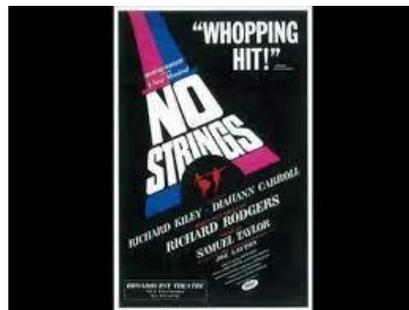


NO STRINGS!

American composer Richard Rodgers who died in 1979 is probably best remembered today for the music he composed for the series of musicals created with lyricist Oscar Hammerstein during the fifteen or so years after World War II, starting with *Oklahoma* in 1943 and ending with *The Sound of Music* which opened on Broadway in 1959. He is also remembered for his earlier partnership with lyricist Lorenz Hart which finally ended with Hart's descendancy into alcohol and his eventual death in 1943 and which forced Rodgers to renew his acquaintance with Hammerstein who he had known from college days. What is not so well known is that when Hammerstein died in 1960 Rodgers enjoyed further success as sole composer and lyricist which included his musical drama – '*No Strings*', which had its premiere in the Meridian Theatre, Toronto in 1962, winning 6 Tony Awards. He also wrote both the music and lyrics to two additional songs for the film version of *The Sound of Music* after Hammerstein's death, *Something Good* and *I Have Confidence*.

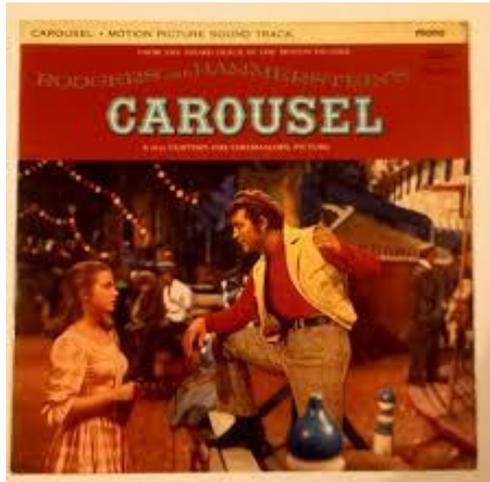


Rodgers' '*No Strings*' is a musical adaptation of a novel by Samuel A Taylor set in Paris and around Europe in the 1960's featuring a female African American from Harlem who has a 'no strings' affair with a white American before concluding that their mixed-race relationship would be unworkable in the USA at that time. Cleverly, Rodgers' musical pun was to compose the music without stringed instruments, relying solely on woodwind, brass and piano, a departure from the style of the Hammerstein era when stringed instruments feature so strikingly. The show's most enduring song is perhaps *The Sweetest Sounds*.

The second of the earlier Rodgers and Hammerstein productions was '*Carousel*' which opened in 1945 following the phenomenal success of *Oklahoma*. It was to become perhaps their most admired piece of work, and their own personal favourite. An early reviewer of the masterpiece noted as follows:

'*Carousel* has no comment to make on anything of topical importance. The theme is timeless and universal: the devotion of two people who love each other through thick and thin, complicated in this case by the wayward personality of the man, who cannot fulfil the responsibilities he has assumed. ... Billy is a bum, but *Carousel* recognizes the decency of his motives and admires his independence. There are no slick solutions in *Carousel*.'

It was the 1956 film which first introduced me to *Carousel*, since when it has been my own personal favourite for its wonderful flowing music, orchestrations and lyrics, and its spectacle of life in a typical Maine fishing and mill town in the early 20th century. Though containing themes of hurt and loss, and moments of violence by the main male character, it's themes of love, loyalty, forgiveness and redemption shine through, as does its glorious melodies. Admittedly, Hammerstein had softened the finale to his musical compared to the more unforgiving ending in Ferenc Molinar's original play *Liliom* written in 1909, on which '*Carousel*' is based.



