

9 The Coming of the Musical Play: Rodgers and Hammerstein

ANN SEARS

Broadway was an exciting place to be in the 1920s, as many new voices were heard in American musical theatre. One important voice was that of jazz; other new voices included the composers George Gershwin, Vincent Youmans, Arthur Schwartz, Ray Henderson and, of course, the team of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. Rodgers (1902–79) and Hart (1895–1943) began their twenty-five-year collaboration during college productions at Columbia University. Their professional productions began with *Poor Little Ritz Girl* in 1920, and they attracted considerable critical and popular attention with their hit song ‘Manhattan’ in *The Garrick Gaieties* in 1925. By the end of the 1920s, several more of their shows had appeared on Broadway: *Dearest Enemy* (1925); *The Girl Friend*, a second *The Garrick Gaieties*, *Peggy-Ann* and *Betsy* (1926); *A Connecticut Yankee* (1927); *She’s My Baby*, *Present Arms* and the disastrous failure *Chee-Chee* (1928); and *Heads Up!* (1929). By the end of the decade Rodgers and Hart counted among the most popular songwriters in America, but after the start of the Great Depression and with the arrival of sound in motion pictures, they turned to the promising opportunities of writing film scores in Hollywood.

Hollywood proved to be financially rewarding, and Rodgers and Hart created some of their most enduring songs for films produced in the early to mid-1930s, such as ‘Isn’t It Romantic’, ‘You Are Too Beautiful’ and ‘Easy to Remember’. However, the waiting game of writing a few songs for a film over which they had little artistic control was not for this energetic pair. They returned to Broadway in 1935 with *Jumbo*, an extravaganza staged by Billy Rose. The 233 performances of *Jumbo* began a five-year series of hit shows for Rodgers and Hart, and at one point they had three shows running simultaneously.¹ Most of these shows from the late 1930s were very successful and later appeared in film versions, including, for example, *On Your Toes* (1936), *Babes in Arms* (1937), *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938) and *Pal Joey* (1940). When their masterpiece *Pal Joey* appeared, Rodgers and Hart were at the peak of their creative partnership. The play’s seamy plot and characters provoked much criticism, but by the time of its revival in 1952, *Pal Joey* was acknowledged as the most important work produced

by Rodgers and Hart. The most integrated of all their musicals, *Pal Joey* is probably the only one of their shows that can be easily revived today.

By the 1940s Hart's lifelong battle with alcoholism and related problems had made meeting theatre deadlines extremely stressful. When the Theatre Guild directors Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner approached Rodgers about transforming Lynn Riggs's play *Green Grow the Lilacs* into a musical, the situation came to a head. Hart did not believe the play could be adapted successfully, and he refused to work on the project, even though Rodgers confronted him with the possibility of finding another lyricist. Rodgers had already discreetly spoken to the man he thought might replace Hart – Oscar Hammerstein II.

Hammerstein (1895–1960) came from a family with theatrical traditions in its bones. His grandfather Oscar Hammerstein I founded the Manhattan Opera Company in 1906, giving the American premieres of several important operas and featuring many famous singers. In 1910 he sold his interests in the Manhattan to the Metropolitan Opera.² Oscar I's sons William and Arthur were also successful producers and theatre managers. Although William's son Oscar II had promised his father that he would never become involved in show business, like Rodgers and Hart, he was drawn to amateur productions while at Columbia University; during law school at Columbia, he began working for his Uncle Arthur. Eventually he became a writer, collaborating with his mentor Otto Harbach on works by Vincent Youmans (*Wildflower*, 1923), Rudolf Friml (*Rose Marie*, 1924), Sigmund Romberg (*The Desert Song*, 1926, and *The New Moon*, 1928) and most importantly Jerome Kern (*Sunny*, 1925). In 1927 Kern and Hammerstein wrote *Show Boat*, a groundbreaking show often considered to be the 'prototype for the "musical play" – the singularly American type of operetta which was popularised by Hammerstein and Richard Rodgers'.³ Hammerstein's great success with *Show Boat* was followed by two other successful shows with Kern, *Sweet Adeline* (1929) and *Music in the Air* (1932). Like many others, Hammerstein was drawn to Hollywood during the 1930s, contributing screenplays or lyrics to ten films.

However, for most of the 1930s Hammerstein's career was an odd patchwork of frustration and gratification. His stage works during the early 1930s had very short runs. *The Gang's All Here* (with Louis E. Gensler) opened to very mixed reviews and closed after only twenty-three performances. *East Wind* (with Romberg) also closed after twenty-three performances, and *Free for All* (with Richard A. Whiting) after a dismal fifteen. Two productions enjoyed respectable runs (*Ball at the Savoy*, London, 1933, 148 performances; and *May Wine*, with Romberg, 1935, 213 performances), and the 1936 film version of *Show Boat*, for

which Hammerstein wrote the screenplay and some new songs, was an instant critical and popular success; but several later stage shows were disappointments (including *Very Warm for May* with Kern, 1939, fifty-nine performances). The early 1940s were likewise uneven. Although Hammerstein had written some of his most memorable lyrics in the years following *Show Boat* ('I've Told Every Little Star' from *Music in the Air*; 'When I Grow Too Old to Dream' from *The Night Is Young*; or 'All the Things You Are' from *Very Warm for May*), it seemed to most of the musical theatre world, and perhaps to Hammerstein himself, that his best work was behind him.

