The American Interest

Publicity Copy

Autumn (September/October) 2014, Vol. X, No. 1

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A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

The News Blues

I pity any fellow magazine editor who is trying to chase international security headlines these days. Just a few months ago, all eyes seemed momentarily trained on some barren islands in the South China Sea. Then, suddenly, attention got yanked to Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Then, in early June, hordes of journalists sprained their necks looking to Iraq and Syria, where armed and marauding Islamists so fanatical that they make al-Qaeda seem almost moderate were busy destroying whatever remained of the post-Ottoman Levantine regional order. In between and all around there have been Thai and Boko Haram blips, Yemeni and Gazan blips, Mistral and BNP Paribas blips, even EU parliamentary election and (mostly harmless) FIFA blips.

An editor could easily get all blipped out trying to tie such an unruly world down long enough to publish an issue on it. Worse, these are not serial eruptions but lingering, compounding accumulations of (mostly not harmless) bad news—enough to induce a kind of news blues. "What next?!" has therefore become the inevitable if anxious question forming on the lips of nervous editors hither and yon.

Not me, not here. We at *The American Interest* use our incomparable online juggernaut, refreshed daily, to race with unfurling reality. The magazine, as always, declines to race. We prefer to ruminate in an effort to get above (or below, as the case may be) the headlines to tell readers not what is happening but why it is happening and what it means.

Appropriately enough, then, this issue's lead cluster is called "Noodling", not a word, I realize, known even to all native English speakers, let alone others. Sometimes used to describe a Southern technique of fishing by hand or improvising on a guitar, we use it here as a synonym for "thinking" of a particular kind—a kind that combines what Stephen Toulmin called "strict thinking" and "loose thinking." It's creative thinking, thinking a bit out on a limb, thinking—in this case about history, social science, and strategy—that wants to stimulate the mental juices rather than drain them into immovable conclusions. It's a quarter century since Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History?" essay; it's several centuries of argument over hegemonic versus "balance" conceptions of systemic security; it's a long time, too, that Americans have striven for a big picture in focus on international society. So what do we think about these matters? Have a look; we've been noodling.

We then follow in "Troubleshooting" with essays about the puzzlements of higher education business models and how financialization affects economic innovation, and then with "Audacities": two bold ideas that might be practical if our political system weren't broken, but are necessary ideas precisely because it is. If that conjures a Batesonian double-bind in your mind, well, that's because it should.

Then it's on to electoral politics and its likely opposite: happiness. Then it's back to campus, back to the music when it still cared about melody, and way back to a couple of dead white Greek males. So indulge, and trust me: The sobering headlines will still be there tomorrow.

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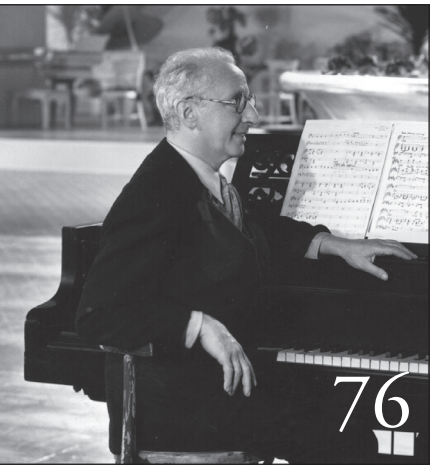

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Subscriptions: Call (800) 362-8433 or visit www.the-american-interest.com. One year (6 issues): $39 print; $19 online; $49 for both. Two years (12 issues): $69 print; $38 online; $98 for both. Please add $14 per year for print-subscription delivery to Canada and $33 per year for delivery to addresses outside the United States and Canada. Postmaster and subscribers, send subscription orders and changes of address to: *The American Interest*, P.O. Box 15115, North Hollywood, CA 91615. *The American Interest* (ISSN 1556-5777) is published six times a year by The American Interest LLC. Printed by Fry Communications, Inc. Postage paid in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. Application for mailing at periodical pricing is pending in Washington, DC and additional mailing offices. Editorial offices: 1730 Rhode Island Ave. NW, Suite 707, Washington, DC 20036. Tel.: (202) 223-4408. Fax: (202) 223-4489.

