



HALE
CENTER
THEATER
OREM

Dirty Rotten SCOUNDRELS

2021
SEASON

MUSICAL

PRODUCTION NUMBER 231

Feb. 26 —THROUGH— Apr. 10

Annual
Sponsors:



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◇ INTERESTING FACTS ◇

The New York Herald, July 8, 1849

Police Intelligence.
Arrest of the Confidence Man.—For the last few months a man has been travelling about the city, known as the "Confidence Man;" that is, he would go up to a perfect stranger in the street, and being a man of genteel appearance, would easily command an interview. Upon this interview he would say, after some little conversation, "have you confidence in me to trust me with your watch until to-morrow;" the stranger, at this novel request, supposing him to be some old acquaintance, not at that moment recollected allows him to take the watch, thus placing "confidence" in the honesty of the stranger, who walks off laughing and the other supposing it to be a joke, allows him so to do. In this way many have been duped, and the last that we recollect was Mr. Thomas McDonald, of No. 276 Madison street, who, on the 12th of May last, was met by this "Confidence Man" in William street, who, in the manner as above described, took from him a gold lever watch valued at \$110; and yesterday, singularly enough, Mr. McDonald was passing along Liberty street, when who should he meet but the "Confidence Man" who had stolen his watch. Officer Swayse, of the Third ward, being near at hand, took the accused into custody on the charge made by Mr. McDonald. The accused at first refused to go with the officer, but after finding the officer determined to take him, he walked along for a short distance, when he showed desperate fight, and it was not until the officer had tied his hands together, that he was enabled to convey him to the police office. On the prisoner being taken before Justice McGrath, he was recognised as an old offender, by the name of Wm. Thompson, and is said to be a graduate of the college at Sing Sing. The magistrate committed him to prison for a further hearing. It will be well for all those persons who have been defrauded by the "Confidence Man" to call at the police court, Tombs, and take a view of him.

While this *New York Herald* article from 1849 coins the term "confidence man," it's certainly neither the first nor last time this quintessentially American character captures the imagination. From our earliest days, we have been fascinated by the charisma and boldness of the kind of con men we see in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*.

Beginning as far back as 1798, the literary American con man is at work. In what is considered to be the first American Gothic novel, *Wieland; or, The Transformation: An American Tale*, an evil ventriloquist uses the skills at his disposal to deceive a family and drive them to madness and murder. Sixty years later, *Moby-Dick* author Herman Melville was so fascinated by the Herald's story that he wrote a novel called *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* which was

published, appropriately enough, on April Fool's Day in 1857. By the time Mark Twain publishes *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1884, his villainous con men The Duke and The King are a familiar type to his readers.

While the literary con man is often a villain, when the con man arrives on the stage and screen their inherent charisma starts making them fascinating to watch and even to root for. After all, as legendary con artist Joseph "The Yellow Kid" Weil made clear, the con man uses the tools of the actor in their performance: "I have played more roles in real life," he once declared, "than the average actor ever dreamed of." Weil knew what he was talking about, too: some of the tales from his long career include hustling World War II dictator Benito Mussolini out of two million dollars and conning a detective out of \$30,000 *while that detective was escorting him to jail!*



Joseph "The Yellow Kid" Weil

Weil also pointed to one of the reasons we love our fictional con men so much: “I never cheated an honest man, only rascals,” he said. “They may have been respectable, but they were never any good. They wanted something for nothing. I gave them nothing for something.”

From Harold Hill in *The Music Man* to Sky Masterson in *Guys and Dolls* to *Catch Me*

If You Can’s Frank Abagnale Jr. and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*’ Lawrence and Freddy, the con man has been a sympathetic character throughout much of American Musical Theatre. In fact, the con man is literally there from the very beginning: *Showboat*, widely considered to be the first modern musical, features Gaylord Ravenal: a smooth-talking gambler who uses fraud to capture the heart of a good woman.

“... Musical con artists embody an extreme lionization of American individualism, becoming emblematic of the ways in which our culture wants to understand, forgive, or even idolize those who take advantage of others, precisely because grifters maintain their status as empathetic subjects, even—or perhaps especially—as they turn people and communities into objectified marks. The charm of the con artist is the charm of the individual.”

“Ya Got Trouble, My Friend, Right Here”: Romanticizing Grifters in American Musical Theatre
by Professor Dan Venning, Union College



“Just like with a magician, we want to be fooled—we want to get really close to it, just to see what happens—but we don’t want to become the victim,” says Javier Leiva, host of the *Pretend* podcast where he’s interviewed many con artists. “I’ve never met one who’s an introvert... they’re very warm and friendly [...] you want to believe them—they’re very likable.”



Tonight’s scoundrels, Lawrence Jameson and Freddy Benson, are so likable they keep on popping up. *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* is based on the 1988 movie of the same name featuring Steve Martin and Michael Caine, which is itself a remake of the 1964 *Bedtime Story* (starring Marlon Brando and David Niven), and has since been remade again in 2019 as *The Hustle* (with Anne Hathaway and Rebel Wilson).

—HCTO Guest Dramaturg Mark Fossen, MFA

Above: *Catch Me If You Can*
Below: *Guys and Dolls*