Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

Anything Goes
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Cover photo by Karl Hugh.
# Anything Goes

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Porter was born in Peru, Indiana, on June 9, 1891, the son of Samuel Porter, a pharmacist who married the daughter of millionaire, James Omar Cole. Kate Porter and her father had competing ambitions for her son. Kate made sure he acquired social skills, including piano lessons and regular visits to Chicago for theatre- and opera-going. After grammar school, at Kate’s insistence, the young Cole attended Worcester Academy in Massachusetts. Her father paid for Porter’s education, expecting that his grandson would go into business or law. Kate had encouraged him to write songs, and he had a piano at Worcester where he often played and sang to his classmates. After graduating from Worcester, Porter entered Yale. There his composing flourished. He wrote and performed in shows for his fraternity and the Yale Dramatic Association. He estimated that in his four years there he wrote 300 songs (Schwartz, Charles, Cole Porter [New York: Dial Press, 1977] 23). To please his grandfather, Porter entered Harvard Law School. He continued writing shows for Yale and after a year switched to studying music. About a year later he moved to New York.

Through his social contacts he met a producer and agent who placed several of his songs in musicals by Romberg and Kern. He had three shows produced between 1916 and 1922. None were memorable. When Richard Rodgers first heard Porter play some of his songs, he asked why he wasn’t writing for Broadway and was embarrassed to learn that two of Porter’s shows had made it to Broadway (McBrien, William [New York: Albert A. Knopf, 1999] 105). See America First had had fifteen performances; Hitchy-Koo of 1919, fifty-six performances; and Hitchy-Koo of 1922 closed in Philadelphia tryout (Schwartz, 274–76). Something of the dilettante clung for a time. A friend said that “he so feared failure that he pretended in the 1920s to be a playboy who incidentally wrote songs” (McBrien, 96). The second strong woman in Porter’s life helped change that.

Porter met wealthy divorcee, Linda Lee Thomas, in Paris in 1918 and quickly became attracted. They had mutual friends, common interests, and a shared social position. She responded to his talent, charm, and irreverence; he to her looks, sophistication, and maturity (she was almost eight years older). They married in 1919. Given Linda’s worldliness, she must have been aware of Porter’s homosexuality but was willing to accept him on those terms. Linda’s first husband had been abusive, and Porter presented no threat to her on that count.

At Linda’s encouragement, Porter resumed music studies (briefly) and composed the jazz ballet, Within the Quota—his only extended orchestral work. She invited several famous authors to write an opera libretto for Porter to set to music, but got no takers. Porter finally established himself as a Broadway composer in 1928, with Paris. The New Yorker magazine reviewer wrote: “No one else now writing words and music knows so exactly the delicate balance between sense, rhyme, and tune” (McBrien, 120–121). An even bigger success was Fifty Million Frenchmen (1929). In 1931 the film version was released. Thereafter all of Porter’s Broadway hits were made into films.

Porter wrote “Night and Day” for Fred Astaire, who starred in Gay Divorce (1932) and in the 1934 film (retitled The Gay Divorcee). Porter didn’t at first recognize it as a potential
hit, but it became one of ASCAP’s top ten money makers of all times (McBrien, 146). He commented in 1930, “Nobody can predict which tune will catch on with the public and which will not. . . . All a composer can do is write the melodies as he feels them and then hope for the best” (McBrien, 127).

It was Porter’s practice to tailor songs to a performer’s vocal range and style. For Anything Goes (1934), he identified Ethel Merman’s strongest notes and, since he wrote his own lyrics, made the key words in her songs coincide with those notes (Meran, Ethel and Eells, George, Merman [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978] 136). When a star had difficulty with a song, Porter usually replaced it with another. Occasionally he stood his ground. Nelson Eddy was uncomfortable with “In the Still of the Night” (for the film Rosalie). Confident that MGM head, Louis B. Mayer, would love it, Porter played it for him. The song stayed (Schwartz, 177).

Finding the Hollywood lifestyle and weather appealing, from 1935 on Porter divided his year between New York and Hollywood. Linda tolerated Hollywood for his sake. Gradually, work and socializing came between them, and Porter became less discreet about his sexual attachments. When he broke a promise to reform, Linda left for Paris (Schwartz, 176). She returned later that year (1937) immediately after Porter shattered both legs in a horse-back riding accident. Linda persuaded the doctors not to amputate though the prognosis was bleak, involving multiple operations with no guarantee of success and the prospect of chronic pain, which, indeed, Porter endured for the rest of his life (Schwartz, 179).

