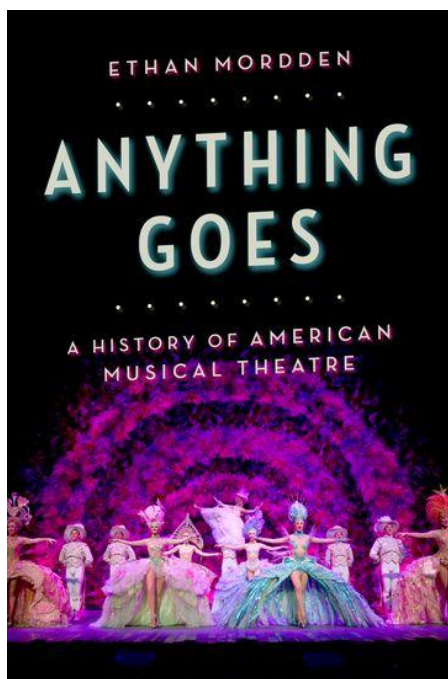


THE RODGERS AND HAMMERSTEIN HANDBOOK



Of the nine stage shows Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II created between 1943 and 1959, one was an outright commercial failure, another was a succès d'estime, and two were hits but did not enter the abiding repertory. The remaining five form the most phenomenal success story in the musical's saga, making up a unique short list of eternally revivable classics and governing Broadway for a generation.

However, many of the breakthroughs credited to the Rodgers and Hammerstein (from now on R & H) canon in fact precede their partnership, especially the main one: that they integrated the musical. *The Beggar's Opera*, way back in 1728 in London, was integrated. In the nineteenth century, Gilbert and Sullivan and Offenbach were integrated. Moving to America, we find that Reginald De Koven's *Robin Hood*, John Philip Sousa's *El Capitan*, and Victor Herbert's *The Red Mill* (among countless others) were integrated. Nor did R & H's emphasis on dance as a psychological instrument open a new path: there were plenty of Dream Ballets in the 1930s. Then, too, Rodgers himself defined a "great musical" as one in which "all the individual parts complement each other." In his words, "the orchestrations sound the way the costumes look." Rodgers expressly offered *Oklahoma!* as an example. But that first *Oklahoma!* production, in 1943, with its unprecedented five-year run and eleven-year national tour, had been compromised by a tight budget, and the sets, at least, looked cheap. The orchestrations, by Robert Russell Bennett, sounded wonderful, yes: Bennett was the Beowulf of his profession. And Miles White's costumes

exploited the novel western setting. However, scenery is usually the biggest expense in producing musicals, and Lemuel Ayers had to limit his geography to small side pieces against backdrops, adding overhead wires strung with baskets for the “Farmer and the Cowman” picnic party. So, in the end, one element in *Oklahoma!*’s production—the scenery—did not truly match the rest of the piece.

No, what made the R & H musicals great was their insistence on unique characters whose interaction creates unique stories. Even that was not new; it’s what attracted Jerome Kern and Hammerstein to *Show Boat*, first staged in 1927. And *Porgy and Bess*, in 1935, offered a one-of-a-kind narrative. Still, for about twenty years before *Oklahoma!*, musicals generally were written around very lightweight storylines. What mattered was interesting stars such as Fred and Adele Astaire, Bert Lahr, and Ethel Merman, and an appealing score—by Cole Porter, say. Here’s an idea: Lahr dreams that he’s Louis XV of France and Merman is his femme fatale, to a Porter score: *Du Barry Was a Lady* (1939). It was musical-comedy heaven, but it had no story to speak of. Stories were contrivances, and whenever the plot thinned someone would don a disguise or steal the jewels.

R & H didn’t cast stars till their fourth show, *South Pacific*, and their plots were too strong in the first place to need the desperation gambit of a zany masquerade or a jewel thief. Thus, while conventional musical comedies tended to resemble each other, the R & H titles are refreshingly inconsistent. We can infer a few guidelines even so. Rule One: Develop each story’s community background, its culture and mores. Thus, *Oklahoma!* isn’t just about the farmer and the cowman: it is imbued with their attitudes and feelings, seeking to pacify their squabbles with a bond as a society so that their territory be fit to join the union.

