

OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN II AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF RACE AND INTERSECTIONAL OPPRESSION IN AMERICAN MUSICALS FROM *SHOW BOAT* (1927) TO *CAROUSEL* (1945)

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Abstract

Oscar Hammerstein II (1895-1960), with various collaborators, addressed issues of race and intersectional oppression (here defined as multiple features that can contribute to oppression either socially or individually, and can include factors such as race, age, gender, and social class) in many of his works. This essay investigates such representations in *Show Boat* (1927, music by Jerome Kern), *The New Moon* (1928, music by Sigmund Romberg), *Sunny River* (1941, music by Romberg), *Oklahoma!* (1943, music by Richard Rodgers), and *Carousel* (1945, music by Rodgers) as well as selected twenty-first century revivals of *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*. In each show, white hegemony is the norm, and characters of color, if they appear, represent some sort of difference that is made

subservient to the white norm. In selected modern revivals, multicultural casting brings such issues, including negative stereotypes, to the fore and allows for new insights into issues of race and intersectional oppression.

Keywords: Oscar Hammerstein II, Jerome Kern, Sigmund Romberg, Richard Rodgers, race, intersectional oppression, *Show Boat*, *The New Moon*, *Sunny River*, *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*

Ključne riječi: Oscar Hammerstein II, Jerome Kern, Sigmund Romberg, Richard Rodgers, rasa, ugnjetavanja među skupinama, *Show Boat*, *The New Moon*, *Sunny River*, *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*

Part of the continued fame and legacy of lyricist and librettist Oscar Hammerstein II (1895-1960) results from his progressive attitudes towards race. Hammerstein's epic lyric about the hardships of African Americans, »Ol' Man River« from 1927's *Show Boat*, with music by Jerome Kern, is indicative of this stance. Accord-

ing to *Show Boat* scholar Todd Decker, the song »laments physical hardship and calls out racial dispossession.«¹ Many of Hammerstein's characters become so memorable and so complex because of how the lyricist's words portray various modes of hardship and oppression. Queenie in *Show Boat* is an African American working-class woman who is slightly older than most of the other characters in the show. *South Pacific's* (1949) Bloody Mary is similar, though she is Polynesian rather than African American. Tuptim in *The King and I* (1951) is a foreign national, a concubine, and a woman. This trio demonstrates how a single character can be oppressed in multiple ways, not only because of race but also through other factors including gender, age, socio-economic status, and national origin. In terms of race theory, this concept is known as intersectionality.

In her groundbreaking article on the topic, which focuses on the intersection of race and gender concerning Black women from a legal perspective, Kimberle Crenshaw offers an image of how intersectionality works:

»Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.«²

In his musicals, Hammerstein frequently created characters who experience some type of intersectional oppression. This essay will explore this phenomenon and its musical-dramatic portrayal in five musicals from the middle period of Hammerstein's career, all of which are set in the United States: *Show Boat*, *The New Moon* (1928, music by Sigmund Romberg), *Sunny River* (1941, music by Romberg), *Oklahoma!* (1941, music by Richard Rodgers), and *Carousel* (1943, music by Rodgers). In this series of shows, Hammerstein created characters who endure hardship because of their race, gender, social class, or age. Many productions of Hammerstein classics in the twenty-first century continue, expand, and problematize the author's treatment of intersectional oppression through sometime risky casting and interpretive choices. Therefore, especially revelatory high-profile revivals of *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* will be included in this discussion. Hammerstein was indeed exceptional for his time in directly raising issues of race in his musicals, and as this essay reveals, the same can be said for intersectionality.

¹ Todd DECKER: *Who Should Sing »Ol' Man River«?: The Lives of an American Song*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 139.

² Kimberle CRENSHAW: Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, issue 1, article 8, 149. <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8> (access 6 July 2019).



Oscar Hammerstein II.



Sigmund Romberg

Show Boat

Show Boat, based on the 1926 novel of the same name by Edna Ferber, remains a high-water mark in the history of musical theatre.³ Its carefully crafted score includes a discernable system of Leitmotifs, a dramatic use of reprises, and character-defining music. In *Show Boat*, Kern and Hammerstein offer a synthesis of sentimental operetta (e.g. the love waltz »You Are Love«), snappy musical comedy (e.g. the female choral number »Life Upon the Wicked Stage«), and kaleidoscopic revue (the fragmentary structure of act 2).

The plot of the musical extends over a forty-year period. When the curtain rises, the year is 1887, and the African American male chorus along with Joe, a stevedore, sings of their hardships. The scene culminates in the afore-mentioned »Ol' Man River«. The Cotton Blossom, a Mississippi River showboat, is under the direction of the ebullient Cap'n Andy Hawks. His daughter, Magnolia (Nola), dreams of being on the stage, while his stern wife, Parthy, is completely against the idea. Julie and Steve star as the showboat troupe's romantic leads, and Frank and Ellie feature as its comedy duo. Nola spies a handsome young man, and they dream of falling in love. She tells Julie about her encounter. Julie is concerned and sings her song about remaining devoted to one man, no matter what, »Can't Help

³ The original production opened at the Ziegfeld Theatre on 27 December 1927. The show has been revived on Broadway six times.

Lovin' Dat Man«. Queenie, the Cotton Blossom's cook (and Joe's wife), is surprised that Julie knows that song, since it is of African American origin. We learn soon enough the reason why – Julie is of mixed race, and in 1880s Mississippi, it is against the law for anyone with African American blood to perform on a showboat. When the Sheriff arrives with this news, Julie, who has been passing for white, and Steve are forced to leave the Cotton Blossom. Their roles as romantic leads on the showboat are assumed by Nola and, in true musical fashion, by the man Nola spied earlier, Gaylord Ravenal. Gaylord is not the gentleman he purports to be; indeed after he and Nola marry and have a daughter, Kim, his gambling habits and mounting debts consume his family. He eventually abandons his wife and daughter, forcing Nola into the life of a single mother. Nola finds work as a singer in Chicago through the graciousness of Julie, who has become a nearly destitute alcoholic. Julie, seeing her friend from long ago, quickly walks out on her job to provide an opportunity for Nola. Nola becomes a star, as does her daughter Kim years later, and in the final section, set in the present day of 1927, Gaylord returns to his wife and grown daughter.

