

**‘You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught’**

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Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, once kings of American culture, invented a new kind of musical theater in shows like *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, and *South Pacific*. But by the time of their final work together, a critical backlash had begun.



CBS Photo Archive/Getty Images

Richard Rodgers, Julie Andrews, and Oscar Hammerstein II in rehearsals for the televised production of *Cinderella*, 1957

**Reviewed:**

**Oscar Hammerstein II and the Invention of the Musical**

by Laurie Winer

Yale University Press, 356 pp., \$32.50 (to be published in paperback in August)

Shy: The Alarmingly Outspoken Memoirs of Mary Rodgers

by Mary Rodgers and Jesse Green

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 467 pp., \$35.00; \$20.00 (paper)

In the middle of the twentieth century Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II were kings of American culture. Almost two thirds of the country tuned in on March 31, 1957, to watch the live broadcast of their made-for-television musical *Cinderella*—expanding the dominion they had established over the previous fourteen years on Broadway with *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, and *The King and I*. Critically acclaimed, popular, and obscenely lucrative, these shows effected a sea change in American musical theater from musical comedy (songs, jokes, and dance loosely collected around a plot) to the musical play (character-driven songs and sometimes dance integrated into a coherent story) that Rodgers and Hammerstein invented.

But by the time of their final work together—*The Sound of Music*, which debuted in 1959, the year before Hammerstein died of cancer—a critical backlash had begun. Hammerstein’s plainspoken lyrics, centered on love and optimism, full of raindrops on roses and sometimes as corny as *Kansas in August*, were derided as unsophisticated, sentimental, square. The Rodgers and Hammerstein model was soon usurped by new modes, especially those of the more jaded, ironic, and formally adventurous work of Hammerstein’s protégé, Stephen Sondheim. The American musical became less widely popular. More recently, the art and lives of Rodgers and Hammerstein have undergone the scrutiny applied to many other once-revered white men and their once-central work. Their musicals are still frequently performed, still seen and heard and loved, but in this censorious era their reputations have been unsettled.

This is why Laurie Winer’s recent biography, *Oscar Hammerstein II and the Invention of the Musical*, starts on the defensive. In an introduction titled “An Unfashionable Take on an Unfashionable Man,” Winer, a critic who calls theater her religion, swings somewhat wildly at various criticisms of her subject: that his lyrics are artless; that he was a naif, blind to dark truths; that he was villainously greedy; that he was dully inferior to Rodgers’s first lyricist partner, Lorenz Hart. These are mostly straw men, and as Winer gets needlessly entangled in the “great man” theory of history and the philosophical pragmatism of William James, the strain makes for an anxious and off-putting start to what turns out to be a smart and insightful book.

Clearly, Winer has read all the other books on the subject, studied all the shows, pored over the reams of letters Hammerstein left behind.<sup>1</sup> Compared with a more foursquare take like Todd Purdum’s well-researched, well-organized *Something Wonderful: Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Broadway Revolution* (2018), Winer’s is digressive and scattershot. But she has an intuitive grasp of Hammerstein’s aesthetic and character. She gets him. Looking back at his old-fashioned virtues

and failings from a distance, like a wised-up but affectionate grandchild, she helps us see, as she puts it, “the mortal who made the immortal work” as “a man of his time, if not entirely for ours.”

Winer presents Hammerstein as “a classic fortunate son...petted and loved almost from the cradle to the grave.” His paternal grandfather and namesake, Oscar Hammerstein I, was a “flamboyant impresario,” a German immigrant to New York who made money in cigars and spent it all on opera and opera houses. His father managed a major vaudeville theater. Oscar II, born in 1895, was close to his mother, who died from an infection following a botched abortion when he was fifteen. “From then on Hammerstein opposed grief as a matter of principle,” Winer writes. His life and work were about looking past that kind of pain, walking through the storm with your head up high.

At Columbia University in the 1910s, Hammerstein was already writing for the Varsity Show, and soon he quit law school to join the family business as a playwright and librettist. The libretti, or books, of the musical comedies of the time were slapdash. “What counted was the music and the jokes and the talents of the cast,” Hammerstein explained in an interview. “We accepted the book as a device for leading into songs.”

Working with the more experienced librettist Otto Harbach, Hammerstein learned the conventions of the day, but Harbach also taught him to construct his stories with care. They worked mainly in operetta, then a popular mode, with plots and manners imported from Europe, and found much box office success. But Hammerstein longed for something else, more operatic than musical comedy but more believable than opera, and American in theme and style. That’s what he created in 1927 with the composer Jerome Kern: *Show Boat*.

