Showstoppers: You'll Never Walk Alone

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On the Operatic

At the opening of Puccini's *Tosca*, we first hear a theme that will later come to be associated with the Baron Scarpia, the Chief of Police. The boldness of the music makes us sit up, announcing that this is a heightened kind of music drama: in other words, an opera. We find similar sorts of gestures in famous operas by almost all the great composers: Mozart (*The Magic Flute*), Beethoven (*Fidelio*), Wagner (*Die Meistersinger*), Strauss (*Der Rosenkavalier*) and so on. The whole thing is operatic, even before the singing has started: there's something particular and special about this mode of artistic expression.

With 'You'll Never Walk Alone' trending as the hashtag #YNWA on social media this week as a result of Liverpool FC's triumph in the premiership, it's easy to forget that the song was original written for an opera singer to perform, Christine Johnson of the Metropolitan Opera, in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Carousel* (1945). This calls to mind a question I'm asked quite often as a musical theatre scholar: What's the difference between an opera and a musical? The question has never seemed fruitful or interesting to me because it requires us to define two overlapping genres with a rigidity that surely prevents meaningful readings of individual works. But a related question appears to be relevant for today's lecture: Why would a commercial Broadway musical evoke opera through its production, casting or writing? This is more useful because it helps us set an agenda for reading today's showstopper, a curious case of an operatic song that later took on new life as a football anthem.

The answer to the question might partly be: an operatic plot. A summary of the key themes of *Carousel* – suicide, violence, poverty, passion, redemption, jealousy – immediately tells us that we're in operatic territory, if not exactly in opera. That no doubt explains why one of the first people to want to turn Ferenc Molnar's play *Liliom* into an opera was none other than Puccini, the composer of *Madama Butterfly*, *Tosca* and *La boheme*. Molnar turned him down on the basis that he wanted his greatest play to continue to be known as a play by Molnar rather than an opera by Puccini, so it's curious that seeing Rodgers and Hammerstein's first musical *Oklahoma!* (1943) is what persuaded him to allow them to adapt *Liliom*. Yet, as Hammerstein's protégé Stephen Sondheim later remarked, *Oklahoma!* is about a picnic, whereas *Carousel* is about life and death. I suggest it's the latter quality that defines the operatic impulse in the story.

Opera and power in nineteenth-century America

In the UK in 2025, opera is on its knees: most companies are struggling to stay afloat, have cut back their seasons or closed altogether. But in nineteenth century America, opera represented power. In the middle decades of the century, operatic centres like New Orleans and New York found the genre becoming popular among the general population and not just the occupation of the upper classes. In 1836, the *New Orleans Bee* described:

> 'Spectacles and operas appear to amuse our citizens more than any other form of public amusement—except balls.' April 28, 1836

And in 1851, the diarist George Templeton Strong described the impact of Bellini's opera *La Sonnambula* on the people of New York:

> 'The people are *Sonnambula*-mad. Everybody goes, and nob and snob, Fifth Avenue and Chatham Street, sit side by side fraternally on the hard benches.'
>
> Quoted in Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, Harvard University Press, 1986

A real highpoint in this growth in operatic popularity in the States was the concert tour of Jenny Lind, the

‘Swedish Nightingale’, who gave 93 concerts between 1850 and 1852, produced by the famous P.T. Barnum. Nathaniel Parker Willis’s 1851 *Memoranda of the Life of Jenny Lind* describes the impact of her appearances, including how the general appreciation for opera was a sign of how America was the land of opportunity:

> ‘The Havana Company, after struggling through an *up*-town season, to audiences of two or three *hundred*, have had a *down*-town season—with their usual patrons all in the country—to audiences of two or three *thousand!* **Opera music has, *in a couple of months*, become a popular taste.** Socially wonderful as this is, it is not unnatural. An ear for music is neither the result of luxury nor refined education. The mechanic is as likely to have it as the banker—the sempstress as likely as the millionaire’s daughter…’
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> ‘But such a transition could never have happened in England. The hardened crusts between the different strata of society, would never let a taste pass, with this marvelous facility, from one class to another. It is a proof of the slightness of separation between the upper and middle classes of our country—**of the ease with which the privileges of a higher class pass to the use of the class nominally below**—and marks how essentially, as well as in form and name, this is a land of equality.
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> ‘Music is a sweetener of toil—a softener of suffering—a helper of endurance—a refiner of brutality—and if Jenny Lind has come among us to set a seal on the universality of music, and make it **the confirmed taste of the People**, her mission is not a trifling one, nor would it seem undirected by a special providence.’