Porter soon resumed his customary work and social life, even visiting Machu Picchu on horseback. Between December 1939 and January 1944 he turned out five Broadway shows plus film scores (Schwartz, 195). The shows (among them DuBarry Was a Lady and Panama Hattie, both starring Merman) were successes, though critics’ complaints that Porter’s inspiration wasn’t up to its former level made him fear he had written himself out (Eells, p. 206–7). When playwright Bella Spewack approached Porter to write the score for Kiss Me, Kate (1948), he turned it down, feeling that his style wasn’t suited to a Shakespeare-based show. Spewack eventually convinced him, and the result was his biggest hit (1,077 performances) both at home and throughout Europe. It was considered “the perfect musical”—until, as Porter quipped, “along came a little thing called South Pacific” (Eells, 255). Depression over poor reviews for Can-Can (1953) was tempered somewhat by its box office success.

After years of suffering from emphysema, Linda died in 1954. Though often separated by illness and work, Linda and Cole were close, and her death affected him deeply. Fighting loneliness, he filled his days with work and socializing. Silk Stockings (1955) earned both good reviews and large audiences, but it was his final Broadway show; pain and poor health caused depression and eroded his inspiration. Aladdin (1958), written for television, was his final show. He hardly noticed its poor reception because chronic bone inflammation finally necessitated amputating his right leg. From then on until his death in 1964, he was frequently hospitalized. Nevertheless, he maintained much of his former routine, alternating living in New York and Hollywood, giving small elegant dinner parties, keeping up with professional interests. But he was often despondent. To cheer him up, his secretary played recordings of his shows. When the music ended, he would shake his head and say “How did I ever do it?” (Eells, 319). Partial answers include hard work, love of word play, willingness to revise—plus some special magic. Critic Walter Clemons wrote: “In a way no other songwriter of the period quite did, Porter created a world. . . . And it was a sexy place to be invited” (McBrien, 172).
Synopsis: Anything Goes

The S.S. American is preparing to set sail from New York to England. Billy Crocker, a young assistant to Wall Street tycoon Elisha J. Whitney, a passenger on the ship, decides to stow away in hopes of wooing his long-lost love and wealthy debutante, Hope Harcourt, who is also on board. However, much to Billy's chagrin, Hope's mother, Evangeline Harcourt, is delighted that Hope is engaged to be married to a stuffy Englishman, Lord Evelyn Oakleigh (who is also onboard), upon arrival in England.

Also on the ship are Reno Sweeney, an evangelist-turned-nightclub singer, and her bevy of "angelic" showgirls, who will be providing music and dance entertainment during the crossing. The ship has no sooner set sail than Reno runs into Billy, an old friend, and he persuades her to help him break up Hope's engagement.

"Moonface" Martin, a gangster known as "Public Enemy 13" and his moll Erma are disguised as a reverend and a missionary, respectively. They have two Chinese "converts" and all four attempt to evade the law while on board. Billy eventually learns the identity of this misfit bunch, and, in exchange for his silence, they too join in the scheme to break up Hope and Lord Evelyn.

After more disguises, ploys, confessions, mistaken identities, and marriage proposals, all done to the fantastic music of Cole Porter, how will everything work out? Who knows? Anything goes!

Characters: Anything Goes

Reno Sweeney: A sexy evangelist turned nightclub dancer
Hope Harcourt: A beautiful debutante
Evangeline Harcourt: Hope's mother, a widow
Lord Evelyn Oakleigh: A wealthy Englishman
Elisha Whitney: A goggle-eyed tycoon
Billy Crocker: Whitney's young assistant
Moonface Martin: A hapless gangster, Public Enemy #13
Erma: A sexy gangster's gal
Luke and John: Two Chinese converts
Ship's Captain
Ship's Purser
Ship's Crew and Passengers
Angel #1, #2, #3, #4: Showgirls with Reno's act
Male Quartet: Sailors
Fred: A bartender
Henry T. Dobson: A minister
Two Reporters
A News Photographer
Two FBI Agents
An Old Lady in a Wheelchair
“Times have changed and we’ve often rewound the clock
Since the Puritans got a shock
When they landed on Plymouth Rock”
(All play quotes are from Anything Goes, 1.8).

Every enduring play has an exciting and varied history, and Anything Goes is no exception. Written in the early 1930s, Anything Goes originally ran for 420 performances in New York's newly-built Alvin Theatre. Ethel Merman created the role of Reno Sweeney, the loud and lusty female lead, in the original production, making her a Broadway and film star. In 1962 Anything Goes was revived off Broadway and ran for 239 performances, winning the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Revival of a Musical. Hal Linden starred as Billy Crocker in that production. Linden went on to enjoy a successful career in theatre and television.

