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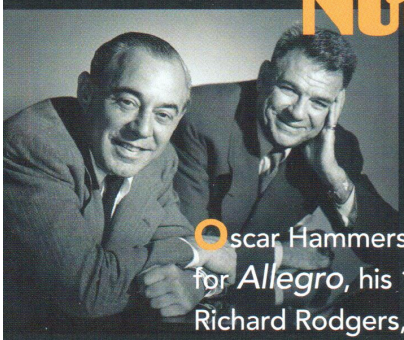
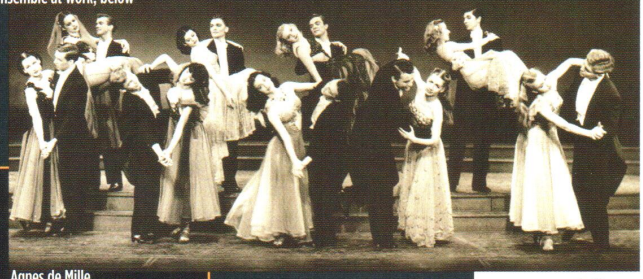
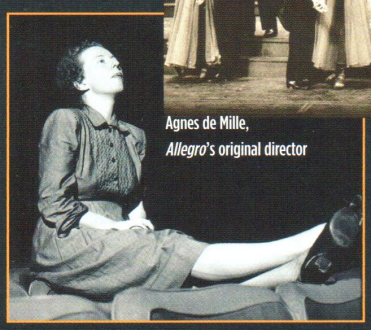


Oscar Hammerstein II's book for *Allegro*, his 1947 musical with Richard Rodgers, was unlike anything he had ever attempted. As a new recording of the show, starring Nathan Gunn and Audra McDonald, is readied for release, LAURENCE MASLON looks at this troubled work.

Rodgers and Hammerstein, top of page; original *Allegro* cast members William Ching (Joe Taylor), Muriel O'Malley (Grandma) and Annamary Dickey (Marjorie), above; the *Allegro* ensemble at work, below





Agnes de Mille, *Allegro*'s original director

Writing the book for a musical is like playing three-dimensional chess; you have to move a lot of complementary and contradictory pieces forward at the same time. A book-writer has to honor the integrity of the source material (assuming there is one); integrate his text with the lyricist's work (assuming he isn't one); and write snappy jokes for the star (assuming the producer has hired one). He has to be bold enough to create moments worth singing about, sensitive enough to find those moments in the story, meticulous enough to craft those moments — haiku-like — with an absolute economy of dialogue. If he has the room to slip in his own point of view or an original observation, he considers himself lucky. A book-writer has to endure the suggestions of everyone — from the most obstreperous of producers to the most solipsistic of chorus girls. If the show is a flop, he'll be the first to be blamed; if the show is a hit, he'll be the last to be congratulated. And the only person who gets fired faster during the out-of-town tryout is the costume designer.

When Oscar Hammerstein II came up with the idea for *Allegro*, in 1947, he was already the premier serious book-writer of his generation — actually, of two generations. He had an earlier career in the '20s as a librettist for operettas and star-driven musical comedies, which culminated with the massive success of *Show Boat* in 1927. After an unsuccessful sojourn in Hollywood, Hammerstein reinvented himself (and the American musical) with three huge hits during the latter days of World War II — *Carmen Jones*, *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*, the last two, of course, in collaboration with composer Richard Rodgers. Hammerstein had proved he could mine the dramatic depths of an epic novel about life on a Mississippi showboat, invigorate a modest play about life on the Oklahoma territory and reimagine both a French opera and a Hungarian melodrama as vitally American stories. Hammerstein had enjoyed mixed success with original ideas (*Rose-Marie*, *Music in the Air*), but *Allegro* would be the most original — in every sense of the word — musical that Hammerstein would ever write, and the most personal.

Stephen Sondheim, who had been an aesthetic ward of Hammerstein's from his teenage years, worked as a production assistant on the original staging during a summer vacation from college. In 1994, before the Encores! concert version of *Allegro*, Sondheim spoke to an audience about the genesis of the show and how it came directly out of Hammerstein's active engagement as a charitable citizen, the writer's success in the mid-'40s, and how the concomitant responsibilities of that success competed with Hammerstein's own work: "He thought that nobody understood what the show was about. On the surface that seems to be a story — the old story — about the idealist getting corrupted. But that's not what it's about. That's not what Oscar meant it to be.... Oscar was talking about the conflict between your responsibility to your community and your responsibility to yourself. Because, of course, what happened to [Oscar] is, he found he had less time for writing the more he made these public appearances and speeches and traveled around the world."

In *Allegro*, Hammerstein hung his morality tale of what he called the "immediate conspiracy to destroy [one man's] usefulness, a conspiracy in which he is usually a willing collaborator"

around the story of a young doctor from the Midwest, Joseph Taylor, Jr. (He acknowledged that "an equivalent story could be told about a lawyer, an artist, a businessman, an engineer — anyone who is good at his job.") Joe's father is a country doctor who is struggling to build a small hospital in his home town, and as Joe grows up, marching through the same signposts of Middle American adolescence and adulthood familiar to anyone who has seen *It's a Wonderful Life*, he trades in his father's homespun truths for the fast track as a career physician in the Big City (Chicago), a fast wife (who is cheating on him) and the slow realization that everything he wanted in life was actually back home all along. This was nothing that audiences hadn't already seen in the parade of "what-profiteth-a-man" dramas that had passed through Broadway and Hollywood during the Depression.