Winer calls *Show Boat* “the most revolutionary show in the history of the genre,” which isn’t hyperbole but a standard judgment. In its epic scope, realist treatment of a weighty American subject (one of the weightiest, race), and sophisticated intertwining of music and story, *Show Boat* radically expanded the aesthetic possibilities of the American musical. Winer illuminates Hammerstein’s achievement by explaining how deftly he adapted Edna Ferber’s thick novel about the white and Black employees of a Mississippi River showboat, finding ways for the story to be coherent *and* songful, partly by choosing scenes in which the characters have reasons to sing. For the first hour, she writes, “a listener may be hardly aware of the difference between music, lyrics, and dialogue.” Hammerstein’s altered ending, “a deeply emotional masterpiece of theatricality,” tilts toward redemption by reuniting the estranged central couple and reprising the score’s deepest song, “Ol’ Man River.”

How to account for this leap in artistry? Winer, in the spirit of her subject, pegs it to falling in love. In March 1927, on the deck of a luxury liner bound for London, the thirty-one-year-old Hammerstein, traveling without his wife, Myra, met and felt an instant connection to the twenty-eight-year-old actress Dorothy Jacobson, already on her second marriage. It was some enchanted morning. During the two years it took for them to detach from their spouses, Hammerstein learned that Myra had been unfaithful, news that sent him into a sanatorium for a few weeks. But by 1929 he and Dorothy were wed, and he had found a version of matrimonial contentment a little more complicated than what he would depict in his shows but nevertheless true and lasting.

The achievement of *Show Boat*, however, did not immediately lead to professional satisfaction. He spent much of the 1930s in Hollywood, subject to the whims of studio producers, cycling through ambitious hope and disillusionment. “Because his gift was for narrative integrity, Hammerstein was destined to be ground up by the filmmaking process,” Winer writes astutely. He returned to Broadway, but with a flop. Quoting Hammerstein’s advice-filled letters to colleagues and family members, Winer shows him staying determinedly buoyant. That whistle-a-happy-tune buoyancy, Winer writes, would “become the standard engine of the musical play.”

**R**ichard Rodgers didn’t have to learn the same lessons. A few years younger than Hammerstein, he teamed up with Lorenz Hart while an undergrad at Columbia in 1920. Almost immediately they started creating a large portion of what became the American Songbook, Rodgers’s fecund musical gifts (“He pees melody,” quipped Noël Coward) married to Hart’s rueful wit. Though in 1930s Hollywood they faced frustrations similar to Hammerstein’s, their return to Broadway produced hit show after hit show—*Babes in Arms*, *Pal Joey*—packed with hit songs like “My Funny Valentine.” The trouble was Hart, a closeted gay man who drowned his self-loathing in booze. Rodgers wanted a more stable partner and a librettist-lyricist of greater substance. Hammerstein, despite his recent failures, fit the description.

With *Oklahoma!*, they picked up on the precedent of *Show Boat* and popularized the kind of musical that followed Hammerstein’s maxim: “The song is the servant of the play.” Where most musicals had opened with pretty chorus girls, this one started with a lone cowboy singing about a bright golden haze on the meadow. Hammerstein’s simple lyrics, much less sparkling when read than Hart’s or Cole Porter’s, took flight on Rodgers’s lilting, instantly memorable melodies. Integrating words and music into a dramatic form more like a play, the team produced a show that would prove much more durable than most of the flimsy musicals that preceded it.

Winer retells the usual story of this period, during which the team pushed their style further in the unlikely *Carousel*, with its unpromising subject matter (theft, spousal abuse, parental neglect) and sustained musical scenes. She registers their aesthetic retreat after the unpopular experiment *Allegro*—which follows a doctor from birth and childhood through marriage, medical school, and middle age, using abstract sets and a Greek chorus—and notes the way their partnership came to resemble a corporation. More originally, she addresses now troubling aspects of each major Hammerstein work by describing and discussing recent productions, like Nicholas Hytner’s 1992 *Carousel*, which helped revive the team’s reputation, and the darkly revisionist *Oklahoma!* that Daniel Fish directed on Broadway in 2019, demonstrating that the shows still find audiences while examining how directors adjust to contemporary mores.

