

## Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: 100-year treat in store in Sturgeon Bay for Gershwin's 'La La Lucille'

### CRITIC AT LARGE

*Third Avenue Playhouse*

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James Valcq gathers with the cast of "La La Lucille" to start rehearsals for George Gershwin's "La La Lucille" that Valcq has revived. (Company photo)

Third Avenue Playhouse will present George Gershwin's "La La Lucille" starting with a pay-what-you-can preview at 7:30 p.m. July 24 in Studio Theatre of the playhouse. Regular performances run July 25-Sept. 1. Info: [thirdavenueplayhouse.com](http://thirdavenueplayhouse.com).

According to the website: This is George Gershwin's first musical, which has not been staged since its Broadway premiere in 1919. The adaptation and restoration are by James Valcq, co-artistic director of Third Avenue Playhouse.

The farce tells the story of a married couple who plot to become temporarily divorced to claim an inheritance. When the scheme goes awry, hilarity, hijinks and tap dancing ensue.

"La La Lucille" includes Gershwin melodies that haven't been heard in 100 years along with some that have never been performed.

The website elaborates:

The more amazing story is that much of the original music from this show was lost. It is only through the efforts of composer/director James Valcq, who has restored and reconstructed the complete score, that “La La Lucille” will be seen (and heard) again, exactly 100 years later.

It all started with a manila file folder.

Valcq was 10 years old when he found a manila file folder at an antique fair in Milwaukee that was marked “La La Lucille Selection” by George Gershwin. Valcq already knew the name George Gershwin and was instantly intrigued. Inside he found sheet music for a lengthy overture-like medley, including the music for six songs. Curious, he convinced his mother to buy it for him and he’s kept it ever since – in the same manila folder.

At the time, Valcq only knew that “La La Lucille” was Gershwin’s very first complete Broadway score and the musical opened on Broadway in 1919. When the *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle* by Gerald Bordman was published 1978 (and Valcq was 15) he learned the detailed plot synopsis for La La Lucille. But it wasn’t until the Internet era that he was finally able to locate sheet music of the score’s published songs. At long last, he was finally able to learn the lyrics that went with the melodies from that manila folder.

In 1982, the mystery intensified when a treasure trove of material from the golden age of theatre was discovered in a warehouse in Secaucus, New Jersey. Many Gershwin shows that were thought lost were found virtually complete. Unfortunately, “La La Lucille” was not one of them. It seemed all that remained of Gershwin’s first musical was the seven published songs, two orchestrated numbers in full score at the Library of Congress, and the complete script (containing all the lyrics) in the research archives of the New York Public Library.

Fast forward to several years ago, when Valcq realized that 2019 would be the 100th anniversary of “La La Lucille”’s Broadway debut. Inspiration struck and he began to plan how to reconstruct and restore a performable version of the show – one that could be produced at Third Avenue Playhouse. It was a daunting, yet challenging undertaking.

Valcq’s first task was to visit the New York Public Library, where he and Bob Boles (the other co-artistic director at Third Avenue Playhouse) photographed every page of the script to complete a feasibility study to determine its stage-worthiness. They were delighted to discover the show was a funny Feydeau-style farce. Together they deemed the show viable and agreed it could work on the stage at Third Avenue Playhouse.

Assembling the score proved to be another matter. Valcq possessed that handful of the published songs from the manila envelope, but the remainder of the music was missing and presumed lost. The photographed script provided the lyrics for the opening choruses, ensembles, “situation” numbers and finales, but there was no music. Anywhere. What to do?

Valcq, a self-proclaimed, amateur Gershwin scholar, was determined to see the project through.

“I have a fairly sturdy working knowledge of how Gershwin constructed his show scores – thanks in large part to having access to numerous reconstructions done in the wake of that Secaucus find in the 1980s,” he said. “I set myself to the task of locating every possible piece of Gershwin music published between 1917 and 1922 – the years just before and after La La Lucille.” All of Gershwin’s music from this time period is in the Public Domain.

Valcq’s plan was to find the right music to fit all the orphan lyrics in the “La La Lucille” script. However, there were very few instances where a “La La Lucille” lyric would graft onto a Public Domain Gershwin song and make sense. Valcq found he needed to meld the melodic contour from one song with the harmonic structure from another, the accompaniment pattern from a third song, and the countermelody “fill” material from a fourth, and by alchemy create a “new” Gershwin song to fit the lyrics.

Confused? Valcq has an analogy that helps explain it:

“Imagine you find a trunk filled with pieces of fabric your grandmother used to create a quilt that has since fallen apart. You decide to sew the pieces together. You don’t know what the original quilt looked like, but you take the pieces you have and stitch them together in a way that makes sense. Is it your grandmother’s quilt? No. Did your grandmother create everything that comprises the quilt? Absolutely.”

During this process, Gershwin blogger Mike Morris generously shared some of his finds from the Library of Congress. Incredibly, one item was the “La La Lucille” orchestral scores, which simply needed to be reunited with its lyric.

“It was also through Mr. Morris that I acquired a sketch (in Gershwin’s hand) of an unknown and unpublished melody simply labeled Nov. 29, 1921,” Valcq said. “This little gem just needed its accompaniment idiomatically filled out to provide a lilting opening to Act Two.”