Having no specific commitments to either Hollywood or Broadway, Hammerstein turned to a project he had first contemplated in 1934 after hearing a concert performance of Bizet's opera *Carmen* at the Hollywood Bowl. He had tried to interest MGM in a film version of an opera, but the studio never followed through on the idea. Nonetheless, in 1942, listening to a recording of *Carmen* and with his career at a watershed point, Hammerstein began the transformation of Bizet's nineteenth-century Spanish gypsies into African Americans from the American South during World War II. By July 1942, he had completed the entire libretto of *Carmen Jones*. Condensing the original four-act libretto into two acts and moving the location from a cigarette factory in Seville, Spain, to a parachute factory near a southern town, Hammerstein set his new lyrics to the original music of the opera. He eliminated the recitatives from the opera, restoring Bizet's original balance of spoken dialogue and arias, and as closely as possible kept to the original order of the music.

Opening only a few months after *Oklahoma!*, *Carmen Jones* (502 performances) further signalled the return of the Oscar Hammerstein who had written works such as *The Desert Song*, *Show Boat* and *The New Moon*. The lyrics captured both the opera's tempestuous love story and the unique character of African American culture. Critics noted how well Hammerstein had matched his words to Bizet's music and story. *Variety* stated that 'Hammerstein is now at the peak of his career'.⁴ With such accolades pouring in and two successful Broadway runs launched, Hammerstein's career was reborn. Thus, both Rodgers and Hammerstein brought many years of theatrical experience to their new collaboration, each was intent on having the plot, music and lyrics closely knit together to form a coherent whole, and each was strongly influenced by the operetta tradition. As collaborators, Rodgers and Hammerstein reversed the writing process Rodgers had used with Hart. Rodgers usually wrote music first to which Hart then set lyrics. Now, however, after lengthy discussions about the play, the characters, and the function and placement of the songs, Hammerstein would carefully craft his lyrics, then turn them

over to Rodgers, who in turn composed the music. Hammerstein had learned from the unhurried, concentrated writing of *Carmen Jones* that he did his best work when he took plenty of time to polish it. Having accommodated Hart for many years, Rodgers found the reliable, meticulous Hammerstein a comfortable partner.

The result of their initial efforts together was *Oklahoma!*, which exploded on Broadway in 1943 with unprecedented critical and popular acclaim that would have been unimaginable in previous decades. Even Hammerstein was surprised, having written to his son William that while ‘here is the nearest approach to *Show Boat* that the theatre has attained’ and ‘it is comparable in quality’, he did not think that ‘it has as sound a story or that it will be as great a success’.⁵ Although the opening-night performance in New York was not sold out, by the next day long lines waited at the box office. *Oklahoma!* ran for 2,212 performances on Broadway and toured for fifty-one weeks. A national company toured for ten years through over 150 cities, and the international companies included a USO unit in the Pacific that entertained American troops. The London production at the Drury Lane Theatre was the longest run in the history of that theatre. The show won a special Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1944. The film version was made in 1955, winning two Oscars: Best Scoring of a Musical Film and Best Sound Recording.⁶

As he wrote the book and lyrics for *Oklahoma!*, Hammerstein aimed to keep the character of the original play, even quoting Lynn Riggs’s opening paragraph:

It is a radiant summer morning several years ago, the kind of morning which, enveloping the shapes of earth – men, cattle in a meadow, blades of the young corn, streams – makes them seem to exist now for the first time, their images giving off a golden emanation that is partly true and partly a trick of the imagination, focusing to keep alive a loveliness that may pass away.⁷

In the stage play, the story takes place in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma around 1900. Laurey, a young, innocent girl, lives on a farm with her widowed Aunt Eller. She falls in love with Curly, a cowboy. They are shy with each other, and to provoke Curly, Laurey agrees to attend a box social with Aunt Eller’s farmhand, Jeeter Fry, whom she fears. At the social, Jeeter and Laurey argue, and Jeeter leaves. Soon after, Laurey and Curly are married. During the shivaree on their wedding night, Jeeter appears and dies after falling on his own knife while fighting with Curly. Aunt Eller convinces the authorities to let Curly spend one night with Laurey before he is sent to jail.⁸ Traditional folk songs were sung throughout the play.

Hammerstein used much of the original play and kept Riggs's arrangement of two acts, each with three scenes. However, he changed the second act considerably, compressing it and writing a new ending in which Jud (formerly Jeeter) Fry's death from his own knife while fighting with Curly is declared self-defence. Laurey and Curly can leave on their honeymoon. Additionally, Hammerstein created a secondary, comic love triangle by redefining Ado Annie and inventing her suitors, neither of whom is in Riggs's play. The shy, quiet Ado Annie of the original becomes a brash, irrepressible girl who cannot resist men. The cowboy Will Parker and the Persian pedlar Ali Hakim both attempt to woo her. Hammerstein expands the traditional pairs of lovers, observed so frequently in opera, to pairs of love triangles.

