



PROGRAM NOTES

By Joshua S. Ritter

Goodspeed Education & Library Director

You don't have to be a baseball fan to know that the New York Yankees-Boston Red Sox rivalry bitterly divides colleagues, neighbors, families, and Goodspeed patrons. In fact, according to The Harvard Sports Analysis Collective, East Haddam is located on the frontlines of this legendary baseball feud with slightly more than half the population favoring the Red Sox. What better way for Goodspeed to bring some levity to this divisive situation than with a hilarious musical comedy? Fortunately, Joe DiPietro's side-splitting adaptation of *Damn Yankees* contemporizes the book by replacing the defunct Washington Senators with the Boston Red Sox. We are pleased to have the opportunity to provide a neutral zone where members of the Yankees Universe and Red Sox Nation can forget their bitter differences for a few hours and share some laughs when the curtain goes up.

Flashing back to the middle of the 20th century, Douglass Wallop's 1954 novel *The Year The Yankees Lost the Pennant* was a best-selling major league baseball twist on the Faust fable. *Damn Yankees'* genesis was set in motion when William Morris agent Albert B. Taylor brought this property to the attention of legendary producer, director, writer, and actor George Abbott. Abbott and his team had just struck gold with the smash hit musical *The Pajama Game*, a show based on Richard Bissel's novel *7½ Cents*. Perhaps this monumental success gave Abbott the chutzpah to take the idea of a baseball musical seriously, despite the fact that all previous attempts at creating one were unsuccessful. Abbott decided to direct the piece after enlisting Robert E. Griffith, Harold S. Prince, and Frederick Brisson as producers.

Griffith and Prince were predominantly stage managers for Abbott until they made their producing debut with *The Pajama Game*. This stunning success established them as a promising new producing force on Broadway. In fact, Prince was only 26 years old at the time, making him the youngest producer on Broadway. Similarly, *The Pajama Game* launched the Broadway careers of celebrated choreographer Bob Fosse and the exceptionally talented and promising writing team of Richard Adler and Jerry Ross. Abbott, Prince, Griffith, and Brisson assembled many of the same investors and creative team members when embarking on their next project, *Damn Yankees*. However, they needed a new cast because *The Pajama Game* was still playing at the St. James Theatre.

They hit the jackpot when they cast Gwen Verdon in the role of Lola, the Devil's personal femme fatale assistant. It was through *Damn Yankees* that Verdon met Fosse. *Damn Yankees* was seen as a George Abbott show at the time, but in later years it would be remembered by most as the first Verdon-Fosse production. The artistic and personal relationship they developed forged one of the most remarkable collaborations in Broadway history. Verdon became Fosse's lover, wife, and the living embodiment of his ingenious choreography. Verdon would prove to be one of the greatest triple-threat performers to grace the Broadway stage. She began her career on Broadway by stealing the show (despite her small role) in the Cole Porter musical *Can-Can*, which earned her the first Tony Award of her career. However, she left *Can-Can* early to work on a film with her former mentor, renowned Hollywood choreographer Jack Cole; she was offered the role of Lola during that time and she eventually accepted.

The work of Richard Adler and Jerry Ross contributed immensely to the success of *Damn Yankees* and *The Pajama Game*. The great Frank Loesser mentored Adler and Ross while they were contracted to his publishing company, Frank Music. Surely Loesser appreciated that Adler and Ross shared some of the remarkable qualities that made his work so unique. For example, similar to Loesser, Adler and Ross had the ability to capture the vernacular of the common man in their music and lyrics. While working for Loesser they penned the chart topping song "Rags to Riches" in 1953. Next, they contributed some numbers to the revue *John Murray Anderson's Almanac*. However, they fully affirmed their place as the most sought-after new writing team on Broadway after collaborating on *The Pajama Game* and, one year later, *Damn Yankees*. Tragically, their marvelous, albeit brief, partnership of only five years ended when Ross died prematurely, at age 29.

Damn Yankees opened at the 46th Street Theatre on May 5, 1955. The timing was impeccable because the baseball season had just begun and attention was already being paid to the nation's favorite pastime. Verdon's co-stars were Stephen Douglass as the rabid Washington Senators fan who is transformed into the baseball phenom Joe Hardy and Ray Walston as the Devil. The reviews were favorable after the New York opening, but the audience objected to Verdon's transformation into an ugly hag and the show was running too long. After an emergency rehearsal before the second night, material was cut and the ending was changed. This reduced the length of the show by twenty minutes, and critic Walter Kerr, who was invited back, expressed his approval. Sales also shot up after the producers shrewdly shifted the advertising focus from an innocent-green baseball theme, to a devil-red sex appeal campaign. *Damn Yankees* became the ninth Broadway musical to run more than a thousand performances, it nearly swept the Tony Awards, and it continues to delight audiences to this day.

Goodspeed's production of *Damn Yankees* is directed by Daniel Goldstein, who directed the Broadway revival of *Godspell* and Goodspeed's *Hello, Dolly!* and *The Unauthorized Autobiography of Samantha Brown*. With the newly-revised book by Joe DiPietro, Goldstein endeavors to bring you a "brand new version of the show you thought you knew." Goldstein's vision is to transport you to 1952 and to put you in the center of the action so you can experience all the nostalgia of America's greatest pastime and relive your own Red Sox-Yankees memories. We are thrilled that you've joined us for this terrific new spin on a classic musical comedy. Your presence at the Opera House is a home run for team Goodspeed.