Intersectional oppression through race, gender, age, and social standing permeates the plot of *Show Boat*. Queenie has been discussed earlier. Her husband, Joe, is African American, working class, and at least middle aged. He does not experience oppression because of gender, however, and is given the opportunity to express his situation in »Ol' Man River«, one of the musical numbers that returns throughout the show. Julie is of mixed race and a woman. She falls from what appears to be middle class to near poverty as a result of her race. When passing for white, she appears to be financially stable; when her biracial ancestry is revealed, her social standing plummets.

In *Show Boat* and following the tenet of intersectionality, characters who do not experience racial or socio-economic oppression can improve their social position. Looking at the comic leads on the Cotton Blossom, Ellie is a white woman, whereas her husband Frank is a white man. They are decidedly middle class for most of the musical, and because they are white and not economically disadvantaged, they can be upwardly mobile and in fact become Hollywood elites by the final scene. Similarly, Nola and Kim do not face racial oppression. They are both white, and therefore can better themselves professionally, which is exactly what happens.

Joe and Queenie, on the other hand, occupy the same professions throughout the show. Has their race affected their professional opportunities? Their stasis is in contrast to that of Cap'n Andy and Parthy, who continue to run the Cotton Blossom and benefit financially from their enterprise.

In the version of *Show Boat* that appeared on stage, Joe and Queenie are childless, and may not have had the financial means to provide the same type of support for their progeny as Cap'n Andy could do (and perhaps did do) for Nola. In an

earlier concept for the show, as Todd Decker has documented, the musical was to conclude with a song recital by Paul Robeson, who the creators wanted to originate the role of Joe.⁴ (Robeson refused to play Joe in the original production, so the idea was dropped.) In the proposed final sequence, Robeson was to play Joe's son, a concert singer who specializes in spirituals, akin to Robeson himself. The question emerges for such an ending, who would have paid for Joe's son's education and promotion? The most likely choice is Cap'n Andy. He could have taken on the role of an impresario-manager for not just his daughter, Nola, but also for the talented son of his stalwart employees. In this interpretation, could Hammerstein perhaps be infusing Cap'n Andy with some of his own desire to help those who are oppressed?

Racial oppression is a central tenet of *Show Boat*. It is evident from the very beginning of the show, with its provocative language, dialect speak, and separation of the Black characters, who work so the whites can play. The miscegenation scene, where Julie's bi-racial identity is revealed, is rooted in race, as is the last time we see Julie, where she has become a drunk, disheveled singer alone in the world, separated from Steve.

This bifurcation according to race is not limited to the nineteenth-century world of *Show Boat*. As Robin DiAngelo (who is white) claims,

»[W]hites can only be white if someone is not white – if someone is the opposite of white. White is a false identity, an identity of false superiority. In that sense, whiteness isn't real. The dream is the »perfect world,« unpolluted by blacks. If whites are to construct this world, blacks must be separated through state violence. Yet they still must exist, for the existence of blacks provides the needed other against which whites may rise. Thus, white identity depends in particular on the projection of inferiority onto blacks and the oppression this inferior status justifies of the white collective.«⁵

This viewpoint seems to be exactly what the Sheriff demonstrates when he comes to the Cotton Blossom to confront Julie. Hammerstein hoped that views would change and puts his utopian vision on stage in the final sequence, set in the present day. In the Papermill Playhouse production from 1989, an extended production number based on the song »Why Do I Love You?« features Kim singing it as her mother, Nola, would have done, in a slightly sentimental parlor style, and then as it is performed »today«, namely in a energetic, faster-paced vein. An extended group of dances follows that showcases the white dancing chorus in the Charleston, the black dancing chorus in a shimmy, and finally an integration of the

⁴ Todd DECKER: *Show Boat: Performing Race in an American Musical*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 48.

⁵ Robin DiANGELO: *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2018, 95.

two troupes. The result is a utopian view of an integrated society where black and white, young and old, male and female, can participate in a celebratory sense of enfranchised community.

This staged post-intersection world, however idealistic it may be, is nonetheless a fantasy. The realities of 1927 were notably different. With the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, men of African descent, including Joe and the men in the Black chorus, could legally vote. Various discriminatory practices kept this from becoming a reality in the South until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Curiously, African American actors who appeared in the final scene of *Show Boat* may well have been able to vote, since they resided in New York, but the contemporary characters they played, those living in the South, would have been denied such rights. Furthermore, with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919, white women were granted the right to vote. So, when *Show Boat* ends, Nola and Parthy could vote, while Queenie could not. Queenie is both black and female, an emblem of intersectional oppression. And what about Julie, if she was still alive? Could she pass as white and vote, or would her past continue to haunt her?

When Hal Prince's much-acclaimed revival began its journey in Toronto in 1993, protests erupted over the show's inherent racist stereotypes. The production opened at the Gershwin Theatre on Broadway on October 2, 1994. Perhaps most overtly, white actors left the stage at the end of each scene, and the black actors had to physically »move« the scenery (aided by stage machinery, of course) in full sight of the audience. Such overtly racialized moments were emblematic of the production.

