

GOOD NEWS!

PROGRAM NOTES

By Joshua S. Ritter, Goodspeed Education & Library Director

Goodspeed Musicals is renowned for identifying and reinterpreting musical theatre gems so that their brilliance can be revealed to a contemporary audience. But not every musical involves characters that shine intellectually. In fact, the fifth longest-running show of the 1920s, *Good News!*, was about students putting football before astronomy, engaging in immodest behavior rather than thought, and neglecting their studies to dance the “Varsity Drag.” College attendance reached a high mark in the 1920’s while the stock market was still booming and *Good News!* appealed to a wide audience thanks to the rah-rah atmosphere of the decade’s collegiate craze.

During this era, musical comedies often attracted higher attendance by contracting well-known bands to play in the orchestra pit, and *Good News!* was no exception. The show began with George Olson’s popular jazz orchestra shouting school cheers to rile up the audience before the overture. *Good News!* embraced many of the artistic and societal fads of the time, helping it become a stand-out hit during the most prolific decade in Broadway history. In fact, many consider *Good News!* the quintessential show of the “era of wonderful nonsense,” as it accurately portrayed the hedonistic innocence, good-natured hijinks, and youth culture of the age.

Arguably, no song writing team could capture the spirit of the decade like B.G. DeSylva, Lew Brown, and Ray Henderson. In fact, the song “Varsity Drag” became the dance craze of the year, and dance bands throughout the nation were regularly playing “Just Imagine,” “Lucky in Love,” “The Best Things in Life Are Free.” and the title song. *Good News!* was so successful that it led the way for a series of similarly lighthearted musical comedies penned by DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson, involving boxing in *Hold Everything*, golf in *Follow Thru*, and aviation as the theme in *Flying High*.

Before writing the music and lyrics for *Good News!*, DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson’s careers both paralleled and were influenced by George Gershwin. Like Gershwin, they gained notoriety by composing songs for Tin Pan Alley and a series of revues entitled *George White’s Scandals*. Gershwin left the *Scandals* in 1924 to work on the book musical *Lady, Be Good*, and White needed a song writing team to replace him. White hired DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson to pen songs for his *Scandals of 1925*, which provided them their first opportunity to work as a unified writing team. In 1927, when George White decided not to produce the *Scandals*, this gave DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson the opportunity to compose music for their first major book musical, *Good News!*. Undeniably, Gershwin, DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson were instrumental in shifting the focus away from the ubiquitous 1920s revue to the development of the book musical.

Good News! opened at Chanin's 46th Street Theatre (now the Richard Rodgers Theatre) on September 6, 1927 and ran for 557 performances. It became the theatre's largest hit to that date and was produced the following year in London. Later, MGM made Hollywood film versions of *Good News!* in 1930 and 1947. Goodspeed Musicals opened its 10th anniversary season with *Good News!* in June of 1972 to rave reviews. In 1973, Producer Harry Rigby chose *Good News!* to follow his successes reviving other popular period shows such as *No, No, Nanette* and *Irene*. The show toured profitably for two years before closing on Broadway in January of 1975. In 1993, the Music Theatre of Wichita premiered a new version of the show and an acclaimed cast album was released.

Goodspeed veteran director/choreographer of *Good News!*, Vince Pesce and award-winning adapter of the show, Jeremy Desmon (*Norma Terris: Girl in the Frame* and *Pump up the Volume*) agree that Goodspeed Musicals is the perfect place to produce *Good News!* again. According to Vince, "We need lightning-fast entrances and exits for this style of comedy, so the intimacy of the Opera House stage works perfectly. Also, the choreography is tight, kinetic, and joyous, and this venue allows us to deliver explosive 1920s dance while making the audience feel like they're a part of the action." Jeremy adds that "the people of Goodspeed are the perfect caretakers of this gem. They have musicals running in their blood. They innately understand what it takes to respect and honor our musical theatre history, all the while having the guts and passion to reinvigorate this common legacy for our next generation of theatergoers."

We are thrilled and honored to breathe new life into this signature Goodspeed show. Now, take off your raccoon coat and prepare to be transported to the glorious time of new beginnings, fabulous flappers, and carefree college days.



Brown, DeSylva, Henderson, and their music publisher, Robert Crawford, c.1927