IF THE GOP TAKES THE SENATE...

REVIEWS

The Melody Man

by Laurence Maslon

Even among the tempered hopes of 1,200 musical theater fans, expectations ran low. In February 1997, the New York City Center's *Encores!* series presented a partially staged concert version of Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's 1929 Broadway musical, *Sweet Adeline*. It was the pair's third collaboration—their first after the groundbreaking *Show Boat*—and it had not been seen in New York since it closed five months after the Stock Market crashed. A show-biz romance built around singer Helen Morgan, the show yielded a few semi-standards ("Why Was I Born?") and was made into an early sound film with Irene Dunne replacing Morgan. But its score was never recorded and eventually faded from the popular consciousness.

It is the mission of *Encores!*, after all, to present lost would-be masterpieces before a contemporary public in particularly grand style, with a full orchestra of some two dozen players—in this case under the skillful baton of conductor Rob Fisher. And so it began, with the enthusiastic subscription audience sitting through the somewhat simplistic story about a singer's rise to fame in the early 20th century, performed by an accomplished, if not stellar, cast of performers.

And then something extraordinary happened. Toward the end of the second act, Thornton, one of the leading lady's admirers, sat in a bar, thought about her charms, and sang a spritely period tune. A friend, also smitten by the leading lady, offered Thornton a drink and a friendly shoulder in a plaintive tenor voice:

Why—
Do you get gloomy
When the other boys are having fun?
Why—
Do you get blue
And want to run away from ev'ryone?
Some girl is on your mind,
Some girl is on your mind.

Opposite: Jerome Kern and Jean Harlow

Getty Images

Soon, Thornton and his pal were joined by another smitten male chorus member, then another, and another, each adding to the chorale in dolorous fellowship:

Half the time,
When you fall,
The very girl you want
Won't fall for you at all—

Then the soaring soprano of voice of that very girl on everyone's mind chimed in, in faraway counterpoint:

Why do I try
To draw you near me?
Why do I cry?
You never hear me.

And then the orchestra swelled, and every hopelessly enamored man who ever lived seemed to join in Kern's throbbing, pulsing final chords, each fellow indelibly cursed with an enchanted memory:

There's someone on your mind,
Some girl is on your mind!

The entire audience leapt to its feet. Romance, longing, the persistence of memory, the pangs of rejection—it all came together in one musical moment. The performance of that number remains one of the most astonishing, moving, and surprising moments I have ever witnessed in thirty years of theatergoing. No one saw it coming, which was part of the thrill. But, why, really, should we have been surprised? Hadn't Jerome Kern been thrilling the American public all along?

"All along" for Jerome Kern began on January 27, 1885. Kern was the pampered son of a dry goods merchant who opened a successful store in Newark when Jerome was ten; Kern's beloved mother, who had introduced him to the piano, died when he was in his early twenties. Contrary to the tradition of many Jewish business owners at the time, Henry Kern had no particular interest in having his son join the family business, especially after young Jerry misread a purchasing order for the store and bought 200 pianos instead of the earmarked two. Clearly, the young man had pianos on the brain.

So father Kern sent Jerome Kern to Europe, first to Heidelburg in 1903 to study classical composition, and then to England, where he embraced not only the cultivated perquisites of British culture (book collecting, pipe smoking), but also a British woman, Eva, who would become his devoted wife. In London, Kern was fortunate to find himself at the epicenter of light popular music; Gilbert and Sullivan had written their final operetta only six years earlier, and the Broadway musical tradition wasn't yet a twinkle in the eyes of George M. Cohan or Irving Berlin. Kern made simple, unaffected, melodious contributions to several forgettable British musicals. When those shows transferred to New York, where Kern himself resettled in 1904, they needed additional material to appeal to the American ear, and Jerome Kern was perfectly placed to assist the transition.