Conversely, *Carousel* (1945) sees in its New England setting a place divided into those with power and those without. It’s not overtly expressed, yet it’s ever present in the controlling force of policeman, mill owner, and such, and *Carousel*’s hero, Billy Bigelow (John Raitt), exemplifies this as a charismatic rascal who is splendid company as long as he doesn’t feel crowded by authority. Interweaving the separate yet connected love plots of Billy and Julie (Jan Clayton) and the Second Couple, Carrie (Jean Darling) and Mr. Snow (Eric Mattson), R & H troubled to place them in a social context, giving their

neighbors “June Is Bustin’ Out All Over”; the sea chanty “Blow High, Blow Low”; “This Was a Real Nice Clambake”; and a hymn tune, “You’ll Never Walk Alone”: all together, enough chorale for a Passion.

Long after all this, *Pippin*, with a medieval Frankish setting, a Stephen Schwartz score, an imaginative Bob Fosse staging (and a very lively revival that is still playing as we speak), proposed a hero with no ambition in life. Searching for meaning, he cried, “I know this is a musical comedy. But I want my life to mean something.” Unfortunately for Pippin, Roger O. Hirson’s book gave him no substance—which brings us to R & H Rule Two: Write about people whose lives have meaning. *Allegro* (1947) was the team’s first original; *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*, produced by the Theatre Guild, were drawn from Guild productions, Lynn Riggs’ *Green Grow the Lilacs* and Ferenc Molnár’s *Liliom*, respectively. *Allegro*’s protagonist, Joseph Taylor Jr., was a doctor’s son and a doctor himself, raised in the person-scaled culture of small-town America, who sees his values disintegrate as a big-city physician to rich idiots. A beautiful symmetry connected his youthful innocence to his later rueful wisdom in a choral number, “One Foot, Other Foot”: first sung when little Joey stood and walked for the first time, it closed the story when he renounced empty prosperity to return to village life.

Allegro was arguably the strangest musical to that point in Broadway history. The title means “lively,” and R & H conceived it to be more or less ceaselessly in motion, to reflect the discordant hubbub of modern life. Accordingly, they promoted *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*’s choreographer, Agnes de Mille, to director-choreographer, to stage the show as if it were a three-hour musical number, using back projections and small set pieces but no full-scale scenery as such: a dancer’s space.

To keep the show tripping along, de Mille used dissolves as each scene ended, bringing on the next team of players while the previous team moved off. In a further decomposition of format, R & H wrote a score using its own version of those small set pieces, some barely eight bars long, and the normal-length songs were distributed among the many principals, so no character—not even the protagonist—was able to offer himself to the public with the eloquence of, for instance, Curly’s “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’” and “The Surrey With the Fringe on Top.” Curly’s sweetheart, Laurey, got a mildly feminist rebel number in “Many a New Day,” but her *Allegro* counterpart, Jenny

Brinker, scarcely sang at all—and, while we're at it, she tore up the sweetheart activity sheet to commit adultery. (*Pal Joey's* Vera sleeps around, too, but Vera's no sweetheart.)

Critics and public alike were enthralled, bemused, baffled, irritated. Was *Allegro* a masterpiece (if a flawed one) or did its ambition outstrip its power? One problem was the design. Jo Mielziner, who with Albert Johnson, Boris Aronson, and Oliver Smith comprised the musical's quartet of Golden Age setmakers, seemed unable to make the unique playing area intelligible. Steps cut into the flooring looked odd, the projections worked only sometimes, and curtained openings in the wings for entrances and exits suggested fitting rooms in Ladies' Lingerie.

