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Somewhat Informed; Zodrow's Performing Arts Column: "Carousel" is Dizzily Antiquated

Andru Zodrow, News Editor

This week, I watched the 2013 Lincoln Center production of "Carousel," the 1945 classic written by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein. While I didn't expect the play to share my contemporary moral sensibilities, the justified abuse that was portrayed through the show was particularly repugnant, and makes it difficult to recommend.

Rodgers and Hammerstein are often hailed as the greatest duo in musical theater history, and revolutionized Broadway. If not for the two lyricists and writers, the modern musical would not exist in the same form. In order to be truly literate in the history of American song and theater, one must be acquainted with the works of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

I must admit to having very little knowledge of the two's work, and set out this week to remedy my ignorance by watching one of their greatest hits: "Carousel." Having now seen the show, I feel that my first encounter with the pair may have gotten us off on the wrong foot.

First, it is important to acknowledge that this production is fantastic. The two main characters, Billy Bigelow and Julie Jordan, are portrayed with actors perfectly suited for their roles. Kelli O'Hara plays a softly quiet Jordan, and Nathan Gunn portrays the barrel-chested Bigelow with proper gravity. They have effective chemistry on stage when belting out their numbers. Jessie Mueller, who plays Jordan's lifelong friend, is a spectacular singer who expertly navigates scenes that task her character with the ability to make the audience laugh and gasp in the same minute.

Hailing from an earlier era during a time where modern musicals were just being formed, the show is just as influenced by opera and ballet as earlier musical theater. The entire cast should be commended for their undeniable skill when perfecting vocals that were intended for actors more accustomed to the deep vibratos and soaring high notes that the music calls for. In later scenes, a viewer less used to ballet performance, such as myself, might be challenged by the slightly alien viewing experience, but the craft of the dancers is brilliant regardless of the novelty of the performance from the crowd's perspective.

Where the show fundamentally fails is the plot. The show is quite structurally simple: Billy Bigelow is a barker at a carousel. A young woman named Julie Jordan falls for him. He hits her, she tells him she is pregnant, he realizes the error of his ways and tries to steal money in order to provide for his future child. He is caught by the authorities, and (spoilers ahead) chooses death rather than to be arrested in disgrace. In the afterlife, Bigelow has the opportunity to look down at his orphaned daughter's life.



Rodgers and Hammerstein hail from a different time with different social norms, but the play's moral message is unforgivable. If there is one message that the viewer takes away from the musical, it is that domestic violence can be overcome with a few tacky songs. There is a line in which Julie Jordan plainly states to her daughter, "it is possible dear, for someone to hit you, hit you hard, and not hurt at all." This line and ones like it are despicable, and make it hard to sit back and enjoy the show.

"Carousel" is hailed as one of the most culturally impactful musicals. That fact is dismaying, and illustrates the reality that Broadway, which is currently considered a bastion of progressivism, has roots in dark places that cannot be forgotten. Young Jean Lee, the first Asian American woman to have her play produced on Broadway, debuted her show in 2018. While this should be celebrated, the fact that it took so long impresses just how far theater needs to go in the march toward equality.

I enjoyed watching "Carousel" as an individual who cares about theater history. Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical DNA still clings to most contemporary musicals. It was enjoyable to watch talented performers bring such a seminal work to life. However, the value of the viewing experience was derived from placing it within the broader history of theater. On its own, "Carousel" is a relic of a worse time in our history. If you are a huge fan of musical theater, then viewing the Lincoln Center production of this show is homework you should do as a connoisseur of the craft. However, if you are simply in search of something fun to watch on a Friday night, look elsewhere.