The very notion of interpolating songs by one songwriter into the work of another would be considered anathema in the current arena of Broadway, with its presumed focus on narrative integrity. One would never expect a producer to insert a song by Stephen Sondheim into a score by Andrew Lloyd Webber (and their attorneys wouldn't allow it, either). But at the beginning of the 20th century, a pleasant evening in the theater trumped auteurism by a country mile, and Kern was Jerry-on-the-spot, providing dozens of jolly tunes (with lyrics by lesser, diverse hands) that enlivened such Anglophile divertissements as *Mr. Wix of Wickham, Oh, I Say!* and *The Earl and the Girl*, which provided the vehicle for Kern's first hit in 1905: "How'd You Like to Spoon With Me?"

Kern's facility for pleasant, yet exceptionally well-structured tunes, combined with his earnest work ethic, led directly to the assignment that would elevate his professional position and give him a bully pulpit to change the American musical theater. The Princess Theater shows were an experiment to give Broadway audiences a more intimate, homegrown type of musical theater while the Great War was raging in Europe. In contrast to the more bombastic fare offered in, say, Florenz Ziegfeld's massive annual

Follies, the Princess Shows were a Sargent watercolor (to stretch an analogy) compared with Ziegfeld's Titian-like, mythological, expansive oil canvases.

The guileless simplicity of these shows makes them practically unrevivable today, what with their artificial conceits; in *Very Good Eddie*, for example, two married couples accidentally switch partners on a day trip along the Hudson River. For Kern, however, it was an opportunity to work with his first lyricist of real merit, P.G. Wodehouse, whom he had met in England. Together, they were able to create accessible songs of real, if quotidian, meaning to ordinary Americans. In "The Enchanted Train", from *Sitting Pretty* (1924), a couple rhapsodizes about a commuter local on the Long Island Rail Road (surely the first and only time this indolent institution was celebrated in song): "It stops to ponder now and then/ The car inside needs oxygen." Kern's accelerated melody keeps to the enchanted rumbling inexorably to its welcome destination.

After a half-dozen Princess Shows, Kern once again paced American musical theater by expanding past the interpolated songs of the revue form, tackling the kind of larger musical comedy vehicles that were becoming popular for emerging star performers, along with the necessary (if minimal) narrative required. Marilyn Miller was the golden girl of the *Ziegfeld Follies* (Ziegfeld worshipped her off-stage as well as on, but that's another story) and Kern composed two scores for her once she broke out and crossed over into stardom: *Sally* (1921), with a variety of lyricists, including Wodehouse, and the conspicuously similar-sounding *Sunny* (1925), with Kern now teamed with such high-caliber lyricists as Otto Harbach and Oscar Hammerstein II. The mid-1920s, however, was still an era when stars and producers called the shots. After Kern and Hammerstein went through the arduous process of playing the score and reading the manuscript of *Sunny* to Miller, she merely paused and inquired, "And when do I do my tap specialty?"

By this point, however, Kern had earned a unique position in the American musical theater. The giants of the operetta scene who had preceded him—Victor Herbert, Rudolf Friml, and to a certain extent Sigmund Romberg—had either passed away or were of passing relevance. George Gershwin (and to a lesser degree, his brother Ira, who had only recently joined up with the composer) had staked out his own territory—jazz—and was bringing it to the concert and Broadway stage. Richard Rodgers had only just begun his spectacular career, teaming with Lorenz Hart on a few successful revues and minor musical comedies; and Cole Porter was spending the 1920s as a legend in self-imposed exile in Paris and the South of France.

All the songs mentioned here can be heard in
"The Song Is Kern"
www.broadwaytomainstreet.com
Air date: May 18, 2014

That left Irving Berlin as Kern's only rival on the Broadway scene—and they were, on a personal level, a sincere mutual admiration society. But Berlin devoted himself to writing songs and producing shows almost exclusively for the revue format. Kern, meanwhile, was universally admired for his attention to detail and his craftsmanship; he nearly always wrote the melody first, and many a lyricist struggled in vain to get Kern to change an eighth note to help them out. He had become more musically ambitious than his peers, but he had earned his ambitions—and had the chops to make good on them.

