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FEBRUARY 2013

arts programs

MEREDITH
WILSON'S

THE MUSIC MAN



2012/13 SEASON

MEMPHIS SEPT 18 - OCT. 2012

THE ADDAMS FAMILY OCT 24 - NOV 11, 2012

ELF - THE MUSICAL NOV 30 - DEC 31, 2012

THE MUSIC MAN FEB 7 - MAR 10, 2013

GREY GARDENS MAR 16 - MAY 20, 2013

JERRY BOYS APR 4 - MAY 4, 2013

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE JULY 11 - AUG 4, 2013

2012

5TH

2013

THE 5TH AVENUE THEATRE



from the desk of
David Armstrong
Executive Producer and Artistic Director

And There Was Music

People are sometimes surprised to learn that when the 1958 Tony Award for Best Musical was handed out, the top prize went to *The Music Man* instead of that season's other outstanding musical, *West Side Story*.

All I can say is that I certainly would not have wanted to be a Tony voter that season, because for me that would be an impossible choice to make.

West Side Story is without a doubt a landmark show – bold, brilliant, and innovative. It is a show that changed forever the face of our great indigenous American art form – The Musical.

However, although *The Music Man* may not be as groundbreaking in form as *West Side Story*, I would contend that it is every bit that show's match when it comes to the brilliance of its book and score, and the spectacular craft with which the story and music are all woven together.

If the decisive factor for winning a Tony Award is "degree of difficulty," then the musical you are about to see is a shoo-in. It took the collaboration of four geniuses to create *West Side Story* (Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Arthur Laurents and Jerome Robbins). Amazingly, the book, music and lyrics of *The Music Man* are entirely the work of one man – Meredith Willson. This is a herculean feat that has seldom been matched. I can think of only one other example of a hit Broadway musical that was the product of only one author: Frank Loesser's *The Most Happy Fella*. Many of you will remember our acclaimed production of that beautiful show in 2002.

When you consider that Meredith Willson was 55 years old at the time and had never before written a Broadway musical, this accomplishment is even more amazing.

In many ways Willson's show is every bit as innovative as its rival. While both shows largely follow the format of "the musical play" as pioneered by Rodgers and Hammerstein, each breaks new ground in its own unique way.

For me, the major achievement of *The Music Man* is the masterful integration of the music into every aspect of the story. Music infuses and illuminates the time and the place, it drives the plot, and instantaneously defines the characters. And those timeless characters are continuously caught up in and affected by the music and rhythms that surround them. (Mild Spoiler Alert: If you have never seen *The Music Man*,

you may want to wait to read the rest of this article until after the show.)

The brilliance of this show is evident from the very first musical number, "Rock Island," which may well be the first "rap" song. By creating a song spoken and chanted by a group of traveling salesmen to the rhythm of the train they are riding on, without employing a single actual note of music, Willson immediately established himself as a unique and sophisticated new voice on Broadway. Our anti-hero, Harold Hill, will shortly thereafter have his own legendary "rap" number, one that echoes the rhythms and cadences of a spellbinding revival meeting preacher attempting to stir his congregation into a frenzy. A bit later, our heroine Marian (the librarian) and her mother will argue and unknowingly pick up the tune of the piano lesson exercise being played her young student. Even the period-perfect musical style known as "Barbershop Quartet" will be used as a plot-changing device.

The examples go on and on and I don't want to give them all away, but I will let you in on one brilliant musical secret of the show's score. Although they have very different musical feels and tempos, Harold Hill's stirring Sousa-style march "Seventy Six Trombones" and Marian's wistful ballad "Goodnight My Someone" share the exact same melody. Yes, I know that is hard to believe, but it is true! This is more than just a musical stunt – it is great storytelling. Because even if we don't consciously understand that the two tunes are the same, this fact subconsciously binds the characters together for us. In their own different ways they sing the same music, and we sense that this means they are destined to end up together.

We have found – somewhat to our surprise – that when we produce even very famous musicals like *The Music Man*, a large segment of our patrons will have never seen the show before. We have a tremendous opportunity to introduce these great works to a new audience, as well as a tremendous obligation to do them the justice they deserve. If you are seeing *The Music Man* for the very first time, or the 100th, we are thrilled to share its magic with you.

David Armstrong

David Armstrong
Executive Producer and Artistic Director



The Memory Man

Meredith Willson was shivering — not from the cold (though it was plenty cold on the night of December 16, 1957) but from nerves. He paced the alley behind the Majestic Theatre on Broadway where his debut musical was about to open to an audience of sophisticated New Yorkers. How would they respond to his heartfelt creation? *The Music Man* wasn't just a show, it was a theatrical representation of his boyhood and the Midwestern world that had shaped him, the world he returned to over and over, for solace and inspiration, in his memories and dreams.