As Rodgers and Hammerstein translated the play to a musical setting, they indeed took the musical in a new direction. While Broadway composers of the day might typically have placed an ensemble number early in the show, preferably with a bevy of beautiful girls singing and dancing, *Oklahoma!* opens with Aunt Eller alone on stage churning butter. The leading man, Curly, begins singing 'Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin' offstage and without accompaniment. The Western setting dictated costumes that were rather homespun compared to the glittering revues and witty comedies of previous eras. No one believed that Rodgers and Hammerstein could sell a death in the second act, not even the accidental death of so disagreeable a character as Jud Fry. Rodgers and Hammerstein themselves joked about why the show could flop: 'The chorus girls didn't appear until the curtain had been up for forty minutes; the first act had no plot except a girl deciding which young man to go to a dance with; there were virtually no important new numbers in the second act; and so on.'⁹ There were further examples of a new approach: the combination of ballet and vernacular American dance used as a narrative element; long musical scenes and thoughtful use of song reprises; a plot about ordinary people and their ordinary, yet deeply dramatic lives; and the unusual way the romantic couple interact and fall in love. It all worked together to form a show that, like *Show Boat*, became a milestone, so that later historians writing about important moments in twentieth-century musical theatre would begin to identify eras according to their relationship to *Oklahoma!* – for example, 'Act I: Before Rodgers and Hammerstein' and 'Act II: The Broadway Musical After *Oklahoma!*'¹⁰

Hammerstein's decision to follow the play's original arrangement of three scenes that developed character followed by three scenes more centred on the plot enabled him to create characters of such depth that the audience empathised with them at once. By the end of Act 1 Aunt Eller is established as a wise woman and earth mother. Laurey has revealed both

her love for Curly and her fear of Jud Fry. Ado Annie is ripe for Will Parker's ultimatum about marriage, and the pedlar Ali Hakim is bound to be caught by some enterprising young woman. Jud Fry is obviously the villain, but touchingly so, because we know from 'Lonely Room' and 'Pore Jud Is Daid' just how miserable he is. All the action of Act 2 follows from the emotions and events set up in Act 1: Laurey and Ado Annie making choices about their love relationships, the resolution of conflicts between their men, the sad end of the villain, and the community moving towards statehood.

The flow of the dramatic action is helped along by the way Rodgers and Hammerstein use song reprises. For example, the two renditions of 'The Surrey with the Fringe on Top' in scene 1 are the first steps in the relationship between Laurey and Curly. As Curly begins to describe the beautiful surrey in which he will take Laurey to the dance that night, he is really telling her how much he wants to spend a romantic evening with her. Following the song, he discovers that she has agreed to attend the dance with Jud Fry. She realises that the wonderful surrey is not just in Curly's imagination; rather, he has really rented it to drive her to the dance. The reprise of 'The Surrey with the Fringe on Top' is Curly's opportunity to tell her what she has missed, and it prompts her to reconsider her feelings for him. The last song in Act 1, scene 1, 'People Will Say We're in Love', functions similarly; in the rendition that ends Act 1, scene 1, an interaction is begun that must be completed later. After the anxiety set up by 'The Surrey with the Fringe on Top', 'People Will Say We're in Love' lets us see the first blossoming of serious romantic love between Laurey and Curly. Not until Act 2, scene 2 do we hear the reprise of 'People Will Say We're in Love' and know that Laurey and Curly have sorted out their differences and agreed to marry, releasing the tension held from Act 1, scene 1. The resulting organic unfolding of the plot gives *Oklahoma!* a dramatic unity and momentum that had hardly been present in American musical theatre before 1943, and thus announces the arrival of the 'musical play'.

Although the self-effacing Hammerstein claimed that his lyrics were a result of a predilection for 'a more primitive type of lyric',¹¹ in fact, his fresh, romantic approach to poetry matched the tone of *Oklahoma!*'s story and frontier location perfectly. The repetition of lines in 'Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin' captured the hushed, suspended serenity of morning in the country before the world was permeated by traffic noise. Country life was also echoed in the patterns of 'The Surrey with the Fringe on Top', where the first two lines are composed of a series of one-syllable words followed by two-syllable words at the end of the line, reminiscent of the true-to-life sounds of clip-clopping horses' hooves and the chicken yard,

still familiar to many people in the 1940s. The patterns of his judicious use of Western dialect add to the depth of characterisation. Special characters and tender moments are delineated by leaving off the dialect, for example, in Laurey's songs and in Curly's songs about his relationship with Laurey. When Curly sings with or about other characters, such as about Jud Fry in 'Pore Jud Is Daid', the dialect reappears. Hammerstein also disproved critics who thought he could only write sweet, sentimental, inspirational lyrics. Precisely matching his lyrics to Jud Fry's interior landscape, he created a dark, introspective picture of *Oklahoma!*'s most sinister character, who describes his bleak world in the song 'Lonely Room'.

