THE MUSIC MAN

MAY 11 – JUL 22, 2012

JUST HANGING ON: ARTS EDUCATION IN AMERICA TODAY

By Marilyn Millstone

Burke Moses and Ian Berlin in Arena Stage's production of *The Music Man*. Photo by Scott Suchman.

Even though "Music Man" Harold Hill is a con artist, audiences root for him – in part because of the way he uses music-making to galvanize the community of **River City**. Bonafide music educators do this every day in schools across America, as do their counterparts in art, theater and dance.

Arts education in America is not new; it is as ancient as the Native American cultures that flourished here long before European settlement. In

these cultures, arts traditions are passed directly from one generation to the next and they remain a cherished part of Native life today.

Formal arts education, however, began in the 1700s when singing teachers travelled throughout the colonies, teaching psalm-singing to church congregations. By the end of the 18th century, formal singing schools had sprung up in cities like Savannah, Philadelphia and Boston.

In the 1830s, Boston became the first U.S. public school system to include music in its curriculum – thanks, in part, to the urging of famed singing teacher Lowell Mason. The Boston School Committee justified its decision by noting that music-making "contributes to memory, comparison, attention and intellectual faculties" and because it produces "happiness, contentment, cheerfulness and tranquility."

Arts education advocates like Mason have been working tirelessly ever since. National arts advocacy organizations abound; chief among these are the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA), Arts Education Partnership (AEP) and such arts-specific organizations as the National Association for Music Education (NAfME). Each organization seeks to demonstrate that arts education enriches the lives of young people and builds the foundation for lifelong participation in, and appreciation of, the arts.

"Arts education equips students to do better in school and in life after school and the evidence [for this] is unequivocal," says Kelly Barsdate, NASAA's chief program and planning officer.

In its 2006 report "Critical Evidence: How the Arts Benefit Student Achievement," NASAA cites a University of California study of 25,000 middle- and high-school students that found students involved in the arts performed better on standardized tests, watched fewer hours of TV, participated in more community service and reported less boredom in school.

Despite their demonstrated value, arts education programs are perennially at risk of being cut, especially in these challenging economic times. "Arts education is under siege nationwide," says Barsdate. "There are uneven experiences in how accessible arts education is to kids, and funding to support arts education has been severely squeezed."

Because funding for public school programs is usually determined at the local level, support for arts education varies widely from school district to school district and state to state. In Iowa – where *Music Man* creator

Meredith Willson grew up steeped in a tradition of marching bands, community bands and barbershop quartets – arts education is "hanging on," says David Law, a member of the Marion, Iowa school board and past president of the Iowa Music Educators Conference. "Midwesterners understand the value of arts education, but in some other parts of the country, people just don't seem to get it."

In the D.C. area, progressive school districts and school principals continue to support arts education programs – and hire dedicated teachers like Marlo Castillo, who taught a third-grade "arts integration" curriculum at Kensington Parkwood Elementary School in Kensington, Maryland. The innovative program – funded by a five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education – involves weaving one or more art forms into the study of an academic subject; for example, to help students understand a science unit about the patterns and cycles found in nature, Castillo taught simple, rhythmic dances.

"This allows more of [students'] senses to be stimulated and allows multiple intelligences to be involved," says Castillo. "Students who learn in different ways have greater opportunity to access the [academic] content."

Castillo herself is an amateur musician who developed a lifelong love of choral singing through the music education she received in Montgomery County, Maryland public schools. For nine years, she sang with Coral Cantigas, a community choir that specializes in performing choral music of Latin America. "I joined the choir in part because my son's father is Latino," she explains. "I really wanted to expose my son to Latino music."

Today, Castillo's son Carlos is passionate about music-making; currently a freshman in a Maryland public high school, he plays bass in the school's jazz band and has acted in two of the school's musicals.

"I have no idea what I'd do without music in school," he said in an e-mail. "I'm always happiest when I play music."

For arts education advocates across America, Carlos Castillo's words are, indeed, music to their ears.

Journalist and award-winning playwright Marilyn Millstone is also a flutist and choral singer. She is delighted to be assisting Arena Stage's literary manager, Amrita Ramanan, with dramaturgy for The Music Man*.*

Extras & Insights is funded, in part, by a grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities.

SUB/TEXT / THE MUSIC MAN:
OVERVIEW
FROM THE WINGS
IN REHEARSAL
SPOTLIGHT ON...
ENCORE

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SIX YEARS, 40-ODD DRAFTS AND A FEW GOOD LAUGHS: MEREDITH WILLSON'S STRUGGLE TO WRITE THE MUSIC MAN

By Marilyn Millstone

Fall 1957: *Leave It To Beaver* debuts on CBS television. Russia launches Sputnik, ushering in the space race. *West Side Story* – a musical that dares to bring violence to the stage – premieres on Broadway. Eugene O'Neill is posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Long Day's Journey into Night*. And on December 19, a long journey of a different kind finally comes to fruition: after six years and 40-odd drafts, Meredith Willson's first musical – *The Music Man* – opens at Broadway's Majestic Theatre.

