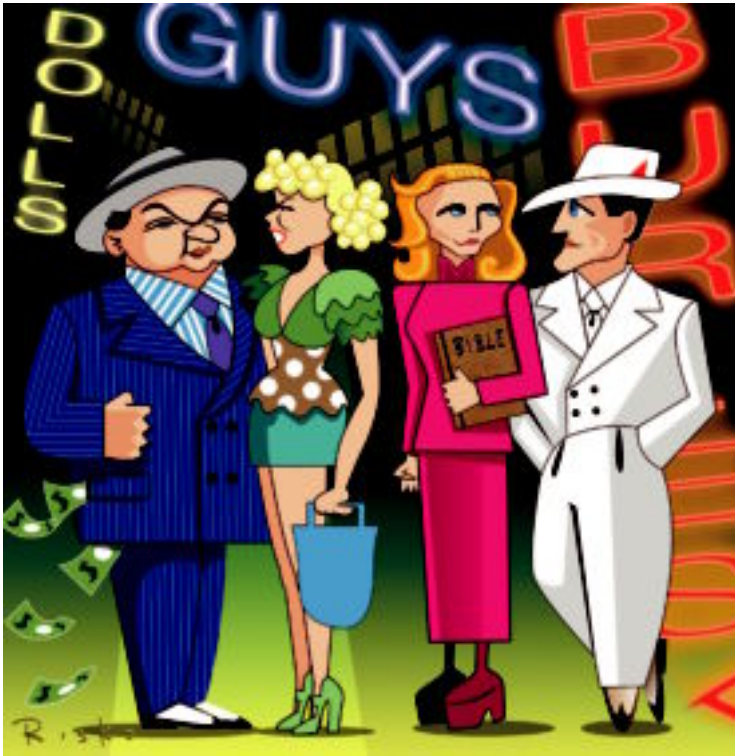


BROADWAY BOOGIE-WOOGIE

"Guys and Dolls" rolls the dice again.

BY JOHN LAHR



With all due respect to Nathan Detroit, the palooka who regularly runs a craps game behind the Biltmore garage in “Guys and Dolls” (in revival at the Nederlander), the oldest established permanent floating craps game in New York is actually the Broadway musical. A big roll of the dice, the musical is a paradigm of pluck ‘n’ luck, the jackpot in cap and bells. “Guys and Dolls,” based on Damon Runyon’s stories and subtitled “A Musical Fable of Broadway,” mines both the rollicking vulgarity and the gleeful rapacity of the rialto. No wonder the show is so jubilant, so eloquent, so pitch-perfect. Has the big-risk-big-reward notion of entrepreneurial capitalism ever worn a happier face? From the first note of “Fugue for Tinhorns”—when the small-time gambler Nicely-Nicely Johnson picks a nag called Paul Revere—we are thrown

into the thrilling hubbub of winning and losing, the hustler’s version of the American percentage play.

Before the show premièred, in 1950—it ran eleven hundred and ninety-four performances—songwriters frequently referred to Manhattan as a playground; “Guys and Dolls” made it one. Gaming, guzzling, gossiping, the mugs and molls who prowl its streets are all on the hunt: for riches, for love, and, in the case of the Salvation Army workers, for souls to be saved. They’re having a heluva time. The question that must be asked of any musical is: Why do the characters sing? Here the audience is never in doubt. Broadway is too damn exciting; its denizens are too damn restless. (“ALWAYS OPEN 10 SHOWS A DAY,” reads the blinking burlesque-house sign that is part of the almost overpowering neon glare of the current production.)

Luck be a lady: Platt, Graham, Grant, and Bierko gamble on love.

The city is the buzz. “Where’s the action?” “What’s playing at the Roxy?” “What’s in the *Daily News*?” “The Biltmore garage wants a grand.” There’s poetry to be limned from the empty streets “a couple of deals before dawn,” and life lessons to be gleaned from shopping. “At Wanamaker’s and Saks and Klein’s/ A lesson I’ve been taught:/ You can’t get alterations on a dress you haven’t bought,” the stripper Adelaide sings.

