

Jacob Allen on Ohio Light Opera's 2024 season

by Mike Telin



One of the neat things about a summer light opera festival is that there is always a family atmosphere. Ohio Light Opera is a perfect example of that, especially when it comes to associate artistic director Jacob Allen and his relationship with the company. 2024 marks Allen's 18th season — and his sixth position within OLO after he started out as a young artist performer.

Allen is directing two shows this season: *Guys and Dolls* and *Me and My Girl*, the latter of which opens on Thursday, June 20 at 2:00 pm at Freedlander Theatre.

The show includes music by Noel Gay and lyrics by Douglas Furber and L. Arthur Rose. Tickets are available [online](#).

I caught up with Allen by phone to talk about the two shows he's directing — and his history with the company.

Jacob Allen: There's *Guys and Dolls*, which was our season opener. It is sort of a revival — we last produced it in 2012. I directed that production as well so it's fun to return to it here at my summer home. And then *Me and My Girl*, which opens on June 20. And it's a premiere for Ohio Light Opera, so something old and something new for me this year.

Mike Telin: You have a long history with OLO.

JA: Yes, this is going on my 18th season with the company. I started in 2006 as a young artist in the vocal ensemble, and it was that experience that ultimately led to my study of stage direction at Eastman School of Music. And as my career has grown, so have my responsibilities within the company. I've moved from being a young artist performer, to a professional artist performer, to an assistant director, to a director, to the assistant

artistic director, and now this year I'm the associate artistic director. So it's a family to me — I couldn't imagine being anywhere else during the summer.

MT: What are the duties of the associate artistic director?

JA: One of the biggest is that I do all the casting for the company. So I spend October and November listening to auditions across the country and meeting with performers. I typically hear maybe 400 auditions for the season, from which we will ultimately hire about 36 performers to be in residence for the company.

That together is a huge undertaking, especially when you consider that everybody has to find places in five of the six shows that we produce each summer. Each member might have a lead role in one show, a secondary role in another, and maybe an ensemble role in yet another.

I also assist Steven Daigle, our artistic director, in managing the production staff. This year, for example, I've taken over the costume area. We've added a new position of costume director, which is somebody who oversees all of the costume designers and hires the technicians in the costuming area. This year that position is being held by Jennifer Gillette, who is coming to us from Florida State University, where she is an assistant professor of costume design.

MT: Casting must be difficult — not everybody is going to get their dream role.

JA: This is my second year of doing the casting, and one of the lovely things about it is when you have somebody join the ensemble as a young artist in their first year, and then you're able to rehire them for a second year and you see the growth that they have made both through OLO and whatever training program they're in. And then maybe you are able to hire them for a lead role or two during their second or third summer.

MT: Back to the two shows you're directing — let's start with Guys and Dolls. How has it changed in your mind since the first time you directed it for OLO?

JA: Last summer I had the opportunity to sort of revive the 2012 OLO production in a concert version with the Northern Mississippi Symphony Orchestra. So it was nice to reminisce with the performers I had worked with in 2012 and it reminded me of what that production had been like.

So heading into this iteration, twelve years removed, it's interesting how the company has grown — and one of the big ways is in the area of dance. I think you will notice a really big change even from last year. Part of that has come with a shift in the role that

technology plays in our company — we are now able to hold virtual dance auditions which has allowed us to add that component into our casting process. So, dance plays a much more central role in *Guys and Dolls* than it did in 2012.

I think the audience will especially see that in the Havana sequence as well as in the crapshooters dance in the middle of Act Two, just before “Luck Be A Lady.”

I also think it’s the evolution of dance in the company that allows us to approach a piece like *Me and My Girl*, which is an OLO premiere. I don’t think the company would have been prepared to do this effectively ten years ago. And a lot of that is also due to our choreographer, Spencer Reese. Spencer brings so much to the table, which is fantastic. So all of that has led to a significant increase in the level of difficulty and quality of the dance work during the season.

MT: Tell me about Guys and Dolls.

JA: It is one of the most iconic musicals of all time. One of the things that I love about it is how a super romantic, luscious story has been nestled inside of one of the funniest comic musicals out there. You go from having your heartstrings tugged in the form of the burgeoning romance between Guy Masterson and Sarah Brown. And two seconds later, you are laughing your head off at the gangsters and perhaps the comic relationship between Miss Adelaide and Nathan Detroit.

And the idea of having two primary romantic couples — one that is a comic romance, and one that is a more serious romance — is a staple in the golden age of American music theater.

Frank Lester wrote the music and lyrics, and I had the opportunity to meet his widow, Jo Sullivan Lester, a number of years ago when I did a production of *The Most Happy Fellow*. She played the original Rosabella in that production, and one of the things she told me was that while Frank was most proud of the success of that show, he was also similarly proud of *Guys and Dolls* as his biggest commercial success because it enabled him to pursue all of the perhaps less commercially viable projects that he wanted to do.

MT: Moving on to Me and My Girl, I know you said that OLO wouldn’t have been able to put it on effectively ten years ago.

JA: Right. This is a piece in which physical comedy and movement in the form of narrative dance are central to its storytelling.

The primary character, Bill Snibson, is absolutely a vaudevillian comic sketch character. And everything he does relies upon sort of a broad physical comedy. Then there's the epic dream sequence ballet in the second act, "Leaning on a Lamp Post." So we didn't want to approach this show until the company had evolved to a place where we could produce it in a way that would be respectful of its content.

It's a piece that has charmed the pants off of me. I was familiar with it prior to it being assigned to me, but it really wasn't until we were in residence and I heard the first read/sing through with the cast that I got truly excited about it. It's just something that doesn't jump off the page until someone breathes life into it. I think it's going to be the sleeper hit of the season.

Of course, the two musical numbers that audiences might be familiar with, even if they're not familiar with the show, are the title song, "Me and My Girl," and the hit dance number, "The Lambeth Walk," which is the finale of Act One. If you're not tapping your toes with a big grin on your face by the time that is over, there's no help for you.

So, I think the show is a great pick-me-up for anybody who wants to laugh and leave with a smile on their face and a skip in their step.

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