In a revealing reflection of intersectionality, Prince's version offers a less prudish vision of Parthy, Cap'n Andy's wife and Nola's mother, played in the revival by the inimitable Elaine Stritch (1925-2014). Parthy is often played as the antithesis of a loving mother and can all too easily receive the full stigma of near invisibility associated with mature women. In Prince's version, act 2 does not immediately begin at the Chicago World's Fair (as in the original), but rather with Parthy singing »Why Do I Love You?« as a lullaby to her infant granddaughter, Kim.⁶ By allowing Parthy to have her own independent musical number, the show's white matriarch is able to reclaim some of the humanity denied her in the orthodox version of the show. The results of the intersectional factors leading to her oppression, gender and age, are mitigated through this song, and Parthy gains both dramatic and musical agency.

⁶ In the original 1927 version, the song is a quartet performed by Nola, Gaylord, Cap'n Andy, and Parthy.

The New Moon

Hammerstein's collaborator for *The New Moon*, Sigmund Romberg (born Rosenberg) was born in Nagykanizsa on 29 July 1887, and moved to Belisce in 1888, when his father became a commercial manager for the S. H. Gutmann Company. At the time, both locales existed within the Austro-Hungarian Empire; nowadays, Nagykanizsa is in Hungary and Belišće in Croatia. The young Sigmund lived with his family in Belišće until 1897, when he went to Osijek to continue his education. He eventually made his way to Vienna and ultimately New York, where he landed employment with the famed Shubert Brothers to write for their spectacular revues, most notably the annual *Passing Show* series. With his knowledge of standard Viennese operetta tropes and nascent American musical comedy idioms, he formulated a distinctive style of American operetta in the 1920s that synthesized aspects of the two approaches. His three most popular works were *The Student Prince in Heidelberg* (1924, book and lyrics by Dorothy Donnelly), *The Desert Song* (1926, lyrics by Hammerstein, book by Hammerstein, Otto Harbach, and Frank Mandel), and *The New Moon* (1928, lyrics by Hammerstein, book by Hammerstein, Mandel, and Laurence Schwab).

The New Moon opens in the early 1790s on the estate of Monsieur Beaunoir, a French monarchist living in New Orleans.⁷ An aristocrat-cum-Republican fleeing from France, Robert Misson, arrives *in cognito* on Beaunoir's estate, finds work, falls in love with the boss's daughter, Marianne, and after a series of events, including news of the French Revolution, succeeds in finally getting Marianne to confess her love for him. As in Victor Herbert and Rida Johnson Young's *Naughty Marietta* from 1910, New Orleans is casually assumed to be under French rule, when in fact the city was under Spanish jurisdiction at the time.⁸ By including Latin-tinged numbers, Romberg and Hammerstein nod to Spanish rule, albeit anachronistically. Latin evocations in *The New Moon* include the »Tavern Song (Red Wine)«, a jota that opens the Chez Creole scene,⁹ and two tangos, »Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise«, also in the Chez Creole scene, and »Fair Rosita«, which launches the spectacular ball sequence that constitutes the act 1 finale.¹⁰

Spanish colonial influence provides the reality (in operetta terms) for the Chez Creole scene. After the opening jota, Philippe, Robert's lieutenant, offers his ode to

⁷ The exact time period of *The New Moon* poses an anomaly, one that was easily resolved. The opening night playbill states that the action takes place in 1788 and 1789, which causes continuity problems with the opening line of the verse to »One Kiss«, »In this year of seventeen ninety-two«. In the published libretto, vocal score, and later playbills, the time period is shifted to 1792 and 1793. *The New Moon* opened at the Imperial Theatre on 19 September 1928, and played 509 performances in its initial run.

⁸ New Orleans was under Spanish rule from 1763 to 1800.

⁹ Act 1, scene 3.

¹⁰ »Fair Rosita« was danced in the original production by Rosita and Ramon (Navarro), a famed specialty dance team.

the tragedy of love, »Softy, As in a Morning Sunrise«. The number, scored for solo tenor and chorus, is in the style of a *tango canción*, a particular type of tango with a lyric about the bitterness and tragedy of love popularized in the 1920s by the French Argentine tenor Carlos Gardel (1890-1935). Audiences hearing this number in *The New Moon* would have made this connection not only for the general atmosphere of the song, albeit with a more sustained and grandiose melody, but also because a tenor was singing it.

The song is exoticized in the operetta musically and dramatically. »Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise« represents the Latin Other, a racial creation distinctive from the white hegemony that dominates the operetta. First, Philippe's soaring tenor is in direct contrast to Robert's euphonious baritone, as heard in expansive, romantically exuberant numbers such as »Wanting You« and »Lover, Come Back to Me«. Robert will find normative operetta love, whereas Philippe will not. Robert's approach to the hopes and expressions of love through waltzes and ballads ultimately succeeds, whereas Philippe's experiences, expressed through a tango, lead only to heartache. Waltzes and ballads endorse the normative; tangos do not. In the world of *The New Moon*, waltzes allow happy endings; tangos do not.

Philippe's racialized musical identity and its implications become even more evident when considering the music of Alexander, Robert's valet, who, like his employer, finds love. In Alexander's case, it is with Marianne's maid, Julie. Alexander and Julie are rooted in musical comedy, with fast-paced songs such as »Gorgeous Alexander« that feature relatively short phrases and perky dance steps that result in happy endings. Because Alexander and Julie dance and sing in a white musical comedy style, they can be together. Philippe, living in the world of Latinx imaginaries, is denied such opportunities. He becomes exoticized in his number, as does his fatalistic – and therefore contradictory – view of love.

The New Moon emphasizes its ethnically French characters in general Broadway terms, through either expansive operetta or snappy musical comedy, as well as offering some tinges of Spanish influence. What is notably missing is the presence of any characters of African descent, free or enslaved. They are removed from the narrative. Appearing the year after *Show Boat*, *The New Moon's* Whiteness is unmistakable. Thus, when Robert leads the rousing march »Stouthearted Men«, Hammerstein's ideals about freedom and rights seem only to apply to whites. In 1928, the song was meant to embrace the ideals of liberty and justice, even though the stage included only white characters partaking in its quest and eventual realization. Could Hammerstein be hoping that, like him, other whites were concerned about racial injustice in America and fighting on behalf of all disenfranchised peoples, including African Americans?

