
Director's Vision

AN INTERVIEW WITH DON STEPHENSON

By Anika Chapin, Artistic Associate

When director Don Stephenson began researching Will Rogers in advance of the Goodspeed's *The Will Rogers Follies*, he didn't know much about the man beyond his folksy cowboy persona and his famous sayings (and the fact that Stephenson's grandfather had been a big fan). He was stunned by what he learned about the famed Oklahoma cowboy who vaulted from the Wild West show to Hollywood and radio, to a national syndicated newspaper column, and even to a presidential run. "In 1933, Will Rogers was the biggest box office star in the world. There's evidence that 40 million people read his column every week. That's a huge number, even today!" Stephenson says. "He was a multimedia star—he was truly the king of media at that time." And since his column focused often on politics, "he was Walter Cronkite and Stephen Colbert and Bill Maher and Samantha Bee combined." But with one major difference from some political commenters today: "Rogers was never mean."

The knowledge of Rogers' truly spectacular life led Stephenson to realize that his production of the *The Will Rogers Follies*, which tells the story of Rogers' life in the form of a Ziegfeld follies revue (Will Rogers was a headliner for the glamorous shows that impresario Florenz Ziegfeld produced), had to do two things: "I knew it had to be entertaining, but I felt like it also had to teach people who Will Rogers was." To that end, Stephenson will fill his



production with images and quotes from Rogers' life. But of course, the show, with its fabulous *Follies* setting, is also a theatrical spectacular, a great American story told by some of the greatest storytellers of the American musical theater (composer Cy Coleman, librettist Peter Stone, and lyricists Betty Comden and Adolph Green are a Broadway dream team). With choreography by Kelli Barclay, all the "va-va-voom showbiz factor, with lots of tap dancing and scantily-clad girls coming down stairs" (a favorite feature of Ziegfeld's) will all be there, Stephenson promises. But he took additional inspiration from another part of Ziegfeld's world. At midnight after the large-scale *Follies*, Ziegfeld would host intimate shows on the roof of the theater. "It was

a little more intimate and maybe a bit more risqué, but still had all the famous people right there with you," says Stephenson. His production will have this more rarified, intimate feel.

Stephenson also loves that the creators of the piece chose to tell Will Rogers' life story within a *Ziegfeld Follies*, complete with interruptions from Ziegfeld himself when Rogers' story doesn't feel sufficiently dramatic (hence why Will meets his wife on the moon, instead of at a train depot in Oologah, Oklahoma). "It's audacious, what they did, and wild and funny," says Stephenson. But luckily, "it really works!"

THE Will Rogers
FOLLIES
a life in revue