Hammerstein admitted as much in the introduction to the published version of the script: "A story like this must, of its very nature, be built of familiar material. There is no novelty in *Allegro* except its style of presentation." But what a style of presentation there was! First, Hammerstein took up Joe Taylor's story from the moment he was born, intending to show the entire arc of Taylor's life from birth to death. (The "death" part proved to be a downer — and the story grew far too long; it eventually concluded with Taylor's career epiphany.) In order to encompass such a broad topic, Hammerstein chose a style of allegorical simplicity. This, too, was nothing new; it stretches all the way back from the medieval Everyman plays through the German Expressionistic "monodramas" to Thornton Wilder's stripped-down portraits of American life, such as *The Long Christmas Dinner* and *Our Town* (1938), the last of which was an admittedly great influence on *Allegro*. But to put the main focus of a Broadway musical on one person for all forty-odd years of his life was a striking concept.

Hammerstein's genius, however, was to put the narrative focus on Joe Taylor by giving voice to the characters *around* him. Realizing that audiences would quickly tire of a central character singing about himself all the time, Hammerstein chose his musical moments from the people who intersect with Taylor's trajectory: his grandmother (at his birth), his father (during his adolescence), his fiancée (during their courtship). Brazenly, Hammerstein even gives the best songs to characters who flit in and out of Joe's life with the speed of, well, people who flit in and out of our lives: Beulah, a passing flirtation of Joe's student days, sings the lyrical "So Far," and Emily (originally played in a star-making turn by Lisa Kirk), his nurse/receptionist, complains of her unrequited love in "The Gentleman Is a Dope." We know practically nothing of these women except the moments when their paths cross with Joe's. In an amazing inversion of stage time versus song time, Joe himself — who practically never leaves the stage — sings only a song and a half during the entire evening.

Yet audiences would want to know what makes Joe tick, and the sheer speed of his narrative (the musical is composed of approximately three dozen short scenes) would require an unconventional solution. Hammerstein solved both problems by bringing a chorus onstage to articulate Joe's inner thoughts, describe the context of his life and take the audience from place to place geographically and emotionally. The chorus alternately sings to Joe, for Joe and through Joe. This dramatic idea of presenting the narrative in dialogue and reflecting the emotional world of the play through the lyrical passages of a chorus was nothing new either, but it was an ambitious (and somewhat alarming) idea for Broadway audiences in 1947. Hammerstein never quite mastered the use of the chorus in *Allegro*; it is monolithic, general and given to sententious pronouncements; the choral passages also occasioned some of Rodgers's least inspired work.

As a good three-dimensional chess player, however, Hammerstein was also thinking about how to move his epic story across the stage. Although the nominal directing work of the original production fell to choreographer Agnes de Mille, who had become a major Broadway name with her dances for *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*, Hammerstein was responsible for the conception of the mise-en-scène, along with designer Jo Mielziner. When de Mille became overwhelmed trying to orchestrate all the elements of the project — with rehearsals for the principals, singers and dancers taking place in different locations — Hammerstein took over the direction, retaining much of de Mille's work, and Rodgers oversaw the staging of the songs. He and Mielziner created as close to a blank page as a Broadway stage can endure: using minimal scenery and a series of curtains that would "wipe" scenes on- and offstage in a cinematic way, *Allegro* broke down and destroyed the onerous requirements for useless musical-theater scenes that existed only for a scene change. For Sondheim — Broadway's ultimate wordsmith — the "most long-lasting experimental influence of *Allegro* was scenic. Oscar had decided to do away with the traditional ways of musical scenery."

Joe Taylor, Jr.'s life began with the best of intentions; so did *Allegro*'s. Hammerstein's allegorical vision of the perils of compromise underwent its own compromises during the out-of-town tryouts. The set design, which included projections, became bigger and more unwieldy; the cast was enormous; the story became more truncated and less incisive. After its October 10, 1947 opening, *Allegro* divided the critics and, despite its large box-office advance, was unable to run more than ten months on Broadway. It was a noble failure but, more important, a noble experiment. Hammerstein proved that a great artist could marshal all the lyrical and scenic options available into something more ambitious than the sum of its parts; by choosing context over content, he created, for better or for worse, the first "concept" musical.

Allegro had its disciples, too — Sondheim, obviously, but also book-writer George Furth, who, as an undergraduate at Northwestern, directed a student version of *Allegro*. In 1970, along with director Harold Prince, Sondheim and Furth would bring the concept musical to full fruition with *Company* and go on to write their own take on *Allegro* — *Merrily We Roll Along* (endearingly flawed in many of the same ways) in 1981. *Allegro* remained a favorite "child" of Hammerstein's for the rest of his life; he was rewriting it for television in 1960 when he died. (He had planned to turn the chorus into voice-overs.) He must always have known the show would be, as Hamlet says, "caviare to the general," but the show meant a lot to him, so he didn't give a damn. As Hammerstein wrote, "If men are continuing to squander their time and usefulness for the wrong things, it would seem important to point this out to them. This is the simple reason why *Allegro* was written. If you don't like that reason, you won't like *Allegro*." □

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