Winer doesn’t go easy on Hammerstein. She recognizes the pervasive orientalism in his stories and songs. She’s forthright about *Carmen Jones*, the all-Black adaptation of the Bizet opera *Carmen* that he made without Rodgers, flagging “racism of which he is entirely unaware,” a condescension that “bleeds into the show in all kinds of ways.” She calls out the absurdity in *Allegro*—“so blithe in its assumptions about gender roles that it could have been written before the author was born”—quoting the lyrics that suggest a fellow needs a girl “To sit by his side/And listen to him talk/And agree with the things he’ll say.” Winer sees her subject as a man who “never conceived of or condoned a life lived outside the system, for he was too much a beneficiary of it.”

Recognizing Hammerstein’s limitations, Winer is better able to help us appreciate his gifts. She accurately identifies him as “a poet of the anticipation of joy.” This is the special meaning of one of the most common words in his lexicon: *dream*. In “A Kiss to Build a Dream On,” “When I Grow Too Old to Dream,” “I Have Dreamed,” and many more songs, the important pleasure is proleptic, imagined in advance. *If you don’t have a dream, how you gonna have a dream come true?*

Despite the gender assumptions in *Allegro*, Winer sees the other social commentary in the show, poking fun at the sped-up shallowness of modern life, as the kind “at which Hammerstein excelled: recognizably true and spooned out softly enough so that each member of the audience can be sure it’s about someone else.” She similarly appreciates the calibration of criticism and comfort in *South Pacific*, whose white American characters have to confront their own racism, as in the then-controversial song “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught,” which locates the origin of racial hatred in the indoctrination of children. The show, she writes, “brilliantly reassures us of our essential decency, and only then does it make its statement—that, unless we are vigilant about the enemy within, our decency as well as our democracy can be lost.” Hammerstein, she says, “knew how to challenge with one hand and give tribute with the other.”

While Winer's book isn't hagiography, it is, like its subject, in favor of redemption. About *Carousel*, which Winer calls "a treatise on the messiness of forgiveness," she writes that "our tears fall as an answer to the ever-evolving question: Can we forgive ourselves, each other, and the artists who still have something to say, no matter how imperfect we all might be?" She's careful to emphasize Hammerstein's late-life advocacy against housing discrimination and she stresses, over and over, that his work "appeals to the best in human nature."

Throughout, Winer keeps Hammerstein in a more flattering light by contrasting him with Rodgers. Yes, both were complicit in cheating the director Joshua Logan out of author royalties for *South Pacific*, which they wrote together, but Winer spends pages detailing Rodgers's cruelty to Logan, who worshiped him, and his minimization of Logan's contributions even decades later. Yes, Hammerstein seems to have had a late-career dalliance with Temple Texas, a chorus girl half his age, but what's that in comparison to the ever-randy Rodgers, who, as the choreographer Agnes de Mille memorably phrased it, used women "like a piece of toilet paper"?

Winer gives attention to the men's wives, both interior designers named Dorothy, and to their parenting. Yes, Hammerstein "practiced the noblesse oblige style of 1940s upper-class fathering," and according to his son Billy could express love only in his work. But such fault-finding pales next to that of Rodgers's daughter Mary. Here she is on the time her father was having an affair with an actress in *The King and I*, in a room at the theater he always had reserved for such purposes, when he made that actress late for rehearsal: "He promised to cover for her but didn't and she was fired. Shitty way to treat someone you supposedly cared about. To say nothing of your wife."

There's a lot more where that comes from in *Shy: The Alarmingly Outspoken Memoirs of Mary Rodgers*. Where Winer's book starts on defense, Rodgers's kicks off on the attack, scoring points while describing an ear-training game that her father played with her and her sister, Linda:

I later learned that this was a routine exercise in elementary music theory classes, universally considered boring. But Linda and I liked it because Daddy seemed to like us when we answered correctly. And to like himself for having taught us so well. Neither of which likings we saw much evidence of otherwise.

"What I wanted, desperately, was my parents' affection, but it wasn't there to be gotten," she says. Her father "hated having his time wasted with intangible things like emotions." Her mother, "even more fanatical about appearances than he," was "frozen," a pampered and antisemitic Jew, a controlling hypocrite who hid secrets like her

husband's infidelity and alcoholism behind an elegant façade. "Pretense, lies, hypocrisy," Rodgers writes. "Put it in Latin and you've got a family crest."