When it comes race in *The New Moon*, the Latinx reality is exoticized and made to be inferior to the white paradigm through its ill-fatedness, while no African American characters are featured in the operetta. Such choices actually reflect the

general racial discourse surrounding orthodox operetta. Most characters are white, and those who are not become exoticized through the style of their music.¹¹

Sunny River

In 1941, Romberg and Hammerstein wrote another show set in New Orleans, *Sunny River*. The earnest attempt to reinvigorate the operetta aesthetic after a decade dominated by musical comedy failed miserably, for the show played only thirty-six performances in its Broadway run.¹² The operetta's action takes place in the early nineteenth century, after the city was under United States jurisdiction, and its plot revolves around a love triangle. *Sunny River's* story begins in 1806, and the young lawyer Jean Gervais loves the café singer Marie Sauvinet. The daughter of Jean's boss, Cecilie Marshall, also loves Jean and forces the singer away so that she can marry Jean herself. When Marie returns to New Orleans five years later as an accomplished operatic soprano, she and Jean realize that they are still in love. The valiant Jean remains true to Cecilie, and Marie gracefully bows out of the scene. After Jean is killed in the Battle of New Orleans, Cecilie and Marie meet and reconcile. The secondary plot concerns Cecilie's brother, Daniel, a happy go lucky man about town. Importantly, the plot is squarely rooted in an entirely white New Orleans under United States control.

Before *Sunny River* reached Broadway, namely during its out-of-town tryouts in St. Louis (5-10 June 1941) and New Haven (27-29 November 1941), Jean sang a joyful Black spiritual-style number, »Lordy«, in act 1. The song was cut before the Broadway opening. »Lordy« is a song of thanksgiving and happiness in which the white male lead expresses his joy at being in love. »Lordy« includes African American dialect lyrics, such as the opening line »De night is friendly«, consistent substitutions of »de« for »the«, and omitted final »gs« in words ending in »ing« (spoonin', callin', livin'). It is the only song written for the show to employ such a dialect-tinged treatment. Musically, it features a solo singer, Jean, with interjections from the chorus in a style not wholly unlike that of »Ol' Man River«. What happens here, in no uncertain terms, is that a white solo singer performs Blackness in song. Jean takes on the oppression associated with African Americans.

As Todd Decker has chronicled, white singers including Frank Sinatra and Gordon MacRae were giving their own interpretation to »Ol' Man River« in the early 1940s.¹³ Romberg and Hammerstein, in creating »Lordy« for the white male

¹¹ For example in Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* (1874), most of the characters represent Vienna. The Russian Prince Orlofsky and the »Hungarian« Countess perform in stylized idioms representative of their respective countries. The exoticized Other in many operettas are the Roma, who perform theatrical renditions of variously titled »Gypsy« songs and dances.

¹² *Sunny River* opened at the St. James Theatre on 4 December 1941.

¹³ Todd DECKER: *Who Should Sing »Ol' Man River«?*, 111-112, 124-137.

lead in another show set along the Mississippi River, may have been building on this practice, just as they had done previously with »Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise« and Carlos Gardel.

Romberg called the song »one of my favorites«¹⁴ and recorded it as an independent number for RCA Victor with his own orchestra, featuring mezzo-soprano Jo Cameron and the Robert Shaw Chorale, on 26 October 1950. Romberg's recorded version follows an easy listening trajectory and replaces the effusiveness of the original with a sultry wistfulness. Don Walker's arrangement begins with a muted trumpet establishing a jazzy atmosphere and features a male chorus, which sometimes interjects responses and at other times carries the melody. Cameron's performance is replete with evocative slides between pitches, both ascending and descending. The gentle upward ascent in the coda is slightly reminiscent of »My Man's Gone Now« from *Porgy and Bess*, but much more limited in scope. This is a Romberg operetta-based spiritual number performed in an easy listening fashion that features white performers and is intended for white listening audiences.

Additional reasons may lie behind Romberg and Hammerstein's choice to include an African American-tinged song in *Sunny River*. As Robin DiAngelo asserts,

»To put it bluntly, I believe that the white collective fundamentally hates blackness for what it reminds us of; that we are capable and guilty of perpetrating immeasurable harm and that our gains come through the subjugation of others.«¹⁵

This notion could help explain the choice to remove the song. Jean certainly ends up being on the verge of »perpetrating immeasurable harm« by reconnecting with Marie in the operetta. By expressing his joy at being in love though an African American-inspired idiom, he could have been hinting at this very possibility. The racial associations and possible racist interpretation by white New York audiences may have implied a dimension of Jean better left unsaid, or unsung.

The song's inclusion could also indicate that Jean is passing for White, like Julie in *Show Boat*. For how did Jean learn this song that sounds as if it comes from an African American tradition? In *Show Boat*, Julie knows a song with a similar pedigree, »Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man«, because of her mixed race heritage. Could the inclusion of this song in *Sunny River* open up similar questions for Jean? By eliminating the song, questions like these about race are excised from the story.

¹⁴ Amy ASCH (ed.): *The Complete Lyrics of Oscar Hammerstein II*, New York: Knopf, 2008, 269.

¹⁵ Robin DiANGELO: *White Fragility*, 95.

Oklahoma!

A defining work of the American musical theater, *Oklahoma!* opened at the St. James Theatre on Broadway on 31 March 1943. As much as the musical is lauded for its artistic integration of story, music, and dance and its stylistic syntheses of humor and pathos, it can also be interrogated for what it reveals about attitudes towards race and intersectional oppression in the U.S. during World War II, the time of its creation; the Cold War, through the 1955 film version; and in the twenty-first century, through several thought-provoking revivals.

