

# BULLETS OVER BROADWAY

*The Shedd takes aim at Irving Berlin's classic musical Annie Get Your Gun*

**A** classic Broadway musical in every sense of the phrase, including its most ambivalent and queasy connotations, *Annie Get Your Gun* is a textbook example of American stage artistry at its mid-20th-century apotheosis: With music and lyrics by Irving Berlin, the show oozes a charm and confidence completely devoid of cynicism, which is not to say the static stereotypes it trots out (racial, sexual, socioeconomic) are lacking in self-criticism, or even their own undoing.

The fictionalized story of real-life Annie Oakley's rise to fame as a sharpshooter in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in the late 1800s, the musical, with an original book written by Dorothy and Herbert Fields, centers on the sexual and professional tension between Oakley and Frank Butler, an egotistical dead-eye who is alternately charmed and threatened by his talented costar, whose bumpkin's naiveté is also the source of her aw-shucks confidence.

As directed by Ron Daum, Shedd Theatricals stages the musical in an orthodox and straightforward manner (though the deletion of the number "I'm An Indian Too" is revealing and, in the end, a blunder). The large cast is strong, especially Shirley Andress and Matt Musgrove as the barrel-crossed lovers Annie and Frank; what these two lack in chemistry (more sexual tension, please!) they more than make up in technical expertise — both are fantastic singers — and their performances fuel the rollicking movement of the show, which proceeds at a gallop.

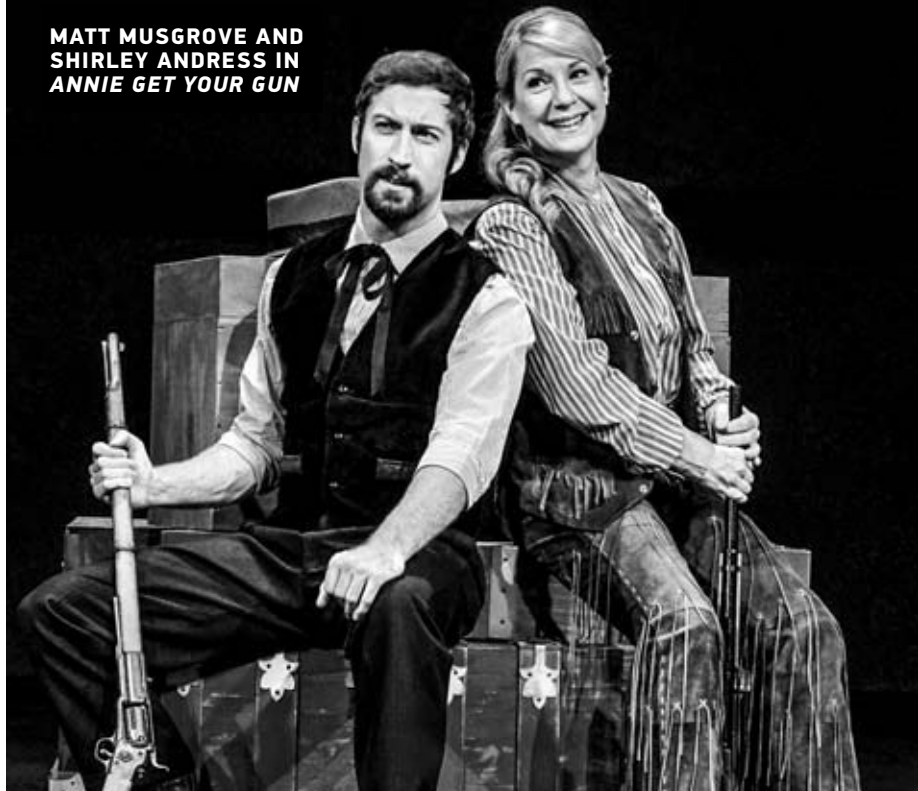
It's truly delightful to see a local production executed with such expertise: The acting, singing and dancing are all spot-on, and the show has a sheen of professionalism that brings out the diverting qualities of classic Broadway musicals. The hidden live orchestra is a great touch. A minor complaint is that, beneath all this technical perfection rests a kind of tightness, a reluctance to cut loose that detracts from the gritty populism of Berlin's writing. Absent is a dash of the heart and sauciness I've seen in previous productions of the show.

*Annie Get Your Gun*, as staged in 2016 at The Shedd, is really two shows: On the one hand, it remains one of our most beloved musicals, a fun and frolicsome romantic comedy featuring such classic numbers as "There's No Business Like Show Business," "You Can't Get A Man With A Gun" and "Anything You Can Do"; on the other hand, its time travel into our era of supposedly heightened political consciousness highlights the show's inherent bigotries, including its canny-like representation of Chief Sitting Bull (played by George Comstock). I believe, however, that using the latter to condemn the former would represent a higher form of intolerance than a whole stage-full of dime store Indians.

We can condemn history, or we can listen to it. Personally, I enjoy uncovering the undeclared feminism that lurks in the show, and I note that, despite the burlesque appropriation of Sitting Bull, he also happens to be the only one on stage with common sense. Such representations, tangled as they are with the framed biases and bigotries of a very particular time and place, give the show a complex tension that I doubt eluded Berlin himself. In the end, it's the fragile male ego that gets the biggest goose of all in *Annie Get Your Gun*.

*Annie Get Your Gun* runs through Dec. 18 at The Shedd; \$22-\$38, tickets at theshedd.org or 541-434-7000.

**MATT MUSGROVE AND SHIRLEY ANDRESS IN ANNIE GET YOUR GUN**



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