Still, *Allegro* was the first musical to align its staging with its theme. Joseph Taylor wanted his life to mean something, and the Majestic Theatre's big stage teemed with the bustle of people eager to catch hold of something, connect, achieve. From the moment the curtain rose on a woman in bed and a robed chorus explaining that she has just given birth to a boy—our hero to be—the public knew it was in for something special in the opening number alone. It was, in fact, the musical's first attempt to start with not fourth-wall realism but a collage of images, as that First Number expanded to take in other principals and the townsfolk as well, in a reality made of different locations collapsed into one.

This brings us to R & H Rule Three: Start uniquely. *Oklahoma!* started with a tiny tone poem of dawn on a golden morning, with Aunt Eller churning butter in her front yard on an otherwise empty stage. After the music died away, Curly was heard offstage launching "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" a cappella, and a bit after the orchestra struck back up to accompany him, he sauntered in. This was actually very much the way *Green Grow the Lilacs* had begun, twelve years earlier (though in that production, which interpolated folk songs, Curly sang "Get Along, Little Dogies"). Still, to most of *Oklahoma!*'s public, these first minutes of stage time were a surprise, with neither the big choral opening nor the bustling book scene that virtually all musicals got into when the curtain went up.

Carousel's first minutes were shocking. Typically, a musical of the 1940s began with a lengthy overture, played in semi-darkness. As it was ending—or, after it had ended, to "curtain music," the house lights darkened all the way, as if to usher the public

into the ceremony of theatre, and the curtain rose. All this emphasized the moment of contact between real life and fantasy, with its made-up characters, its attitudes, symbols, and myth. But *Carousel* had no overture. An odd, scratchy prelude suggested the winding up of the mechanism of a merry-go-round, and, after about a minute of music, the house began to dim—way ahead of the usual time, startling the audience—and the curtain then unexpectedly went up on the sight of a carnival in full cry. There was no singing, no dialogue: the story began in pantomime, and it really was *Carousel*'s story, as most of the major characters made their first appearance, the scene carefully staged to point out crucial details of the exposition: Julie and Carrie are friends, and Billy is the center of attention, especially Julie's.

And the fourth R & H show, *South Pacific* (1949), another adaptation, this time from war stories by James Michener, began with two Polynesian children singing a simple French tune, "Dites-moi." Actually, the kids are half-Polynesian (which will be an important plot point later on), but before the audience can digest the mystifying number—who are these children and what are they singing about?—the show's stars suddenly walked on: Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza.

This in itself was astonishing, as stars tended to get star entrances, usually heralded with a ramp-up. But R & H didn't write for stars even when stars were cast in their shows, a direct contradiction of conventional musical comedy, in which a star's persona created the script and score as if by dictation. The Astaires, Bert Lahr, and Ethel Merman weren't just performers: they were characters, part of the fabric of the composition, even the reason that the composition existed. Without the availability of Lahr and Merman, there never would have been a *Du Barry Was a Lady*. But *South Pacific* was going to be the next R & H show after *Allegro*, with or without Martin and Pinza.

South Pacific offers another departure from convention: No choreography. No dance, really, to speak of. The R & H revolution partook gluttonously of thirties "dance"—that blend of hoofing and ballet that was to inform the work of all the great masters from Jerome Robbins to Gower Champion. Then, too, *South Pacific* tested the R & H sense of community by treating the divisive notion of racism, for Pinza, as a Frenchman, was the father of the two children from the opening scene, which is why they

are but half Polynesian. Martin, a southern girl, from Little Rock, lives within the unquestioned racism of her background. After so many musicals where intermissions fell just after a risible sweethearts' misunderstanding, it was unsettling that *South Pacific's* first-act curtain fell when Martin, realizing that Pinza has cohabited with an Asian, deserted him in fear and confusion. Race becomes her crucible, her test, and we can rephrase Pippin's line as "I want my show to mean something."