This is the sound of *Shy*: pull-no-punches, punch line after punch line. It is essentially an edited transcript of Rodgers, who died in 2014, recounting her life to Jesse Green, the chief theater critic for *The New York Times*. Green arranged the results and added footnotes that identify people and keep a parallel stream of jokes flowing along the bottom of the pages. One self-aware bit down there proposes alternative titles for the book. "Where Was I?" mocks the conversational rambling that is part of the book's charm. "What Do You Really Think?" is a deadpan comment on what Green calls Rodgers's "knee-jerk transparency."

*Shy* is much more than a daughter's memoir. Mary Rodgers was herself an accomplished musical theater composer. The ironic title comes from an ironic song in *Once Upon a Mattress*, her popular 1958 musical adaptation of *The Princess and the Pea*. (The recent City Center *Encores!* revival of this terrific show, headed to Broadway this summer, is a reminder of her abundant talent.) Rodgers describes the show's heroine, a breakout role for Carol Burnett, as

a big, awkward, loudmouth princess, born to royalty but nevertheless a misfit, likable but unsure of herself. Despite her exalted provenance, she has to outwit a vain and icy queen to get what she wants and live happily ever after.

The kicker: "Story of my life."

The sections about the creation of that show have all the excitement, all the love of theater and theater people, that you find in classic showbiz memoirs, except that the frazzled artist finding her voice and struggling to get her songs heard is a divorced mother of three who needs a babysitter. Along with the dryly delivered insider dish on the sex, drugs, and secrets of her milieu, much of the fascination and import of *Shy* lies in the exceedingly rare perspective of a woman in an industry dominated by men like her father (who always encouraged her composing).

Compared with the story of her father's career, hers is a struggle all the way through, with more bombs and never-produced projects than successes. Her version of Hammerstein's fortunate-son buoyancy is "learning to swerve." That's how she found a second career as a writer of children's books, including *Freaky Friday*, a swerve that led to another—writing screenplays in Hollywood, an episode she calls the "most mortifying" part of her tale. At least that she had in common with Hammerstein (whom she calls kind, generous, principled, but "no saint").

Hers is the messy, affecting story of a woman in the postwar period, “a woman who tried everything,” stumbling to find “more honest ways to live.” She married a closeted gay man (“everyone should marry a gay man at least once”) and divorced him after he started hitting her. She slept around (her phrase) and almost married some other gay men. She, who considered childhood “the most miserable punishment exacted upon anybody,” had a total of six children.<sup>2</sup> When, more than halfway through the book, she settles into a lasting second marriage, to the film executive and theater producer Henry Guettel, she aptly describes it as “like finding your way home in a song, after the bridge.”

In her eighties, armed with hindsight and wisdom, she’s as tough on herself as she is on everyone else, calling out her own bad behavior, delusions, and complicity. But she’s also forgiving, or at least understanding. She acknowledges that her parents generally did the right thing during the big crises in her life, even if “it doesn’t even out” because “there weren’t as many big things as little.”

*Shy* puts on the page a person in full, and its cumulative message is what Green says Rodgers wanted it to be: “You could have a good life without being dull and without being perfect or great.” Still, the book has a special spark whenever it touches on a certain male genius of musical theater. Not Richard Rogers. Stephen Sondheim.

“**T**he love of my life” is what she calls Sondheim. They met in 1944 at the Hammersteins’ farm in Pennsylvania, where Sondheim, who lived nearby and was friends with one of the Hammerstein boys, spent so much time that he was practically adopted.<sup>3</sup> He was fourteen, Mary thirteen. Watching the brilliant boy beat her at chess and show off on the piano, Mary was enchanted. “I thought I would never be as infatuated with anyone again. Which turned out to be true.”

As young adults, they became friends and wrote music together. They were gossiping under her father’s piano when Sondheim told her he was probably gay. As she married and divorced and played the field, she found other men wanting because they weren’t him. Eventually, when they both were around thirty, she wrote him a “shit-or-get-off-the-pot letter,” and they entered what she calls a trial marriage.

This is no doubt the juiciest revelation in the book, and it is a sad, painful episode: the two of them, side by side in bed, doing nothing; Mary sneaking home in the morning before her kids woke up. He wasn’t in love with her, she says. She wasn’t physically attracted to him. “I just loved him, thoroughly enough for nothing else to matter. Do you not believe in that? Have you never seen *Carousel*?” It couldn’t work. She swerved on with her life.