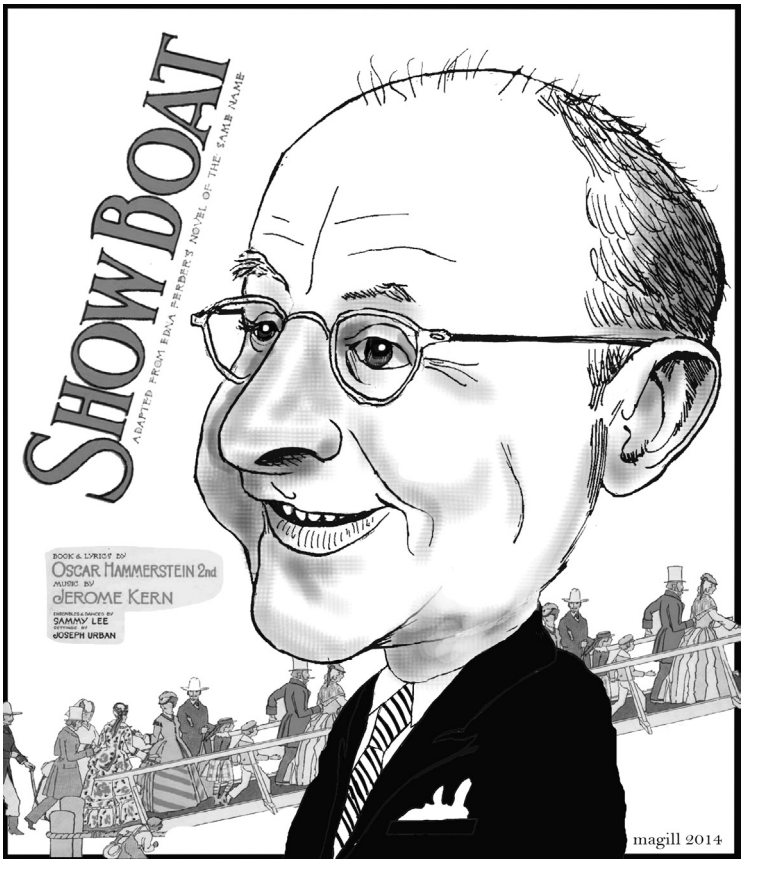
Kern's big chance came in 1926, when he bought a copy of Edna Ferber's epic novel about life on a travelling showboat during the late 19th century. *Show Boat* was a complex excursion with a wandering narrative, but its characters and milieu couldn't be beat. Kern knew as much and immediately contacted Hammerstein: "Would you like to do a show for Ziegfeld? It's got a million dollar title: *Show Boat*." Hammerstein quickly said yes, and they ensnared a slightly overwhelmed Ziegfeld to produce their dramatic undertaking.

Much is made, quite correctly, about how *Show Boat,* which opened at the Ziegfeld Theater on December 27, 1927, raised the bar for the American musical overnight. There had never been an American musical based on such a serious-minded book, nor one that had attempted to wrangle so vast a narrative. Yet Hammerstein's immense achievements should not overshadow Kern's contribution. Besides introducing immortal standards such as "Ol' Man River", "Can't Help Lovin' That Man", "Make Believe", "Why Do I Love You?", "You Are Love" and "Bill" (repurposed from a couple of older Kern/Wodehouse shows), Kern contributed the first American musical theater score of scale, scope, and ambition. As Stephen Sondheim put it in the 2004 television series *Broadway: The American Musical*, "One of the reasons *Show Boat* turned out as well as it did is that [Jerome] Kern knew what Oscar was trying to do, and he was just as interested in doing it—attempting to tell some kind of story about character."