In his 1959 memoir about the making of the musical, *But He Doesn't Know The Territory*, Willson describes waiting for the opening-night downbeat

with his wife Rini:

“Rini and I were sitting in the farthest two seats over the side under the box nearest the exit. Plenty places to hide, easy to duck out fast. I had a hold of her cold hand with its wet palm and she had my cold hand with its wet palm.”

Willson has cause to be concerned. Only hours earlier, he and director Morton DaCosta had made a significant change to one of the show’s crucial numbers, deciding to bring Harold Hill – played by Robert Preston – back in to finish the song “Marian the Librarian.” The change is rehearsed until an hour before showtime.

“It would have meant a major alteration for Bob [Preston] any time, let alone the day of the opening,” Willson recalls in his memoir. “A tough switch. To say nothing of having to come back and nicely sing 16 pay-off bars after dancing your head off for eight minutes…Not a gripe out of Bob, though. Not a murmur.”

It is the final change in a musical that Willson has been relentlessly revising for half a decade. An accomplished songwriter known for composing the catchy “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas,” Willson has written over 40 songs for the show – and ends up cutting over half of them. He also makes the difficult decision to drop a major character and turn a nameless bit part into the key role of **Winthrop**, a little boy whose self-consciousness about his lisp dissolves at the sight of a shiny new trumpet.

But the greatest challenge Willson has faced in writing *The Music Man* involves wrestling with a subtle concept that has preoccupied him for years. “I had developed an abiding conviction…that in a musical comedy **the song ought to materialize out of the dialogue**,” he notes in his memoir. “I was really getting Iowa-stubborn about…the way…to bridge dialogue and song.”

The concept finally jells in Willson’s mind, and he writes a new opening scene in which salesmen on a train speak the opening number instead of singing it. He uses the innovative technique several times in the musical, perhaps most memorably in the number “Ya Got Trouble.”

Troubles of all sorts plague the show’s development over the years. Prospective producers appear, then – feeling that Willson’s sprawling script can never be transformed into a hit – disappear. Willson himself considers abandoning the project to take a job he’s been offered on

another musical; his wife Rini talks him out of it. And after the first night of the show's pre-Broadway run in Philadelphia, Willson overhears a critic in the theater lobby proclaim: "They'll never make it."

But these troubles vanish the day after the Broadway opening, when critical reviews hit the streets. *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson gushes: "Willson's music is innocent; the beat is rousing and the tunes are full of gusto…*The Music Man* is a marvelous show." The show runs for 1,375 performances, garnering five Tony Awards, including Best Musical and winning the first Grammy for "Best Original Cast Album." Five years later, in 1962, Robert Preston marches Harold Hill from Broadway onto the Big Screen; the film version of *The Music Man* – both produced and directed by the show's Broadway director, Morton DaCosta – wins an Academy Award and appears on many lists as one of the best movie musicals of all time.

Forty years later, on May 18, 2002 – the centennial of Willson's birth – his hometown of **Mason City, Iowa** (affectionately referred to as "River City" in *The Music Man*) pays spectacular homage to him: adjacent to Willson's boyhood home (a museum since 1995), they open Music Man Square: a multi-million-dollar entertainment complex dedicated to keeping the performing arts alive in the Hawkeye State.

Marilyn Millstone is a magazine writer and playwright, whose first play – The Sculptress *– was selected for production by Fells Point Corner Theatre last year and won third prize for Best Play at the 2011 Baltimore Playwrights Festival. She is delighted to be assisting Arena Stage's literary manager, Amrita Ramanan, with dramaturgy for* The Music Man*.*

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A GRIP, A SAMPLE CASE, AND A TRAIN TICKET

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN TRAVELING SALESMAN

By Marilyn Millstone

When the Golden Spike uniting the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads was hammered in on May 10, 1869, it ushered in a new era in American migration: many Easterners - as well as many foreigners - rode the transcontinental rail line west, searching for new opportunities and new places in which to settle. Riding the rails along with them was the traveling salesman.

The traveling salesman was “a middleman in the commercial landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the key link between traditional folk figures, like the peddler, and twentieth-century advertisers,” writes cultural historian Timothy Spears in his landmark 1995 study *100 Years on the Road: The Traveling Salesman in American Culture.* Sometimes pejoratively referred to as a “drummer” – a term whose exact origin is unknown but may relate to the phrase “drumming up business” – the traveling salesman was also known as a commercial traveler. The U.S. Census first named the commercial traveler as an occupational class in 1870 and cited 7,262 commercial travelers working in the U.S. By 1900, that number had increased twelve-fold to over 90,000.

There were two types of traveling salesmen, the first being those who developed their own product lines, represented various wholesalers and carved out their own territories. Charlie Cowell – one of the traveling salesman in *The Music Man* – falls into this category. He specializes in selling anvils, having determined that this is a product rural Midwesterners need.

