

Guys and Dolls

Music and lyrics by Frank Loesser/Book by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows



Guys and Dolls is based on "The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown" and "Blood Pressure", two short stories by Damon Runyon, and also borrows characters and plot elements from other Runyon stories, most notably "Pick the Winner". Premiering on Broadway in 1950, it ran for 1,200 performances and won the Tony Award for Best Musical, and has had several Broadway revivals as well as West End productions.

The 1955 film starred Marlon Brando, Jean Simmons, Frank Sinatra and Vivian Blaine.

Synopsis

Although there are detail differences between the stage and movie versions, the plot is essentially based around the activities of New York petty criminals and professional gamblers in the late 1940s.

Gambler Nathan Detroit (Frank Sinatra) is under pressure from all sides: he has to organize an unlicensed crap game but the police, led by Lieutenant Brannigan (Robert Keith), are "putting on the heat". All the places where Nathan usually holds his games refuse him entry due to Brannigan's intimidating pressure. The owner of the Biltmore garage does agree to host the game provided Nathan pays him \$1000 in cash in advance. The garage owner will not even accept a "marker" or IOU, he insists on having the money itself. Adding to Nathan's problems, his fiancée, Miss Adelaide (Vivian Blaine), a nightclub singer, wants to bring an end to their 14-year engagement and actually tie the knot. She also wants him to go straight, but organizing illegal gambling is the only thing he's good at.

Trying to obtain the money for the garage, Nathan meets an old acquaintance, Sky Masterson (Marlon Brando), a gambler willing to bet on virtually anything and for high amounts. Nathan proposes a \$1000 bet by which Sky must take a girl of Nathan's choosing to dinner in Havana, Cuba. The bet seems impossible for Sky to win when Nathan nominates Sergeant Sarah Brown (Jean Simmons), a straight-walking sister at the *Save a Soul Mission* (based on the Salvation Army) which opposes gambling.

Sarah herself has problems. She has been in charge of the Broadway branch of the Mission for some time now and no drunks or gamblers have come in to confess or reform. It's "a store full of repentance and no customers". To approach Sarah, Sky makes out that he is a gambler who wants to change. Sarah knows of his reputation and is suspicious: "It's just so unusual for a successful sinner to be unhappy about sin."

Hearing that Sarah's superiors are threatening to close down the Mission in order to concentrate their activities in other places, Sky suggests a bargain: he will get the sinners into the Mission in return for her having dinner with him in Havana. With little choice left, Sarah agrees.

Confident of his victory, Nathan has gathered together all the gamblers, among who is Big Jule (B.S. Pully), a Chicago mobster. When Lieutenant Brannigan appears and notices this gathering of "senior delinquents", Nathan's sidekick, Benny Southstreet (Johnny Silver) covers it up by claiming that they are celebrating the fact that Nathan is getting married to Adelaide. (Nathan is shocked by this, but is forced to play along). Later, when he sees the *Save a Soul Mission* band passing by and that Sarah is not amongst them, he collapses on the realization that he has lost the bet. He has no money and nowhere to play the game and he is now committed to

actually marrying Adelaide. (Nathan does love Adelaide but is rather uneasy about going straight, either martially or lawfully.)

Over the course of their short stay in Cuba, Sky manages to break down Sarah's social inhibitions, and they begin to fall in love with one another. He even confesses that the whole thing was part of a bet but she forgives him as she realizes that his love for her is sincere.

They return to Broadway at dawn and meet the *Save a Soul Mission* band which, on Sky's advice, has been parading all night. At that moment police sirens can be heard and before they know it the gamblers led by Nathan Detroit are hurrying out of a back room of the Mission, where they took advantage of the empty premises to hold the game.

The police arrive too late to make any arrests but Lieutenant Brannigan finds the absence of Sarah and the other *Save a Soul* members too convenient to have been a coincidence, and implies that it was all Sky's doing: "Masterson, I had you in my big-time book. Now I suppose I'll have to reclassify you — under shells and decoys". His suspicions are passed on to Sarah who dumps Sky there and then, refusing to accept his denials.