In late 1987 Patti LuPone—fresh from her Broadway appearances as Eva Peron in Evita—starred as Reno Sweeney in a newly-revised version of Anything Goes, which ran at New York's Vivian Beaumont Theatre for eleven months. The most recent Broadway revival was staged at the Stephen Sondheim Theatre in April 2011 and ran until July 2012, starring Sutton Foster and Joel Grey.

How does Anything Goes—written eighty years ago for a world vastly different from today’s—continue to speak to and entertain contemporary audiences around the world? It begins with the music and lyrics, which sprang from the inventive and playful genius of Cole Porter (1891–1964). Porter is one of only a handful of composer/lyricists to have written both music and lyrics, but he’s in formidable company with George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, and Richard Rodgers. In a recent article by George Eells, “naughtiness” and “unblushing romance” describe Porter’s lyrics in Anything Goes. “[Porter] is best known for the cleverness, double entendres, and sexual suggestiveness . . . and for melodies that pulse with a Latin or tropical beat” (“Porter, Cole,” Reader’s Companion to American History, 1991 [History Study Center, 1 Jan 2013]).

The love triangle in Anything Goes may have been the inspiration for that of Titanic, in which a rich girl is forced to marry a rich man in order to save her family’s fortune, only to fall instead for a penniless gambler. It may not be mere coincidence that there is card playing in the hull of the ship in both stories! The 2011 revival of Anything Goes included a quartet of singing sailors and nautical themes among all the major characters. When Reno Sweeney visits the ship’s lounge to sing “Blow, Gabriel, Blow” she does so in full gospel revival style. Each production of Anything Goes will infuse the show with unique and creative themes, through set design, lighting, instrumentation, makeup and costumes.

“In older days a glimpse of stocking
Was looked on as something shocking
But now God knows, Anything Goes!”

The financial and sexual themes woven into Anything Goes provide a vehicle for the likes of gangsters, nobility, singers, Brits versus Yanks, rich versus poor, heathens versus evangelists, and disguises versus revelations. By intermission, nearly every character in the show will be exposed as a phoney hiding behind some form of social mask; however, by the
final curtain, the audience will have seen most of the characters shed their societal disguises and embrace happiness over wealth.

“The world has gone mad today and good’s bad today
And black’s white today and day’s night today
And most guys today that women prize today
Are just silly gigolos.”

The 1920s found Americans using a new euphemism—“anything goes.” It referred to the new social mores of the Roaring Twenties: rising hemlines on women’s dresses, Prohibition (which created the semi-hidden world of the speakeasy), the peacetime euphoria that followed WWI, the financial security of post-industrial America, and a sense that anything can and probably would be acceptable eventually. How right they were! Entertainment quickly became daring, glorifying the female body in the popular musical theatre revues filled with scantily clad chorus girls, as in Ziegfeld’s Follies.

The Great Depression saw revues pared down, for the sake of expenses, with smaller casts, less lavish sets and costumes, and sturdier storylines. In her book on this topic, Lucy Moore discusses the impact the Depression had on the country. “Families were shattered, the birth rate dropped and marriages were postponed indefinitely. . . . Government leaders experimented with programs to relieve poverty and restore the economy,” which gave Americans hope. “Leisure activities remained popular and provided an escape from the troubles of everyday life . . . and the New Deal programs provided government-subsidized arts programs that gave many Americans the opportunity to experience cultural activities for the first time” (Anything Goes: A Biography of the Roaring Twenties [New York: Overlook Press, 2010]).

Anything Goes is a musical in two acts set within various locations on an ocean liner. Loosely wrapped in a plotline written by Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse, Anything Goes has been liberally rewritten in intervals by Howard Lindsay, Russel and Anna Crouse, Timothy Crouse, and John Weidman. In 2013, the Utah Shakespeare Festival will produce the version of Anything Goes that was written for the 1987 revival. Permission from Tams-Witmark has been given for this popular “Beaumont version,” which differs from the original by virtue of plot revisions, rearranged music, additions and deletions of songs, and a few songs re-assigned to various characters. These changes help to explain why Anything Goes remains one of the most popular musicals among high school and college theatre departments.

Clearly, this is a play/musical that continues to speak of and to audiences through its colorful cast of loveable, duplicitous characters who sing and dance to some of the most romantic and catchy tunes ever to grace the American stage.

“And though I’m not a great romancer
I know that I’m proud to answer when you propose
Anything Goes!”