

SHOW BOAT

Director's Vision

by Rob Ruggiero

SHOW BOAT has moved and entertained audiences since it was first produced back in 1927. The musical is based on the 1926 novel of the same name by Edna Ferber and has seen many productions for close to a century. It is a powerful story spanning nearly four decades, and takes us on a journey into the lives of those living and working on the *Cotton Blossom*, a Mississippi River show boat. The play's dominant themes of racial prejudice, family struggles, and enduring love have touched the lives of many audiences over the years, and the show itself helped redefine the musical in its time.

It is certainly a daunting task to take on this monumental classic. When Goodspeed first approached me to direct *Show Boat*, I realized I actually knew very little about it. I have never seen the show to this day. Here I am now preparing for our production and I have become totally consumed and moved by this powerful story and extraordinary piece of musical theater. I continue to be humbled and impressed at how this show affects all of us and how “not old” it feels. I am very honored Michael Price has trusted me to direct Goodspeed’s first and only production of *Show Boat*.

What interests me most is telling the story of this intimate show business family; a family that reaches beyond any biological connection to a place that represents a very deep connection and love. This family crosses lines of race and class, which in its time was even more provocative and dangerous. I was particularly surprised to encounter how assertively *Show Boat* dealt with race issues. For me, these relate back to the *family* issues of the play and are not some huge political statement. It’s very personal.

Our version of *Show Boat* is based on the 1946 published script, but we have made (with the support and approval of **The Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization**) some adjustments, edits, and changes specific to the Goodspeed production. *Show Boat* has never been performed the same way twice – it’s a piece of repertoire that has always invited interpretation and choice. In addition, we faced specific challenges with producing *Show Boat* at Goodspeed: the size of cast we could accommodate on stage and the limited amount of physical stage space available to perform the show. Certain changes we made reflect necessary adjustments that serve both those challenges, but there was also the more important choice of *HOW to tell this story*. I really wanted to focus our production on the story of this show business family. I found particular inspiration in both the novel and 1936 movie as I searched for authenticity. This *Show Boat* will hopefully be more intimate and story centric, possibly one of the most intimate *Show Boats* to date.

The support of the R&H organization was instrumental as I searched for solutions that both served the story and honored the history of the show. They provided access to rare archival materials, offered suggestions, advice, and guidance, and most importantly trusted and encouraged my vision for *Show Boat*.

So... what will be distinct about Goodspeed’s *Show Boat*? Here a few highlights to watch out for:

- First, this will be a more concise and streamlined production – one that is very focused on story and relationship, while maintaining its entertainment value. I hope audiences will leave this *Show Boat* with a very personal connection to this extended family, these characters and how life on the Cotton Blossom (and away from it) changes them.
- *Yes, there will be a boat*. One thing we all felt was imperative was “you can’t do *Show Boat* without a boat” and we’ve worked hard to meet that challenge on this very small stage. Working with my long-time collaborator, set designer **Michael**

Schweikardt, solving the design has been both an inspiring and epic undertaking. We had two major tasks: how to articulate the boat on the Goodspeed stage, and then how to articulate the change to Chicago and the Trocadero. Michael has worked tirelessly to design a beautiful set skillfully brought to life by the Goodspeed artisans.

- One of the most exciting and original changes will be found in the how we are approaching the top of Act Two. With the support and approval of R&H, Alice Hammerstein, and the Ferber estate – I was invited to present an alternative solution to this section in particular. Our *Show Boat* combines and re-structures existing materials in a new and original way.

Finally, casting is something that is critical in producing a successful *Show Boat*. I wanted a great acting company as well as a great company of singers. Though the music must be served, of course, I didn't want the show to be just "sung," but rather *lived*. Goodspeed searched very diligently with our casting director to find the right actors to support this vision.

Captain Andy is the heart of any *Show Boat*, and the charming and funny **Lenny Wolpe** will fill those shoes. His other half, the strong and protective **Parthy** will be played by the uniquely amusing **Karen Murphy**. The key roles of Magnolia and Ravenal are being brought to life by the quirky and wonderfully talented **Sarah Uriate Berry** matched with the authentically charming **Ben Davis**. Naturally, the choice of Joe is very important as well. We chose the powerful and sublime **David Aron Damane**. His (and our) Queenie will be experienced through the maternal strength and humor of **Andrea Frierson**. The song and dance team of Frank and Ellie will be played by the delightful "triple threat" couple, **Danny Gardner** and **Jennifer Knox**, and the pivotal role of Julie by the beautiful and layered **Lesli Margherita**.



I continue to feel very fortunate to be able to collaborate with this level of talent here at Goodspeed, and this cast is no different. The entire company of twenty-five actors (plus three swings!) will certainly bring a very special passion to our version of *Show Boat*.

Come aboard for this unique and intimate journey!

Goodspeed Executive Director Michael P. Price and Show Boat Director Rob Ruggiero at the first read-through with the cast