The music Rodgers wrote for *Oklahoma!* matched and amplified the brilliant characterisations of Hammerstein's lyrics. Curly's repeated opening lines ('There's a bright golden haze on the meadow' and 'Oh, what a beautiful mornin', Oh, what a beautiful day') are paralleled by repeated musical phrases. The repeated notes on 'looks like it's climbin' clear up to the sky' along with the other repetitions reinforce the environment of the Oklahoma territory: wide-open spaces, long days and repetitive tasks, and the deliberate unfolding of a daily life marked by occasional festivities. The hesitant steps Laurey and Curly take towards each other are mirrored in their songs, 'The Surrey with the Fringe on Top' and the 'almost love song' (also a 'list song'), 'People Will Say We're in Love'. Compelling characterisations and music are also given to the minor characters. For example, Will Parker's 'Kansas City' simultaneously introduces Will Parker and the context of the show to the audience. Ado Annie is given some of the most interesting characterisation in the show through her song 'I Cain't Say No', which leaves the audience with a crystal-clear understanding of what motivates her. 'Lonely Room' particularly shows Rodgers's ability to describe character through music. The dissonant intervals of a second that murmur through much of the accompaniment to the song also begin and end the vocal part, mirroring the pain within Jud's psyche and his dysfunctional relationship with the world around him.

The dances in *Oklahoma!* were choreographed by Agnes de Mille, fresh from her triumphs of choreographing and dancing in Aaron Copland's ballet *Rodeo* with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1942. The choice of de Mille seemed natural in view of the Western theme and set of *Rodeo*. Her mixture of vernacular American dance and ballet turned out to be just right for *Oklahoma!*, continuing the character illustration and plot propulsion already inherent in the book, lyrics and music. Will Parker's dance following 'Kansas City' uses a new social dance, the two-step, tap dancing with references to ragtime and occasional square dance steps. It sums up

the potpourri of popular culture at that time, neatly paralleling the dialect in which Will both speaks and sings. For the 'Dream Ballet' at the end of the first act, de Mille used ballet, flavoured with turn-of-the-century costumes, to reveal Laurey's psychological state and her fear of Jud Fry. While all kinds of dance had been incorporated in the shows of earlier eras, the profound connection of the 'Dream Ballet' to the plot of *Oklahoma!* revolutionised the use of dance in musical theatre. As her fellow choreographer Jerome Robbins said about the use of ballet to tell a story, 'Agnes made it stick.'¹²

There were many obvious innovations in *Oklahoma!* – the importance of the story, songs growing seamlessly out of the plot and characters, the complexity of the strong women characters, the use of lengthy musical scenes, the striking simplicity of the opening, the 'almost love song', the narrative use of multiple dance styles and the forthright approach to moral and social issues. Nearly all these elements had appeared to some extent in the work of Rodgers and Hart, who had always considered the integration of story and music a crucial factor in a successful show. For example, Rodgers and Hart had incorporated dance significantly in their shows, showcasing George Balanchine's ballets. As Hammerstein had in 'People Will Say We're in Love', Lorenz Hart often approached love-song lyrics obliquely, sometimes even speaking of love more as a disease than an emotional state ('This can't be love because I feel so well'). Some aspects of the Rodgers and Hammerstein collaboration had been important in Hammerstein's earlier work as well. Hammerstein had tried the Western theme in *Rainbow* (1928), and moved towards longer musical scenes in *Show Boat* with Kern. However, with Rodgers and Hammerstein these ideas coalesced, and their innovations would become the recipe for a series of Rodgers and Hammerstein hits. Part of *Oklahoma!*'s immediate success, along with the freshness and coherence of the production itself, was its appearance at the midpoint of World War II, a crucial time in the nation's history. In the context of a devastating world war, the outcome of which appeared far from certain, *Oklahoma!*'s story transmitted a powerful message about the American spirit to its audiences. After Hitler's advance through Europe, the shock of Pearl Harbor and two brutal years of war, *Oklahoma!*'s celebration of the indomitable pioneer spirit was just what Americans needed to hear. The book, lyrics, costumes and music (especially 'Oklahoma', the 'song about the land' that closes the show) reflected currents in American art, music and popular culture that looked at American life past and present through a haze of romanticism and nostalgia.

Shortly after *Oklahoma!* was launched, Hammerstein wrote the screenplay and lyrics for Twentieth Century Fox's remake of *State Fair*, returning

to the nostalgia of rural America. Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote two of their most memorable songs for the film, 'It's a Grand Night for Singing' and 'It Might as Well Be Spring', which won the Academy Award for Best Song that year. These songs and the title song continued the Rodgers and Hammerstein strategy of using songs to move the plot and explicate character. As the film opens, the title song 'State Fair' functions as an exposition of the story, carrying the action as the song is handed from one character to another, with each giving his or her description of the chief delights of attending the fair. 'It's a Grand Night for Singing' also moves the plot along as the characters hand this song back and forth while they move through the fair. The soliloquy 'It Might as Well Be Spring' provides the most personal, intimate observation of any character in this film, as we see a young girl learning about love between men and women. The making of *State Fair* was a better experience than most of either Rodgers's or Hammerstein's early Hollywood work, and it may have influenced them later to consider film adaptations of their stage productions.

Knowing that it would be difficult to surpass or even equal the triumph of *Oklahoma!*, Rodgers and Hammerstein carefully weighed possibilities for a new show. When the Theatre Guild suggested adapting Ferenc Molnár's play *Liliom*, they refused. After all, 'common knowledge' said that Molnár had refused even Puccini permission for an opera setting.¹³ Further more, they thought that the Hungarian setting and the bitterness of the second act presented insoluble difficulties. The first challenge was met by having Molnár see *Oklahoma!* for himself, after which he happily gave permission for a musical setting. The other obstacle was overcome by moving the play to the coast of Maine in 1873, turning the leading lady into a wife rather than a mistress, and finding a more acceptable approach to the ending. Inspired by the carnival theme of *Liliom*, they called the new show *Carousel*.