Out of this general expansion of opera for the people came the start of a move in the opposite social direction. The older families in New York established the Academy of Music in 1854 to be able to control operatic production in the city (which had never previously had a continuous home) and enforce social strata (the old families tended to control who owned a box – the most desirable place to sit). The Academy thrived until 1883, when the nouveaux riches established the Metropolitan Opera, which was better resourced and led to the Academy’s downfall within a couple of years. The tension between the two organisations is portrayed in HBO’s *The Gilded Age*. Perhaps inevitably, even the Met met its match eventually: in 1906, the second Manhattan Opera House was built, and by 1911 the Met’s board had to persuade their rival to cease production in return for $1.2 million, a price seen as more desirable than allowing a rival to continue to stage more exciting productions. The rival impresario’s name was Oscar Hammerstein I, grandfather of Oscar Hammerstein II, who wrote the script and lyrics for *Carousel*, thus providing a key link between actual opera and Broadway’s version of the operatic: the operatic subject and the operatic aesthetic.

The Age of Rodgers and Hammerstein

Rodgers and Hammerstein were by any standard a cultural phenomenon in mid-century America. Whether one likes their work or not, their track record was remarkable: *Oklahoma!* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951) and *The Sound of Music* (1959) remain popular and successful today, never mind the five others. The 1950s was the decade of television, and one of the easiest ways to understand R&H’s importance is to look at two projects in which they were involved: *A Salute to Rodgers and Hammerstein* in March 1954, which was broadcast live on all four main television channels in the USA, and *Cinderella*, an original television musical for Julie Andrews that was broadcast live to an estimated 107 million people.

What was their winning formula? One of them was taking established literary texts—plays, short stories, novels, films—and turning them into music. Adaptation was therefore key to their success: it can be no coincidence that their five most popular musicals are all adaptations. It’s worth considering briefly why *Liliom* might have appealed to them. Alexander Woollcott’s review of the 1921 Broadway revival in the *New York Times* commented on its unusual flavour:

> ‘*Liliom* in its quizzical and airy and light-hearted way says that brave and bracing thing which Gorky said in *Night Lodging*—that down in the very dregs of humanity the spark that is divine lives on, waiting to be kindled into flame.
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> *‘Liliom* lets you look into the soul of a dirty bum, lets you follow it beyond the grave and back to earth again and leaves you uplifted. There are scenes of human squalor in it as Gorky might have

written, but now and again there are dancing lights that Barrie might envy, and at times a cathedral hush settles over the play for those out front who have a prayer in their hearts.'

Mention of the cathedral hush, and of the divine, hints at the idea that would become 'You'll Never Walk Alone'.

Writing You'll Never Walk Alone

Carousel concerns the relationship between Billy Bigelow, a carousel barker, and Julie Jordan, a mill worker. They are attracted to one another and become married, but poverty leads them to live with Julie's cousin Nettie, and Billy feels constrained. He becomes restless, but when he discovers that Julie is pregnant he is overwhelmed. Faced with responsibility, he decides to commit a burglary to provide money for his family. He is caught in the act, and rather than go to prison, he commits suicide and dies. Over his body, Nettie sings 'You'll Never Walk Alone', comforting her through song.

Hammerstein's draft outline of the show always intended a song to be performed at that moment in the story (Act 2, Scene 2: there are four scenes to come) and he referred to it as a 'lullaby'. In the end, though, the musical setting evokes a more religious trope. Rodgers's fair copy of the song reveals that the piano accompaniment familiar from the published score was almost entirely his – Broadway composers often didn't write either any accompaniment or a very simple accompaniment, but the flowing piano writing of this piece is his. Therefore, its evocation of Bach's C major Prelude, as used in the Bach-Gounod 'Ave Maria', is a deliberate reference point. When married with the bigger operatic requirements of the vocal writing for Christine Johnson, and the secularised prayer of Hammerstein's lyrics, it is the perfect showstopper—and a distinctive popular song. Reviewers from the beginning recognised this quality: John Chapman in the *Daily News* said it was 'almost a hymn'. Note, however, that musically it is not *quite* a hymn, but a musical prayer.

In a promotional interview for *Carousel*, Rodgers described the moment when he decided *Liliom* could work as a musical: 'I said to Oscar, 'How would this be for a song?' and I told him about it. Not the actual notes in the music, but the color of it and the thought. He saw what I saw in it.' (*New York Herald Tribune*) Although he was actually referring to another operatic song from the show (Billy's Soliloquy) Rodgers's reference to 'colour' evokes Verdi's concept of musical 'tinta', a specific colour to unify a score in Italian opera (again: the operatic).

What did Hammerstein mean by the song? In a letter from April 1960, the year of his death, he responded to a clergyman who had written to ask him about its meaning: 'It is difficult for me to add any interpretation…I mean exactly what the words say.'

Ambiguity in the critical reception

A commonality between reviews of the opening of *Carousel* in 1945 is ambiguity or perplexity about the genre to which it belongs. Everyone know they had gone to see a musical, but at that point the word 'musical' alone was not in use as a generic marker: instead, it was still adjectival, as in 'musical comedy'. We see the critics reaching for the correct words. The *New York Journal-American* remarked: 'It's romance. It's comedy. It's melodrama. And it's metaphysical.' The last word is especially curious.