Of course, all of this dramatic bravado would be worthless without first-division music and lyrics, and Rule Four is: Anchor the score with character traction. *The King and I* (1951) exemplifies this above all in a form R & H virtually made their own, the restless, searching monologue in which a character lays bare his feelings to the public, most often structured as a collection of songlets while his focus shifts from topic to topic. The outstanding such exhibit is *Carousel's* "Soliloquy," especially arresting in its exploration of Billy's attitudes and concerns in the very words he would use to articulate them. Anticipating the birth of a son, he veers from exuberance to anxiety to confidence. What will he become? What if some "boss' daughter"—another authority figure, Billy's natural enemy—scoops him up into a loveless marriage? No—Billy can advise his boy on the boxing-ring of romance. But while he gloats over his mastery of fatherhood, a terrible thought strikes him: what if he has a daughter instead? After all—in a superb Hammerstein insight—a scapegrace like Billy instinctively understands the difference between genders. You can raise a boy rough, but a girl needs the tenderness that Billy doesn't possess. Yet as he tells us this, he *sounds* tender, feeling it more easily than he can verbalize it.

One wonders what audiences in 1945, when *Carousel* was new to them, were thinking as this masterpiece of poetic psychoanalysis unfolded. Never before had a musical number so scrutinized a character—and *The King and I* (1951) has two such, the King's "A Puzzlement" and Anna's "Shall I Tell You What I Think of You?" These brilliant scenes situate these two—arguably the strongest characters in all R & H—as antagonists by temperament. He is all about policy and maintaining a powerful image—Yul Brynner, the original King, to the life. She is all about feelings—the trembly, easily hurt, yet fiercely independent Gertrude Lawrence, the show's original headliner. Ironically, both characters are conservatives, but of two very different worlds, his pre-

industrial and hers Victorian. Their dueling behavioral norms will drive them apart just when they have most closely bonded, creating in effect a sad ending for the First Couple and offending the musical's oldest ceremony, the happy romance. After all, even *Show Boat's* Magnolia and Ravenal were reunited (after twenty-three years), and though Porgy's departure to reclaim Bess defies reasonable expectations, the atmosphere is ecstatic. *Pal Joey* closes without a kiss panel, but that show is comically heartless throughout. It was really R & H, in *Carousel*, *Allegro*, and then *The King and I*, who saw the musical as potentially tragic or, as in *Allegro*, romantically inconclusive, freeing other writers to do the same in, among many other titles, *On the Town*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *West Side Story*, *Milk and Honey*, *Tenderloin*, *No Strings*, *Flora*, *the Red Menace*, *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, and *Cabaret*.

Along with Hammerstein's lyrics, Rodgers' music, too, sought to specify character far more intensely than he had done with Lorenz Hart. *Carousel* in particular is filled with arresting touches—operatic underscoring, echo texture, telling counter melodies—and they're Rodgers' work. The R & H production associate John Fearnley told me that he was very taken with a piquant effect in "You're a Queer One, Julie Jordan," when the trio's "weaving" theme unexpectedly decorates the return of the main strain, and Fearnley once went up to Robert Russell Bennett (who had orchestrated the scene, though not *Carousel* as a whole) and complimented him on the imaginative counterpoint.

"Oh," Bennett replied, "that was all laid out in Rodgers' parts."

Rule Five is: Change your genre from show to show, and after *The King and I* the two masters of the "musical play"—more evolved dramatically and musically than musical comedy but not exotically loony like operetta—cultivated the snazzier style of show. *Me and Juliet* (1953) was a backstageer with Latin accenting in the music; *Pipe Dream* (1955), a John Steinbeckian idyll with no Second Couple, had more atmosphere than plot. And *Flower Drum Song* (1958), with pointedly jazzy orchestrations (by Robert Russell Bennett, aided by Luther Henderson Jr.'s dance arrangements) offered a very contemporary tale about Chinese-American culture in San Francisco. The last R & H work, *The Sound of Music* (1959), again with Mary Martin, was another musical play, but a simplified one, without the typical R & H elements—the very long melody-stuffed

overture, the surprising opening, the musical scenes, the soliloquy (retained in *Me and Juliet*'s "It Feels Good" and *Pipe Dream*'s "Thinkin'"), the Dream Ballet.