The extent of Kern's triumph is deepened by the fact that the score to *Show Boat* was the first to present white characters and African Americans side by side with respect and integrity. Most Americans with a passing knowledge of popular culture have heard one version or another of "Ol' Man River" (some of whom may still believe it is a traditional "Negro" spiritual), but Kern also composed a Cassandra-like choral ode entitled "Mis'ry's Comin' Aroun'" for the show's black characters. Disturbing in tone and complex in its arrangements, the song was the first thing the skittish Ziegfeld cut from the show when it ran long in its tryout engagement. Kern felt so strongly about the song that he kept its melody in the show's overture, and its absence from the full score wounded him deeply. (It has been restored in various Broadway and opera house productions in the past twenty years.)

While *Show Boat* was hardly a *succès d'estime* (it was one of the longest running shows of the 1920s and was revived as early as 1932), it was something of an outlier. No other show of comparable ambitions followed immediately in *Show Boat*'s wake. Kern and Hammerstein collaborated on three more musicals after *Show Boat,* into the late 1930s, and while these shows (*Music in the Air*, *Very Warm for May*) contributed several major entries to the popular song canon ("Why Was I Born?", "The Song Is You", and the magisterial "All The Things You Are"), they were dramatically inert at the time and are rarely revived today. Tastes had changed since the Depression, and the Hollywood film presentation of the musical—initiated two months before *Show Boat*'s Broadway debut with *The Jazz Singer*—had brought a new sense of vitality and competition to the scene.

Ironically, then, it was the Hollywood musical that gave Kern's career a new lease on



life. Alone among most other accomplished Broadway composers (with the exception of Cole Porter), Kern actually liked Hollywood. He moved there permanently in 1934 and transplanted his cozy New York lifestyle to Beverly Hills, including his piano, recording equipment, assortment of pipes, renowned book collection, and beloved wife and daughter. There he could play poker with Ira Gershwin and bet on the ponies down at Santa Anita Park.

He also continued working with Hammerstein (who hated his motion picture assignments) in Hollywood. They wrote several classic songs for various pictures, such as "The Folks Who Live on the Hill" and the one-off "The Last Time I Saw Paris", which won an Academy Award when it was incorporated into the film *Lady Be Good*. But when RKO Pictures assigned Dorothy Fields to be Kern's lyricist on the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers picture *Swing Time,* it was a huge shot in the arm for Kern's musical inspiration.

Fields, from a prominent Broadway theatrical family, was born in 1905, the same year Kern had his first big song, and her sassy style gave a new piquancy to Kern's tunes. Having Astaire and Rogers sing his songs also went a long way to make Kern relevant during the more cynical, streamlined years of the mid-Depression era, with memorable numbers like "A Fine Romance", "The Way You Look Tonight", and "Pick Yourself Up." Although Kern could never be accused of being a jazz composer, he certainly contributed a jazzy number to the soundtrack with "Bojangles of Harlem", Astaire's tribute to great dancer Bill Robinson. Marred by Astaire's decision to perform the song in blackface, the number is routinely cut from television, which is a shame; if Kern had ever composed a song that sounded as hip as one of Gershwin's, this is it.

Although Kern's movie assignments kept him from achieving anything ambitious—the studio system made it impossible for him to have anything like the creative control on which he insisted in New York—they provided two more inspired lyricists: Johnny Mercer, whose words for "I'm Old Fashioned" were anything but, and Ira Gershwin, who collaborated with Kern on the film *Cover Girl* and on the biggest hit the lyricist ever had: "Long Ago (And Far Away)." But by the time *Cover Girl* was released in 1944, Kern's longtime collaborator, Oscar Hammerstein, had reinvented himself back on the East Coast.

After several years in the relative wilderness, Hammerstein had a hit—not just any hit, but the biggest one Broadway had ever seen: *Oklahoma!*, with music by Richard Rodgers. (Kern had turned down Hammerstein's suggestion to adapt *Green Grow the Lilacs*—*Oklahoma*!'s source material—in the mid-1930s.) Hollywood had been good to Kern (and, to paraphrase Noel Coward's self-referential quote, Kern was very good to Hollywood). Still, the movies offered the opportunity to write only half a dozen songs per film, and, of course, nothing could be originally written for a film studio that embraced anything like the ambitions of a *Show Boat,* which was, by 1945, when Hammerstein was contemplating a new revival, nearly a generation old.

