

# OLT MUSICAL THEATRE

*... is the eighth of ten exhibits to  
be presented during  
OLT's 100th Anniversary Season.  
This exhibit will remain on display in the  
Besserer Street lobby during the entire  
run of Steel Magnolias.*

**F**or more than a century, the Ottawa Little Theatre (OLT) has presented some of the finest plays ever written to a wide range of theatre lovers. But did you also know OLT has presented dozens of musical theatre productions, dating back as early as 1928? From original Canadian musicals to Gilbert & Sullivan operettas; from small scale musical comedies to big Broadway blockbusters, this exhibit puts a spotlight on the Ottawa Little Theatre's contribution to the local musical theatre scene, which you will soon learn is really not so "little" after all.



## SOLDIERS AND PIRATES AND DAMES, OH MY!

The first musical ever to be performed in the original Ottawa Little Theatre was *The Chocolate Soldier* in 1928, based in part on George Bernard Shaw's famous play *Arms and the Man*. It was a collaboration between OLT, the Orpheus Amateur Operatic Society (known today as the Orpheus Musical Theatre Society) and The Rotary Club of Ottawa.

The Rotary Club's own history declared that: "it ran for a whole week at the Little Theatre, the old Russell Theatre having been demolished earlier that year. Attendance was headed by a veritable 'Who's Who' of Ottawans including the active patronage of the Governor-General and Viscountess Willingdon."

CHOCOLATE SOLDIER



In the mid 1930s, the Ottawa Drama League (OLT), in association with the Orpheus, presented two ambitious musicals created by two men of extraordinary talent and imagination: William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan.

The first was *H.M.S. Pinafore* in 1935, directed by Leslie Chance with musical direction by H. Bramwell Bailey, and featuring a cast of more than 80 singers and actors on stage. The production was such a huge success that local reviewer Isabel C. Armstrong called it "A Delight for Ear and Eye", reporting: "Not for many a day has such a finished amateur production of this order been witnessed in the Capital City."

The second collaboration took place the following year, in 1936, with Chance and Bailey as producer and musical director once again leading a large cast in G&S' *The Pirates of Penzance* (1936).



## — GIVE MY REGARDS TO BROADWAY —

**L**eonard Bernstein. Cole Porter. Irving Berlin. Stephen Sondheim. Big names synonymous with big musicals. As the popularity of the American musical grew in the 1960s and 70s, the OLT began presenting larger scale musical productions as part of their regular season programming. Leonard Bernstein's *Wonderful Town* in 1961 (a musical based on the 1940s play *My Sister Eileen*) and Cole

Porter's infamous toe-tapping *Anything Goes* (1963) kicked off the decade in true Broadway style.

**D**id you know that the OLT opened and closed their 1967-68 season with big musical productions? The Dickens classic *Oliver!* (based on *Oliver Twist* and directed by Barry Stewart) was presented in October 1967, and Frank Loesser's campy, tongue-in-cheek look at corporate America, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, was on stage the following May.

**T**hat same year, 1967, the OLT commissioned a 35-year-old Canadian musical-comedy writer named David Morley to write a new musical as part of Canada's Centennial celebrations. It was called *Good Morning, Mr. Bell*, and told the story about Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone. Although the show was met with mixed reviews, the Ottawa Little Theatre was praised for going out on a limb and showcasing a new creation with great future potential.



ANYTHING GOES



# THOSE SUMMER NIGHTS

In the fall of 1995, former OLT President Sybil Cooke suggested to the play selection committee that it might be time to bring musicals back to OLT as part of the regular eight-show season package. As a result, in 1996, the season opened with what the Ottawa Citizen called a "first class production": *Nunsense* directed by Wayne Nolan with musical direction by Marylen Milenkovic. Tickets for this musical were in very high demand. In fact, during the run of the show, there was a published ad in the classified section of the Ottawa Citizen begging for tickets! Although the following season also opened with a musical (*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* in 1997) members of the Ottawa Little Theatre felt that a musical—even a small one—was too expensive to be part of the regular season. So the decision was made to move to the summer slot, and *Forever Plaid* (directed by Wayne Nolan) became the first summer musical in 1998, followed by *The Boyfriend* (directed by Debbie Miller-Smith with Sherwin Lyman as assistant director) in 1999.

