

Ohio Light Opera: everything free and easy at *Me And My Girl* (June 20)

by Stephanie Manning



Not only is it a challenge to walk out of *Me and My Girl* without the music stuck in your head, it's also a challenge to pick *which* of the many songs you might be humming.

The charming, feel-good 1937 musical — with music by Noel Gay and book/lyrics by Douglas Furger & L. Arthur Rose — may not be much of a household name these days. But after

its original success in London's West End, a revised book by Stephen Frey and Mike Ockrent in the 1980s made the show a huge hit across the pond on Broadway. And the Ohio Light Opera's dazzling premiere makes it easy to see why.

Stage directed by Jacob Allen, the company's newest production opened on June 20 in Freedlander Theater at the College of Wooster. The story centers on a brash, unassuming Cockney named Bill Snibson, who must adjust to life in upper-class London society after he is revealed as the last living heir of the Hareford estate. Tensions only escalate when Bill discovers his new aristocratic family disapprove of his girlfriend and fellow Cockney, Sally. Cue the comedic hijinks.

Originally designed around the existing Bill Snibson character, the show absolutely rises and falls under the strength of its leading man. (Robert Lindsay even won a 1987 Tony award for the role.) Thankfully, the OLO has such a star in Spencer Reese, who has all the singing, dancing, and physical comedy chops in spades. Not to mention his



megawatt smile and the Robert Lindsay-esque expressive eyebrows.

Plus, Reese has an equal match in the charming Kate Bilenko as Sally Smith. The two make quite a believable pair of sweethearts, established early on during their heartfelt duet “Me and My Girl.” Bilenko has a poise beyond her years, and her contributions are not to be underestimated, whether that’s her nimble dancing during numbers like “Hold My Hand” or her sweetly melancholic vocals in “Once You Lose Your Heart.”



Yvonne Trobe gave the evening’s other standout performance as Maria, the snooty Duchess of Dene, who sets her mind to molding Bill into a real gentleman. Trobe’s dry wit and steadily increasing exasperation as Bill tests her limits made for quite an entertaining watch.

Costume designer Jen Gillette really outdid herself here — the Duchess’ luscious purple gowns perfectly

represented her highbrow ideals, while Sally’s sparkling, sky-blue number during “Leaning on a Lamp Post” twirled like a harp glissando personified.

The whole cast gets involved during some of the show’s most famous numbers, including the cheery “The Sun Has Got Its Hat On” — and of course, the unstoppable kinetic energy of “The Lambeth Walk,” the Act I finale that brought some actors into the aisles while they danced their hearts out.

The ensemble members gave their all to the choreography (by Spencer Reese, what *can’t* he do?), and gamely stepped into roles like the household’s beleaguered staff, headed by manservant Charles Heatherset (Jeron Robinson); a group of haughty London socialites; and even the temporarily-resurrected ghosts of the Hareford family ancestors during “Song of Hareford.”

The show isn’t without its moments of dated humor — for one, the greedy Lady Jaqueline Carston (Maggie Langhorne) gets a whole song about her forceful attempts to seduce Bill (“You Would If You Could”). Still, the production’s light-hearted tone and staging keeps the story from getting too bogged down here.



R. Porter Hiatt, as the well-meaning baronet Sir John Tremayne, was obviously younger than his “middle aged” character description. But he produced some excellent comedic timing, especially with the recurring gag of his watch getting pilfered by a certain Bill Snibson. James Mitchell consistently drew laughs as Mr. Parchester, the family solicitor prone to launching into song. And the orchestra, conducted by Michael Borowitz, eagerly kept the energy up for all of two-and-a-half hours.

It’s almost impossible to picture an audience who would leave Freedlander Theater without smiles on every face — so there’s no doubt that this low-stakes, high-fun musical has more than earned its place in OLO’s repertoire for years to come.

Photos courtesy of Ohio Light Opera

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