The plot, briefly, consists of two love triangles. The first is between Laurey and her two suitors, the clean-cut and sunny Curly McLain and the brooding and perhaps violent Jud Fry. The second centers on Ado Annie, who confesses that she is »a girl who cain't say no«. She must decide between the cowboy Will Parker and the itinerant Persian peddler Ali Hakim. By the end of the show, Laurey chooses Curly, and Ado Annie opts for Will Parker.

The story promises an inclusive community, where those who come from different backgrounds (symbolized by farmers and cowboys) can work together toward a better future. Through the character of Ali Hakim (typically played by a white actor), it advocates the welcoming of immigrants, but only if they demonstrate core »American« values, namely capitalism, and can pass as white. For the original Broadway production, the comedian Groucho Marx was offered the part of Ali Hakim,¹⁶ though the role eventually went to the Yiddish actor Joseph Buloff, who inscribed the character as Jewish.

What the stage show – and the film it inspired – does not offer is any visual sense of racial diversity, especially concerning Native Americans, who after all had been moved to Indian Territory before it joined with the Oklahoma Territory to become the state of Oklahoma. This erasure, according to Donatella Galella, promotes a troubling »appearance of effortless racial egalitarianism.«¹⁷ Indeed, the musical ignores the disturbing historical realities that resulted in Oklahoma's statehood in 1907, namely the land runs and a failed attempt to turn Indian Territory into its own state. In the musical, white folk are the sole inhabitants of the new state so unforgettably celebrated in the title song.

But for its time (World War II for the original stage musical, the Cold War for the film adaptation), *Oklahoma!* reflected a desire for homogeneity and suggests that history, even when fictionalized, should look – and sound – like its contemporary white, middle-class audience. (In the film, the obviously white actor Eddie Albert played Ali Hakim.) So, if this same idea is applied to twenty-first century

¹⁶ Todd S. PURDUM: *Something Wonderful: Rodgers and Hammerstein's Broadway Revolution*, New York: Henry Holt, 2018, 78.

¹⁷ Donatella GALELLA: *Redefining America, Arena Stage, and Territory Folks in a Multiracial Oklahoma!*, *Theatre Journal*, 67 (2015) 2, 217.

audiences, which are more diverse, at least in some ways, than their counterparts just over seventy-five years ago, *Oklahoma!* might take on a different look. And when markers of intersectional oppression are mapped onto the narrative as a result of this approach, the musical can offer new ways to explore systemic concerns.

The Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. revived the classic musical in 2010 with a multiracial cast typical of the company that also reflected its audience makeup.¹⁸ As Gallela remarks, »Revivals allow artists and audiences to reconsider the same story within new historical contexts and new racial projects«.¹⁹ In this production, African American actor Eleasha Gamble played Laurey and E. Faye Butler, also African American, appeared as her Aunt Eller. Nicholas Rodriguez, who identifies as Mexican American, Welsh, and Cherokee,²⁰ performed the role of Curly. Both the actor and the character could be read as any of these three identities as well as mixed race, white, and/or postracial.²¹ White actors played Jud, Ado Annie, and Will. Especially telling is having Jud played by a white actor, for it then becomes a white man who tries to thwart the budding relationship between two people of color. Does Jud perhaps feel, as a white man, that he has the right to interfere in Laurey and Curly's lives because of his race and theirs, and even more so in the case of Laurey because of gender dynamics? Such casting accentuates aspects of intersectional oppression and raises new questions.

The February 2012 production at Seattle's 5th Avenue Theatre offered a reverse corollary to the Arena Stage revival by casting the African American actor Kyle Scatliffe as the violent and overly possessive Jud Fry in an otherwise white cast. In doing so, the creators, who were striving for a multiracial production in the best sense of the idea, according to several reviewers instead ended up inscribing negative stereotypes of African American men as violent and abusive. When the white Curly suggests that Jud hang himself – something that happens in the original libretto – he now, in a literal sense, would be seen as perpetrating white-on-black violence in the form of lynching, as the *Seattle Times* reviewer Nicole Brodeur noted.²²

A substantial move toward addressing intersectional oppression occurred in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's production in summer 2018. With the sanctioning of the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, who closely guards their properties, Curly is cast as female (the name, after all, is gender neutral) and Ado Annie becomes Ado Andy, who must now choose between two men, one of whom

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of this revival and its implications, see Donatella GALELLA: *Recasting Americans in a Multiracial Oklahoma!*, chapter 6 in *America in the Round: Capital, Race, and National at Washington, DC's Arena Stage*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019, 192-217.

¹⁹ Donatella GALELLA: *America in the Round: Capital, Race, and National at Washington, DC's Arena Stage*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019, 198.

²⁰ Donatella GALELLA: *America in the Round*, 208.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Nicole BROUDER: 'Oklahoma' seen in a new light, *Seattle Times*, 20 February 2012, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/oklahoma-see-in-a-new-light/> (access 18 September 2018).

is an African American Will Parker. Will is now African American and gay, two markers of intersectional oppression. Furthermore, Aunt Eller is played by, and as, a transgender woman. Jud, played by a man, now has an additional reason for his fury against Laurey's rejection – she not only rejects him for someone else, but that someone else is a woman. Thus, the heteronormative structure of *Oklahoma!* (and so many musicals of its time) is reframed, and Laurey and Curly's »almost love song«, »People Will Say We're in Love«, with lines such as »Don't throw bouquets at me«, takes on new levels of meaning. Curly is Lesbian, and Laurie is making up her mind whether she prefers men or women. Despite such modifications, the absence of any Native American characters in the text remains unsettling.

