 'Blood Pressure' form the basis for this musical.

I go into such lengths about the background to the history of the material on which this show is based to underline that here we have a show that has as strong a dramatic base, as it has a musical one. The performers in this production had to display strong acting ability as well as their musical talents.

The wonderful characters they have inherited afford them some wonderful opportunities to show their talents in both areas, but with these opportunities go tremendous responsibilities to play them to a standard that will in no way waste such gifts.

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The Director gave notice that he had no intention of missing any opportunity to make full use of the wide range of characters available to him. In that nicely staged opening scene, where good use was made of mime, we were introduced to a steady flow of Runyon's colourful characters.

The Orchestra who had already made a pleasing impression with their handling of the music at the start of this first scene continued to give those onstage the sort of backing that gives them complete confidence.

A neat change instituted by the backstage team, and admirably lit by the lighting crew picking up Nicely, Nicely, Benny and Rusty down stage right, took the action smartly on. Taken seamlessly back into full lighting for 'Follow the fold' a number which benefitted in no uncertain manner from the presence of 13 {please excuse me if I miscounted them} members of the 'Sally Anne'. The often thin sound associated with this number was forgotten when this group burst forth into song.

The slightly less in number of male gamblers who assembled for 'The Oldest Established' quickly showed that they were not going to be considered an inferior group of singers compared to the 'Sally Anne' members.

As the storyline progressed scenes were changed with accuracy, little hassle, and rarely any extraneous noise. All though these changes the lighting crew made continuous good use of the fine lighting rig available to them, immaculately cueing each alteration in the lighting plot. You might say that nothing less was expected of them, be that as it may, but for the Director and Actors to know that they could rely on such quality work is a tremendous plus which gives them in turn extra confidence.

'Bushel and a Peck' gives the Choreographer a chance to take over proceedings, and she and her 'Hot Box' Girls provided us with a routine that fitted the club and its personnel. When we arrived in Havana the Choreographer has a much better and freer hand to provide something original, and they rose splendidly to the challenge.

The fight sequence was well choreographed leaving me with the feeling that it would probably have survived being a little longer in duration. That being said is it restricted by the score? If so I withdraw my comment.

'Take Back Your Mink' saw the 'Hot Box' girls, and the Choreographer, if anything in even better form than they had been in 'Bushel and a Peck', helping to get the second act got away to a very good start.

The boisterous 'Luck be a Lady' with the 'Crapshooters Ballet' which precedes it is a difficult number to stage. You must have a male chorus who can really belt out the number and at the same time a group of dancers who can handle the mime within the sequence. Between them the Director and Choreographer, let them take the praise, and any blame in proportion to the work they put into the scene, made excellent use of the dancing and vocal ability of those concerned. With the orchestra in particularly good form, fine backing from the lighting and Stage teams this sequence captured the mood of the moment very well.

In a very different vein is 'Sit Down Your Rockin' the Boat'. Which we can talk about more when discussing Nicely, Nicely Johnson, at this point it is fair to say that this 'Show Stopper' still packs a punch which was never in danger of being wasted by any of those concerned in its presentation.

I have purposely not discussed costumes during this look at the production as a whole leaving that subject to come up in Individual Performances. Sufficient to say at this point that, whilst they may not be completely excluded from any criticism, in no way can they be accused of having let down, or lowered the quality of this production in any way whatsoever.

## Individual Performances

### Sky Masterson

When an actor with the personal clout of Marlon Brando fairly steamrollers a film producer of the importance of Sam Goldwyn to give him this role you can appreciate in what high regard the role of Sky Masterson is regarded. Although not the world's greatest singer Brando also insisted on singing his own numbers, without wishing to over praise you in any way I would suggest that you were more than just a match for the great man in that quarter. 'Why do they call him Sky' Nicely, Nicely asks, because Nathan tells him he is the highest player of them all. He is indeed a gambler par excellence, a man who has the confidence to back his judgment on any bet he believes he can win. When, as with the bet to take Sarah to Havana he realises that he has been tricked he still does not back out instead he examines methods by which he can win his bet.

Such a man has to be played with an air of confidence which borders on arrogance, and thereby is your problem how to portray such a man without losing the sympathy of the audience. We need to see a man with such charm that it defuses any thoughts we might have about him being selfish and arrogant. That easy slightly 'laid back' manner in which you played Sky fitted the bill admirably. Which was just as well because we, the audience, become very fond of Sarah and we want her to find a partner who will always put her and her needs first.