In the meantime Sky has to make good his arrangement with Sarah to provide sinners to the Mission. Sarah would rather forget the whole thing, but Uncle Arvide Abernathy (Regis Toomey), who acts as a kind of father figure to her, warns Sky that "If you don't make that marker good, I'm going to buzz it all over town you're a welcher."

Feeling that he has little to lose anyway, Sky lies to Nathan about succeeding in the original bet and pays him the \$1000. Nathan has continued the game in a sewer. With his revolver at his side, Big Jule won't let the game break up until he has recovered all his losses, which seems unlikely since "Big Jule cannot make a pass to save his soul". Sky overhears this and makes a bold bet: he will play and if he loses he will give all the other gamblers \$1000 each; if he wins they are all to attend a prayer meeting at the Mission.

The Mission is near to closing when suddenly the gamblers come parading in taking up most of the room. This is taken to mean that Sky won the roll. They grudgingly confess their sins, though they show little sign of repentance: "Well ... I was always a bad guy. I was even a bad gambler. I would like to be a good guy and a good gambler. I thank you." Even Big Jule declares: "I used to be bad when I was a kid. But ever since then I've gone straight, as I can prove by my record — 33 arrests and no convictions."

When Nathan tells Sarah that Sky denied winning the Cuba bet (which she knows he won), she hurries off in order to make up with him.

It all ends with a street double wedding, with Sky marrying Sarah, and Nathan marrying Adelaide (who is given away by Lieutenant Brannigan). They arrive in a food delivery van and leave in police cars, though this just seems to be an attempt at humor since Brannigan has been unable to find any witnesses against Sky and Nathan and their activities.

Songs

Act I

- "Runyonland" (Orchestra)
- "Fugue for Tinhorns" (Nicely, Benny, Rusty)
- "Follow the Fold" (Sarah, Mission Band)
- "The Oldest Established" (Nathan, Nicely, Benny, Guys)
- "I'll Know" (Sarah, Sky)
- "Pet Me Poppa" (Miss Adelaide, Hot Box Girls) – ONLY IN FILM VERSION
- "A Bushel and a Peck" (Miss Adelaide, Hot Box Girls) – NOT IN FILM
- "Adelaide's Lament" (Miss Adelaide)
- "Guys and Dolls" (Nicely, Benny)
- "(Your Eyes Are the Eyes of) A Woman in Love" (Sky) – ONLY IN FILM VERSION
- "Havana" (Orchestra)
- "If I Were a Bell" (Sarah)
- "My Time of Day/I've Never Been in Love Before" (Sky, Sarah) – NOT IN FILM

Act II

- "Take Back Your Mink" (Miss Adelaide, Hot Box Girls)
- "Adelaide's Second Lament" (Miss Adelaide)
- "More I Cannot Wish You" (Arvide) – NOT IN FILM
- "The Crapshooters Dance" (Orchestra)
- "Luck Be a Lady" (Sky, Guys)
- "Sue Me" (Miss Adelaide, Nathan)
- "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat" (Nicely, Company)
- "Marry the Man Today" (Miss Adelaide, Sarah) – NOT IN FILM
- "Guys and Dolls (Finale/Reprise)" (Company)

Through the years, *Guys and Dolls* has been nominated for 11 Tony Awards and won 9.

In 2004, The American Film Institute (AFI) ranked "Luck Be a Lady" #42 on their list of 100 greatest film songs in "AFI's 100 Years...100 Songs" list. In 2006, AFI named *Guys and Dolls* #23 on its list of greatest American Musicals.

The 1955 film's budget was \$5 million (\$20.7 million today) and it grossed in excess of \$13 million (\$53.9 million today) for a profit of \$9 million (\$37.3 million today).