To round out the remainder of the score, Valcq interspersed a number of early Gershwin songs in their entirety as a way to give a voice to some of the song-free characters and situations.

Now, two years after his centennial brainstorm (and many years after that antique fair find), “La La Lucille” will be seen – and heard – again for the first time in 100 years in Sturgeon Bay.

“This has truly been a labor of love,” Valcq said. “I hope we do George proud.”

In the cast are Drew Brhel, Ryan Cappleman, Zachary Dean, Lydia Rose Eiche, Adam Estes, Meghan Jarecki, Alex M. Sabin, Samantha Sostarich and James Valcq.

Brhel returns for his sixth season with Third Avenue Playhouse. Previous roles there include Mark Rothko in “Red,” Voltaire in “Candide,” Matt Friedman in “Talley’s Folly,” Bellomy in “The Fantasticks,” Frank in “Educating Rita,” Robert Hooke in “Isaac’s Eye,” Uncle Theophilus in “Madame Sherry” and Weller Martin in “The Gin Game.” Last season, Brhel was Lou in “Stella and Lou” and Billy in “Billy

Bishop Goes to War.” Brhelworks primarily in Milwaukee, where he has performed with the Milwaukee Rep, Skylight Music Theatre, Next Act, Milwaukee Chamber Theatre and many others.

Cappleman is a performer, choreographer, music director and teaching artist from Milwaukee. Door County audiences may recognize Ryan from last year’s “Billy Bishop Goes to War” at Third Avenue Playhouse or “Home for the Holidays” at Northern Sky Theater. Favorite credits at Skylight Music Theatre include Pooh Bah in “The Hot Mikado,” Scarecrow in “The Wizard of Oz,” Woof in “Hair” and choreographing “Hairspray,” “Urinetown,” “Sweeney Todd” and “The Pirates of Penzance.” Other appearances include Danceworks, Optimist Theatre, First Stage, Northbrook Theatre for Young Audiences, In Tandem, Milwaukee Opera Theatre and off-Broadway at the Cherry Lane Theatre. Dean is making his Third Avenue Playhouse debut. Based in Milwaukee, Dean has worked with Milwaukee Opera Theatre, Capital City Theatre, Theater RED, Optimist Theatre, Bard & Bourbon and more. Credits include M2 in “The Hunchback of Notre Dame,” Pseudolus in “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum,” Uncle Fester in “The Addams Family,” William Barfee in “The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee,” Sarastro Cover in “Zie Magic Flute” and James Wilson in “1776.”

Eiche is at home in opera, musical theater and on the concert stage. Eiche has sung roles as diverse as Pamina in “Zie Magic Flute” and Yitzhak in “Hedwig and the Angry Inch.” She has performed with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Skylight Music Theatre, Milwaukee Opera Theatre, All In Productions, First Stage Children’s Theatre, Sunset Playhouse, Waukesha Civic Theatre, Soulstice Theatre, Haylofters, Boulevard Theatre, Capital City Theatre, Plymouth Chorale and Fresco Opera Theatre.

Estes previously appeared at Third Avenue Playhouse as Edward Sherry in “Madame Sherry.” Other credits include performances with The Goodman Theater, Writers’ Theatre, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, The Arvada Center, Sierra Repertory Theatre, Milwaukee Opera Theatre, Marriott Lincolnshire, Ravinia Festival, Peninsula Players, Lake Dillon Theatre Company, Florentine Opera, Skylight Music Theatre and The Fireside.

Jarecki is making her Third Avenue Playhouse debut. A Minnesota native, Jarecki received her training at the Duluth Playhouse Education program and continued her studies at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in the BFA Musical Theatre track. Some of her recent credits include Kathy in “Company” and Velma in “Chicago.”

Sabin is a graduate of UW-Stevens Point and works at the Broadway Theatre of De Pere as an event manager and bartender. Sabin also is an acting/performance instructor with Studio12. He has performed with such Green Bay companies, such as Theatre Z, Northeastern Wisconsin Dance Organization and St. Norbert College Music Theatre.

Sostarich is returning to Third Avenue Playhouse after playing Mehitabel in “Shinbone Alley” last summer. Favorite roles include Velma Von Tussle in “Hairspray” (Skylight Music Theatre), Lily St. Regis in “Annie” (Skylight Music Theatre), Gretchen in “Boeing Boeing” (Milwaukee Chamber Theatre), Lady of the Lake in “Monty Python’s Spamalot” (Four Seasons Theatre) and Fortuna in “Fortuna the Timebender vs. the School Girls of Doom” (Milwaukee Opera Theatre.) Sostarich also

has worked with First Stage, Children's Theater of Madison, In Tandem Theatre, Music Theater Works, Theater RED, All In Productions and Madison Repertory Theater.

Valcq has appeared at Third Avenue Playhouse in "Souvenir," "I Love a Piano," "Yuletide Tales," "Madame Sherry" and "Velvet Gentleman." Favorite roles include Cosme in "Souvenir" (Boise Contemporary Theatre, American Stage Company and Third Avenue Playhouse), Feste in "Twelfth Night" and Friar Francis in "Much Ado About Nothing" (Door Shakespeare), Ernie in "Guys on Ice" (Milwaukee Rep) and Pierre in "How I Became a Pirate" (First Stage Milwaukee). Valcq is a member of Actors Equity.