You were smartly, but not flashily turned out playing the first exchange with Nathan in a way that told us why you were a far more successful gambler than that gentleman. Your attempt to 'pick up' Sarah was played with confidence, but not in a manner that suggested that you felt that she was an easy target, or someone not worthy of your attentions.

Our first chance to sample your singing came in 'I'll Know' where you proved firstly to be an excellent listener as Sarah sang helping to focus our attention onto her, and then singing your part of the number with an easy control. My only complaint came in the setting of the number which gave you too many movements that became intrusive. When towards the end of the number you took hold of Sarah the picture was much more pleasing.

The Kiss and the slap that followed was convincing presented, the little build up to the moment was not so convincing.

You were back in form when you took advantage of the situation to force Sarah to accept your invitation to Havana. Keeping a close eye on Sarah throughout the period in Havana we saw a change in your attitude towards her developing, it therefore came a no surprise when you began to open up to her in the 'My Time of Day' number.



This difficult number requires as much acting ability as vocal, and again singing with control you took the character right into the heart of the music. There was a real sense of hurt, at being accused of knowing about the crap game in the mission, and a gradual feeling of despair which was mixed with a determination to put as many things right as was humanly possible.

Having KO'd Big Julie in fine style you led the 'Boys' into the 'Luck Be a Lady' number showing us exactly how much the throw of the dice meant to you. Following this number we saw a man fully in control driving his 'winnings' into the mission, and ensuring that they behaved themselves whilst they were there.

It was this image of Sky, rather than the mild Obadiah Masterson that we saw in the final scene, that I am sure the audience took away with them.

### Sarah Brown

If you read in a synopsis of a story which tells you that one of the leading characters is a Salvation Army Sergeant whose main aim in life was to bring sinners back into the fold it would conjure up a very different picture to one which you presented of Miss Sarah Brown. The character which that synopsis throws up would indeed have many things in common with your Sarah, but be nowhere as feisty and be prepared to go outside the strict rules of 'The Army' in order to achieve the high aims she has set out to achieve.

That being said it may seem strange that my first comment is to complain that your first major speech was delivered in too diffident a manner. The problem I think came from you, and/or the Director forgetting that this speech was being delivered in the street surrounded by the hustle and bustle, and noise that was going on around you and your group.

Almost immediately after this opening address you blossomed out into the more confident woman that was prepared to tackle Sky head on when he attempted to win your favours in order to take you to Havana. Dramatically that scene with Sky in the Mission went extremely well; vocally there were a couple of question marks. These I hasten to add do not concern the actual quality of your singing. What we are talking about is the interpretation of this and other numbers. In order to maintain the strength of the character you were creating the delivery was sometimes dominated by a hard edged tone, 'I'll Know' would have benefitted from more thoughtful tones that could often be heard in the vocal. There were also moments when your British accent took over the lyrics from the American lass who spoke the dialogue.

I did not have the pleasure of meeting Sky after the show, had I done so I should have made an inspection for facial bruises after watching you deliver a fair old blow after the kiss in the mission.

The change to, and from Havana, helped tremendously by the well worked lighting team, and that Airliner crossing the stage, set this part of the show away to a flying start, no pun intended. The script gives you very little time to get drunk, so invariably it is quite a pill to swallow that this so uptight young lady has in so short a time become so inebriated that she loses almost all of her self control. Far better than many of your predecessors in the role you swept into the change realistically. After your efforts in the 'Fight' you earned Sky's description of 'You were still champ'.



Having sung 'If I were a Bell' in this same funnily belligerent character you combine nicely with Sky for the more romantic 'I've Never Been in Love Before', helping to set up the abrupt change back to being a 'Mission Doll' for the end of Act 1.

The second Act gives you fewer chances to be the focal point of scenes. With Arvide you showed a little too much of your sweeter side as he sang his gentle 'More I Cannot Wish You'. Dealing with Sky as he tried to make recompense for causing so many problems, and then pleading with General Cartwright to give the mission another chance, you were smoothly back into the strong portrayal created in Act 1.

'Marry the Man Today' is a difficult number to score heavily with, coming as it does immediately after the show stopping 'Sit Down Your Rocking the Boat', and before an ending which draws all the threads together in double quick time. To say that it was fun and did not, as is often the case, look like a number slipped in so that the finale could be set is meant I can assure you to be praise.

### Nathan Detroit

Although I freely confess to being a Frank Sinatra fan I still unreservedly say that Sam Levine, who originated this role on Broadway and in the London Coliseum, captured the spirit of Nathan far better than 'Old Blue Eyes'. The reason is that whereas Sinatra had his roots in Italian American, Levine's background was, as created by Damon Runyon, strictly New York Jewish.