For Daniel Fish's Tony-Award winning revisionist revival that opened on Broadway at the Circle in the Square Theatre on 7 April 2019, the actors cast as the female leads bring new dimensions to their roles.²³ Rebecca Naomi Jones, who is African American, played Laurey, while Ali Stroker, as Ado Annie, became the first actor to play the role in a wheelchair and won the 2019 Tony Award for Best Featured Actress in a Musical for her performance. (Stroker was left paralyzed after a car accident when she was two.) As Stroker remarked, »I hope this revival and this specific character will remind audiences that the traditional musicals and characters we've seen for many years don't always have to look the same way as they have for the past 75 years.«²⁴ Rather than inscribing intersectionalities, these casting choices can help audiences mitigate their attitudes toward race and ableness.

Oklahoma! remains a mainstay of the American musical theatre and a show that over time continues to reflect what it means to be American. Since race and intersectional oppression are part of this definition, this particular musical becomes a vehicle through which biases and hopes for a more just future can be identified and explored.

Carousel

As in *Oklahoma!*, intersectionality is readily apparent in *Carousel*, the second collaboration of Rodgers and Hammerstein, which opened on Broadway on April 19, 1945. Based on the Hungarian author Ferenc Molnár's play *Liliom* (1909), the musical's setting is moved from Hungary to Maine around the turn of the twentieth century. The musical tells the troubling tale of Julie Jordan, a young girl who falls in love with the carnival barker Billy Bigelow, described by Michael Dale as

²³ The revival won the 2019 Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical. The production originated in 2015 at Bard SummerScape, with roots in a 2007 student staging, and played at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, New York in fall 2018.

²⁴ Leigh SCHEPS: Why the Women of *Oklahoma!* Can't Say No to this Evocative Revival, *Broadway Direct*, 21 January 2019, <https://broadwaydirect.com/why-the-women-of-oklahoma-cant-say-no-to-this-evocative-revival/> (access 22 January 2019).

»the object of every young lady's bad boy fantasy«. ²⁵ They do end up together, and it becomes obvious that Billy is a violent individual who beats his wife. He also sings the »Soliloquy«, one of the most extensive, heartfelt, and vocally demanding numbers in the entire Broadway repertory. This contradiction haunts and plagues every production of the show. Billy is killed during a robbery and returns near the end of the show to offer help to his now teenage daughter, Louise, who is being taunted by boys all too similar to Billy in his youth.

Several supporting characters offer advice, support, and dramatic mirrors to Julie. Her best friend, Carrie Pipperidge, wants a traditional marriage and family, and her cousin Nettie provides moral guidance. Notably, all the characters in *Carousel* are white, and the principals are working class. Intersectional oppression occurs in terms of social class and, for the three most important female characters, through gender.

Multiracial casting became part of the musical's performance legacy in the 1994 Broadway revival that transferred from London's National Theatre. In this evocatively lit production, Audra McDonald (as Audra Ann McDonald) played Carrie in a Tony Award-winning performance, her first of a record six Tony Awards. Opera singer Shirley Verrett played Nettie, proffering the anthem »You'll Never Walk Alone«. In these supporting roles, African American actors offer emotional aid to their dear Julie. Notions of an interracial marriage between Carrie and her beloved Enoch Snow take second seat to the tumultuous relationship between Julie and Billy.

With the casting of Audra MacDonald, intersectionality appears in the character of Carrie in terms of not only gender class but also race. Issues of masculine domination appear in »When the Children Are Asleep«, Enoch and Carrie's vision of an ideal family life. Enoch compares raising a family to building his business; he is in charge. When Carrie enters in her refrain and tries to express something she wants, Enoch all too frequently interrupts and cuts her off. She wistfully gets the final word, however. So even with this safe, secondary couple, the woman is subservient to the man. Add race to the mix, and another level of power is presented on stage.

How things can change when it isn't the safe, secondary couple that is interracial, but the primary one, and where, in this show oozing male dominance over women in truly horrific terms, an African American actor plays Billy. This is exactly what happened in the highly lauded 2018 revival that starred baritone Joshua Henry.

²⁵ Michael DALE: BWW Review: Joshua Henry Thrills in Jack O'Brien's Drastically Edited Version of Rodgers & Hammerstein's CAROUSEL, *broadwayworld.com*, 13 April 2018, https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/BWW-Review-Joshua-Henry_Thr...tically-Edited_version-of-Rodgers_Hammerstein-SCAROUSEL-20180413 (access 27 February 2019).

The production increasingly focused on Billy, as noted in the shift in *Playbill*® covers. *Playbill*® covers early in the run depict Billy and Julie with a notable amount of space between them, perhaps indicating the difficulty of their relationship. The later version shows a determined Billy alone and as a man with a mission. Barbara Schuler interprets this shift as »Let's leave her out of it.«²⁶ The relationship between Julie and Billy gives way to the character of Billy himself. Race is undeniably foregrounded and the influence of the #blacklivesmatter and #MeToo movements become impossible to ignore. When discussing racial aspects of the production, Henry remarked,

»There were things that made me uncomfortable, like the cop who corners me in the pre-»If I Loved You« scene. Is he gonna be a white cop or black cop? Those are really big deals. When we're in the bench scene together, are we really a black guy and white girl at this moment here in 1900? Is it literal?«²⁷

In another interview, Henry responded when asked if he was playing Billy as an African-American man,

»Honestly, we grapple with it from show to show, week to week. I'm playing him as me, who is an African-American man. I think this material is so great that whoever plays these roles can bring themselves to them and the story makes sense. And sometimes more things are brought to the forefront because I am African American. I'm honored and grateful to be telling this story right now. After this, I think other doors are going to be opening up for men of color because of me doing this role right now.«²⁸

In the original production, Julie's friends warn her of Billy because of his violent behavior. Around 1900 in Maine, if Julie was involved with an African American man, they would have also been warning her against an interracial relationship. In act 2's »What's the Use of Wond'rin?«, Julie expresses her love for Billy, no matter what. In the 2018 revival, as Julie proclaims her unequivocal love for Billy, Carrie and Nettie enter the stage wearing judgmental facial expressions.²⁹ Nettie joins the second refrain as a verbal expression of her disappointment in

²⁶ Barbara SCHULER: 'Carousel' Review: Glorious music, but a troubling story, *newsday.com*, 12 April 2018, <https://www.newsday.com/entertainment/theater/carousel-review-1.17984076> (access 27 February 2019).