The musical version begins without the customary overture; rather Rodgers settled on a 'Prologue (The Carousel Waltz)' that is an integral part of Act 1. As the waltz plays (its orchestration reminiscent of genuine carnival music), a pantomime unfolds in which the two most important characters are introduced. The body of the play explores the relationship between Billy and Julie, who fall in love, marry and are expecting a child, and the moral choices they make. Julie's friend Carrie marries Mr Snow, providing a stable family story against which Billy and Julie's tragedy is counterposed. Having been fired from the carnival by Mrs Mullin, Billy is unable to support his family. He and his friend Jigger contemplate a robbery, during which Billy is killed. The celestial Starkeeper allows him to return to earth for one day, during which he tells Julie he loved

her and encourages his daughter Louise to believe in herself, because she is not alone.

Many ingredients from the smash hit *Oklahoma!* reappeared in *Carousel*, including the use of long musical scenes and reprises. Dance was still an important element, with ensemble numbers for the whole cast and a ballet introducing Billy and Julie's troubled child, Louise. The 'almost love song' ('If I Loved You') appeared in an even more integrated way, emerging seamlessly from the dialogue. Moral choices were more realistically addressed, as conflicted leading man Billy Bigelow struggled with issues such as work and responsibility, domestic abuse and whether to turn to a life of crime. Julie and Carrie joined Aunt Eller, Laurey and Ado Annie in the Rodgers and Hammerstein pantheon of strong, individualistic women characters. Rodgers and Hammerstein also added an element that would appear in all their subsequent shows: important child characters and issues concerning children.

Musically, the Rodgers and Hammerstein approach became even more organic. Many critics have noticed that 'The Carousel Waltz' of the 'Prologue' provides much of the musical material for the songs in the show.¹⁴ Borrowing from melodrama, *Carousel's* characters frequently speak over music, a technique that Hammerstein previously used in *Rose Marie*, *Show Boat* and *The New Moon*. The greater complexity of all the characters, whose stories often involve conflict and resolution within themselves, is reflected in their music, particularly in Billy Bigelow's 'Soliloquy', an episodic song that moves far away from the traditional AABA form of the typical Broadway song and through several keys, and the reprise of 'If I Loved You' in Act 2, in which Billy Bigelow finally allows himself to admit his love for Julie.

Like *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel* was produced by the Theatre Guild and supervised by Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner. The superb integration of all the show's elements was carefully overseen by a production team almost transplanted from *Oklahoma!*, headed by director Rouben Mamoulian. Agnes de Mille again choreographed the dances, and Miles White designed the costumes. Although some critics found the second act too slow and the ending peculiar, the opening reviews were generally enthusiastic. A few reviewers liked *Carousel* even more than *Oklahoma!* Anticipating Richard Rodgers's own opinion, Robert Garland wrote that 'when somebody writes a better musical play than "Carousel", written by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein will have to write it.' Later Rodgers admitted that *Carousel* was his favourite of all his musicals, saying: '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.'¹⁵ Certainly Rodgers and Hammerstein reached a more profound level of integration and dramatic sensitivity in *Carousel*.

Following *Carousel*, Rodgers and Hammerstein began a pattern of producing other work in between writing and producing their own. In 1946 they produced *Annie Get Your Gun* with a score by Irving Berlin, which went on to have successful runs in New York, London and throughout Europe. By 1946 Hammerstein had running simultaneously on Broadway a string of hits that included *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *The Desert Song* (with *Carmen Jones* to follow), *Show Boat* and two shows that he and Rodgers co-produced, *I Remember Mama* and *Annie Get Your Gun*. Rodgers and Hammerstein had become two of the most influential men in American musical theatre, and with theatre receipts and royalties flowing in steadily, two of the most affluent.

Their next show, *Allegro* (1947), is perhaps Rodgers and Hammerstein's most experimental work, but its 315-performance run could not compare to their first two outings. Based on the life story of a doctor from birth to the age of thirty-five, the show illustrates stages of his life through a 'Greek chorus', various lighting effects, lantern slides and rear-screen projections, short scenes, dances and songs. The idealistic doctor, Joe Taylor, marries a hometown girl, becomes corrupted by money and power, and loses his healing connection to his patients. Eventually his friend Charlie and Emily, a nurse who loves Joe, help him face his life and leave his unfaithful wife. They return to their hometown and their ideals of medicine. There is much speculation about the so-called 'failure' of *Allegro*. It was the first show Rodgers and Hammerstein created from scratch, whereas their previous two successful productions were based on strong literary sources. Agnes de Mille, who directed, found the play uneven. She thought the first act so beautiful that she cried when she first read it, but she felt that the second act, which Hammerstein wrote under time pressure, did not match the first act, either in quality of lyrics or in continuity of story. *Allegro* marked de Mille's directorial debut, and she struggled to direct, choreograph and manage the complicated, multilevel sets plus a large cast of forty-one principals and almost a hundred dancers and chorus singers. After a frantic rehearsal period and many revisions, *Allegro* opened to mixed reviews. Its forty-week run and thirty-one-week tour might have been a success had the production not been so expensive. However, the artistic failure distressed Rodgers and Hammerstein more than the financial loss. While some praised the show as 'unconventional' and 'a

