

A chat with Ohio Light Opera choreographer, director, singer, and dancer Spencer Reese

by Daniel Hathaway



When I interviewed Ohio Light Opera artistic director Steven Daigle about the six shows the company is producing this summer in Freedlander Theater at The College of Wooster, he suggested that I also contact music director Michael Borowitz and choreographer Spencer Reese to find out what excites them about the 43rd season.

Reese has been with OLO since 2014, serving as assistant director and choreographer for more than 30 shows. I caught up with him early one morning for a fast-paced conversation that covered a lot of material in only ten minutes.

Daniel Hathaway: Thanks for agreeing to chat this early in the morning. I'm glad I got on your call board before other people did.

Spencer Reese: Thank you for letting it be early. Once nine o'clock hits, I'm not available again until 10 pm.

DH: I won't take much of your time, but Steve Daigle thought I should talk to you because you turn out in many ways to be the MVP of the company.

SR: Thank you for saying that.

DH: Directing, choreographing, singing, acting, dancing — how do you do all of that?

SR: The way that my mind and my heart think about art is that everything overlaps. I take in the style and the period and the essence of the show and start from there. I really let

everything influence itself. The way I interpret the music when I sing it influences the way I interpret the dance when I stage it.

And when I'm directing a show like *H.M.S. Pinafore*, the way I hear the music and see the movement influences the way that I envision the visual world and the way I work with the designers. So it's really about capturing the overall style and essence of the period or the specific aesthetic that the composer and the librettist were going for. And I try to let everything speak the same language and live in the same world.

DH: What particularly excites you about this season?

SR: As a performer, I've been waiting a long time for *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* to come around. I love the music, and I've had my eye on the role of Finch for a long time.

On the choreography side, I'm really excited that the company is doing *No, No, Nanette* for the first time — a show that is most often staged in its revival version, but we are taking it back as close as we can to what it would have looked like when it first opened.

It's full of stylish, '20s-style music. Almost every number is danced, which would have been the practice at the time. There are lots of big ensemble numbers, lots of tap dancing, and we're trying our best to recreate the energy of its premiere.

DH: Do you have experienced dancers in the company already?

SR: For the first time this year, we had folks dance on recordings as part of their audition, so I was able to tell what they were coming in the door with. Some people have been in dance class since they were five, and some are newer, but I think one of the great things about OLO is that most folks come from some sort of musical background, whether they are classically trained opera singers, or coming from musical theater programs.

Since everyone is trained in music, we all have an innate feeling for musical style, and even folks who haven't been trained in dance their whole life have a sense of musicality that helps them dive in right away. And I really believe that everybody should be up there as part of the chorus line.

This year is exciting. *No, No, Nanette* is a tap show, and so the whole company will be tapping, which is always exciting for the audiences. I have about 15 or 16 folks who had already tap danced, and about 10 or 12 more who have learned to tap since they've arrived. Even if you went to music school, tap dancing is a whole different ball game.

DH: Later in the season, you'll be stage director for H.M.S. Pinafore, a very different production. Take us through the process of getting a show from concept to stage.

SR: It takes almost a full year. The season is announced in the fall, and once casting is started we find out what we're directing. We'll start to have early conversations with our designers in January and February about what this world might look and feel like, taking into account both aesthetic and logistical things, knowing that we share the stage with six productions, and thinking of ways that we can use the space imaginatively. We have to keep in mind that sometimes there are two or three shows on the stage in a single day.

By the time we arrive on campus in May, everything is designed, the set is fully sketched, and the costumes are ready to go. Then as director, my mind switches more into cast mode and meeting the people. I take pride in embracing and showcasing the best of what everybody has to offer, and in the first couple of weeks, I try especially to get to know the new cast members, and think of ways their characters interact so that everybody can feel confident and really take ownership of their individual roles.



Especially in some older pieces like *Pinafore*, the social interactions of the characters are quite different from what we experience now. So we're thinking of ways we can embrace what already feels natural and organic in the performers and transferring that into the more period relationships.

DH: Once you start rehearsing, how many days does it take from the beginning to the stage?

SR: It's way quicker than most people would realize. In those first couple of weeks, we rehearse the music for all of the shows and we sketch all of our biggest dance

numbers for the season to get the things that need the most muscle memory up and running.

After that, each show gets the equivalent of about three full days — whether it's consecutive or spread over time — of staging time. Then each show gets about a week of

tech time — adding lights, scenery, and costumes. It really ramps up quickly as we add those elements heading towards the opening of each show.

DH: Do you do a warm-up and dust-off between performances? Sometimes there's as much as a week between them.

SR: We keep such a busy schedule that even as we're performing, we're rehearsing future shows. We actually don't have any official brush-up rehearsals. But we are always astounded by the wonderful work ethic of the cast, and you see everyone practicing and reviewing, either together informally or on their own.

DH: I have this projected nightmare of somebody coming onstage and suddenly thinking, wait, where am I?

SR: We have all had that dream where you're in the wings not knowing what show it is. But, knock on wood, that has never happened in real life, just in our dreams.

We'll have more information to share about OLO's No, No, Nanette and Arizona Lady in the coming weeks.

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