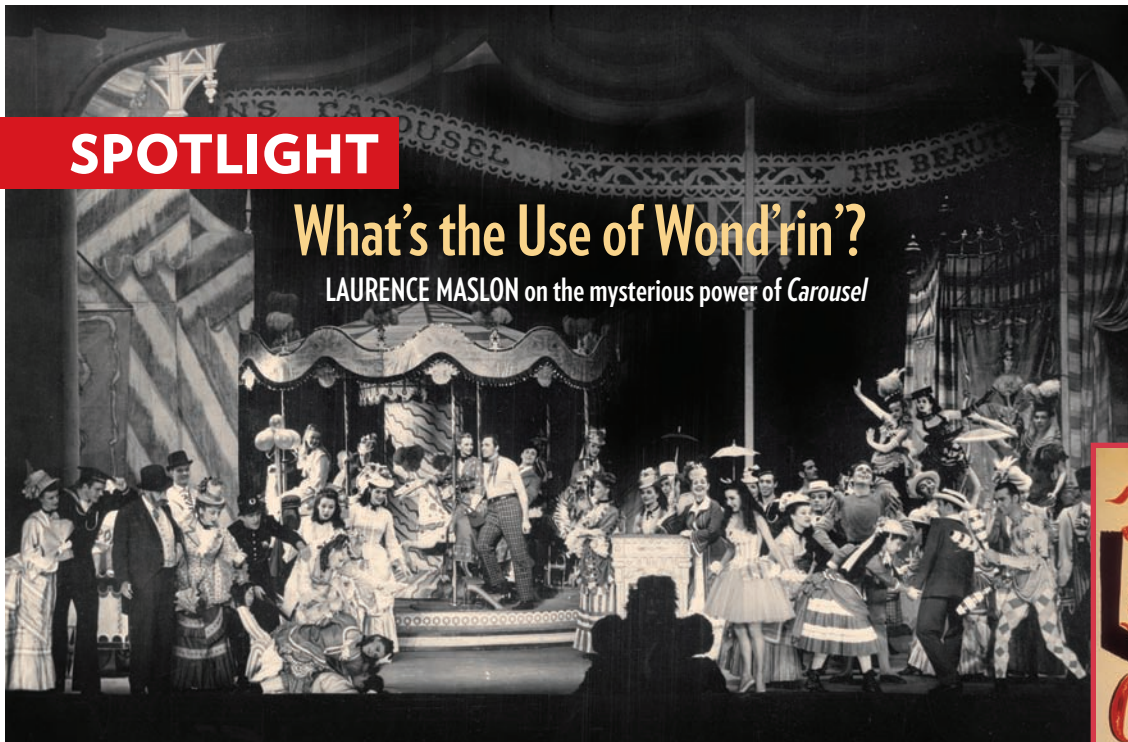


SPOTLIGHT

What's the Use of Wond'rin'?

LAURENCE MASLON on the mysterious power of *Carousel*Rouben Mamoulian's original 1945 production of *Carousel*, left

If you wanted to pick a musical comprised of one element after another that's guaranteed to fail, you could do a lot worse than *Carousel*.

A partial list of cringe-worthy blunders — easily avoidable by skilled craftsmen such as Rodgers and Hammerstein — would include:

- No overture
- The first ten minutes contain no songs or dialogue and climax with an unwieldy and large piece of scenery
- The hero is a jerk
- The heroine not only puts up with his jerkiness but loves him for it
- The hero is given his big number not at the end of Act I but in the scene *before* the end of Act I
- The heroine is given nothing to sing in the last third of the show
- A pivotal and important character is introduced fifteen minutes before the show ends (devoid of dialogue or song, no less)
- And, worst of all, the hero kills himself twenty minutes after intermission

Well, given that it was only the second time Rodgers and Hammerstein had worked together in the theater (despite the fact that their first collaboration, *Oklahoma!*, was the biggest hit anyone had ever seen), they might be excused such egregious bêtises. But how does one explain the fact that *Carousel* is widely considered to be Rodgers and Hammerstein's aesthetic masterpiece, that it was Rodgers's favorite score — “it affects me deeply every time I see it performed” — and that audiences since 1945 have consistently embraced it and been moved by its sentiments (even though others have been put off by its perceived sentimentality)?