musical play without any of the conventions of form', Hammerstein knew that he had not written the story he really wanted to convey.¹⁶ The commentary of the 'Greek chorus' seemed too moralistic, and it sapped the vitality of the characters and the action. The attempt to make characters less important while emphasising the other elements of the show – dancers, the chorus, the abstract set, the lighting effects – was lost on most people. Some people thought that Rodgers and Hammerstein's styles did not match well enough in the innovative *Allegro*, which may have been the first concept musical, and that Rodgers's music was too conventional for the book and lyrics Hammerstein had written.¹⁷ In any case, the failure of *Allegro* was a misfortune for the world of musical theatre, because Rodgers and Hammerstein never again ventured into so radical a project. The rest of their collaboration was devoted to 'refining the dramatic musical play until they took their particular brand of it as far as it could go'.¹⁸ However, Hammerstein retained an affection for *Allegro*, and was rewriting the musical for television when he died.

Returning to the successful approach that had produced *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* required finding the right literary property to adapt. When Joshua Logan suggested James Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific*, both Rodgers and Hammerstein were enthusiastic. A series of short stories about World War II in the South Pacific, the book included many characters and episodes. Hammerstein settled on 'Fo Dolla', the story Logan had first mentioned, and combined it with 'Our Heroine'. The resulting play revolved around two couples: Liat, a young Tonkinese girl, and Lt Joe Cable, an American from an aristocratic Philadelphia family; and Nellie Forbush, a young nurse from Arkansas, and Emile de Becque, a middle-aged French planter. Each couple faces the obstacle of racial prejudice. Lt Cable cannot imagine taking Liat back to America, and Nellie hesitates to marry de Becque after learning of his children born to his late native wife. Cable tells Liat he cannot marry her and leaves on a reconnaissance mission, during which he is killed. De Becque returns from the same mission to discover that Nellie has transcended her learned racism and awaits him with the children. Since having two serious romantic couples was unusual, two important, high-energy characters provided comedy: Bloody Mary, a native trader and Liat's mother, and Luther Billis, an entrepreneurial enlisted man.

Early in the writing of *South Pacific*, Rodgers and Hammerstein engaged Ezio Pinza, a bass with the Metropolitan Opera, and Mary Martin, whom they had wanted but could not get for *Oklahoma!*. Having two major stars in the show created tremendous publicity, and the show's entire try-out week in New Haven was sold out. The Boston try-out was

also well received, leading one critic to call the show 'South Terrific, and then some!' With such enthusiastic advance press, the New York opening on 7 April 1949 was equally triumphant.¹⁹ *South Pacific* went on to run for 1,925 performances in New York, winning nine Donaldson awards, eight Tonys and the coveted Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Many of its songs became familiar to the general public. The original cast album sold over one million copies, and in 1957 a film version appeared, directed by Joshua Logan.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's stamp was on every aspect of the production. They created another pair of strong female characters: nurse Nellie Forbush, who proves her spirit by overcoming her prejudices, and the irascible, incorrigible Bloody Mary. The spotlight on child characters begun in *Carousel* continued with Emile de Becque's two children. Furthermore, the children open and close the show with their song 'Dites-moi', illustrating their pivotal importance in the plot. The old device of a show-within-a-show appeared as a variety show for the troops. The show contained several stellar examples of Rodgers and Hammerstein's extraordinary ability to suggest a locale or a setting, from the exotic flavour of the beautiful, mysterious island described in 'Bali Ha'i' to the rowdy, slightly shady world of 'Bloody Mary' and the soldiers' world of 'There Is Nothin' Like a Dame' and 'Honey Bun'.

The refinements of their evolving formula were apparent in the dramatic use of two romantic couples, and the character-tailored music that fitted the vocal and acting talents of the two stars so well. A new level of dramatic maturity was noticeable in the social commentary of 'You've Got to Be Carefully Taught'. *South Pacific* also ventured into more adult territory with the sexual relationship between Liat and Lt Cable, engineered by Bloody Mary with the hope that Cable would marry her daughter.

Their next show would be an adaptation of Margaret Landon's 1943 *Anna and the King of Siam*, about British widow Anna Leonowens and her stint in the 1860s as tutor to the children of King Mongkut of Siam. The show featured the brilliant actress Gertrude Lawrence, who was not a particularly accomplished or reliable singer, but who had a wonderfully magnetic stage presence. Again the Rodgers and Hammerstein formula would be extended and refined, and again the expansion of the recipe would create a hit show. *The King and I* enjoyed a 1,246-performance Broadway run, toured for eighteen months and ran for 926 performances in London. After capturing three Tonys and five Donaldson awards as a stage production, the 1956 film version won six Academy Awards.