Against his doctor's wishes, the 60-year-old Kern, who had suffered a minor stroke in 1937, left the sun-dappled palms of Hollywood (and the planning stages for a highly fictional biography of him at MGM called *Till the Clouds Roll By*) to come to New York in early November. He wanted to exercise his talents on Broadway again; he planned to help Hammerstein revise *Show Boat* (they had already written "Nobody Else But Me" to replace a specialty number at the end of the show; it too became a standard) and was eager to start a new project with Dorothy Fields, a new musical featuring Ethel Merman as sharpshooter Annie Oakley.

Two days after he arrived, Kern suffered a cerebral hemorrhage while walking along Park Avenue. For reasons not entirely clear, he was rushed to a public hospital on Welfare Island. Hammerstein was the first person in Kern's circle to be contacted with the dire news; someone on the staff at Welfare Island had discovered Kern's ASCAP card and phoned the ASCAP offices. Kern lingered for almost a week—the story goes that the six-foot-three Hammerstein clambered onto Kern's bed and sang "I've Told Ev'ry Little Star" as a way of reviving him. He passed away on November 11, 1945. The nation's radio stations and editorial pages were filled with tributes to Kern, who was universally

recognized as both a pioneer in his field and a dear soul.

The parameters of Kern's career are monumental. He composed his first stage successes when Victoria was still Queen and lived long enough to hear his songs performed by Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole. He wrote songs specifically to be performed by stars as diverse as Al Jolson in 1911 and Rita Hayworth in 1944. Kern songs were introduced to the American public by Marilyn Miller, Paul Robeson, Irene Dunne, Fred Astaire, Bob Hope, Eve Arden, Kate Smith, and Gene Kelly.

His songs were interpreted and recorded by every major (non-rock) performer of the 20th century, and are still being used to move audiences in movie soundtracks, as recently as this year. Richard Rodgers was only two years old when Kern was making a name for himself and still he outlived George Gershwin by nearly a decade. Kern had a hit song during Theodore Roosevelt's first term and several during Franklin Roosevelt's final term. He preceded the height of ragtime and outlived the swing era, even though he only made it to age sixty—which says plenty about how fast American music developed over the 20th century.

As if those bona fides weren't enough, Kern can be credited as the man who created the American popular standard. Rodgers himself wrote in a 1951 *New York Herald Tribune* feature:

> It is possible, of course, that as this country grows older its various art forms will lose their traces of continental origin and perhaps this is as it should be, but the first man to break with European tradition in theater music was Jerome Kern in much the same sense that Beethoven was the last of the classicists and the first of the romanticists.

If Irving Berlin made the American show tune accessible, and Gershwin made it relevant, and Rodgers made it ubiquitous, Kern made show music *important*. Even more, he made the show tune a uniquely American property.

And yet, one might ask, has Kern's moment passed? Although, as Stephen Sondheim wrote, no American songwriter has written as many standards as Kern, he is not nearly as well represented in our current popular culture as many of his peers. Some of this has to do with the nature of his stage shows; nothing keeps a Broadway score in the public eye (or ear) as well as the currency of a stage production, whether it be revived on Broadway, the West End, or even in a local high school auditorium. On this last score (as it were), Kern's collaborator, Hammerstein, has him beat all hollow with his subsequent collaborations with Richard Rodgers. Of all of Kern's dozens of theatrical offerings, only *Show Boat* is consistently revived on stages and concert halls around the world, and its rich complexity makes it an unlikely candidate for a high school auditorium. Aside from the curatorial platform given Kern by *Encores!* at City Center (followed by *Music in the Air* several years later) and a misguided attempt to stage *Swing Time* as *Never Gonna Dance* (2004), Kern's music has been mostly absent from the Broadway stage since 1939.

