

Review

**Ohio Light Opera:
George & Ira Gershwin's *Lady, Be Good!* (July 14)**

by Timothy Robson

T H E George and Ira Gershwin's 1924 Broadway show *Lady, Be Good!*, currently in the repertoire of Ohio Light Opera, resident at the College of Wooster, falls into the category of “They don’t write ‘em like that anymore.” Depending on one’s point of view, the response to that characterization might be either, “What a shame,” or “I’m really grateful.”

OHIO LIGHT OPERA I saw the Sunday, July 14, matinee performance. As an example of musical theater of the time, *Lady, Be Good!* can’t really be faulted; however, we can be grateful for the revolutionary changes to the Broadway musical form by Jerome Kern’s *Showboat* in 1927 and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma* in 1943, which much more closely integrate the show’s book, music and lyrics into a unified whole. That evolution of musical theater reached its apotheosis in the works of Stephen Sondheim, in which individual songs melt into the flow of the story.

Lady, Be Good!, on the other hand, has a flimsy and immensely convoluted storyline that requires considerable suspension of disbelief. With book by Guy Bolton and Fred Thompson, *Lady, Be Good!* was written as a starring vehicle for the brother and sister singing and dancing team of Fred and Adele Astaire. The book exists for the purpose of highlighting the stars’ talents, and, most of all, the great songs by the Gershwins. The show’s two big hits are still performed today: “Fascinatin’ Rhythm” and the eponymous “Lady, Be Good!”

The story is too complicated to detail here, but involves brother and sister Dick and Susie (the Fred and Adele characters) who have been dispossessed of their home and set up their household on the sidewalk. Milquetoasty Dick is in love with Shirley, but he believes he’s too poor to marry her. Brassy Susie falls for a hobo, who turns out eventually to be the immensely-wealthy-but-thought-to-be-dead-in-Mexico Jack Robinson. Dick feels that he has to marry instead the wealthy socialite Josephine Vanderwater for her money. The expected mayhem and confusion ensue, but all turns out well in the end.

It is never explained why (at least in this production) Dick has a midwestern accent, but sister Susie has an accent right out of Brooklyn (or was it New Jersey?) Some weird nature/nurture stuff going on there, perhaps? The authors have thrown in a number of contemporaneous cultural references — for example, references to the angst in Anton Chekhov’s plays. (“Why are we here? I’m so sad.”) There are opportunities for Mexican costumes, fake Spanish accents and what would now be highly politically incorrect refer-

ences to Latinos. At one point Susie shows up in a Swiss Miss costume and we are treated to a Swiss musical number, for no reason whatsoever relating to the plot. There is a chorus of girls in nightclub cigarette girl outfits who magically appear at opportune times to add choral harmonies and perform tidy tap dances to enhance the songs. It's all good, silly fun, with little redeeming social value beyond that of light entertainment.

The Ohio Light Opera production has an endearing earnestness about it, with all of the young performers giving their best to carry the show off. As Dick and Susie, Nathan Brian and Nathalie Ballenger are on stage for most of the show, and, although they don't have the charisma of Fred and Adele, they performed their many songs and dance numbers with suitable aplomb. Of the large cast, Elise Kennedy, who is Dick's true love, deserves mention, as does Ezra Bershatsky as the sleazy lawyer Watty Watkins.

Tara Sperry played the rich girl Josephine Vanderwater to the best Kitty Carlisle hilt. Ted Christopher's stage direction was unfussy and clear. The pit orchestra under Steven Byess sounded a bit scrappy but got the job done. The show has excellent production values: the sets (C. Murdock Lucas) and costumes (Charlene Gross) were first class, and Michael Banks's lighting enhanced the proceedings. As a postscript, I note that the Freedlander Theater, where Ohio Light Opera performs, is a very comfortable space, with plenty of leg room between rows of seats and good sight lines from everywhere in the theater.

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