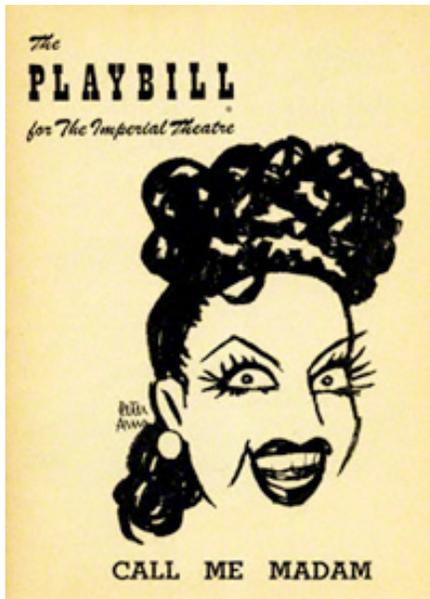


Review: Ohio Light Opera: opening performance of Berlin's *Call Me Madam* (June 19)

by J.D. Goddard



“Another opening, another show...” And so it was on Thursday afternoon, June 19 when the Ohio Light Opera staged its opening performance Irving Berlin’s *Call me Madam* in Freedlander Theater on the campus of The College of Wooster. Filled to capacity, the house was teeming with enthusiasm as OLO launched its 36th season with a political topic that, not coincidentally, hit close to home.

Call me Madam (book by Howard Lindsay and Russell Krouse) is a satire that spoofs America’s habit of showering money on foreign countries, and is based on the life of Washington D.C. super-hostess and Democratic Party fundraiser Perle Mesta, who was named Ambassador to Luxembourg in 1949.

In the musical, Mesta becomes Sally Adams, a well-meaning but ill-informed socialite widow who is appointed U.S. Ambassador to the fictional and “penniless” European country of Lichtenburg. While there, she charms the local aristocracy, especially Cosmo Constantine, and her press attaché Kenneth Gibson falls in love with Princess Maria.

Upon entering Friedlander Theater one was immediately struck by the enormous picture of Ambassador Mesta on an oversized Time Magazine cover from the fifties that filled almost the entire center stage top to bottom. This set the tone for what can only be called a one-woman show in the style of Ethel Merman, who premiered the role of Sally.

Filling the vocally challenging role of Sally “Call Me Madam” Adams was mezzo Alexa Devlin. Her stylized movements, whimsical carefree attitude and blatant party girl exuberance were marvelous. Her voice reverberated brilliantly as she shifted from chest voice to head voice with ease in “The Hostess with the Mostes’ on the Ball,” “Can You Use Any Money Today,” “The Best Thing for You” and “You’re Just in Love.”

Baritone Ted Christopher brought maturity and professionalism to the stage as Lichtenburg's Foreign Minister Cosmo Constantine. His "Marrying for Love" with Sally and "Lichtenburg" with chorus were highlights of the show.

In the role of press attaché Kenneth Gibson, Stephen Faulk's lyrical tenor contrasted perfectly with the brashness of his boss, Ambassador Sally. His duet "It's a Lovely Day Today" with Princess Maria and chorus was refreshingly smooth and pleasing. His disciplined voice and mild-mannered demeanor made an excellent foil to the Mermanesque style of Sally.

Soprano Tara Sperry's Princess Maria was gentle and warm. She spun an alluring vocal sound filled with grace and poise. "The Ocarina" (with chorus) was a highlight.

Tenors Clark Sturdevant (Congressman Bill Wilkins), Jacob Allen (Senator Brockbank) and Anthony Maida (Senator Gallagher Acheson) joined forces in the crowd-pleasing "They Like Ike," which allowed the audience to take a breath, sit back, and relax for a moment.

Conductor Steven Byess skillfully held the excellent orchestra and cast together while bringing out the nuances in the score. The chorus of Various Senators, Townspeople of Lichtenburg, Socialites and Politicians had impeccable diction, focused vocal production and resonant sound.

Rounding out the cast were Stefan Gordon (Sebastian Sebastian), Michael Lucas (Pemberton Maxwell), Aiden Smerud (Congressman Harry Gibson), Janie Crick (Miss Phillips), Jayson Lebaron (Clerk), Christopher Oglesby (Court Chamberlain), Boyd Mackus (Grand Duke Otto of Lichtenburg) and Julie Wright Costa (Grand Duchess Sophie of Lichtenburg).

Director Steven Daigle's staging wonderfully utilized Kim Powers' efficient stage designs. Charlene Gross' costumes were period-appropriate and shone under Erich Keil's crisp lighting. The choreography by Carol Hageman and dance captain Spencer Reese was simple and clear.

This was yet another auspicious opening for OLO's 36th season. If you travel to Wooster to see *Call me Madam*, you will come away humming and feeling good for days. The entertainment value of OLO's productions is unbeatable.

Next performances: June 25, 28, July 11, 19, 26, August 1, 6, 9

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