Although any good cabaret singer worth his or her salt can still strike a deep emotional chord with a Kern ballad, there has been very little recording activity of the Kern canon among our better contemporary interpreters of popular song. From the mid-1950s to the early sixties, Oscar Peterson, Ella Fitzgerald, and especially Margaret Whiting each released essential "songbook" albums devoted entirely to Kern, but there has been nothing significant on that front since. Perhaps this is due to the fact that, while Kern's music is not entirely devoid of irony, it is certainly devoid of cynicism. The interesting if perhaps dismaying truth may be that his pure musical honesty can no longer speak to the harsher world of the 21st century.

Still, Kern's contribution is immeasurable. Long ago, but not that far away, in 1971, when Stephen Sondheim was not yet a household name, he contributed a thorough and thoughtful series of liner notes to a boxed set of LPs entitled *The Columbia Album of Jerome Kern*. In them, Sondheim wrote:

> [A] Kern song is almost always recognizable,

even to the untrained ear. It has a "feel," a "sound" that is distinct and unique. The melody has an enduring freshness. The harmony is usually simple and not very inventive or eventful, yet graceful and clear and full of air. . . . All of his best songs have that economy indigenous to the best art: the maximum development of the minimum of material. . . . Thus it is that Kern's songs sound so unforced, so easy. But because they have the simplicity of artfulness, they grow richer on rehearing. As with all good music, no matter how large or small, subtleties begin to shine through the second time around, and new ones appear the third, fifth, tenth and fiftieth times. That is why no American songwriter has written so many standards as Kern. Small and simple and subtle as they are, his songs stand up under countless rehearings. And this is also why Kern's music survives the fads of American popular taste—from "jazz" (musical comedy style) to rock-and-roll. His music deals with the essentials, not the decoration. And the essentials are timeless.

I can attest to Kern's timelessness. When my 89-year-old father lay dying in his hospital bed this past fall, I attempted to comfort him in much the same way that Oscar Hammerstein attempted to comfort the ailing Kern almost seventy years earlier. Courtesy of iTunes, I was able to play Kern's most beautiful songs for my father in blissful renditions he would have remembered and enjoyed from his earlier days: Jo Stafford singing "All The Things You Are"; Margaret Whiting crooning "Long Ago (And Far Away)"; Irene Dunne chirping "I've Told Ev'ry Little Star."

Like Hammerstein, I couldn't be certain if this immortal music touched the recesses of the patient's consciousness. But I knew one thing: If flights of angels were going to sing my father to his rest, they ought to be singing Jerome Kern.

Laurence Maslon *is an arts professor at New York University's Graduate Acting Program and is the host of the weekly radio program* Broadway to Main Street*, which airs on Peconic Public Broadcasting.*

A College President Speaks

William M. Chace

Many a college president, upon leaving office, turns back to the time when the lectern was his, the microphone was before him, and the audience was focused with rapt attention on the words he had so carefully put before them. Gerhard Casper, a largely successful president from 1992 until 2000 at Stanford, now gives us a book composed of eight of his speeches. They are, he tells us, only a fraction of what he delivered—"one speech every three days for eight years." But as a subset of his orations they are thematically linked by one basic concern: the university's unstinting responsibility to champion academic freedom, defined as the freedom to conduct research as that research itself will direct; the freedom to teach as one judges best; and the freedom of the university to work in ways untrammeled by external pressures.

Casper, a constitutional law professor by training, writes with both passion and lucidity. The speeches are his testament to posterity, and each one is excellent. But the resulting book, as Casper early on observes, is rendered "idiosyncratic." That oddity is owed both to what it leaves out and what it returns to again and again.

The Winds of Freedom does not address many of the matters a university president could talk about, or might well be asked about today. There is nothing about reforms in undergraduate education (Stanford labored hard to produce one over the years, and the experiments included "Western Culture", "iHum", and "Thinking Matters"), nothing about online education or MOOCs, and nothing about what he bats away as only "hot button" issues: admissions, curriculum, tuition costs, and athletics. These apparently lesser matters are for other presidents and other writers to mull over, even though they constitute some of the public's most pressing concerns regarding higher education.