

Ohio Light Opera: a look ahead — part one of two previews

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en·sem·ble /än' sämbəl/
noun

1. a group of musicians, actors, or dancers who perform together.

That definition perfectly describes the company of magicians who form Ohio Light Opera, a summer organization housed on the campus of The College of Wooster that provides a colorful look at musical theater of the past. *Mostly* — the past is always encroaching on the present.

Those who follow the company can't help but be continually impressed by the camaraderie and inclusiveness of the 150 or so musicians, actors, and dancers, as well as the designers who build the sets and costumes, and the technicians who enhance the whole with light and sound and present magic to the audience at every single performance. In fact, there are 56 performances of 7 productions between June 15 and August 10 of imaginary examples of time and space not our own.

OLO's 41st season is something of a split personality. It has one foot solidly planted in the near past, while the other is parked on *today* — or at least 1987, which musically speaking is not that far from the present, though a good many in the cast of Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods* are younger than his score. At the other end of the spectrum is Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*, first produced 140 years ago.

Artistic director Steven A. Daigle has chosen an assortment of musical theater pieces for 2019. Opening the season will be Rodgers & Hammerstein's *South Pacific*, first performed by the company fifteen years ago. It is one of only two productions this season that have previously been staged by OLO, along with *Pirates of Penzance*, which is being produced for the 14th time.

Among the OLO premieres are the Gershwins' 1930 *Girl Crazy*, the above-mentioned *Into the Woods*, Jerome Kern & Oscar Hammerstein II's 1932 *Music in the Air*, Emmerich Kálmán's 1932 *The Devil's Rider* (English translation by Daigle), and Ivor Novello's 1945 *Perchance to Dream*.

South Pacific is based on portions of James Michener's 1947 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Tales of the South Pacific*. The production ran for 1,925 performances on Broadway and garnered ten Tony Awards, plus a second Pulitzer Prize — this one for drama. Jacob Allen is stage director, and J. Lynn Thompson conducts the OLO Orchestra. Sarah Best and Jocelyn Hansen will alternate in the role of Nellie Forbush, while Ted Christopher and Brad Baron will take turns as Emile. Spencer Reese is choreographer.

The Gershwins' *Girl Crazy* will bring some very familiar songs to the stage, including "Bidin' My Time," "Embraceable You," "But Not for Me," and "I Got Rhythm." Daigle, who will stage direct, refers to the show as a "tap dance ensemble piece." Steven Byess will conduct, and choreographer Spencer Reese will be responsible for all that dancing.

Reese also portrays Danny Churchill, a New York playboy banished from Broadway to the wilds of Custerville, Arizona, in order to be cured of his attraction to alcohol and women. Hah! There are no female residents in Custerville, except for the Postmistress, played by Hannah Holmes. Other than that, this small town has whatever you want — cowboys, gamblers, and especially lots of tap dancing. In 1992, *Crazy for You*, heavily based on the storyline and wonderful songs of the original *Girl Crazy*, opened on Broadway and ran for 1,622 performances. Gotta love those Gershwins!

In Daigle's opinion, *Into the Woods* is "a true ensemble piece." For sure, we'll all recognize the main characters. Just dig out any book of fairy tales and there they are. You may be forgiven for not knowing all their family members, as many of them stayed in the background of their stories — and now you can find out why.

There's Cinderella — her mother and father, step-mother, step-sisters and her prince. There's also Rapunzel and *her* prince; Little Red Riding Hood, her grandmother, and the wolf; Jack (from before the beanstalk tales) and his Mom, a baker and his wife; Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, and so on.

But Sondheim's characters are not your ordinary fairy tale characters — they're much more human and susceptible to human foibles. Funny foibles at times, but still, foibles. You may not be whistling the tunes on your way out of the theater, but you'll probably still be chuckling over the comic inventions.

J. Lynn Thompson conducts, and choreographer Spencer Reese is half of the duo who portray the simpleton Jack (Alan Smith is the other). Their mother is Julie Wright Costa.

South Pacific opens the 2019 season on Saturday, June 15 in Freedlander Theatre on the campus of The College of Wooster. Season and single tickets are available [online](#) or by calling the ticket office at 330.263.2345.

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