²⁷ David GORDON: Jessie Mueller and Joshua Henry are the Yin to Each Other's Yang in *Carousel*, www.theatermania.com/california-theater/news/interview-jessie-mueller-joshua-henry-carousel_85771.html (access 27 February 2019).

²⁸ Frank SCHECK: Tonys 2018: Joshua Henry on Playing a Thorny Character in 'Carousel' Amid the #MeToo Movement, *hollywoodreporter.com*, 1 June 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/tonys-2018-joshua-henry-playing-thorny-character-billy-bigelow-carousel-1116117> (access 27 February 2019).

²⁹ Michael DALE: BWW Review: Joshua Henry Thrills in Jack O'Briend's Drastically Edited Version of Rodgers & Hammerstein's *CAROUSEL*.

Julie's point of view. This raises an important question: Do they oppose Billy because of his behavior, his race, or both?

Other changes were made to the original, including omitting the horrendously difficult line Julie tells her daughter late in act 2, »It is possible, dear, for someone to hit you – hit you hard – and not hurt at all«. Hayley Levitt says of the change,

»It's a line that should make modern audiences cringe, but with Billy dominating the narrative, it's more of a disservice to Julie's agency to bury her perspective than to let her voice it. It may be misguided, but the only thing worse than a woman verbally legitimizing abuse is a woman silently accepting it.«³⁰

Oppression is running deep.

So what else happens when Billy, a frightening violent man, is cast as an African American? Stereotypes of violent and suspicious African American men certainly play into this formation, as was also the case in the Seattle production of *Oklahoma!* that featured a black Jud Fry. Would the police officer mentioned earlier be as suspicious of Billy walking around the fairground if he was white? Here, his class and his race act in tandem for intersectional oppression. This image that appears early in the show endorses what DiAngelo wrote in 2018, the year of the production presently under discussion, about depictions of African Americans,

»Today, we depict blacks as dangerous, a portrayal that perverts the true direction of violence between whites and blacks since the founding of this country. This characterization causes aversion and hostility toward black people and feelings of superiority toward ourselves, but we cannot morally acknowledge any of these feelings. To reiterate, I am speaking here of the collective white consciousness. An individual white person may not be explicitly aware of these feelings, but I am often amazed at how quickly they surface with even the slightest challenge.«³¹

Sociologist Crystal Fleming, in *How to Be Less Stupid about Race*, relates media connections between African Americans and criminal behavior, remarking that in a 2015 study by Color of Change,

»While blacks represented 51 percent of all arrested New Yorkers, they were 75 percent of the criminal perpetrators shown on the local news.«³²

³⁰ Hayley LEVITT: Broadway Takes Another Spin Around Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*, *theatermania.com*, 12 April 2018, https://www.theatermania.com/broadway/reviews/rodgers-and-hammerstein-carousel-broadway-revival_84795.html (access 27 February 2019).

³¹ DiANGELO: *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, 91.

³² Crystal M. FLEMING: *How to Be Less Stupid about Race: On Racism, White Supremacy, and the Racial Divide*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2018, 148.

She continues by discussing ABC's representation of African Americans in network programming, relating that the study revealed that

»The network portrayed a stunning 82 percent of criminal perpetrators as black.«³³

In a racial corollary, by casting the most violent character in *Carousel* as non-White, are these violent tendencies being erased from the White experience and expunged from White behavior? Can such casting raise questions about the relationship between race and violence? To again quote Crystal Fleming,

»Millions of people go to sleep every night after being indoctrinated with police propaganda, inaccurate images of black criminality, and false portrayals of white innocence.«³⁴

She continues,

»The underrepresentation of white violence, white perpetrators, and white crime (past and present) means that generation after generation have been socialized to disassociate whiteness from negative traits.«³⁵

Casting a non-white actor as Billy undoubtedly contributes to such a disassociation between whiteness and violent behavior. No matter who plays Billy, a working class violent individual, significant problems arise. Joshua Henry expressed caution when Scott Rudin, the show's producer, approached him about taking on the role, remarking,

»My first question to him, when he approached me about it was 'How are you looking at this cast? Are you trying to use the fact that I am an African-American man to tell the story?' That wasn't his thought. He was like, 'I want to get the best people to tell the story.'«³⁶

Henry offered a truly *tour de force* performance of Billy and set a new bar for any baritone who performs the »Soliloquy,« which comes near the end of act 1. In this dramatic musical scene, where the blend of form and content are paradigmatic, Billy reflects on the news that Julie is pregnant. He is elated, worried, confused, joyous, concerned, and ultimately decides he must do what is necessary to take care of his child. It is an epiphany. In one part of the number, Billy reflects that

³³ *Ibid.* 148.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 149.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 149.

³⁶ Laura COLLINS-HUGHES: Joshua Henry Does Whatever It Takes, in 'Carousel' and as a Father, *New York Times*, 10 May 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/05/10/theater/joshua-henry-carousel-billy-bigelow.html (access 27 February 2018).

his son could become anything he wanted, including president of the United States. This remark takes on additional meaning when an actor of African ancestry plays Billy and a white actor plays Julie. In 2018, this line would have evoked the image of Barack Obama for many in the audience.³⁷ Henry's interpretation of the song took on further resonances while the show was in rehearsal, for the actor's wife gave birth to a son. Cast members remarked how the number took on a new intensity after the musical's leading man himself became a father.

