

Just when we need a little 'White Christmas'

Gateway's Irving Berlin musical comes to the Patchogue Theatre

BY LINDA LEUZZI

The Gateway's new production of "Irving Berlin's White Christmas" may not have Hollywood stars from the golden years like Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye.

But it does have East Patchogue local Mary Giattino as its choreographer, and "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark" resident director David Ruttera, who is also directing this beloved musical. There's also the original Broadway set, as well as Scot Patrick Allan, Gateway's assistant to producer Paul Allan and director of development, in a starring role. Rehearsals start next Monday; the show will run from Dec. 14 to Dec. 30 at the Patchogue Theatre for the Performing Arts.

The musical, which played on Broadway in 2009 at the Marquis Theatre (it toured before that from 2004), is based on the 1954 smash hit movie featuring Crosby and Kaye as successful Broadway partners. They stay at a ski resort in Vermont owned by their old Army General, who may have to pack it in because snow's been lacking. The guys provide a Broadway revue to help out; Rosemary Clooney and Vera Ellen were the love interests and there are great song-and-dance scenes as well as heartwarming moments. Will it snow? Will people come to the revue? Will it be standing-room-only at the inn?

Revelation is better in person.

What most people aren't familiar with are the powerhouse backgrounds of Giattino and Ruttera outside the theatre world. Both met doing "Peter Pan," then "Jungle Book" at Gateway's children's theater shows back in 2002. Giattino, then 21, was an ensemble dancer; Ruttera at 19 was a flyman, and they clicked. Giattino went on to become a swing in Broadway's "White Christmas," as well as assistant choreographer and assistant dance captain in 2009. She even appeared with the cast in a skating number for "Good Morning America" that year. (A short resume synopsis includes stints as a Radio City Rockette as well as tap teacher to the company of "Billy Elliot." She's currently artistic and executive director of Stage Door School of Dance in Patchogue.)

Ruttera has served as associate director of the recent "Follies," and assistant director of "Million Dollar Quartet," "Irving Berlin's White Christmas" and "A Man for All Seasons," as well as associate director of "Lombardi." He's taking a leave of absence from "Spider-Man" to do the Gateway show. Ruttera actually took the train from the city to sit in on the *Advance* interview, then returned an hour later to Manhattan.

There's an affectionate, humorous chemistry between Ruttera and Giattino; both work hard, respect their careers with an organic, disciplined approach, and are grateful.

"We were so lucky to be working with such a creative team," Giattino said of their time with "White Christmas," especially their Broadway run. Choreographer and director Randy Skinner, who has worked on such heavy hitters as "42nd Street," was an intrinsic part of the show.

"Dave and I ran back and forth, sharing charts," she said. "White Christmas' is an old-school, gorgeous, traditional Broadway piece. There are seven production numbers with dancers and principles. To keep it organized, we charted every single scene — circles for girls, squares for guys — and know where everyone would stand at all times."

"You're trying to create these pictures on stage," Ruttera explained of the scenes. "Someone has to be there to push off the bench," added Giattino of the complex staging and its importance.

They also credited the meticulous training of their Gateway experiences. "It's the best crash-course training you'll ever get," Giattino said of the shows they starred in.

The musical features famous songs like "Count Your Blessings Instead of Sheep," "Sisters" and "The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing."

Any changes in store for this production?

The changes will be small, Giattino said. "The biggest change is that there are two less men; there are eight women and six men." Not to worry. The cast is still a big one, 26 altogether. Chris Vettel will play the Bing Crosby role; Vettel played the lead in Gateway's "I Love a Piano." Trista Moldovan, who just completed her long run as Christine in Broadway's "Phantom of the Opera," signed on for the Rosemary Clooney part as Betty Haynes. Beth Glover, who was in Gateway's recent "Dolly Parton's 9 to 5," is Martha Watson. Matthew LaBanca will portray the Danny Kaye part. Two Gateway Acting School students, Alison Cordaro and Rebecca Goldfarb, will share the Susan Waverly character. Steve Brady, who played Pickering in "My Fair Lady," is General Waverly, the innkeeper, in the show.

Mike the stage manager will look especially familiar to Gateway fans; Scot Allan, who pumps up audiences before each performance, will morph into



Director David Ruttera, Gateway's Scot Patrick Allan, and Stage Door School of Dance executive director and choreographer Mary Giattino are about to flex their muscles for Gateway's upcoming production of "Irving Berlin's White Christmas" at the Patchogue Theatre.

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that character.

Giattino was excited that Randy Skinner would come out to supervise the rehearsals. "We'll recreate his choreography," she said. "It's a major deal to have someone's blessing and supervision on something they've created. That doesn't happen often. He came to the final callback to the dancers. He trusts Dave and me."

Gateway producer Paul Allan had been trying to get the show since it opened, she pointed out. Persistence usually triumphs; he was successful this year and also with getting the Broadway set, Giattino said. It's Gateway's first three-week holiday show.

Irving Berlin, whose songs are featured, penned a thousand during his prolific, successful career. His works are trademarked under the Irving Berlin Music Co., part of the Rodgers & Hammerstein, An Imagen Company umbrella. "The Berlin sisters [Berlin's daughters] are still alive," explained Ruttera. "They care very much about this musical."

So, the final question was, will it snow on the Patchogue Theatre stage?

"It's a gorgeous set with endless amounts of scenery and stunning drops," Ruttera answered. "It will snow on stage. It's the Christmas you've always been dreaming of." ■

To order tickets, go to
www.PatchogueTheatre.com

or come to The Gateway
box office located at
215 South Country Rd. Bellport.

The box office is open Mon. to Sat.
between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m.;
Sun. from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.