

Morning Call
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NO STOPPING US NOW...

**Sparkling design, Broadway magic
keep Muhlenberg summer theater
kickin' at 25**

By Geoff Gehman

It was 1988, and Curtis Dretsch wasn't happy with the curtain call for the Muhlenberg Summer Music Theatre production of "The Music Man." A band parading in shabby costumes in a grimy gym just didn't satisfy a scenic designer

with a mission to provide "pure delight."

With considerable help from costume designer Mildred Greene, his formidable ally, Dretsch made the "Music Man" finale splashier and flashier. As the curtain rose, musicians marched in spanking-new, sparkling white, red and gold uniforms on the Main Street set, a picture-perfect postcard from the first act. Audience members gasped, cooed and clapped wildly.

Extraordinary applause for extraordinary design is one of the many elements that makes Muhlenberg Summer Music Theatre special. Since 1981 the non-profit program produced by Muhlenberg college's department of theatre and dance has presented lavish, richly entertaining versions of Broadway's instant classics ("Guys and Dolls"), gradual classics ("The Most Happy Fella") and almost-forgotten classics ("The Red Mill"). It has been a showcase for Muhlenberg students, a sanctuary for professional guests, a repertory company for some of the Lehigh Valley's best performers, a treat for nearly 20,000 spectators a year.

"George M!," which opens the 25th festival on Wednesday, is the latest smorgasborad. T's more than a celebration of George M. Cohan, the song-and-dance king who wrote more than 40 Broadway shows and helped elevate Broadway to the Great White Way. Loaded with tap dancing and rousing anthems ("You're a Grand Old Flag" earned Cohan the Congressional Medal of Honor), it's a celebration of a quarter century of Broadway's greatest hits in Muhlenberg's great white Center for the Arts.

Choreographing the show is Germaine Salsberg, who taught tap visionary Savion Glover. Playing Jerry Cohan, George's father, is Mark Chmiel, a Salsberg student who performed with Jerry Lewis in a touring "Damn Yankees."

"George M!" is a double homecoming for Chmiel, a 1981 graduate of Palmerton High School. It's his first production with Salsberg, who has choreographed four shows for Muhlenberg. It's also his first significant role at the Allentown festival. In the summer of 1981, Chmiel sat in the front row of Muhlenberg's Empie Theatre and watched "Candide" with piano teacher Earl Seip, his musical mentor. Chmiel was so bowled over that night he promised himself and Seip he would perform on the same stage. He fulfilled his vow in 1993, returning as a professional actor to play Tulsa in "Gypsy."

Directing "George M!" is Charles Richter, one of the festival's three founding fathers. Back in 1981, he recalls, the main goal was training Muhlenberg students by pairing them with professional guests. The musicals that first season were breezy summer vehicles: "Candide," "The Student Prince," "The Mikado." Staging one of Gilbert & Sullivan's most beloved operettas was a marketing ploy, a way of turning older fans into patrons. "It was still when there were a lot of people," says Richter, "who remembered what an operetta was."

Twenty-five years later, Richter remains a teaching producer with the spark of the high schooler who helped stage a musical a week at a summer-sock theater in Barnesville, Schuylkill County. In 1995, for example, he chose "A Chorus Line" partly to develop Muhlenberg's year-old dance minor. The next year, he raised the ante by hiring Salsberg to choreograph that tap-athon, "42nd Street." He also wanted to spotlight the dancing of Muhlenberg seniors Ryan Gardner and Cheryl Galaga. After four years, he said at the time, they needed to be out front, "before they leave and become famous."

As a director, Richter specializes in unifying huge casts of disparate performers: students, pros, local amateurs, children. He keeps everyone in line by stressing clean, honest acting. Leave the ham, he essentially says, at the deli.

Richter is known as a generous teammate. He's been especially supportive of William Sanders, who has choreographed and/or directed a half-dozen Muhlenberg productions, including "Damn Yankees (2002) and "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" (2003). The latter two jobs kept Sanders financially and emotionally afloat when he was struggling as a freelance director in Manhattan.

"Charlie trusted me as a choreographer from the star," says Sanders, who is in his second term as artistic director for Civic Theatre of Allentown. "He let me stage complete numbers, which doesn't often happen when you're working with a director for the first time. He wants input; he's really good at allowing a process to happen. Charlie gave me a lot of opportunities. He provided me with a home."

