

## Carousel: From Budapest to Broadway

When asked which of his musicals was his favourite, Richard Rodgers would reply, "Carousel". In his autobiography, "Musical Stages", he goes on to justify his choice:

"Oscar never wrote more meaningful or more moving lyrics, and to me, my score is more satisfying than any I've ever written. But it's not just the songs; it's the whole play. Beautifully written, tender without being mawkish, it affects me deeply every time I see it performed."

Strange then, that it began life as the show that Rodgers and Hammerstein did not want to write.

Richard Rodgers first met Hammerstein in 1917. The two were introduced by Richard's older brother following a performance of the annual varsity show at Columbia University. Hammerstein (aged 22) was a law student there and had written the lyrics for the show. Rodgers was a kid of 15 and had already dabbled with song writing. Also at Columbia was Lorenz (Larry) Hart and Richard Rodgers was himself to follow a few years later. Before Hammerstein and he collaborated in 1942 to write their first show Oklahoma!, Rodgers had an enduring partnership with Larry Hart that had spanned almost 25 years. What is not so well known is that before the Rodgers/Hart partnership began (but in the same year – 1919), Hammerstein actually penned the lyrics to three of Rodgers' songs for an amateur show Up Stage and Down. The songs, like the show, are now forgotten.

The prestigious Theatre Guild of New York had given Rodgers and Hart one of their most important writing opportunities in 1925. In 1942 the tables were turned and it was now Rodgers and Hart's chance to help out the cash-strapped Guild by producing a musical from one of its previous dramatic triumphs; Green Grow the Lilacs. In the event, this show (that was to become the ground-breaking Oklahoma!) turned out to be the one that ended the Rodgers & Hart partnership and launched the Rodgers & Hammerstein one. Hart's drunken and increasingly flamboyant lifestyle had finally caught up with him and Rodgers reluctantly had to find another collaborator.

Oklahoma! is a defining moment in the Broadway musical. It epitomised the maturity of Rodgers' and Hammerstein's individual strivings to produce a true "book" musical (where the drama, songs and dance are fully integrated) rather than the "review" type of show that had been loyally – if slavishly – followed throughout the 20s and 30s. It was the first time that an original cast album was recorded of any show and the first time that the "road" company began performing before the New York production had closed. But more importantly, it smashed every record in the history of the Broadway musical theatre. At this time a 3-month run for a musical was considered pretty good going: 6 months (the equivalent of about 160 performances) was a huge success. By December 1947, Oklahoma! had chalked up its 2000th Broadway performance.

It was inevitable that the Theatre Guild should turn again to Rodgers & Hammerstein for another sure fire hit. Again, the Guild suggested a reworking of something with which they had had a previous dramatic success; Ferenc Molnár's play Liliom. The Guild had produced Liliom in 1921 and, later in 1940, with a stellar cast. However, there were (as Rodgers and Hammerstein perceived it) insurmountable problems. Liliom had achieved something of a cult status (as had its Hungarian émigré author) and consequently presented a frightening prospect for those who might want to tamper with it.

Rodgers & Hammerstein knew only too well that Molnár himself had brusquely refused similar approaches from Puccini and Gershwin to make a musical adaptation of his play. Furthermore it was a fantasy set in Budapest for which the two writers had no feeling and, worse, it had an unbearably bitter, pessimistic ending...not really the stuff of musical escapism. The breakthrough came when Rodgers suggested that they move the action to late 19th Century New England and that they change the ending to suggest a more optimistic outcome.

In the original play, when Liliom – "Billy" in *Carousel* – is called to judgement in Heaven, he defiantly defends his life on earth and is sentenced to 16 years in Purgatory after which he is granted one day on Earth to do 'something good' for his daughter Louise to prove that his soul has been purified. He tells her that he used to know her father, and that he was a bully, and used to beat her mother. Julie sees but doesn't recognise her dead husband and vigorously defends his memory. When Liliom offers his little girl a star he stole from Heaven she tells him to leave and he slaps her hand, but it does not hurt her. Louise asks her mother how a slap cannot hurt; Julie explains "someone may beat you...and not hurt you at all". Liliom is led down to Hell for failing to prove his redemption.

There were still two problems to overcome; Molnár himself and the unyielding character of Liliom. The directors of the Guild solved the first in the sweetest way possible: they obtained the unobtainable for the playwright - tickets for *Oklahoma!* He so admired what Rodgers & Hammerstein had done with the work of another writer that he immediately gave his consent to their being allowed to adapt his own work. As for the central character, Rodgers and Hammerstein needed desperately to "feel" how Liliom would sing. After reading and rereading the play they had a notion for a soliloquy at the end of the first act in which the audience would learn of the fears and torment that the character was going through after he learned that he was about to become a father. This soliloquy proved to be the key that opened the lock. As Rodgers later wrote; "Once we could visualize the man singing, we felt that all the other problems would fall into place. And somehow they did."

They assembled the same production team that had had such a success with *Oklahoma!*, director Rouben Mamoulian and choreographer Agnes de Mille and again decided on a largely unknown cast in order to make the characters more believable. Another lesson taken from *Oklahoma!* was how to deal with the opening. Rodgers again decided to have no overture. He had long felt that audiences never listened to overtures anyway and therefore decided to make the opening music part of the action. The resulting *Carousel Waltz* has since become one of his most enduring pieces of music.

On the day of the first run-through, Richard Rodgers turned around and saw the monocled Molnár sitting at the rear of the theatre. The two writers had never met him and they were acutely aware that this would be the first time that he had seen their adaptation...including, of course, the altered ending. To Rodgers and Hammerstein nothing seemed to go right with the run-through and then, finally, they realised that they would have to brave what they expected to be a humiliating dressing down. Molnár's monocle dropped out of his eye as he spoke: "What you have done is so beautiful. And you know what I like the best? The ending!"

The out-of-town tryout unearthed problems only in the second act. A minister and his wife (representing Mr and Mrs God) were eliminated and replaced by the Starkeeper and a reprise of "If I Loved You" was added because it was felt that the act needed more music.

The New York opening at the Majestic Theatre was on 19th April 1945 and *Carousel* ran for 890 performances to become the fifth longest running musical of the decade. Of course, most people now know *Carousel* through the 1956 film version starring Gordon MacRae and Shirley Jones. In common with most film versions of Rodgers & Hammerstein shows, the darker edges of the plot were smoothed out thus denying it much of its bite. Beautifully filmed against an authentic New England backdrop, it is nevertheless a curiously lack-lustre affair. This may be in part due to the fact that excessive running time meant the deletion of a couple of musical numbers and that production was halted almost as soon as it began when the intended star, Frank Sinatra, walked off the set. Ostensibly due to the need to film each scene twice in two different movie formats, Shirley Jones (who played Julie), maintains that Sinatra, (albeit rather late in the day), came to the conclusion that he was miscast.

Although Carousel had long been the staple diet of amateur societies, it had somehow resisted being successfully revived professionally. That is, until 1993 when the Royal National Theatre staged a phenomenally successful production. Together with their recent presentation of Oklahoma!, the British are making a name for themselves in rediscovering the magic of Rodgers & Hammerstein.



*Burgess Meredith, Joan Tetzel & Ingrid Bergman in  
"Lillem" - New York 1940*