Meredith was born in 1902. He grew up in a prosperous family — not wealthy, but quite comfortable by the standards of Mason City, Iowa. His father, John Willson, was a prominent attorney, real estate agent, and loan manager, with a passion for baseball and brass bands. Rosalie, Meredith's mother, was a primary school teacher who gave piano lessons on the side. Their children — Dixie, Cedric, and Meredith — each learned multiple instruments, first piano, then harp, bassoon, flute, and (Meredith's favorite) piccolo.

In retrospect, life was idyllic, but the weather was harsh — scorching in summer, bone-chillingly cold in winter — and the days were filled with schoolwork, chores, and church. But there were amusements, most of them community-based: church pageants, volunteer bands, and amateur theatricals.

In the 1950s, Willson remembered it all: the chores, the music lessons, the pageants, the mysterious traveling salesmen who breezed through town, leaving everyone's pockets a little lighter, the billiard parlor and barber shop where the men gathered to swap stories and sing, the ladies' clubs for culture and improvement, the public library where the strictly enforced quiet was punctuated by the steady thump of the due-date stamp. All this and more went into *The Music Man*, giving it an authentic sense of time and place that few musicals can match.

There were shadows, although in later years Meredith chose not to dwell on them. In the early 1920s, Rosalie, tired of John's prolonged business trips, asked for a divorce, a move practically unheard of at the time. The disappearance of the father from the family, and the ensuing small-town gossip, may be echoed in *The Music Man* story (in the script, Marian and Winthrop's father is dead, and the disruptive newcomer is a traveling sales man).

His sister, Dixie — ten years older than Meredith — enjoyed an active and interesting life: selling poetry, short stories, and screenplays; creating toys and games; dancing as a chorus girl; writing and directing her own musical in Montana; riding an elephant in the circus; and contributing early ideas for *The Music Man*.

Meredith and Cedric kept up their music,

and by 1923 they both were playing in John Philip Sousa's famous band. Cedric eventually turned from music to engineering, where his inventive mind brought him national success.

After his stint with Sousa, Meredith played piccolo for five years with the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Arturo Toscanini, then moved to San Francisco as the concert director for radio station KFRC. He then moved to Hollywood to work as a music director for the NBC radio network.

He wrote film scores for Charles Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and William Wyler's *The Little Foxes*. He spent World War II as the head music director of the Armed Forces Radio Service. On his return to civilian life, his inner performer found an outlet as music director and cast member for the Burns and Allen radio show, where he presented himself as a naive country yokel. He further developed this persona as Tallulah Bankhead's music director/sidekick on the lavish comedy-variety program *The Big Show*. Pretending to be in awe of his boss, he addressed her as "Miss Bankhead, sir." And he became known for his endless string of tall tales about his "cousins" back home in Iowa.

In 1949, Frank Loesser, the composer of *Guys and Dolls*, encouraged Willson to combine his Iowa stories with his musical talents and try his hand at writing a musical comedy. Eight years and forty revisions later, *The Music Man* opened on Broadway to rapturous reviews, long lines at the box office, and — beating out *West Side Story* — Tony Awards for Best Musical and Best Score. The movie version, preserving nearly the entire show, was one of the big hits of 1962.

Meredith Willson kept writing. He had another Broadway hit with *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (also a popular movie). But *The Music Man*, with its brilliant score, fascinating characters, and loving evocation of a long-vanished world, is his one-of-a-kind masterpiece.

Albert Evans *Artistic and Music Associate*



ON THE ROAD

They were hailed as knights of the road and condemned as smooth-talking outsiders. They hauled their sample cases through hotel lobbies, railroad depots, and general stores, linking retail merchants to wholesalers and manufacturers. They brought big-city style to small-town customers. Folks bought their goods but kept them far away from their daughters.

They were the legion of traveling salesmen who crisscrossed the country on the expanding railway system from around 1870 to the 1920s. In their heyday, they were known as "drummers," and their here-and-gone lives were celebrated in plays, novels, films, and off-color joke books found in the magazine racks at drugstores and railway stations.

Eventually their ranks dwindled when their function was supplanted by mail-order houses like Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward and by the national retail store chains with direct links to suppliers. They held on, barely, until the 1950s, by which time they had entered American mythology, forever on the road, riding — in Arthur Miller's phrase — "on a smile and a shoeshine."