The charm of the show was obvious from the beginning, often in a way predictable from their previous three big shows. The fascination of the

exotic time and place was gloriously emphasised by opulent sets and costumes designed after authentic models. Rodgers incorporated enough pentatonic melodies and Thai percussion motifs to imply a genuinely Oriental environment. Three significant songs featured adorable children of various ages: 'Getting to Know You', 'I Whistle a Happy Tune' and the 'March of the Siamese Children'. Jerome Robbins's imaginative ballet, 'The Small House of Uncle Thomas', retold the story of Harriet Beecher Stowe's controversial novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, pinpointing several important social issues, such as slavery and gender inequality. Dance and the 'almost love song' combined in 'Shall We Dance?'. Strong women characters abounded in this show: Anna, Lady Thiang and Tuptim.

The real story of *The King and I* was the relationship between Mrs Anna and the King. Bit by bit through the show, the audience observes the gradual understanding established between these two strong-willed characters, reaching towards each other across an enormous cultural abyss. Despite their political and philosophical differences, they grow to love and depend on each other. Their love is never overtly expressed, though coming close in 'Shall We Dance', when they talk about relationships and connect physically in the polka. As they gaze at each other breathlessly after dancing, the audience knows that the love between them hovers on the brink of speech. The tension is broken, not by spoken words of affection, but by the announcement that Tuptim has been found by the police. Any further progression of their feelings is prevented by the King's death, and the 'almost love song' becomes part of a compelling 'almost love story'.

With a fourth huge hit show behind them, Rodgers and Hammerstein had established a nearly infallible relationship with the theatregoing public. Consequently their next two shows managed respectable runs (*Me and Juliet*, 1953, 358 performances; *Pipe Dream*, 1955, 246 performances), but were far from their finest critical successes or best financial windfalls. As with *Allegro*, *Me and Juliet* was an original story by Hammerstein, in this case springing from Rodgers's desire to do a show about life in the theatre. Despite George Abbott's experienced direction, Irene Sharaff's costumes and Jo Meilziner's ingenious set, the public did not respond to the story. *Pipe Dream* fared still less well, even with a story by John Steinbeck and glamorous opera star Helen Traubel in the cast. Unfortunately, Steinbeck's story and characters were closer to the world of Rodgers and Hart's *Pal Joey* than to the usual Rodgers and Hammerstein recipe. The failure of the production to recreate the earthy atmosphere of Steinbeck's novel and Helen Traubel's unsuitability in the role of whorehouse madam led to the shortest run of a Rodgers and Hammerstein show.

Despite the disappointments of *Me and Juliet* and *Pipe Dream*, Rodgers and Hammerstein forged ahead into new enterprises in the early 1950s. Rodgers wrote the music for a thirteen-hour television documentary series, *Victory at Sea* (1952), which covered important naval battles of World War II. Still popular today, the documentary is available in video format. The film version of *Oklahoma!* released in 1953 was the first film version of one of their shows, and they gave it careful attention, producing it themselves. A close reworking of the stage numbers, except for the omission of 'It's a Scandal! It's an Outrage!' and 'Lonely Room', the film repaid the time and money that went into it, winning two Academy Awards and becoming a screen favourite. They also wrote a well-received version of *Cinderella* (1957) for television that featured a young Julie Andrews, and assisted with producing film versions of *Carousel* (1956) and *South Pacific* (1958). Their new show *Flower Drum Song* began a 600-performance run in March of 1958. Both films and *Flower Drum Song* won Gold Records for their respective cast recordings and soundtracks, and *South Pacific* won an Oscar for Best Sound Recording.

As the 1950s closed, Rodgers and Hammerstein began a new show based on the story of the von Trapp family and their escape from Nazism.



Plate 14 Shirley Jones as Maria with the children in the 1977 production of *The Sound of Music* at Starlight Theatre, Kansas City, Missouri. Photograph courtesy of Starlight Theatre, Kansas City, Missouri

Early in the show's preparations, Hammerstein became ill and was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Nonetheless, they were able to write one of their most memorable works. Perhaps the best known of all their shows because of the immense popularity of the film version, *The Sound of Music* was the epitome of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical play. The components that had guaranteed the success of the first big shows appeared in force in *The Sound of Music*: tightly integrated book, lyrics and music with significant dramatic use of song reprises; an atypical love story; important child characters; strong women (a whole abbey of them, along with Maria von Trapp!); narrative use of dance, for example the 'Ländler' during which Captain von Trapp and Maria fall in love; the trademark 'almost love song'; and a brilliant depiction of the story's environment through poetic, musical and design elements. Hammerstein wrote some of his simplest, most heartfelt lyrics.

With memories of World War II and the Nazis' rise to power still vivid and reinforced by the spread of communism in Europe, and well-publicised stories about attempted escapes from communist countries in the American press, audiences took the singing von Trapp family to their hearts and made the show a hit. The artistic acclaim for the show meant even more to Rodgers and Hammerstein. Though some critics found it 'sticky with sweetness and light', many others considered it 'the full ripening of these two extraordinary talents'. Six Tonys, a Gold Record and a Grammy for the cast album, a *Variety* Critic Poll Award for Best Score, and a National Catholic Theatre Conference Award were indisputable evidence of the show's immediate success. A two-year American tour and a 2,385-performance London run were followed by the film version (1965) which carried away five Academy Awards, a Golden Globe, a Gold Record for the cast album and various other awards. Although Hammerstein did not live to know of the remarkable popularity of this show and its film version, in many ways it was a most appropriate capstone to his career and in particular his collaboration with Richard Rodgers. Often decried as overly sentimental, Hammerstein's story and lyrics encoded his own values and principles that he thought audiences found important and believable. Over the years, his continued insistence on writing what he found authentic led to his development as a writer of great maturity, and combined with Richard Rodgers's musical and theatrical genius, produced a series of musical plays that revolutionised post-1943 American musical theatre.