1956 Film

It was with such enduring memories that I was thrilled with the announcement that *'Carousel'* was to be performed for a short summer season at London's Regents Park Open Air Theatre, a venue that on a summer evening provides a stunning setting and ambience for a performance of any piece of theatre, in particular for a musical such as the past productions I had witnessed and enjoyed there such as *'Hello Dolly'* and *'The Sound of Music'*

Having anticipated the normal opening in a fairground setting complete with carousel, I was somewhat surprised on arrival into the open-air auditorium to find a bare stage, comprising a sloping wooden platform over which hung two ancient industrial cranes. I should have known then what an evening of disappointment and surprise I was in for. Reference to the programme notes told me the composition of the *band*, not the *orchestra*, though this distinction did not resonate until the music started with the prologue piece, The Carousel Waltz, when the band, who indeed visually reassembled a pop band with guitars and keyboard, was joined by a small brass ensemble – no strings! No carousel, no fairground!

The characters then assembled in somewhat bland and dull costumes of a somewhat indeterminable modern age, but certainly not typical of Maine early 20th century. The ensemble included one female character carrying a transparent polythene bag complete with water and goldfish, presumably a prize from a fair stall somewhat reminiscent of the UK fairground prizes around 1970, though not Maine C1900. Ah, so this is the clue to being set in a fair!

As the dialogue starts I notice no American accents, but a variety of English accents normally heard in the northern counties. "Not sure I can handle this," I think to myself. But I was not to know that there was worse to come, as each principal character appeared, conspicuously very different from the images one associates with this musical. We meet Mrs Mullin, owner of the carousel – not the middle-aged somewhat flighty lady we know, but played by a tall transgender person who clearly still portrayed many male characteristics. Further surprises are in store as we meet normally roguish but likeable anti-hero of the piece, male lead Billy Bigelow. But there is nothing likeable about this Billy, obviously a thoroughly dislikeable, nasty, scruffy and untrustworthy figure. Next we meet the originally lovable, portly, side-burned fisherman Enoch Snow, now played by a slightly built black actor with his hair styled in braids – deliberately more in the image of a rapper than a Maine fisherman with ambitions to be the owner of the biggest sardine cannery in the USA. So, I now gather this is set somewhere indeterminable in Northern England and at an

indeterminable time in the late 20th century, even though the original lyrics, thankfully retained but at times at odds with the new setting, tell us otherwise.



2021 Style.

Julie and Billy, Mr and Mrs Enoch Snow and Mrs Mullins

Further modernisation becomes apparent as female lead Julie appears in a hooded plastic rain jacket, and again finally when we eventually meet the dark-skinned daughter conceived by white-skinned Julie and Billy from their short marriage.

By now I am under no illusion that this is a production to surprise and perhaps shock anyone who has admired the work in its original form.

Further reference to the programme notes confirms that this is no longer a musical about a roguish yet likeable carousel barker, but a statement and platform for protest against male domestic violence and, as declared by the production team '*...highlighting Refuge, a charity that supports....those affected by domestic abuse*' .

In its finale, the entire conclusion of the plot that signifies Billy Bigelow's redemption is now changed to offer no such forgiveness, compassion or clemency. The message is clear! Abusers beware!

Sadly, this production is a product of modernisation and diversity and the tendency to challenge old values and themes even if this makes little sense and offends the traditionalists. This is exactly what this production sets out to do, one admiring press reviewer even suggesting that a musical such as this which does not meet current thinking and correctness should be banned altogether! If this is to be the case, many of the best-known plays, musicals and even operas will similarly disappear, ranging from Shakespeare onwards. It's the same modernisation that threatens many of the statues that appear around our cities.

Having avoided the expert reviews beforehand, I have since read several of these, all of which predictably admire and applaud the fresh approach to this musical and what it now stands for, or against. I of course cannot agree, and I am sad that the present generation are now never likely to enjoy *Carousel* as the marvellous and joyous theatrical piece as it was originally conceived.

Jim Stebbings
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