Without capturing the distinctive Jewish feeling of Levine's characterisation you did take us into the heat of the New York ghetto's inhabited by former European immigrants. As he says himself Nathan had been living off his wits running the 'Crap game' ever since he had been a juvenile delinquent.

Nathan is sharp in every way, dealing with the Police, manipulating the 'Crap Shooter', and for fourteen years avoiding matrimony with his beloved Adelaide. He is also a 'snappy dresser' not one of, but the leader of the 'Floating Crap game' fraternity which makes his broad check suit, more suitable for Ali Hakim in 'Oklahoma', completely wrong for this character. The 'co-respondence' shoes were OK, but the trilby hat needed to be more stylish, or even replaced by a slightly more formal stiffer brimmed Homburg hat.

The scene in which you attempt to con Sky onto a sucker bet was neatly played spoilt just a shade by the placing of Sarah in the cross over when you pick her as the girl he has to take to .take to Havana. You obviously have lynx eyes because you picked her out in a flash from a position where she was not particularly well isolated. From the audiences point of view, and in order to make us pick up immediately on his 'Daddy I've got cider in my ear' line she should have been far more isolated, and therefore easy to spot immediately.

From the very start you were at ease in your partnership with Adelaide. We had the impression that whilst the thought of marriage, and the restraints you felt that would impose on you frightened you to death, there was the strongest of bonds of true love between this pair of star crossed lovers.

That first meeting with Big Julie when you immediately realise that this is a man not to be treated lightly was played in just the right manner to set up the more telling coming together in the cellar. You have a healthy respect for this man, at the same time you do not rate him as anything more than a big bullying thug that he is. With that in mind your 'worm turning' lines first suggesting that he 'bumps you off' after cheating you out of all the money you have earned leaving you broke in a cellar, and then after Sky's appearance having the nerve to challenge him to a proper throw of the dice, came naturally from the character you had created when you met him at the begging of the show.

The scene with Adelaide which leads up to 'Sue Me', along with the reading of the letters from her 'lovely old broad' of a mother saw you at your best. I was so glad to see you acting, rather than concentrating on the singing, of 'Sue Me' it is so good when done as you did as a continuation of the dialogue.

When you emerged from behind the news paper stand I still had the feeling that Adelaide would be lucky to find this Nathan at home every evening, even if their little house had railing around it painted in the same racing colours of the Whitney family. That final act of forgetting to book a Church for the wedding ensured that we were left with the feeling that the Nathan we loved was still only just behind the respectable facade erected around him by Adelaide.

### Miss Adelaide

The name Vivian Blaine nowadays means little to the British public, and in all fairness it is probable true to say that compared to her contemporary Broadway stars Ethel Merman, and Mary Martin it never did. Yet unlike them, and her fellow leading players from the original production of 'Guys and Dolls' she is the only one who originated one of the classic roles in a Musical in New York, London and on Film. She also has the distinction of having received rave notices in both cities and from the film critics.

The problem with having such a definitive performance is that audiences come with a certain expectancy, and if this is not delivered in the style they believe it should be they rather take against the performer in question. Fortunately for you Vivian Blaine, for some unknown reason, for all her close association with the role of Miss Adelaide did not leave an indelible mark on the character in the same way that Rex Harrison did on Professor Higgins in 'My Fair Lady', or Topol on Tevye in 'Fiddler on the Roof'.

When Julia McKenzie played Miss Adelaide in 1982 in the National Theatre hers was a distinct creation of her own, as was yours. Most importantly you captured the spirit of this woman, a mixture of schoolgirl naivety, world wise chorine, and anxious nearing middle age loving woman wanting to settle down with a home and a family. That is quite a wide range to encompass, but encompass it you did. The naivety came to the fore time after time as you once again fell for another of Nathan's tales, the world wise, world weary show girl appeared in the way in which you led your 'troops' in the two 'Hot Box' numbers, and those so well played sudden attacks on Nathan, whilst the romantic in you was never far below the service. There was also a touch of desperation about you at times shown in the way in which you continually forgave Nathan, something he exploited time after time knowing that when push came to shove you had too much invested in him to walk away.

You first appeared wearing clothes, and shoes which fitted extremely well into the slightly brash picture the leader of the 'Hot Box' girls should conjure up in the public eye. The business with Nathan that preceded your fine interpretation of 'Adelaide's Lament' in, which you made excellent use of the clever lyrics, was as well judged as the song which followed.

