

## Ohio Light Opera: *Kiss Me, Kate* and *Annie Get Your Gun* (June 25)

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*special to ClevelandClassical.com*



Many aspects of Ohio Light Opera's productions are moving forward along with their repertoire, which is expanding beyond the traditional Gilbert & Sullivan oeuvre and the European Operetta into an exploration of early American musicals and Broadway masterpieces of the Golden Age.

Costume fabrics seem different and the colors brighter this season. Sets and lighting are more technologically advanced. But perhaps the biggest difference is in the choreography. This has been especially noticeable in the first two productions of the company's 38th season. New

Choreographer Spencer Reese is a gifted actor as well as choreographer, and he gets his turn in the spotlight for the opening number of the second act of *Kiss Me, Kate* — the season opener — as well as in the ensemble for *Annie Get Your Gun*.

Reese is remarkably loose-limbed, as he demonstrated in "Too Darn Hot," but as the dresser, Paul, he also has notable singing and acting chops as well. But most noticeable was his extensive use of "jazz hands" that added immensely to the vitality of the music.

Cole Porter's *Kiss Me, Kate* is one of the career highlights of an artist known for composing both music and clever lyrics. Although the original "book" for this show comes from William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, it was somewhat renovated by the team of Bella & Samuel Spewack before their split. *Kate* is both a play-within-a-play and a back-stage drama, providing a sense of intimacy for the audience.

The story revolves around the divorced couple Fred and Lilli. Fred is noodling around with Lois Lane (Hannah Kurth). Lilli is now enamored of the Washington bigwig Harrison Howell (Clark Sturdevant). There are numerous amusing mishaps among these four. What's more, Lois has also captured the eye of Bill Calhoun (Stephen Faulk), who has a serious gambling problem, having just lost \$10K to the mob (big bucks in 1948). No problem: Bill has signed Fred's name to the IOU.



Things go downhill after two mob enforcers appear in Fred's dressing room, but the show must go on, and so it does. The mobsters (Kyle Yampiro and Royce Strider) eventually become an unwilling part of the show, singing the rousing "Brush Up Your Shakespeare." Eventually, the shrew is indeed tamed and claimed by her real-life hubby, so all ends well. It's a dazzling production!

The roles of Fred and Lilli are double-cast; I saw Ted Christopher as Fred and Sarah Best as Lilli on Saturday, June 25. Both are stage creatures *par excellence*, and can sing, dance, and act with the best. There is no lack of charisma between the two, even in their most acidic moments.

Setting the pace as stage director is Stephen Carr, who returned this summer after spending several years directing and acting in other countries. It was obvious that he understands and respects the traditions of American Musical Theater.

Stefanie Genda's costumes are colorful. A neat touch is the use of costumes worn in previous years by Sarah Best — who sings Kate here — to populate the various costume racks which are pushed about the stage at various times. The set pieces are by Ken Martin, and lighting by Kent Sprague.

One of the greatest assets of OLO is its orchestra. It may seem small, but the quality is there. You can hardly have jazz without saxophones, and in *Kate*, they were splendid! Steven Byess conducted briskly or sentimentally, as required.



Nearly every song is a hit that you'll hear being hummed by the audience as they leave the theater. The same could be said of the songs in *Annie Get Your Gun* by Irving Berlin, who was working from a book by Herbert and Dorothy Fields to create songs for the great Ethel Merman. I saw OLO's production on Saturday evening, June 25.

*Annie's* producers (Rodgers and Hammerstein) had originally contracted with Jerome Kern to write the score. Sadly, within two months, Kern had suffered a fatal stroke, leaving the show with no composer. Berlin was not sure he really wanted to do it, but a successful weekend of composing changed his mind. Four months later, Broadway proclaimed a new triumph!

Annie Oakley is the best shot in her part of the world (near Cincinnati) and she supports her little brother and sisters by selling the game she hunts. When Col. Buffalo Bill brings his Wild West Show to town, he persuades her to join his troupe. Once Annie sees the headliner, Frank Butler, she falls hard for him. Before long, she becomes the main attraction in the show — good for business, not so good for romance. Frank joins a rival show, but soon finds himself engaged in a final shoot-out with none other than Annie. Her idea is "Anything you can do, I can do better!" In the end, Annie wins both the gold medal and the guy.

Not every lyric theater company can produce a substantial *Annie Get Your Gun*. OLO is fortunate to have to have the young mezzo-soprano Alexa Devlin on its roster. Once you've seen and heard her in an Ethel Merman role, it's hard to imagine anyone else at that level. She can be sweet and simple, or a belter, as the character of Annie Oakley

requires. As Frank Butler, the handsome baritone Nathan Brian was a suitable foil for her, and their duets were entirely scrumptious.



Julie Wright Costa was delicious as Dolly Tate — assistant to Charlie Davenport, manager of the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show (Kyle Yampiro). Whether stern, frazzled or sweet, she drew the eye. Samus Haddad was the very dignified Chief Sitting Bull. It was fun to see Ted Christopher’s two daughters — Madi and Anna — onstage as Annie’s younger siblings, along with Madison Mitchell and Elizabeth Perkins.

In addition to the sensitive casting, OLO pays an immense amount of attention to detail in their productions. Here, the sets by Kim Powers are terrific — whether it’s the hotel outside Cincinnati, the Pullman railroad car, a cattle boat, or the ballroom at the Hotel Brevoort in New York City. Myron Elliott’s costumes equal the sets in variety and authenticity (I loved the feathers in the top hat of Chief Sitting Bull). J. Lynn Thompson returns for his 27th season to conduct the OLO Orchestra.

For a full schedule of Ohio Light Opera productions and ticket information, visit the company’s [website](#).

*Photos courtesy of Ohio Light Opera.*

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