

IRVING BERLIN'S
ANNIE GET YOUR GUN

Program Notes

by **Joshua S. Ritter, Education Director**

There's No Business Like Show Business!

Irving Berlin's unforgettable tune captures the essence of life in the entertainment business like no other song in history. Only Berlin could so eloquently express the highs and lows that accompany a theatrical career. Remarkably, Berlin was concerned about including "There's No Business Like Show Business" due to a muted initial response from his colleagues. Unbeknownst to Berlin, their silence was one of awe rather than disapproval. When Berlin submitted his score to producers Rogers and Hammerstein for the second round of rehearsals without the famous song, he drew the following reaction:

"Where's that 'Show Business' thing?" Hammerstein asked, sure that he had misplaced the number.

"I left it out," Berlin said somberly.

"In Heaven's name, why?" Hammerstein inquired.

"I didn't think you liked it," Irving retorted. "You didn't say enough."

Later, Hammerstein reflected on the situation: "He was just going to throw it away. Now out of context of the play, it's merely the song that means show business."

However, despite Berlin's incredible work on the production, he was not the original intended composer and lyricist for *Annie Get Your Gun*. Dorothy Fields conceived the idea for the musical and she intended to write the lyrics and co-write the book with her brother Herbert. She stated that the idea formed in her head after witnessing a decorated soldier who was extremely successful at a Coney Island shooting gallery. This observation conjured images of the famous sharpshooter Annie Oakley and the idea for the show was born. Dorothy brought the idea for the show to producers Rodgers and Hammerstein, who were delighted with the concept and became the creative force behind the show. Dorothy and Herbert felt that the role of Annie Oakley would best suit the inimitable Ethel Merman. What's more, her star power was sure to attract a producer and an expanded audience in the critical early stages of the run.

To compose the score, Dorothy and her collaborators contracted the prolific and renowned composer Jerome Kern. Kern had recently traveled to New York to work on a revival of *Show Boat* and he planned to discuss his potential involvement on *Annie Get Your Gun*. Tragically, Kern suffered a stroke at the age of sixty and collapsed on the street on his way to rehearsals. President Harry Truman, who was in office at the time of Kern's death, stated the following: "[Kern's] melodies will live in our voices and warm our hearts for many years to come. The man who gave them to us earned a lasting place in his nation's history."

Despite Kern's unfortunate demise, producers Rodgers and Hammerstein were successful in contracting Irving Berlin to compose the music and lyrics for *Annie Get Your Gun*. David Ewen states the following about the collaboration in his book *Complete Book of the American Musical Theatre*: "This is perhaps the only time in stage history that one of America's greatest song writers was acting as producer of a musical comedy for which another all-time great was writing the score. While Rodgers never entered into Berlin's domain by making suggestions on the kind of music needed (no more than Berlin would

tell Rodgers how to run the production), this unusual association resulted in one of the richest and most varied scores Berlin ever wrote for the stage and made possible the greatest box-office success of his career.”

Berlin, however, was accustomed to writing both lyrics and music and he had no experience writing for a “situation show.” In response, Dorothy Fields was willing to relinquish her role as lyricist. Berlin was concerned that he couldn't write music for hillbilly people, until he traveled to Atlantic City and returned with the first five songs. In the Atlantic City he composed “Doin’ What Comes Natur’lly,” “You Can’t Get a Man with a Gun,” “They Say It’s Wonderful,” and “The Girl That I Marry.” As a testament to his talent, Berlin completed the entire score before the first day of rehearsals.

Annie Get Your Gun ran for 1,147 performances after opening at the Imperial Theatre on May 16, 1946 and it went on to be a four-year hit in London. The show was revived on Broadway in 1966 with Ethel Merman reprising the role of Annie. It was later aired on ABC-TV and no copies of the broadcast have been found. A second revival was staged on Broadway in 1999, starring Bernadette Peters. Peter Stone revised the script for the 1999 revival and Goodspeed Musicals is using his version. Goodspeed Director Rob Ruggiero stated that, “Peter Stone did an incredible job of re-shaping that revival in a way that highlighted all the wonderful things about the show for more contemporary audiences.” Stone added a romantic relationship between Winnie, the sister of Frank's assistant, and Tommy, a Native American boy. He also creates a Wild West show-within-a-show that highlights the relationship between Frank Butler and Annie. Ruggiero is excited to embrace the show within-a-show concept while preserving the wonderful entertainment value of the production. He also hopes that you will enjoy his beautiful and authentic “Wild West Show” approach. We at Goodspeed are thrilled to present this enduring musical and triumph of the Broadway stage!



Ethel Merman as Annie Oakley in the original 1946 Broadway production