Not your fault but a lovely little moment of comedy connected to you was not fully exploited because it was did not have enough focus put on it. The moment is the one that comes when the Drunk appears as you cross over after your 'Kitchen Shower' and after spending some time examining you says 'I hate vulgar jewellery'.

The second Act starts with you once again performing that good double of leading the 'Hot Box' girls, and then reprising your lament. This time you added a nice extra bit of pathos to the lament.

The moment you ignored, or at least tried to ignore, Nathan was admirably played, as was the whole 'Sue Me' sequence. I have already commented on the duet with Sarah, 'Marry the man Today' which provided a neatly framed scene.

In those final moments you kept the balance between yourself and Nathan intact showing no smugness about the fact that after 14 years you had landed this most slippery of would be husbands.

### Nicely-Nicely Johnson

Vocally this part was always being presented on a high level; some of the dialogue however did not match that quality. The repartition of your name the reason you are called 'Nicely-Nicely' was often thrown away, at times all but just mumbled as if for some reason you were ashamed of having acquired the nick name.

Nicely is a big friendly man, who loves his food, it is the one reason he leaves his post disobeying Nathan's orders. Like the name repetition not enough emphasis was placed on this continuous need to fuel this large bulk. Admittedly you were not that overweight looking, which may have caused you and/or the Director not wanting to go too far along this road. If that was the case then a little body padding would not have gone amiss.

An overgrown schoolboy of an adult Nicely should show plenty of confusion when placed with a problem that require some brain power, and this you did when desperately trying to think of what to say to Adelaide as to why Nathan had not arrived for their elopement.

One thing that Nicely should never be is knowing, and there were times when your otherwise beautifully drawn portrait of this most loveable man was rather too knowing in his reactions and responses.

None of that showed when you burst into song where the character was always in exactly the right picture frame, ready willing and able to take advantage of the musical goodies on offer. Both 'The Oldest Established' and 'Guys and Dolls' rolled along at a fine pace with the tale they had to tell coming over loud and clear.

As for 'Sit Down Your Rocking the Boat' still a show stopper after over half a century you were not going to let such a gift horse in the mouth, and you duly gave it full value ending your contribution on the highest of notes



### Benny Southstreet and Rusty Charlie

Two characters straight out of the heart of Damon Runyon's Broadway stories they may look to be too broadly drawn to be true but in fact like all of his characters they were based on real people. Regret, a character that does not appear in the two stories from which this show is derived, was a quite accurate portrait of the actor George Raft. He lost fortunes gambling, and was always known to regret having gambled after a particularly large loss. In this show these two can be played as mere window dressing which can when called on sing quite nicely. You certainly fulfilled the last part of that request adding greatly to the enjoyment of 'The Oldest established' and 'Guys and Dolls'.

By creating, and sustain two 'Broadway' characters, and when the opportunity came slipping in a incisive line or so, you also added to the creation of the atmosphere in which this hybrid group of people lived, and in their own unique way 'worked'.

### Arvide Abernathy

As he showed when pointing out to Sarah that he knew that Sky had fallen for her, and she for him probably before they realised it themselves, he is by no means an old dodderer who sees little and understands even less of life. There is a tendency in some quarters to play Arvide in that manner, and in doing so take all the dignity out of the character. Fortunately you saw more in the old gentlemen than that, and as result we had a much more likeable, believable figure on stage.

The line in which you inform Sky that you will tell everyone that he is a 'Dirty rotten welcher' if he does not deliver two dozen assorted sinners, a line you delivered in fine style, was another that gave us a deeper insight into this apparently not particularly 'with it' elderly man.

I know your one song, 'More I Cannot Wish You' is very over sentimental, some real old American Smoltz, but if sung with complete sincerity, as it was on this occasion, it has a charm to it that is almost irresistible.

### Joey Biltmore

Now you see him now you don't could well be the words to sum up the way in which this character appears, or does not appear in a production of 'Guys and Dolls'. Some producers like to use the character as a disembodied voice; others go to often very difficult means of staging in order for us to see the said Joey.

It makes little difference really as long as one of life's true cynics emerges. On this occasion that is what we had a man quite prepared to bend the law provided it was for cash in hand, no Director could ask for more.

## Harry the Horse, Big Julie, and Angie the Ox

If you think this trio are much too larger than life think again because up to about twenty years ago, before computers took over you could have found their British counterparts on most of the bigger horse race courses in England. It is sad in some ways that nowadays with business men having taken over from the old style 'on course' bookmakers that such characters have virtually disappeared from view.