But they stayed friends. It was she who pushed Sondheim together with her father after the death of Hammerstein, who had been Sondheim's surrogate father and most important mentor. A Rodgers–Sondheim collaboration was also Hammerstein's expressed wish. It turned out to be acrimonious, and the resulting show, *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, was middling, but it did occasion from Sondheim some wickedly cynical, Hart-like lyrics about falsity in marriages like that of the Rodgerses.<sup>4</sup>

Soon after, when Sondheim was writing a show about marriage and commitment, he needed to learn from someone with experience, so he talked with Mary and took notes. Her attitudes toward marriage—hers, her parents', and maybe whatever she and Sondheim had, the attitudes we hear in *Shy*—are all over his acerbic lyrics for *Company*, which was to the 1970s concept musical what *Oklahoma!* was to the musical play.<sup>5</sup>

Which is to say that all this gossip about marriages, including the metaphorical marriages of lyricists and composers, and all this griping about parents—all this illuminates the development of the American musical. One of the best chapters in Winer's book about Hammerstein is mainly about Sondheim, whose "responses to Hammerstein's work," she writes, "constitute the most productive Oedipal impulse in the history of musical theater." As she notes, there are many echoes of the poet of anticipation and community in the poet of ambivalence and alienation: Sondheim's "No One Is Alone" speaks to Hammerstein's "You'll Never Walk Alone"; "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught" is a father of Sondheim's "Children Will Listen."

Sondheim famously called Hammerstein a man of limited talent and unlimited soul, and Rodgers the reverse. But Sondheim was also, in later years, the chief advocate for Hammerstein's artistry—arguing that he should be seen as an experimental playwright; that his painstaking lyrics, despite diction and sentimentality left over from operetta, have weight.

"The most important ingredient of a good song is sincerity," Hammerstein advised in his "Notes on Lyrics." For him, sophistication was a false pose. "If you *do* find something exciting," he advised his daughter in a letter, "it is silly to make believe you *don't*." He preferred characters that he considered "primitive"—cowboys, carnival barkers, Black and Asian people—because he thought that they say what they mean. "There's nothing wrong with sentiment," he said, "because the things we're sentimental about are the fundamental things in life." That earnestness is easy to mock.

Or to distrust. For Mary Rodgers and Sondheim and many of their generation, afraid of sentimentality, the happy talk that Hammerstein considered sincere could sound like pretense, lies, hypocrisy. But her knee-jerk transparency—"Make it funnier," she told Green, and "make

it meaner”—is equally a kind of sincerity. “The real reason to tell the truth, or truth within reason, is that it’s healthier for everyone,” she says.

There’s something here at the heart of many debates about musical theater, whether Hart versus Hammerstein or Hammerstein versus Sondheim, debates about what to believe and what to make believe. As Winer puts it, defending her love of Hammerstein, “One woman’s profundity is another’s useless sentimentality.” One generation’s sincerity is another’s artifice. Sophistication isn’t always a pose. It can be a condition: the old pathways to the heart are closed and new ones must be found. Each generation, searching for more honest ways to live and make art, mocks its biological and artistic parents, resolving to be their opposite and failing.

Then again, to dwell on these debates about language might be to miss the point, like reading “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’” without the transfiguring tune. Speaking for herself—but not only for herself—Mary Rodgers explains why she always forgave her father: “It was all about his music; everything loving about him came out in it, and there was no point looking anywhere else. It’s also true I didn’t have any choice—but it was enough.”

### **Brian Seibert**

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1. See *The Letters of Oscar Hammerstein II*, compiled and edited by Mark Eden Horowitz (Oxford University Press, 2022). ↩
2. One died at three. Another, Adam Guettel, took up the family business as composer-lyricist. His music for *The Light in the Piazza* won the 2005 Tony Award for Best Original Score. His *Days of Wine and Roses* was on Broadway earlier this year. ↩
3. Sondheim also had a narcissistic mother to flee, one who later wrote him that her only regret was giving birth to him. ↩
4. Dorothy Rodgers, in her daughter’s words, “sniffed a satire too close to home” and turned her husband against the song, which Sondheim then self-bowdlerized. Sondheim includes both versions in the first of his two invaluable books about his lyrics, *Finishing the Hat* (Knopf, 2010). ↩
5. It’s also surely not a coincidence that the lovelorn “best pal” character in Sondheim’s growing-up-in-showbiz musical *Merrily We Roll Along* (now on Broadway) is named Mary. ↩