

The New York Times March 14, 1999 by Vincent Canby

## A New Annie, the Same Old Berlin Magic

NEW YORK -- Irving Berlin, born Israel Baline, was 5 when his family emigrated from Byelorussia to the United States in 1893 and settled on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. By 1910 he was an established Tin Pan Alley songwriter. The following year, with his first great success, "Alexander's Ragtime Band," his career as America's premier composer and lyricist took off and never seriously faltered for much of the rest of the century.

By the time of his death in 1989 at 101, he had moved chameleonlike through the ragtime, jazz and swing ras, absorbing and learning as he went, turning out songs in every conceivable pop style. He had also created some of the most enduring Broadway and movie scores ever written. George and Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, and Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein all shaped American popular music in their own ways. Yet no single mind mastered as much of the popular American musical idiom, for so long with such an unaffected wit and elegance, as Irving Berlin.

Think of the romantic pessimism of "Let's Face the Music and Dance," the gung-ho patriotism of "God Bless America," the nimble soft-shoe satire of "A Couple of Swells," the contrapuntal bliss of "(I Wonder Why) You're Just in Love," the double-edged sentimentality of "White Christmas," the disenchanting doughboy comedy of "Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning" and the Dom Perignon fizz of "Top Hat, White Tie and Tails."

How Berlin did it remains forever mysterious. He grew up in a home where Yiddish was spoken. He had no more than a few years of schooling. Words, with all of their associative connections, seem to have come to him as easily as the melodies he conceived without formal musical training. He gave status to the vernacular. Further, he was plugged into the temper and tempo of the decades. Possibly because he felt himself to be an outsider, he saw and heard the world around him with a clarity

denied the rest of us. The American experience was sunlight to his talent.

Like everyone else, Berlin had his humiliating flops, but when he was finally bested, it was only by time: he gave changing fashions a longer run for their money than anyone else on the American entertainment scene.

This is the context that makes the new production of *Annie Get Your Gun*, directed by Graciela Daniele and starring the exquisite Bernadette Peters, now at the Marquis Theater, such an engaging and welcome theatrical event.

This isn't to say that you'll suddenly forget the robust, inimitable Ethel Merman, who originated the role of Annie Oakley in the 1946 production. I mean only that Ms. Peters, who looks like a wasp-waisted kewpie doll, can be just as implacably funny and as fully audible as Merman, though in her own deceptively fragile way.

Don't fret that Peter Stone has revised the original Herbert and Dorothy Fields book to make it less offensive to minorities. The jokes at the expense of American Indians were never that great anyway, nor was "I'm an Indian, Too," a Berlin patter song that has been cut from this production. Notable mostly for the number of tribal names it squeezes into a very short space, "I'm an Indian, Too" isn't missed from a score that is otherwise rich with vintage Berlin contributions.

Slightly less felicitous is the introduction of an interracial romance as a subplot: the love of a young man, who is half-Indian and half-white, and a young woman who is all white. Though it doesn't impede the show, it does seem an extremely half-hearted attempt to do the right thing.

If political correctness has not diluted the show's charm, it also has not noticeably enriched the humor of the book. This remains a perfectly serviceable, hugely idealized tale suggested by the real-

life story of Annie Oakley and her romance with Frank Butler, her co-star in Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show in the 1880s.

As conceived by the Fields writing team, Annie is an illiterate country girl whose spectacular marksmanship creates a rivalry with Frank that nearly wrecks not only their lives but also Cody's traveling show. Though *Annie Get Your Gun* concludes with their marriage, it clearly points the way to what would happen later in real life: Frank Butler retired from performing to become his wife's manager and assistant.

*Annie Get Your Gun* was initially the idea of Dorothy Fields who, with her brother Herbert, planned to write the show's lyrics as well as its book. Rodgers and Hammerstein were to produce, Jerome Kern to compose the music, Joshua Logan to direct and Merman to star. When Kern died of a stroke just before work was to begin, Berlin was brought in. Because Berlin insisted on writing his own lyrics, the Fields team agreed to stay on to do only the book.