One of Richter's homiest productions was "The Red Mill," a 1906 Victor Herbert musical comedy about a Dutch village tilted by American flimflammers. "We're talking about one of the oldest chestnuts in the world," says Richter. "I gave the cast a script and they looked at me as if I was a lunatic."

Richter updated "The Red Mill" by casting four of the Valley's most versatile vaudevillians: Joe Birchak, Bob Fahringer, Neil Hever and the late Tom Roche. He picked these "exposition kings" – Fahringer's phrase – for their inventive improvisations, their Cuisinart accents, their fluctuating body types – from Fahringer's roly-poly Mutt to Hever's bean-pole Jeff. He made them stand together simply because they looked ridiculous.

Richter even invented a role for David Smith, a balding, squat, moon-faced third banana so popular with festival audiences, he was applauded for entrances. In "The Red Mill," Smith appeared for no reason but comic relief, scampering across the stage with paint can, paint brush and yellow fright wig. Richter figured that a spoof set in Holland needed a Pennsylvania Dutch Boy.

Richter is the festival's song-and-dance impresario, the head counselor of Camp Muhlenberg. Dretsch, who met Richter in graduate school at Southern Methodist University, is the architect of practical fancy, the scenic emperor. He's the one most responsible for the festival's brilliant colors, its crowd-rousing grandeur.

Dretsch's sets are still talked about decades after being dismantled. The train interior in "On the Twentieth Century" (1990), a gleaming, rolling, thrilling facsimile of stainless-steel Art Deco pizzazz. Henry Higgins' library in "My Fair Lady" (1991), a two-story, winding-staircased, mobile 40- by 22-foot Victorian character. The rising moon in "H.M.S. Pinafore" (1982), an illuminated drum head pulled slowly by a stage hand.

Dretsch sounds a bit embarrassed by all this opulence. The "My Fair Lady" set, he admits, was "obscenely massive." Then again, he's speaking with a certain amount of distance. In 1993-2003 he gave up his festival duties to

serve as Muhlenberg's vice president for academic affairs and dean of the college for faculty. Last year he returned to the festival fold to design sets for "Annie Get Your Gun."

Dretsch no longer has the money to design huge, over-the-top sets. As he points out, the cost of lumber and other shop materials has increased more than 300 percent over 10-plus years. Gone are the days when two Muhlenberg students spent an entire summer carving "Carousel" horses.

While Dretsch's budget is smaller, his goal remains grand. "What we try to do during the summer season is to provide audiences with something that's not necessary, something I think is necessary to a rich life, a fulfilling life," he says. "You know, people don't know what they've missed until they actually have it."

The festival's third charter captain is musical director Jeremy Slavin, whose first purchased LP was "South Pacific." He's the one who balances untrained singers with finalists in the Luciano Pavarotti Vocal Competition, who makes the chorus a star, who serves as a level-headed lightning rod for the more emotional Dretsch and Richter.

"Jeremy has such a calming influence on the company," says Sanders. "But he doesn't back off from what he wants. He's a hard-ass without being a hard-ass."

Slavin is endorsed by Neil Hever a 1982 Muhlenberg graduate who has played a slew of funny, nimble characters for the festival. "I've always felt that I'm a marginal singer with some poor habits, but Jeremy never let my view interfere with our time together," says Hever, who is program director of WDIY-FM in Bethlehem. "He always tried to encourage me to make improvements and assured me that I had a pleasant voice – a great compliment from such a fine instructor."

From 1981 to 1996 the festival's fourth wheel was costume designer Mildred Greene, a professional pattern maker and an expert seamstress. Before coming to Muhlenberg, she attended bushels of operas with her late husband, David Greene, an English professor and an authority on classical music. She was, however, no fan of musicals. She remembers attending only one, "One Touch of Venus," and hating it.

Greene signed up for the chance to use all her skills, for the adventure of large-scale collaboration. Partnering with Dretsch, she created banquets of colors, textures and embellishments. She was insanely busy on "My Fair Lady." She mixed satins and silks, capes and plumed hats, dresses for

ballroom and race track. The final tally was an astonishing 350-plus costumes.

Greene is an unusually intuitive technician, that rare costumes designer who begins cutting fabric after only a handful of body measurements. "Mildred is very brilliant, and this is where she put her brilliance," says Richter. She knew how to make miracles out of nothing. I'd give her a preposterously small budget and she'd say no problem."

Dretsch qualifies Richter's statement. "Well, that's not quite right," he says. "It eventually became no problem. If I did something Mildred thought was too much, too over-the-top, she'd simply say 'No.' When she said that, I knew not to push her."