Your Harry the Horse quite rightly came over as a man who loves to live in the reflected glory of somewhat bigger, more dangerous villains like Big Julie. The few lines that came your way, the 'I'll lend you my getaway car' line was expertly timed, were delivered in good style always in character, and picking up the laughs where they were available.

Big Julie has more chances to create a more memorable character, but is also a more difficult role to play. There were during the 'Golden Age' of Hollywood a whole raft of actors, Allen Jenkins, later the voice of the cartoon character 'Top Cat', and Edward J Brophy immediately come to mind, who made a speciality of playing comic tough guys. Underneath this comic facade lurked some very competent actors, Jenkins showed a much nastier persona in Stanley Kingsley's harsh look at New York's juvenile underclass 'Dead End'.

You brought the right sort of big presence and personality to the role which lent enough menace to the character to make the fear shown by others towards you believable. The business with the no spots dice was nicely played, and as shown with the almost pleading delivery of the fact that none of your friends would ever talk to you again if they discovered that you had been to a mission you were no mean hand at delivering a comedy line. The way in which you gave your testimony in the mission was equally well done.

Angie the Ox has to live up to his name, most probably he is an 'enforcer' a not too bright man used to following rather than giving orders. Your Angie, who like the other two more than just pulled your weight in the vocals, helped to make and keep the atmosphere of Runyon's Broadway always before us.

## Lieutenant Brannigan

Even more than Joey Biltmore Lt Brannigan is a world weary cynic. He has been around villains all his life, knows every stroke in the book, and as we hear from Nathan is not above taking the occasional bribe to turn a blind eye to minor breaches of the law. Can you wonder that such a man would find it all but impossible to make sense of the goings on in the Save a Soul Mission?

We saw the tough side of your personality when you first appeared talking to Nicely-Nicely, and Benny living up to Nathan's description of 'That lousy Brannigan'. The encounter with the 'Chorus men from Blossom time' where you told Big Julie not to help your Mother across the road was equally in character.

Apart from the encounter with the fleeing 'Crap Shooters' during which you showed the right amount of frustration, we lose you until you arrive determined to throw your weight around in the Mission prayer meeting.

When you arrive Nathan empowered by Sky to keep order neatly put you in your place insisting that you removed your hat and listen to proceedings. This act underlined the fact that the Gamblers present were still wearing their chapeaus. In view of Sky's instructions for them to behave according to 'Hoyle' this was an error.

It is never easy to maintain a characterisation when there are such long periods between appearances, and it says much for your performance that the Brannigan who showed such frustration when Sarah refused to identify any of the assembled company as the Gamblers who had used the Mission for their 'Crap' game was the same one we had seen throughout proceedings.

### General Cartwright

With the power to close or the Mission, general Cartwright must always present the sort of figure of authority that commands immediate obedience. This you did adding a nice touch of kindness in the way in which you responded to Arvide's request for stay of execution, and common sense when you readily accepted the fact that this motley crew were all there because they had been won in a 'Crap' game.

We could readily accept that this admirably drawn lady was in charge of these Missions because she was by no means as unworldly as she first appeared, and was very quick to pounce on an opportunity to enhance the work of the Mission when an opportunity presented itself.

### Agatha and Mimi

Almost all their best work came 'Off the ball' responding to the words and actions of others on stage with them. Occasionally, Agatha more than Mimi, had the opportunity to slip closer to centre stage, and when these opportunities came up they were never ignored.

It was watching you in those 'Off the ball' moments that left me with the impression that here we had two players who would have relished and gobbled up a greater challenge had one been offered to them.

### Ensemble

The Director, Choreographer, and Musical Director should be congratulated on the way in which they used this sizable number of players

You always had the impression that they had never been treated as just a 'Mob' assembled to fill up the stage as background fodder for the principals. They created a wealth of characters themselves in the bigger ensemble numbers, acting out some excellent cameo moments, and at the same time primed and ready to leap into action as dancers or/and singers.



In both those capacities there was a feeling that they were comfortable in their work, and that the Choreographer, and MD, whilst never settling for the cheap option, had never pushed them to the limit of their abilities leaving them worried about the tasks facing them. Like a top class Jockey waiting to call for maximum effort at the end of a race it takes good judgment for the Director, Choreographer and Musical Director to know exactly to what extent they can drive or lead their company.

Judging from the work presented I would say this triumvirate know, and worked skilfully with this Ensemble throughout the whole production.

Thank you for the warm reception and the provision of an ideal seat from which to scribble away to my heart's content without disturbing any neighbours.

Gerry Parker