The transcendent appeal of *Carousel* (which will be performed in a new production at Glimmerglass from July 12 through August 22) springs from a unique combination of narrative skill, contemporary context and an ineffable wisdom — both musical and lyrical — that manages to tap into some deep and longstanding truths about our national psyche.

Initially, *Carousel* had nothing to do with our national psyche at all; it had its roots in an odd and whimsical Hungarian play, *Liliom*, by Ferenc Molnár. Molnár's play tells the tale of a self-centered bully (“liliom” is Hungarian for “lily” and, counterintuitively, slang for “a tough guy”) who spends his aimless days as a carousel barker until a local girl falls head-over-heels in love with him. *Liliom* wasn't very successful in its initial 1909 Budapest

production. Presented on Broadway in 1921, with Joseph Schildkraut and Eva Le Gallienne in the leading roles, it was transformed into the kind of shimmering star vehicle that its producers — the Theatre Guild — mastered so well.

Molnár, one of the most inventive playwrights ever, was a quotable and much-embraced foreign author and personality of the 1920s and '30s. (Think Tom Stoppard's American reception in the 1970s and '80s.) The piquant irony of his theatrical recipes — equal parts whimsy, cynicism and *paprikash* — proved to be attractive to audiences and star actors alike. (Burgess Meredith and Ingrid Bergman would appear in a revival of *Liliom* in 1940.)

When the Theatre Guild suggested to Rodgers and Hammerstein, in 1944, that yet another play the Guild had produced should be adapted to the musical stage (*Oklahoma!* had been based on the Guild's 1931 *Green Grow the Lilacs*), the duo instantly demurred. Dry Hungarian cynicism was not Hammerstein's cup of *tokaj*; *Liliom* kills himself during a robbery and is sent back to earth by some celestial truant officers to redeem himself but screws it up at the last minute. (There is also a fair amount of anti-Semitism among *Liliom*'s characters.) Besides, Rodgers and Hammerstein felt that the milieu seemed overdone and impossible to present in a fresh way.

But the Guild persisted, and in tossing the idea around one last time, Rodgers apparently suggested a change of scenery: move the play to the New England coast in the late nineteenth century. Now they had something: Hammerstein always enjoyed rolling up his sleeves and exploring American history, and Rodgers was attracted to the theme of faith — “The kind of thing the average show wouldn't be interested in,” he said in an interview. Their casual disregard for the conventional wisdom of commercial success allowed them to create some extraordinarily risky set pieces, such as a brilliant Rodgers waltz (perhaps the most brilliant of his astonishing three-quarter-time career) to set off the pantomimed establishing scene of the carousel and its customers (although, to be fair, Molnár had created a similar prologue for the play); an extraordinary twelve-minute tour de force of musical narrative in which Billy Bigelow (our Americanized carousel barker) becomes enraptured by Julie, our heroine; a transcendent solo for Billy

when he realizes he is about to become a father — surely one of the best (and perhaps the first) examples in musical theater of a character going through a personal epiphany during the course of a song; an expansive ballet (choreographed originally by Agnes de Mille) that allows us to witness the emotional trajectory of Billy and Julie's daughter; and a concluding inspirational encomium to community and survival.

Excellent though these disparate elements are, what unites them in *Carousel* is a subtle but important change in perspective gained from changing the setting of the story to America. The resetting of *Carousel* in a New England fishing village (as opposed to “downtown” Budapest) and its chronological “back-dating” to the nineteenth century allowed Hammerstein to explore a theme only dimly suggested by the original — the essential incompatibility between men and women. In *Carousel*, the women work in a mill, or tend to menial domesticity in support of the working men; the men themselves venture out to sea — “a’whalin’” — within their own fraternity and seek acceptance almost exclusively among their own company. This would be a neat analogy for life on the homefront during World War II. Relations between men and women in *Carousel* are either brutish (Billy's physical abuse of Julie; his fair-weather-friend Jigger's advances to the virginal Carrie) or mismatched (Carrie and her intended, Mr. Snow), or they simply surpass all understanding. “What's the Use of Wond'rin'?” asks Julie, about the nature of attraction between the sexes, although this dilemma is even better expressed in her dialogue to the dying Billy: “I always knew everythin' you were thinkin'. But you didn't always know what I was thinkin'.”