In act 2, Billy sings the faux spiritual »The Highest Judge of All«. When sung by a white actor, it reflects a character from Maine evoking a Southern Black tradition, not unlike the original plan for Jean to sing »Lordy« in *Sunny River*. But when sung by a Black actor, a new level of performance authenticity emerges, despite the fact that it was crafted by two white creators.

* * *

Three subsequent Rodgers and Hammerstein shows directly address racial issues coupled with aspects of intersectional oppression: *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), and *Flower Drum Song* (1958). The complexities of intercultural discourse between Pacific Islanders or Asians on one hand and white Europeans or Americans on the other are central to the plots of these shows, all of which reflect the manifold challenges inherent when dealing with difficult issues.

Any discussions of race and intersectional oppression are going to be hard. This is no small part because of shifting definitions and revelations of the issues at hand. As Ijeoma Oluo reminds us in her book, *So You Want to Talk about Race*,

»No matter what our intentions, everything we say and do in the pursuit of justice will one day be outdated, ineffective, and yes, probably wrong. That is the way progress works. What we do now is important and helpful so long as what we do now is what is needed now. . . . And if I refuse to acknowledge and adjust to that, all I'm doing is making things harder for a generation that would really like to move things forward.«³⁸

From *Show Boat* to *Carousel*, Hammerstein infused his libretti with themes concerning race, racial hierarchies, and intersectional oppression. These notions can be explicit in shows with characters who come from multiple races, such as *Show Boat* and *The New Moon*, or remain implicit in others that reflect white hegemony, such as *Sunny River*, *Oklahoma!*, and *Carousel*. In recent revivals of *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*, directors have made the implicit explicit by giving characters

³⁷ The production included another Obama connection. At the concert that took place at the Lincoln Memorial to celebrate Obama's first inauguration in 2008, the opera singer Renee Fleming performed »You'll Never Walk Alone«. She sang the same song, this time as Nellie, in the 2018 revival.

³⁸ Ijeoma OLUO: *So You Want to Talk about Race*, New York: Seal Press, 2018, 187.

attributes associated with some type of oppression, either race on its own or through intersectional means.

When it comes to looking at musicals through various lenses, important recent studies have addressed, separately, issues of gender and race.³⁹ When viewing these and other issues in tandem, the resulting intersectionalities reveal how oppression is created and performed in the American musical theatre. By being cognizant of such constructions and their implications, audience members can practice their own social awareness and recognize that intersectional oppression is not limited to the fictional world of the musical but surrounds us in our everyday lives. While Hammerstein and his recent interpreters might not offer direct and viable solutions as to how to deal with this dilemma, they most certainly make its presence known.

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³⁹ These include Stacy WOLF: *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; Warren HOFFMAN: *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014; and Sarah WHITFIELD (ed.): *Reframing the Musical: Race, Culture and Identity*, London: Red Globe Press, 2019.

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Sažetak

OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN II. I PRIKAZIVANJE RASE I INTERSEKCIJSKE DISKRIMINACIJE U AMERIČKIM MJUZIKLIMA OD *SHOW BOAT* (1927) DO *CAROUSEL* (1945)

Oscar Hammerstein II. (1895-1960), s raznim je suradnicima dotaknuo temu rase i interseksijske diskriminacije (ovdje definiranih kao višestrukih značajki koje mogu pridonijeti ugnjetavanju bilo društveno ili pojedinačno, a mogu uključivati čimbenike kao što su rasa, dob, spol i društvena klasa) u mnogim svojim djelima. Ovaj tekst propitkuje izvedbe u mjuziklima *Show Boat* (1927, glazba Jeroma Kerna), *The New Moon* (1928, glazba Sigmunda Romberga), *Sunny River* (1941, Rombergova glazba), *Oklahoma!* (1943, glazba Richarda Rodgersa) i *Carousel* (1945, Rodgersova glazba) kao i odabranim ponovnim postavljanjima u 21. stoljeću mjuzikla *Oklahoma!* i *Carousel*. U svakoj izvedbi bjelačka je hegemonija postavljena

kao norma, a obojenost, ako se javlja, predstavlja neku vrstu razlike koja je podložnički postavljena prema bjelačkoj normi. Pojedini likovi koji su predmet ovoga teksta uključuju Queenie, Joes, Magnoliju i Julie u mjuziklu *Show Boat*; Filipa i Roberta u djelu *The New Moon*; Jean u *Sunny River*; Julie Jordan, Billyja Bigelowa, Carie Phipperidge i Enocha Snowa u *Carouselu*; te Curly, Laurey, Juda Fryja, Ado Annie i Willa Parkera u *Oklahomi!* Glazbeno evociranje afričko-američkog spirituala («Lordy» i «The Highest Judge of All») i tanga («Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise») igraju važne uloge rase u ovim predstavama. Višerasne postavbe u 21. stoljeću izazivaju suvremena pitanja o rasi i intersekcijskoj diskriminaciji. Uočljivi primjeri uključuju afroameričke glumce koji igraju likove s nasilnim sklonostima, uključujući Juda Fryja u produkciji *Oklahoma!* iz 2012. u Seattleu i Billyja Bigelowa u obnovljenoj predstavi *Carousela* na Broadwayu 2018. S druge strane, postavljanje bijelca u ulozi Juda Fryja nasuprot obojenim glumcima u ulogama Curlyja i Laurey, što je bio slučaj u Washingtonu 2012. (Arena Stage), izaziva neka druga pitanja o bjelačkom nasilju prema obojenima. Multikulturalna postava stavlja takva pitanja, uključujući negativne stereotipe, u prvi plan i potiče svijest o problemu rase i intersekcijske diskriminacije.