

The Most Happy Fella

We have a phrase nowadays: "it does what it says on the can". We use it to express the fact that our experience of something is exactly what we would expect...no surprises, no disappointments. I don't think the phrase existed in the 1950s but if it had, the critics of the time would have found it (or at least the obvious question it poses) very useful indeed. It was the question on all their lips. Just when they felt they exactly understood Frank Loesser's style and were ready to welcome his latest Broadway hit they found themselves faced with...well something that wasn't quite what they were expecting.

Loesser had been one of Hollywood's most sought-after lyricists and then lyricist-composer. His first Broadway score was for the 1948 *Where's Charley* featuring the elastic-bodied Ray Bolger. And then, in 1950, there was *Guys and Dolls*; a show that has proved to be just about indestructible and regularly appears in "greatest-of-Broadway" lists. Then Broadway waited with baited breath – for six years – for the next Frank Loesser smash. This was to be completely written (lyrics, music and, for the first time, book) by the great man himself. And what they got in 1956 was *The Most Happy Fella*. It had very good reviews from its tryouts in Boston and Philadelphia but it wasn't really what they expected. Right from the start, the "Is it a musical? Is it an opera?" questions were asked.

We have such a need to pigeon-hole things and our need is all the greater when the things refuse to be pigeon-holed. Broadway had had to deal with the same issue before, of course. Gershwin had started the rot with *Porgy and Bess*; the epic sweep of the storyline, the inclusion of operatic devices like recitative and musical motifs, very little spoken dialogue and, crucially, requiring legitimate operatic voices to cope with the expansive range of the songs (or are they arias?). Similar comments were made about Kurt Weill's *Street Scene*, and would, in the future be asked of Bernstein's *Candide* and Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*. It was certainly the case for *Happy Fella*.

When asked, Loesser himself simply said "It's not a play with music; it's not an opera, and let no one mention folk opera! It's a musical – with a lot of music." The critic William Hawkins wrote: "It has so much music, so much going on that you feel Verdi must have written *Oklahoma!*".

Broadway, of course, did everything it could to distance itself from the poisonous word "opera". Any show that had ever been described thus (like, for instance, the Gershwin and Weill mentioned above) had, despite any critical acclaim, lost their backers a heap of money. (The same was not, incidentally, true for *Happy Fella* which made a healthy profit during its first Broadway run of about 2 years - or 678 performances. And that, despite the fact that 1956 was a vintage year and the competition was stiff; *Damn Yankees*, *Bells Are Ringing*, *The Pyjama Game* and *My Fair Lady*, to name just a few.)

The Most Happy Fella is based on Sidney Howard's play, *They Knew What They Wanted*, which had been produced by the prestigious Theatre Guild in 1924. It won the Pulitzer Drama prize for that year and had been made into a number of film versions; the best known starring Charles Laughton and Carole Lombard in 1940. Five years of working on this material (and frequent dead-ends, brick-walls and other set backs that almost threatened its completion) saw it transform in Loesser's hands from what it had been. The original play focussed on the labour movement of the 1920s (Joe was a union organiser) and was weighty with frequent social comment and religious debate. Loesser's musical focuses on Tony's love story.

It has been criticised (as a piece of theatre) for not tidying up its loose ends: did Tony not think through the inevitability of his deception coming to light? What persuades Rosabella to forgive him so readily? ...and, what on earth makes Rosabella give in to Joe's charms so readily? The typical musical-comedy audience is more used to having the motivations of the characters being better defined: Loesser gives us very little explanation. If a show has to have a "point", may not this be it...that we often do things based on ill-considered reasoning, defying most logical thought, that may have very great consequences. If *Happy Fella* sometimes presents this a little awkwardly, it may be that we are not used to a musical having such "human" humans.