Facing the certainty of his imminent death, Hammerstein encouraged Rodgers to find new projects and continue working with other lyricists. A second television documentary, *Winston Churchill – The Valiant Years* (1960), garnered Rodgers a second Emmy, and his television version of

Androcles and the Lion (1967; book by Peter Stone, music and lyrics by Rodgers) was generously reviewed. Several new shows had impressive runs: *No Strings* (1962; 580 performances, book by Samuel Taylor, music and lyrics by Rodgers); *Do I Hear a Waltz?* (1965; 220 performances, book by Arthur Laurents, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim); and *Two by Two* (1970; 343 performances, play by Peter Stone, lyrics by Martin Charnin). While he proved his ability to write his own lyrics when necessary, Rodgers continued working with various writers. However, he never found a third collaborator who matched his own innate gifts so well as Hart or Hammerstein. Compared with most of his earlier work, his final two shows (*Rex*, 1976, forty-nine performances, and *I Remember Mama*, 1979, 108 performances) were failures.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's legacy rests on an astonishing body of work, first with other partners, and second on their collaborations, particularly their five best shows: *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music*. All these shows had lengthy if not record-breaking Broadway runs, received significant Broadway show awards, and were issued in film versions. A long list of songs from their shows have become standard popular songs, heard around the world in a dizzying array of arrangements and contexts. Much of popular and even critical perception of their work is based primarily on knowledge of the film versions of their shows, sometimes softened and sweetened for accessibility. However, viewing stage versions, hearing original recordings or reading the plays makes clear the fundamental integrity and power of the shows, and Rodgers and Hammerstein's best work retains its significance into a new century.

The vitality of the musical play that Rodgers and Hammerstein developed remains undiminished. Performances of their works in both amateur and professional theatres are ongoing, and the shows continue to find new venues. *Oklahoma!*, *The King and I* and *South Pacific* all enjoyed important London revivals in the late 1990s and early 2000s. A television version of *South Pacific* starring Glenn Close appeared in spring 2001 and the show had a highly-praised revival on Broadway starting in 2008, and *The Sing-along Sound of Music* has become the latest Rodgers and Hammerstein rage. We cannot know what Rodgers and Hammerstein might have thought about seeing long lines of movie-goers in their favourite characters' costumes from *The Sound of Music*, but the movie-goers' opinion is quite obvious: the Rodgers and Hammerstein phenomenon is alive and well! Various opinions have been offered as to the reason for Rodgers and Hammerstein's enduring popularity. Irving Berlin said that 'of all the Broadway lyricists, Hammerstein was the only one who was a poet'.²⁰ Oscar's own words

about what he wanted to write may be the best description of his and Rodgers's work and its evergreen presence on the stage: 'The good and the simple and the true are alone eternal.'²¹

Notes

1. William G. Hyland, *Richard Rodgers* (New Haven and London, 1998), p. 104; Hugh Fordin, *Getting to Know Him: A Biography of Oscar Hammerstein II* (New York, 1977, 1995), p. 138.
2. H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie (eds.), *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, vol. II, s.v. 'Hammerstein, Oscar I'.
3. *Ibid.*, s.v. 'Hammerstein, Oscar II'.
4. Stanley Green (ed.), *The Rodgers and Hammerstein Fact Book* (New York, 1980), p. 502.
5. Fordin, *Getting to Know Him*, pp. 199–200.
6. For further information about various productions, tours, revivals and excerpts of reviews, see Green (ed.), *The Rodgers and Hammerstein Fact Book*; Fordin, *Getting to Know Him*, p. 202; and Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages: An Autobiography* (New York, 1975; repr. with an introduction by Mary Rodgers, New York, 1995), p. 228.
7. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *Six Plays by Rodgers and Hammerstein* (New York, n.d.), p. 7.
8. For further discussion about the play and its Broadway run, see Hyland, *Richard Rodgers*, pp. 139–40.
9. Fordin, *Getting to Know Him*, p. 200.
10. See Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from 'Show Boat' to Sondheim* (New York and Oxford, 1997), pp. ix–x.
11. Philip Furia, *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America's Great Lyricists* (London and New York, 1990), p. 181.
12. Ethan Mordden, *Rodgers and Hammerstein* (New York, 1992), p. 34.
13. Rodgers, *Musical Stages*, p. 238.
14. For a lengthy discussion of the complexity of 'The Carousel Waltz' as source material for songs in *Carousel*, see Joseph Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York and London, 1990), pp. 99–114.
15. Block, *Enchanted Evenings*, pp. 162–63.
16. Fordin, *Getting to Know Him*, p. 255.
17. Thomas Hischak, *Word Crazy: Broadway Lyricists from Cohan to Sondheim* (New York, 1991), p. 37.
18. Fordin, *Getting to Know Him*, p. 258.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
20. Hischak, *Word Crazy*, p. 42.
21. Fordin, *Getting to Know Him*, p. 126.