## ENTERTAINMENT

### THEATRE REVIEW

## Unholy humor colors tale of nuns who find spotlight habit-forming

### **Nunsense**

**When:** Sept. 16-Oct. 5, 8 p.m.  
**Where:** Ottawa Little Theatre,  
400 King Edward Ave.  
**Tickets:** \$10, phone: 233-8048

**By Iris Winston**  
Citizen correspondent

Praise the Lord! There are no penguin jokes in *Nunsense*, but there is plenty of benign irreverence, catchy music and unholy humor.

In living "conventcolor" (black and white), the Little Sisters of Hoboken stage a concert to raise funds to bury

four departed sisters (currently stored in the convent freezer). Apart from a brief explanation of how they and 48 other members of the order died after stepping on vichyssoise, the surviving nuns simply adjust their wimples, seep into the spotlight and sing.

This is a little more difficult than it sounds as Sister Myopia, the nun in charge of the lighting board, has some trouble focusing on the Reverend Mother. But as soon as she does, the Ottawa Little Theatre production of Dan Coggin's nonsense bubbles into life.

The book of *Nunsense* is as thin as a communion wafer. The five sisters, ac-

companied by Sister Mary Gregorian and the last Chanté, are given little meat on which to build their characters — although this group of performers make their caricatures surprisingly believable. The joke of the unlikely situation — just naughty enough to have special appeal for convent-educated theatre-goers — should not be sufficient to sustain the musical.

But it is. As the opening number points out, *Nunsense* is *Habit-Forever*. And a devilish amount of fun for both cast and audience, despite the occasional flat spot.

Generally, director Wayne Nolan and

musical director Marylen Milenkovic deliver a first-class production that makes the most of the vocal and comic abilities of a talented group of performers.

Carolyn Dunlop, in her comedic element as the forgetful Sister Mary Amnesia, scores two bullseyes as a country singer (*I Could've Gone to Nashville*) and as a ventriloquist (*So You Want to be a Nun*) — she even makes you forget that her lips are moving!

Suzanne Castagna, as the ambitious Sister Mary Hubert, is in spectacular form in her rollicking spiritual, *Holer*

Than Thou, and sparkling with humor in *Just a Cousin Sister*, her duet with Sister Mary Regina, the Reverend Mother (RM for short).

As the leader of the flock, Arlene Watson is outstanding in this quality ensemble. At her funniest as a tightrope walker, complete with twirling umbrella, she is hearty, happy and bursting with humor.

Christine Moran is in fine voice as Sister Robert Anne, the nun from the wrong side of the tracks. Debbie Miller as Sister Mary Leo, the dancing novice, rounds out the fine cast.

Get thee to this nunnery.

# MUSICAL THEATRE AT OLT TODAY

The musical theatre productions that followed featured the three OLT volunteers that created this exhibit for you: Nicole Milne (as Bianca/Lois Lane), Sherwin Lyman (as Harry Trevor/Baptista) in *Kiss Me, Kate*, and Shaun Toohey, who choreographed the aforementioned Cole Porter classic and played the title role in *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*. Toohey went on to direct OLT's second production of *Nunsense* in 2002, collaborating with Wendy Berkelaar as musical director.

Most recently, OLT's musical theatre offerings have taken on a more contemporary feel. In December 2009, Debbie Millett (who appeared as Sister Leo in *Nunsense* in 1996) directed a strong foursome in the popular off-Broadway production *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*, with musical director Paul Legault. And last summer's *Jasper Station*, directed by Richard Elichuck and written by Canadian playwright Norm Foster and composer Steve Thomas, brought five strangers to *Jasper Station* on one random night to buy a ticket to their future.

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NUNSENSE



JASPER STATION

# 100<sup>TH</sup> *Season* *Exhibits*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Although we can't speak to the future of musical theatre at OLT, we can most certainly celebrate and thank the wonderful volunteers, directors, musicians and production teams that have entertained our musical theatre-loving audiences at OLT over the years.

The musical theatre exhibit curators  
Nicole Milne, Shaun Toohey  
and Sherwin Lyman  
wish to thank  
Jim Robertson, Wayne Nolan  
and Joe O'Brien, and everyone at the  
Ottawa Little Theatre, for giving of their  
time and for providing helpful information  
as the exhibit was being created.