

Guys & Dolls

May 8-24

(206) 363-4807

SeattleMusicalTheatre.org

**Study
Guide**



SYNOPSIS

Musical: *Guys and Dolls*, by Frank Loesser, Jo Swerling, and Abe Burrows

This production takes place in Times Square, New York, in 1947. We meet a group of gamblers and a group of missionaries who are trying to convert the gamblers. One of the gamblers is Nathan Detroit. He has been engaged to Adelaide, a dancer at the Hot Box Club, for 14 years. Nathan needs to raise some money to find a spot for the craps game he runs, and to buy a present for Adelaide. When he hears the big gambler Sky Masterson is in town, Nathan decides to try to make a bet with Sky to raise the money he needs. He bets that Sky can't get Sarah Brown, the head of the Save-A-Soul Mission, to go with him on his upcoming trip to Havana. Sarah resists at first, but eventually relents when Sky quotes the Bible and offers to bring a dozen gamblers into her mission, and the two travel to Cuba. They both mean to resist falling in love with each other, but they find themselves enjoying their time together. Sky and Sarah return to New York, and Sky sets about trying to get a dozen gamblers to come to Sarah's mission. He wins the souls of a group of gamblers at Nathan's crap game, and they show up as promised, providing Sarah the proof of Sky's love that she needs to marry him. Two couples marry at the end of the musical: Sarah with Sky, and Adelaide with Nathan.

Short story: *The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown*, by Damon Runyon

A man known as The Sky is a big-time gambler, especially fond of proposition gambling: betting that he can do some task that sounds impossible (although The Sky will usually only bet if he's rigged it beforehand so he can win.) On a trip to New York, he sees the head of a local mission, Sarah Brown, and falls in love at first sight. They chat some, but she turns cold when she learns he is a professional gambler. The Sky decides he will have to get some gamblers to start coming to her mission, so he starts gambling for the souls of his fellow gamblers at a local craps game—but he keeps losing to Brandy Bottle Bates. He has to keep raising his bets to try to cover his losses. The Sky figures the dice are phony, and is about to kill Bates when an angry Sarah Brown discovers the location of the crap game and barges in. She puts up two dollars against The Sky's soul, throws the phony dice, and wins. The Sky joins the mission, starts playing the drum in the mission band, and marries Sarah Brown.

THE SALVATION ARMY

The Save-A-Soul Mission in *Guys and Dolls* is based on The Salvation Army, an evangelical Christian movement that is known both for its missionary work and for its charitable work. The group was founded in 1865 in London and is still a successful organization today. It runs a chain of thrift stores that help to support its work and is one of the largest charities in the United States, as well as in many other countries around the world. The Salvation Army was organized as a military-style hierarchy in 1878 when the founder's son objected to being called a volunteer; the group is still organized as a kind of army today. Thus, in the musical, Sarah Brown's rank is that of Sergeant, while the head of the mission is known as General Cartwright.

HAVANA, CUBA IN THE 1940'S AND 1950'S

Today, not many Americans visit Cuba, because of an embargo against the country that has been in effect since 1962, following Fidel Castro's Communist revolution there in 1959. In the 1940's and '50's, however, Cuba, and its capital, Havana, were major tourist destinations for Americans. Because gambling was legal there, it attracted many American gamblers, as well as other tourists who were interested in its cultural attractions and natural beauty. In 1958, over 300,000 American tourists visited Havana, which made more money than Las Vegas. Today, there are signs that the Obama administration may lift the embargo; combined with efforts by Cuba to encourage tourism, Havana may once again become a travel destination for Americans.

DID YOU KNOW?

If you've ever used the terms “shoo-in,” “monkey business,” “shill,” “dukes” (for fists), “croak” (for die), “knock” (for criticize), or “kisser” (for mouth), you are using slang first created by Damon Runyon, whose short stories created the world dramatized in *Guys and Dolls*.

In 1947, the designer Christian Dior released his first collection. However, the low-life characters in *Guys and Dolls* probably wouldn't have bought the classy new outfits quite so soon, so the costume designer for this production chose to have the characters wear post-World War II outfits instead.

The Times Square area of New York has been the main theater district of the city since the 19th Century. Since that time, the neighborhood has been the meeting place of a wide variety of New Yorkers, from theater-goers to con men.

The set designer for this production lived in the Times Square neighborhood of New York, about twenty years after this production takes place.

PRE-PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS

What kinds of characters do you think you will find in a musical about New York lowlives—real people, or stereotypical/cartoon characters? How would you play characters like this in a musical?

While this story takes place in many different locations, the Magnuson Park theater does not have enough room to store sets for all of those different places. How would you design a single set to house all of the different places this story needs to show?

This play will introduce you to “low-life” gamblers as well as more “respectable” members of society like mission workers and policemen. Who do you normally sympathize with when those two groups meet? Who do you expect to like more in this production?

POST-PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS

Which group of characters did you like better: the lowlives or the more respectable citizens? Were you surprised by your answer? If so, why?

What did a character sneezing mean in the play? Why did the play end with Nathan sneezing?

Why did the different characters break into song in the play? How did the production make the singing and spoken parts of the performance feel different?

ACTIVITIES

Write like Damon Runyon: read one or more of Runyon's short stories. He has a very distinctive style. Try writing a story yourself in the style of Damon Runyon. If you come up with something great, send it to us at [jeremy @ seattlemusicaltheatre . org](mailto:jeremy@seattlemusicaltheatre.org) and we'll put it up on our website!

Read the short story *The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown*. Pick out music that you think would fit each different scene in the story. What kinds of music are you picking? How do your choices of music to fit the story compare or contrast with the music that is sung in *Guys and Dolls*?

Look at the differences in the stories of *The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown* and *Guys and Dolls*. Why do you think the authors of the musical made the changes that they did? Which story do you like better, and why?

When you go to the performance, listen for the following words and see if you can figure out their meaning: marker, tinhorn, scratch sheet, and floating (to describe Nathan's crap game.) Here is some other vocabulary you won't hear in the performance but may be useful in understanding different aspects of the show: fable, reprise, periaktoi, compulsive gambling.

EALRs

This study guide incorporates the following Washington State Essential Academic Learning Requirements:

Reading: 1.1, 1.3, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 4.2

Arts: 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 2.3, 3.1, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.4

Please contact us for help using and applying the EALRs to the work in this guide.