In fact, Berlin was not eager to do "a situation show," which is what he called the integrated musical, or musical play, that had been newly defined in 1943 by the success of *Oklahoma!* Yet he adapted himself to the demands of the project and, without apparent effort, produced a score that was probably as integrated as any true musical comedy up to then, with the exception of *On the Town*.

*Annie Get Your Gun* is a glorious bridge between the old era and the new. In all technical ways it is an integrated musical. But Berlin's music and lyrics -- while defining characters and situations sometimes sweetly, sometime hilariously -- have all of the light-hearted charm of the kind of musical that refuses to take itself too seriously. The score also includes a marvelous "new" number, "An Old-Fashioned Wedding," which Berlin wrote for the 1966 revival at the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center.

Like "Play a Simple Melody," which he had written in 1914 for the show *Watch Your Step* and "(I Wonder Why) You're Just in Love"

from the score of Call Me Madam (1950), "An Old-Fashioned Wedding" is a lilting, comic two-part song. Placed in the the second act of Annie Get Your Gun, it more or less spells out the future of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Butler.

While Frank, who has described his wifely ideal in "The Girl That I Marry" in the first act, repeats those sentiments in even more chauvinistic terms, Annie, singing in counterpoint, offers her own vision of what their marriage will be like, if and when it ever takes place. The number is the highlight of this new production, as sung by Ms. Peters and her excellent leading man, Tom Wopat.

Then, too, most of the show's familiar numbers, which have since become standards, are also very fine: "They Say It's Wonderful," "My Defenses Are Down," "Lost in His Arms," "I Got the Sun in the Morning."

I even like the placing of the classic Berlin anthem "There's No Business Like Show Business" at the top of the show, where it is begun by Wopat, a cappella and almost mournfully, before he is joined by the rest of the company and the full orchestra for its rousing conclusion. The way that Annie Get Your Gun is now played, the audience is seeing a show-within-a-show as Buffalo Bill (Ron Holgate) invites the audience to watch the true story of the legendary Annie Oakley and Frank Butler.

This conceit is more or less forgotten as the musical continues, but it helps to explain Tony Walton's handsome unit set, a big-top tent where all the action is set, no matter what the locale.

Berlin's comic songs "Doin' What Comes Natur'lly," "Anything You Can Do (I Can Do Better)" and "You Can't Get a Man With a Gun" demonstrate his easy way with the racy, 1940s-style doubles entendres. Sample: "A man's not so hot/ When he's shot/ Oh, you can't get a man with a gun." They also have a way of settling in your mind and refusing to leave; like happy houseguests, they stay on indefinitely.

There is never any doubt that Ms. Peters is the star of the show, though she receives superb support from Wopat, best known for his role in the television series "The Dukes of Hazzard." Though he has also appeared on Broadway in I Love My Wife, City of Angels and Guys and Dolls, his easy stage manner and fine singing voice seem to come into their own in this production. His Frank Butler is stalwart, ruggedly handsome and self-assured in a laid-back manner that enchants the awkward Annie.

Tiny creature that she is, Ms. Peters is the big, grandly comic stage presence that keeps Annie Get Your Gun on track. Looking like a dream, with or without smudges on her face, she has authority and humor that can't be faked. One can even hear in her gorgeous singing voice the thin line of resonant brass I associate with the voices of the kids who performed on the old "Horn and Hardart Children's Hour." Ms. Peters was apparently 5 when she appeared on the show to give an imitation of Sophie Tucker. An imitation? Those kids were incubi who could assume any identity they chose. There is still a little of Sophie Tucker to be enjoyed in Ms. Peters' performance here, especially in her timing and control, which are irresistible.

What there is of the choreography devised by Ms. Daniele and Jeff Calhoun is so attractive that one would appreciate more. There is a certain parsimoniousness about this physical production - the costumes and lighting, in particular -- that I hesitate to mention, in part because of the high cost of staging any musical show these days. Also because the production is so ingratiating, I don't want to sound like a scold. A major bonus: the amplification system seems to have been devised by people who feel no need to establish their credentials by blasting the audience into the next world.

Most important, Annie Get Your Gun returns Irving Berlin to Broadway, where he belongs. He is more than a theater treasure. He is a national resource.