

**Ohio Light Opera:
The Pajama Game (June 16)**

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Who would ever have thought that labor troubles in a pajama factory in Iowa could become the fodder for an award-winning musical comedy that is still lively and topical at almost 65 years of age?

The twentieth century might almost have been known as the century of the labor union, which

peaked in the 1950s. At that time, they were still a major force, as cheekily demonstrated in the buoyant presentation of *The Pajama Game* that opened the Ohio Light Opera season in Wooster on Saturday evening, June 16.

From the very first note of the overture, familiar tunes happily lure us into the enchantment of the musical that won three Tony Awards in its first incarnation on Broadway: Best Musical, Best Actress in a Musical (Carol Haney as Gladys) and Best Choreographer (Bob Fosse). A new team of composer Richard Adler and lyricist Jerry Ross burst onto the New York musical scene with this first big hit (followed up the following year by possibly the even more famous *Damn Yankees*). Sadness struck all too soon, however, with the premature death of Ross at the age of 29. Frank Loesser had been mentoring the two and



contributed two uncredited hits to the score: 'There Once Was a Man' and 'A New Town is a Blue Town'.



Based on the book *7½ Cents* by Richard Bissell about just such a labor vs. management struggle, the story caught the eye of 'Mister Abbott' (George to his Mom) a well-known and highly-respected director, who proceeded to shepherd its disparate parts into a winner on Broadway. The workers want a raise of 7½ cents an hour, and of course, management rejects their plea.

Directed by Jacob Allen, the OLO production contains enough energy to light up a good many theaters. Spencer Reese created the joyous choreography, colorful, yet appropriate costumes are by Myron Elliott, and enhanced by the lighting design of Brittany Shemuga. The versatile set (several small rooms easily moved on or off the stage behind the clever scrim) is by Daniel Hobbs. J.

Lynn Thompson conducted the versatile orchestra, which included more brass than strings.

Basically, the plot revolves around the struggle of the workers against unsympathetic management, all the while fighting off the romantic elements that swirl through and around. Myron Hasler, (Cory Clines) manager of The Sleep Tite Pajama Factory, is adamantly against any raise for his slightly disgruntled workers. Among these are the union rep, Prez



(Spencer Reese), Babe (Alexa Devlin), head of the union's grievance committee, the newly-hired superintendent Sid (Nathan Brian), his secretary Mabel (Hannah Kurth), time-keeper Hines (Daniel Neer), and Hasler's secretary Gladys (Sarah Best).

It's very easy to follow the action of the employees, whether they're planning a slow-down in the stitching area, or enjoying themselves at the company picnic. Among the musical hits are 'Hey, There,' 'Once-A-Year-Day,' 'There Once Was a Man,' 'Hernando's Hideaway,' '7½ Cents,' and the sizzling 'Steam Heat.'

A personal note: In 1954 when this show first appeared on Broadway, the music heard on the radio and very early TV came from Broadway and/or Hollywood. If a show tune landed on the Hit Parade it was a very big deal! Rosemary Clooney's version of "Hey There" was number one for several weeks, while 'Hernando's Hideaway' was also big as was 'Steam Heat' (where it wasn't banned). Perhaps that's why these songs resonate so well with an older audience — it was the music of our youth! And about that 7½ cent an hour raise? Don't laugh. I had a part-time job at that time and my hourly wage was 60 cents! Believe me, 7½ cents would have meant a lot to this high school senior.

Photos: Ben Small.

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