The *Herald Tribune* said: that *Carousel* 'proved [that] music and real drama can be combined outside the opera'. Here, the operatic aesthetic is being alluded to, while also realising this is not *quite* opera. *Time* wrote: 'It is not a musicomedy but a lovely and appealing musical play'. As for the *Daily News*: 'I don't know just what to call it.'

Indeed, genre was a topic of conversation from reports of the earliest previews of the show in Boston, where the show was tried out before New York. The famous *Boston Post* critic remarked: '*Carousel* is not so much a musical comedy as a musical play…A perfected *Carousel*, containing all the emotional power of fine drama heightened by the visual and aural splendours of beautiful music…would come very close to being a new dramatic art form…Wagner aimed at something like this…'

And in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, we read of an interesting reflection on *Liliom*'s theme of 'Second Chances', something that's carried forward in *Carousel*:

'But no dramatic statement of our dream of the second chance seems to me to have been more

> moving than was that final scene in *Liliom* in which a Budapest barker returned to earth to strike his daughter even as, when living, he had struck her mother. In fact, few plays to have come out of the modern theatre have equalled Molnar's fantasy in imagination or pathos, in charm or universality, in tenderness or timelessness. Written and originally produced in Budapest in 1909, it remains undated in a medium where time is at its cruelest.'

This is a reference to the final third of the story, in which Billy is seen at Heaven's back yard, sentenced to 16 years in purgatory but given the opportunity to return to earth for one day to atone for his sins. In both the play and musical, he visits his daughter, now 15, and takes her a star he has stolen from heaven. When she rejects it in fear, he attempts to strike her, but because he is a ghost she can't feel it. In the play, he is sent to hell because of his inability to change his ways, but the musical adds a scene in which Billy witnesses his daughter's high school graduation, at which 'You'll Never Walk Alone' is sung as a choral reprise. This scene provides some moral ambiguity in suggesting that Billy may be able to be saved (if the song's lyric is to be believed), which is at the heart of why *Carousel* is a controversial work. In a famous exchange from *New York* magazine in 2011, writers Frank Rich and Nora Ephron commented:

> **Frank Rich:** I love *Carousel*.
>
> **Nora Ephron:** Yes, but you're a boy.

Carousel and the sublime

Why, then, has *Carousel* continued to be performed and revived, admired by and moved audiences? I suggest that the nineteenth-century pull of the work's operatic themes and aesthetics bring with them the kind of extremes we find in a strand of art and philosophy from that period. Edmund Burke's famous eighteenth-century treatise on the idea of the sublime explains:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the idea of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling…' **Edmund Burke: *On the Sublime: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757)**

There is obvious naivety in his challenge to older ways of thinking about beauty and pleasure, and he was challenged and disagreed with by many others; there isn't space to unpack it properly here. But what matters is that something about this idea of terror and pain ran through a lot of nineteenth-century art, opera and literature, perhaps most arrestingly in the art of JMW Turner where ships are shown in peril at sea and the Houses of Parliament are on fire. In other words, sometimes art is supposed to evoke terror, and the horrors of *Carousel*'s many extreme, operatic plot points – the violence, criminality, meanness and suicide – are intended to be read as difficult. The show is, however, very difficult to direct and perform with nuance, so that we understand that we are not supposed to agree with everything that's said, something that's also true of *Carousel*'s near-contemporary, the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, whose toughness is more extreme than the musical's.

The wartime context of *Carousel*'s composition also provides an insight into *Carousel*'s moral dilemmas. As everyday men were called upon to go and fight for their country, they were required to do things that caused lasting psychological damage to them. By the end of the war, 40% of active American servicemen were discharged for psychiatric reasons, and questions about whose life matters and who can be redeemed brought about some of the most complicated and distressing challenges of society. I'm struck by the overlaps between the plot of *Carousel* and that of an English opera that premiered just two months after the musical: Britten's *Peter Grimes*. Here too we see a troubled central figure, one who works in a poor fishing community, one who neglects to look after others, one who is perhaps redeemed by the love of a woman who understands him, and one whose life is not really missed upon his death. The expendability of life was a terrifying subject in 1945, and Britten, Rodgers and Hammerstein create suitably terrifying responses to the mood of the day. Thus 'You'll Never Walk Alone' has built into it the kind of catharsis to an existential crisis that has led it not only to be sung at tense moments in football matches but also at other times of collective emotional tension: for example, it's no coincidence that five years ago it topped the UK charts again at the end of March 2020 during the first weeks of the covid-19 lockdown.

Further Reading

Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008.

Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages*, 1975.

Barry Kester, *Round in Circles*, 2022.

Ferenc Molnar, *Liliom*, in *The Theatre Guild Anthology*, 1936.

John Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 1993.

Edmund Burke: *On the Sublime: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757.

Nathaniel Parker Willis, *Memoranda of the Life of Jenny Lind*, Philadelphia: Robert E Peterson, 1851

Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, Harvard University Press, 1986

Primary Sources

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Filmography

Carousel, 1956

Carousel, 2013