

## Runyonland

*Better it is that thou shouldst not vow, than thou shouldst vow and not pay.*  
Ecclesiastes 5:5 [Gideon Bible.]



New York has its origins in Fort Amsterdam, built by the Dutch in 1626 at Manhattan Island's southern tip. Over the following centuries, merchants developed trade so that the city became the most prosperous on the continent. By 1898, New York was the richest and most populous state and the five boroughs of New York City became one city. Although our production is set in the 1950s, the period when Damon Runyon wrote about *Guys & Dolls*, from the accession of Theodore Roosevelt to the Presidency in 1901 to the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1945,

New York was at the apogee of its self-confidence. The city grew rapidly and its emblem had become the skyscraper: the Woolworth Building was the tallest building in the world from 1913, surpassed by 40 Wall Street in April 1930, the Chrysler Building in 1930 and the Empire State Building in 1931.

Meanwhile, particularly south of Central Park and north of 40<sup>th</sup> Street, areas of New York were ruled by gangs controlling the gambling establishments. One typical case was that of Herman Rosenthal who opened a small gambling house. Rival proprietors arranged for his premises to be raided and so he moved. A succession of his gambling houses fell prey to attacks by rivals and police raids so he went to the source of his troubles. He entered into an agreement with Lt. Charles Becker, the head of the city police Gambling Squad. For a while



everyone was happy; the police were paid off and Rosenthal made money. Then in 1912 Becker demanded \$500 for the defense of his press agent charged with killing a man in a raid on a dice game. Rosenthal balked and so Becker ordered a raid on Rosenthal's club. Rosenthal threatened to tell the DA about the racket. Black Jack Delig was paid \$2,000 to kill Rosenthal. This attempt failed so Rosenthal made a statement to the press that the cops were corrupt. A second attempt to kill him succeeded. The shooters were arrested but Zelig offered to turn state's evidence. He too was shot. The four gunmen and the Lieutenant were convicted and executed. Not quite the cosy world of Nathan Detroit and Lt. Brannigan.

The lyrics of *Guys & Dolls* are based on two stories written by Damon Runyon, *The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown* and *Blood Pressure* plus some characters from *Pick the Winner*. He was born as **Alfred Damon Runyan** in Manhattan, Kansas. In 1887, the family eventually settled in Pueblo, Colorado where Runyon spent the rest of his youth. He began to work in the newspaper trade under his father in Pueblo. He worked for various newspapers in the Rocky Mountain area; while there, the spelling of his last name was changed from "Runyan" to "Runyon," a change he let stand.



After a notable failure in trying to organize a baseball league in 1910, Runyon moved to New York. For the next ten years he covered baseball and professional boxing for the New York American. Note the token boxer in the opening number of *Guys & Dolls*. As a baseball columnist for many years and his knack for spotting the eccentric and the unusual, on the field or in the stands, he is credited with revolutionizing the way baseball was covered. His best friend was a mobster accountant Otto Berman who he incorporated into several of his stories under the alias "Regret, the horse player." When Berman was killed in a hit on Berman's boss, Runyon quickly assumed the role of damage control for his deceased friend, correcting erroneous press releases. One stated Berman was one of Schultz's gunmen, to which Runyon replied, "Otto would have been as effective a bodyguard as a two-year-old."

Prohibition in the United States was in the period from 1920 to 1933, during which the sale, manufacture, and transportation of alcohol were banned nationally as mandated in the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution and repealed by the 21<sup>st</sup>. While Prohibition was successful in reducing the amount of liquor consumed, it stimulated the proliferation of rampant underground, organized and widespread criminal activity. Damon was always a heavy drinker when he was a young man but he fell in love with Ellen Egar who persuaded him to give up the bottle before they got married. Both Nathan Detroit and Sky Masterton mend their ways to get the lady they love. Notice also, the drunks who stumble onto the stage at various intervals. He was also a notorious gambler and, of course, gambling is a running theme of *Guys & Dolls* with its series of crap games. One of Damon's paraphrases from a line in Ecclesiastes ran: "*The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong*, [Ecclesiastes 9:11] but that's how the smart money bets." The dice game of crap originated in New Orleans among the Negro population. Since the squatting punters resemble toads, the game got its name from the French word for toad, *crapaud*. We also know that Damon was fond of cheesecake! His favourite was that supplied by *Lindy's* on Broadway founded in 1921, reputed to sell the best cheesecake in the US. This was immortalized by Damon in his stories as *Mindy's* and so incorporated into *Guys & Dolls*.

Runyon's contact with the world of gambling and gangsters would have brought him into contact with the Salvation Army, founded in London's east End in 1878. By 1880, the Salvation Army had arrived in the USA. The main converts were at first alcoholics, morphine addicts, prostitutes and other "undesirables" unwelcomed into polite Christian society. Among their beliefs are that its members should completely refrain from drinking alcohol (Holy Communion is not practiced), smoking, taking illegal drugs and gambling.



Runyon's marriage to Ellen Egan broke up in 1928 over rumours that Runyon had become infatuated with Patrice, a Mexican girl he had first met while covering the Pancho Villa raids in 1916. Runyon had promised her in Mexico that, if she would complete the education he paid for her, he would find her a dancing job in New York. Possibly, she was the inspiration for Adelaide. She became his companion after he separated from his wife. After Ellen Runyon died of the effects of her own drinking problems, Runyon and Patrice married but that marriage ended in 1946 when Patrice left Runyon for a younger man. He died in 1946, at age 66. His body was cremated, and his ashes were scattered from an airplane over Broadway.