Considering the phenomenal success of the film version, *The Sound of Music* might be the team's greatest hit, but it must be said that a certain pall hangs over the second half of the R & H output. *Variety*, crunching shows' capitalization and box-office take into the Hit or Flop category—and preserved in the Burns Mantle *Best Plays* annuals—called *Me and Juliet* a hit. Still, the piece failed to outlast its season. As with *Allegro*, its cast album quickly disappeared—a dire outcome for an R & H title, which more usually produced "If I Loved You"s and "Some Enchanted Evening"s: the bullet points of American song. And *Pipe Dream*, said *Variety*, was a flop. Further, it bears the reputation of having bowdlerized Steinbeck's wastrels and whores of the mid-California coast—of work at the canneries, cheap wine, and flophouses—as if R & H were cleaning up saucy, bawdy musical comedy in general, running off the showgirls and con men that had flavored it since the late 1920s.

"Mug shows" was the term Cy Feuer coined for this kind of musical, idealized in *Guys and Dolls*, which Feuer, with his longtime partner, Ernest H. Martin, produced. But R & H put on—and they used exactly these words—"family shows." So Hammerstein's *Steinbeck* lacked the novelist's earthy anarchism, the magnificent languor of California mañana culture, and—their own producers, if not always in name, from *Carousel* on—R & H may have erred in casting the Met Brünnhilde Helen Traubel as a bordello madam. The R & H musical play isn't simply more "playwritten" and musically idealized than the musical comedies of Cole Porter or, for that matter, Rodgers and Hart. It's about different things: the thrilling nationalism of *Oklahoma!*'s impending statehood, *Carousel*'s class war in New England, the life of a doctor. R & H don't do bordellos. As the Theatre Guild PR associate Helene Hanff recalled in her memoirs, *Oklahoma!* opened "with a middle-aged farm woman . . . churning butter, and from then on it got cleaner."

That is the standard measure of *Oklahoma!*: a family show on a Broadway obsessed with sex and gags, the work that no one wanted to invest in and all the wisenheimers said would flop. True enough, *Oklahoma!*'s rustic setting was startling in 1943, given the near-to-strip-burlesque riot of the typical wartime musical. "No gags, no gals, no chance" is, legendarily, the producer Mike Todd's dismissal of the show on its

New Haven tryout. However, *Oklahoma!*'s Dream Ballet featured de Mille's depiction of Jud Fry's naughty-postcard girls doing the cancan in cut-down-to-there black fetish, and if the New Haven stay revealed glitches, the Boston tryout played very, very well.

There's too much legend in the R & H saga. We are told also that Rodgers was tough of heart and Hammerstein the softy. On the contrary, both were very experienced theatre men who knew that playmaking devolves into chaos without the muscle of ruthless leadership. One night during *Allegro*'s tryout, while singing "The Gentleman Is a Dope" way downstage, Lisa Kirk lost her footing and pitched headlong into the orchestra players. They helped her back onto the stage while she gamely kept her place in the music, and of course the audience gave her a hand. Americans love the underdog who triumphs. It's the kind of event that gives a performer talkabout in the business, and Kirk foolishly decided to repeat the stunt. Storming backstage, Hammerstein told her that if she did it again she'd be fired.

And Rodgers was no dearheart. Ask any actor—auditions before the Big Guys are the hardest in the life. They can be distant and unsympathetic, bunched up in Row J with a "Show me" face, even with major names. I played Russell Nype's audition for the role of the lawyer in the original production of *Chicago*, and I still remember how Bob Fosse troubled to come up onto the stage to shake Russell's hand and say how eager Fosse was to hear him. Compare that with Jon Cypher's close encounter with Rodgers when auditioning for the role of the Prince in the R & H television original, *Cinderella* (1957). The cast, headed by Julie Andrews a year after *My Fair Lady* opened, was to be all stars except for the hero, and Cypher, just starting out, not only sang and read well but was tall and handsome. Still, few are they who audition confidently, and Cypher told Rodgers, "I have to admit, I'm a little nervous."

So Rodgers replied, "That's your problem."

And of course Rule Six is: Don't have rules.

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