Oklahoma!, which opened in April 1943, perfectly captured (and projected) the spirit of the land, of a country in desperate need of a victory in the middle of a worldwide conflagration. When *Carousel* opened at the Majestic Theater, two years and two weeks later, the world — and by extension, the American homefront — was a very different place.

By April 1945, the Allied forces and the Russian army were moving inexorably to crush the Third Reich, but they were moving forward with some apprehension about what they might encounter on their way to Berlin. They were right to be apprehensive. At the beginning of the month, the Fourth Armored Division was stunned to encounter the concentration camp at Ohrdruf, the first camp to be liberated by U.S. troops; even General Patton wouldn't enter the camp, for fear of becoming violently ill.

While the American Army in the South Pacific was arduously invading Okinawa (a siege that wouldn't end successfully for three months), on the western front, the Allies would capture nearly 800,000 German troops before mid-April. Within two weeks of *Carousel*'s opening, on April 17, Berlin would be besieged by Russian forces, and the U.S. and Russian armies would unite at the banks of the Elbe River. Before the month was out, Mussolini would be captured and shot, and Hitler would commit suicide. No wonder the choristers of *Carousel* were singing about the joys of June “bustin' out all over”; the freedom of the spring would be celebrated when victory in Europe came on May 8.

As that day arrived, the citizens of the U.S. had to “look around, look around, look around” and assess what had happened over the previous forty months. By the spring of 1945, there were nearly 140 million people in the country and more than 16 million people in the military, 7.5 million of them overseas. Nearly 300,000 soldiers, sailors and marines were killed in

battle, and there were another 113,000-plus “other deaths.” Almost 671,000 were wounded. Could anyone who saw *Carousel* in 1945 not have known someone who was in harm's way in the service of the country, or known someone who had been killed? How many lost husbands, lost brothers or lost sons were being mourned by members of the audience? What would be the resonance for that audience when the celestial Starkeeper asked Billy “Is there anythin' on earth you left unfinished?” Or when another heavenly friend told Billy's spirit that “as long as there is one person on earth who remembers you — it isn't over”?

The shadow of death, so potent and prevalent throughout the musical, would have touched everyone who saw it, especially during the week of its opening on Broadway. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the nation's seminal father figure for twelve years, had died seven days before the premiere. At the end of *Carousel*, the final benediction is given at a school graduation by an elderly, comforting sage, Dr. Seldon, who says he “brought most of you into the world.” (Rodgers's own father was an obstetrician.) “The world belongs to you,” he counsels the youngsters in the onstage audience, as well as the audience in the Majestic Theatre. Would that audience have heard that counsel as a final Fireside Chat from a factotum of the great man who had just left them, only days before the moment when the world did, in fact, belong to them?

The triumph of *Carousel*'s artistry, of course, goes beyond historical synchronicity. But it's important to remember that its final scenes exist in what — for the characters onstage — is fifteen years beyond, in the future. And, although sensitive audiences will always care and be curious about the future and the legacy of their families and children, there was never a more potent time to consider those questions than in the concluding — but not conclusive — days of World War II.

Carousel was not the mega-hit that *Oklahoma!* had been. How could it be? In fact, *Oklahoma!* was running across the street from *Carousel* when the latter show opened and was still running when *Carousel* closed, in May 1947, after 890 performances. *Carousel* has also been less fortunate in its ongoing performance legacy; the 1956 film version is surely the least persuasive of all the Rodgers and Hammerstein Hollywood screen adaptations (how different it might have been had Frank Sinatra, cast as Billy, not stormed off the set on the first day of shooting?), and despite the occasional reinterpretation of the material, such as Nicholas Hytner's 1992 production for the Royal National Theater (brought to Lincoln Center Theatre in 1994), the musical still seems, for many, to be hidebound by a lead character wearing a bandanna and striped pants, and by an excessively sentimental finale that has been appropriated by junior-high-school choirs and British football teams.

But any chance to take another ride on the carousel is a welcome one. The musical's pleasures are so rich and unexpected that one often doesn't appreciate fully the deep mythical roots exploited by Rodgers and Hammerstein until the show's powerful conclusion. Perhaps *Carousel*'s most powerful attribute is its reconfiguration of our American roots. Molnár's Hungarian play was about life after death: Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical is about life *before* death. That's the theme that grips your heart and affirms your faith. It's the only theme that really counts; and all the rest is talk. □

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