Greene says she thoroughly enjoyed working with Richter and Dretsch – "the boys." "I really felt that we all wanted to make it look good," she says. "My attitude about life in general is not to make things hard. I wanted to make people comfortable, because I think they perform better if they're comfortable."

The festival's high level of comfort has attracted a high level of professional guests. In 1997 Joan Susswein Barber played Aldonza/Dulcinea in "Man of la Mancha," a role she played on Broadway opposite Richard Kiley and Raul Julia. It was one of many memorable spitfires she played in Allentown in the '80s and '90s. Donald Holder, who designed lights for most Muhlenberg productions from 1981 to 1993, won a 998 Tony award for lighting "The Lion King." This year he was nominated for Tonys for "a Streetcar Named Desire" and "Gem of the Ocean." At Muhlenberg he played tuba in the orchestra, and met his wife, Off-Broadway director Evan Yionoulis.

Mark Chmiel returned to the festival because of his amiable ambition. He likes Richter's thank-yous after rehearsals. He likes the first-class facilities. He likes the first-rate student performers, who often steal the show from professionals. They've become more important as Muhlenberg's department of theatre and dance has become more important. In 1981 there were 16 theater majors. Now there are nearly 120 theater majors and 60 dance majors.

The festival is not only a recruiting tool for incoming students, it's a career trampoline for graduates. David Masenheimer has performed in Broadway productions of "Les Miserables" and "Ragtime." Nick Carriere, now studying at the Yale School of Drama, recently made a splash on "The apprentice." He was fired by Donald Trump after appearing in a commercial so bad it became a promotion for the reality show.

The road to success hasn't always been straight or smooth. In 1994 the festival's production of "The Boys from Syracuse," a 1938 adaptation of Shakespeare's "The Comedy of Errors," sold far fewer tickets than expected. The next season Richter beefed up box office receipts by booking the more familiar , more popular "Fiddler on the Roof" and "Evita."

The festival has had to adjust to the rising cost of staging musicals, one of the most expensive forms of theater. Due to dramatically higher prices for everything from fabrics to royalties, shows are smaller and plainer than in the heyday of the late '80s to early '90s. This summer's schedule includes "My Way," a four-performer Rank Sinatra tribute and the second revue in two years.

Another challenge is an increasingly tough market. In 1981 the festival was pretty much the only major summer entertainment game in the Valley. Today, it competes for audiences with the Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival, Musikfest and other warm-weather institutions.

Richter has used programming hooks to hire distracted audiences. In 1992 he picked the political satire "Of Thee I Sing" partly to coincide with the Republican and Democratic national conventions. Last year he chose "Godspell" partly to piggyback on the enormous popularity of the film "The Passion of the Christ."

Outreach programs have been expanded to attract younger audience members and grants for youth-oriented services. For six years inner-city kids have attended the festival's Camp Imagine. For five years children accompanied by adults have received free tickets on Sunday nights.

Muhlenberg College has helped the festival survive financial storms. The college provides free housing, pays the salaries of four full-time staffers and balances the budget when the festival inevitably fails to break even. The festival, in turn, has passed on savings to spectators. Over 25 years the top ticket price has increased from an affordable \$7 to a fairly reasonable \$30.

Balancing the budget is particularly important this year. In the winter the festival learned it was going to lose an \$18,000 grant from the cash-poor City of Allentown, which eliminated aid to non-city services deemed non-essential. To compensate for the shortfall, the festival this August will hold a benefit concert starring alumni performing greatest hits. One of the scheduled professional guests is Jeffrey Lentz, who graduated from tenor leads in Gilbert & Sullivan operettas at Muhlenberg to prime roles for the New York City Opera.

Asked for near-future plans, Richter says he wouldn't mind staging a new musical. Two years ago he directed "Once Upon a Time in New Jersey," a '50s fairytale about a shy deli clerk who changes identities with a studly, shady cousin to meet the woman of his dreams was a happy experience for Richter; composer Stephen Weiner, a 1975 Muhlenberg graduate, and lyricist Susan DiLallo, a jingle writer responsible for the "I Like the Sprite in You" campaign. The play drew more than 5,400 spectators and won two major prizes, including the 2003 Richard Rodgers Development Award for new musicals.

What Richter doesn't want is a new musical that high concept and high maintenance. "Let's just say," he says, "that I'm not interested in doing anything about the digging of the Panama Canal or an adaptation of the large chunks of the New Testament. Although we did do 'Godspell.'"