Director Mary Zimmerman, used to transforming ancient tales, now takes on *Guys and Dolls*—a different kind of enchantment.

By Mark Dundas Wood

Urban missionary Sarah Brown from *Guys and Dolls*—the 1950 musical based on stories by Damon Runyon—believes steadfastly that true love is out there, fated for her, and that she’ll recognize her white knight instantly when he arrives. “I’ll know when my love comes along . . .” she sings. “I’ll know, as I run to his arms, that at last I’ve come home safe and sound.”

The sentiments of Frank Loesser’s song “I’ll Know” are nearly interchangeable with those in ballads written for Walt Disney’s *Snow White* (“Someday my prince will come . . .”) and *Sleeping Beauty* (“I know you! I walked with you once upon a dream . . .”).

But that shouldn’t be surprising. *Guys and Dolls* is in good company with a number of mid-20th-century American stage musicals with a fairy-tale sensibility. *My Fair Lady* is based on George Bernard Shaw’s take on the myth of “Pygmalion and Galatea,” but also calls to mind “Cinderella.” *Funny Girl* gives us the Ugly Duckling transformed to a Ziegfeld Follies swan. *Once Upon a Mattress*, meanwhile, goes directly to Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Princess and the Pea” for its libretto.

**Gangsters with heart**

In an interview at OSF in June, Director Mary Zimmerman said she recognizes *Guys and Dolls*’ connection with the worlds of storytellers like Andersen. “For all its milieu of Damon Runyon and the back-alley world of New York City, *Guys and Dolls* is, in the end, a sort of brilliant, complex fairy tale,” she said. “It’s a world in which the gangsters aren’t particularly dangerous, and the ‘doll’ Adelaide—the burlesque performer—wants nothing more than a house full of children and a white picket fence. A great deal of its charm resides in how essentially sweet these rough-and-tumble characters and story turn out to be in the end.”

The reformation of *Guys and Dolls*’ gamblers Sky Masterson (Sarah’s love interest) and Nathan Detroit (Adelaide’s guy) is familiar territory for Zimmerman: “Radical transformation or transfiguration is a big theme in a lot of what I’ve done. This is that in more human and realistic terms. There is radical transformation and transfiguration of these two characters, Nathan and Sky, away from their gambling ways.”

Chicago-based Zimmerman has repeatedly turned to storybook worlds, often with “presto-change-o” plot points, throughout her career. In 2012 she directed *The White Snake*, an adaptation of an ancient Chinese legend, for OSF. Her most famous work, *Metamorphoses*, was a stage adaptation of Ovid’s myths. Developed at Northwestern University and the Lookingglass Theatre Company, of which she is a longtime member, the play opened on Broadway in 2002 and earned Zimmerman a Tony Award for direction. She also developed stage versions of “The Arabian Nights,” Homer’s “Odyssey” and—more recently—Rudyard Kipling’s “Jungle Book” stories (for Disney Theatricals).

Although she has directed opera and revamped Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide*, Zimmerman has never directed a classic American musical—until now. Unsurprisingly, she’s begun the process by examining the original Runyon stories used by writers Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows for the show’s book. *Guys and Dolls* is customarily presented in a post-World War II setting, but Zimmerman is rethinking that: “The stories on which *Guys and Dolls* is based were written and set squarely in the 1930s—the heyday of gangsters and ‘dolls.’ The OSF production will push more toward that era.”

Music director Doug Peck is concocting an effervescent, early-jazz orchestration of the Loesser score. Wrote Peck, in an email: “Many of the songs of *Guys and Dolls* have become jazz standards in their own right—‘If I Were a Bell,’” “I’ve Never Been In Love Before,” “Luck Be a Lady,” “My Time of Day,” etc.—and it’s exciting to be able to acknowledge the double life these classic tunes have led when scoring them in the context of the show.”

Zimmerman emphasized that the original stories and the show both have a “defiantly exuberant” energy. Theatregoers need not worry about being enshrouded in Hooverville gloom. “You know, gangsters and showgirls do very well during the Depression,” she said. “The spirit of the stories and the show is very, very high.”