At the center of “Guys and Dolls,” glowing like a kind of nuclear core, is Frank Loesser’s gorgeous music, which is, to my mind, one of the high-water marks of the genre. Loesser was a pint-size perfectionist. (He once stepped on a stool in order to slap an actress who wasn’t singing at full tilt.) “Guys and Dolls” is musical comedy, not musical theatre. Loesser’s songs may not expand the psychology of the characters, but they’re always *in* character. His music and lyrics have tremendous range; they play the same high-low comic game as Runyon’s stories, combining highfalutin classical-music elements with vulgar circumstances. For instance, “Oldest Established,” a hymn to Nathan’s craps game, ends as a cantata; his hustlers tip the ponies in Bach-like counterpoint. Loesser is one of the few lyricists who are genuinely funny in song; he revels in the sludge of urban locutions, and his lyrics are a feast of witty surprises. (He uses “streptococci” in song, for God’s sake!) Words sit on the notes with uncanny ease and make them seem inevitable. “There are well-heeled shooters/ Ev’rywhere ev’rywhere,” the avid gamblers sing. “And an awful lot of lettuce/ For the fella who can get us there.” Loesser plays a demotic game with slang and syntax, a brilliant simulacrum of Runyon’s comedy of manners. “Alright, already, it’s true, so nu?” Nathan sings to Adelaide, claiming to love her despite all evidence to the contrary. “So sue me, sue me,/ What can you do me?” Like Runyon’s prose, the songs engineer a collision of punctilio and illiteracy. “So take back your mink,/ To from whence it came,” Adelaide sings during her specialty striptease at the Hot Box Club. “And tell them to Hollanderize it/ For some other dame.” The “from whence” just kills me.

The director, Des McAnuff, who knows his way around musical theatre,

and whose most recent gold mine was "Jersey Boys," delivers a successful slick evening, but not without stumbling out of the gate. "Guys and Dolls" traditionally opens with the trumpet voluntary of the "Racetrack First Call"; here, instead of beginning with a laugh that instantly draws the audience into the hustlers' comic universe, McAnuff imposes a reverential, overproduced, cornball preamble that leaves nothing to the imagination. We move from an image of Runyon typing the play's title onto a behemoth rear-projected downstage screen to a choreographed illustration of the louche New York underworld from which his characters emerged. After much generic Broadway bustle—from racetrack and subway to pool hall and boxing gym—we come to the newsstand where the gamblers are studying the racing forms, at which point Abe Burrow's tightly written, original book begins. Inevitably, the great opening song loses much of its wallop. But, once McAnuff stops competing with the musical's ingeniousness and settles down to serve the story, all is pretty much well. He nails "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat," the show's eleven-o'clock number, by making Nicely-Nicely (Tituss Burgess) strut his gospel stuff on a row of empty chairs. Gleeful, rousing, and eye-popping, the staging is McAnuff at his inventive best.

"We want people with bumps," Cy Feuer, one of the original producers of "Guys and Dolls," said of casting the show. As the current Nathan Detroit, the gambler who can't bring himself to bet on marriage, Oliver Platt is certainly an image of bumpiness. A big man with a pickle nose and a belly that precedes him by a foot or so, Platt and his pinstriped suit are permanently rumpled. His Nathan, under pressure from the crapshooters to find a place to gamble and from Adelaide (Lauren Graham) to hand over a ring, sweats and dithers to charming effect. "The boys are slightly fatigued from weariness," Nathan tries to explain to Big Jule (the excellent Glenn Fleshler), who wants to recoup his losses by using his own loaded dice. Platt's understated ambivalence is a good match for Graham's emotional full-court press. As the blond and frazzled Adelaide, who suffers from psychosomatic sneezing for lack of a marriage li-

cense, Graham makes a terrific Broadway debut; she is a potent combination of sweetness and sexuality. "If she's getting a kind of a name for herself/ And the name ain't his,/ A person—can develop a cough," Adelaide sings in her famous lament. Graham's delight in the character is palpable across the footlights. She seems too young and too fresh for the lovelorn Adelaide, who has been waiting for fourteen years to become Mrs. Detroit. No matter, Graham's sly sense of humor and her clever delivery give her a winning fragility. Without overselling Adelaide's desperation or her dopiness, she captures both the role's poignance and its piquancy. "Tell him I never want to talk to him again," she sniffles to Sky Masterson (Craig Bierko), after one of many break-ups. "And have him call me here!"

In the musical's parallel romantic universe, Masterson, on a bet, pursues the pious, unbiddable Sarah Brown (Kate Jennings Grant), who is finally seduced by his suave good looks. Bierko, who has a strong voice and a strong chin, gives Masterson a credible whiff of daring and decency. Grant's starchiness, a certain reserve in her lean frame, also works well for Sarah as they sing about their ideal partners. "Mine will come as a surprise to me/ Mine, I leave to chance—and chemistry," Masterson says. The lovers' chemistry has sufficient amperage. They fall under the spell of romance; the production falls under the spell of technology, which, at times, threatens to upstage the hardworking ensemble. (Dustin O'Neill's video designs are projected onto a gargantuan backdrop.) It is hard enough for the actors to win over the audience, let alone to defeat the set. But, in the end, "Guys and Dolls" trumps even stage effects; nothing but a four-alarm fire in the theatre would prevent these wonderful characters and memorable songs from coming across.

"Guys and Dolls" debuted when America was a powerhouse; this lively revival arrives when the country is in the poorhouse. To see how the show's infectious buoyancy plays out in an entirely different economic and emotional climate is fascinating. If anything, the desperation of the story is closer to our own, and so is its mission of good times. Courage, after all, wants to laugh. ♦