Then there were the “company men.” In the 1880s and 1890s, now-famous manufacturers such as Eastman Kodak, Coca-Cola, Wrigley's Chewing Gum, General Electric, and PepsiCo were established. These firms employed their own traveling sales forces.

But whether he represented wholesalers or a particular manufacturer, the traveling salesman was always, by definition, an outsider. While many salesmen tried to paint a romantic picture of their life on the road, the reality was that it was lonely, grueling work: sample cases were heavy, travel beyond rail lines was difficult, and everywhere the respectability that salesmen sought eluded them.

One way in which the salesman’s road life was sometimes improved was through something known as the hotel “sample room” - a room in a hotel designated as a place where a salesman could set out his wares and greet potential customers. Not all hotels offered this accommodation, but one that did - and profited from it - - was the Statler hotel chain. In addition to dedicating whole floors to sample rooms, Statler hotels featured private bathrooms, running water, thermostats, and individual telephones - - innovations that catered to the needs and desires of the commercial traveler. Salesmen wrote glowingly in trade publications of hotels that offered such amenities and began frequenting the towns and cities where such hotels were located. Thus, the commercial traveller began shaping the landscape to his liking.

Still, the traveling salesman—no matter how personable — had to contend with the suspicions of strangers. Writers of the era capitalized on this issue, creating - or perhaps simply reinforcing —the stereotypical image of the traveling salesman as a clever, often deceitful, interloper. According to Spears, a widely produced 1881 play by George Jessop called *Sam’l of Posen; or The Commercial Drummer* greatly — and adversely — influenced people’s perceptions of traveling salesmen. A surviving playbill from the production - which toured well into the 1890s - includes something called the “drummer’s balance sheet.” Although a fictional document, it is presented as a realistic tabulation of protagonist Samuel Plastrick’s activities: “lied…33 [times]; drank…11; been to church…0; accompanied girls from church home…17; girls flirted with…42; agreed to marry…2; left by back door…3; dodged fare on railroad…5.”

With such negative press swirling around them, travelling salesmen were perennially concerned about winning the trust of locals. As the twentieth century dawned, numerous trade magazines offered how-to articles on the principles of “scientific” salesmanship (“salesmanship” itself having

become a term coined only a few decades earlier). One such publication, *Salesmanship: The Magazine for Business Getters*, issued a series of conversational but hard-hitting guides called *Sales Ginger*, which were designed to improve a salesman's effectiveness.

"There is gunpowder in every man, if you can only get the spark to it," begins one such manual published in 1905. "There is latent power in every salesman – often more than he himself dreams he possesses. All that is necessary is to light the flame of his enthusiasm by showing him his own opportunities and possibilities. Do but this much for him, and the hidden gunpowder within him will make him explode into sudden and irresistible action."

Sales Ginger advised salesmen to be assertive; much of their advice was assertively printed in capital letters: "MAKE your arguments actual and personal. Bring them home to [the potential customer]. Stab every point into his mind so that he can't miss it or forget it." "YOU haven't half made your point with your man if when you get through he looks upon [the] product merely as something he would do well to use in his business. Make him feel that he CAN'T GET ALONG WITHOUT IT."

By the early twentieth century, "salesmanship" had become a formal discipline taught in business colleges and corporate training programs. As it gained academic credibility, books on the subject of "salesmanship" began proliferating. According to Spears, only 10 books on the subject were published before 1900; nearly 40 were published between 1900 and 1910; over 200 between 1910 and 1920 and 150 published during the following three years alone. Still, the vast majority of traveling salesmen honed their craft not in colleges, but on the road. Yet the road itself was changing: increasingly, traveling salesmen who were "company men" ceased to be their own bosses; instead, they came under the control of demanding managers.

The landscape of business was changing too. Mail-order houses like Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck and Company, founded in the late nineteenth century, brought catalog shopping to nearly every home in the American hinterland, issuing a direct challenge to wholesalers, retail merchants and, of course, traveling salesmen. In their advertising, they touted the benefit to consumers of cutting out the middleman. Their advertising strategy paid off. Eventually, Montgomery Ward and Sears established big retail stores throughout America. In *The Music Man* playwright Meredith Willson's hometown of **Mason City, Iowa**, for example, Sears opened a two-story store on March 5, 1936. In that year,

the company operated 440 department stores and 11 Catalog and Merchandise Distribution Centers across the country, employed 48,000 people and had net sales of over $494 million.

Not long after came the growth of shopping centers. Again, the Sears in Mason City is illustrative: in 1959 - having outgrown its downtown location - Sears relocated to an 80,000-foot store in the new South Federal Avenue shopping center. The company's net sales now exceeded $4 billion dollars; it operated 734 retail stores and employed over 230,000 people. The Mason City store included a furniture showroom and appliance center, a candy counter, carpet sales, a 260,000 square foot parking lot for 650 cars, and an eight-car service station.

By that time, of course, the heyday of the traveling salesman – like the vast railroad system he travelled on – was over. Both would live on, however, in the memories of those who had encountered and been charmed by them - as Meredith Willson so gloriously proves in *The Music Man*.

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