

# What's the Use of Wondering if He's Good or Bad?: *Carousel* and the Presentation of Domestic Violence in Musicals.

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## ABSTRACT

The analysis of the 1956 film *Carousel* (Dir. Henry King), which was based on the 1945 play by Rodgers and Hammerstein, provides a suitable example of a musical with explicit allusions to male physical aggression over two women: the wife and the daughter. The issue of domestic violence appears, thus, in a film genre in which serious topics such as these are rarely present. The film provides an opportunity to study how the expectations and the conventions brought up by this genre are capable of shaping and transforming the presentation of Domestic Violence. Because the audience *had to* sympathise with the protagonists, the plot was arranged to fulfil the conventional pattern of a romantic story inducing audiences forget about the dark themes that are being portrayed on screen.

**Key words:** Domestic violence, film, musical, cultural studies.

¿De qué sirve preocuparse por si es bueno o malo?: *Carrusel* y la presentación de la violencia doméstica en los musicales.

## RESUMEN

La película *Carrusel* (dirigida por Henry King en 1956 y basada en la obra de Rodgers y Hammerstein de 1945), nos ofrece un gran ejemplo de un musical que realiza alusiones explícitas a las agresiones que ejerce el protagonista masculino sobre su esposa y su hija. El tema de la violencia doméstica aparece así en un género fílmico en el que este tipo de tratamientos rara vez están presentes. Igualmente interesante es el estudio de cómo las expectativas y las convenciones creadas por el género son capaces de perfilar y transformar el modo en el que la violencia doméstica es presentada. Dado que la audiencia *debía* simpatizar con los protagonistas, la trama fue manipulada de forma que encajara dentro del patrón tradicional del musical romántico. De esta forma, el público podía olvidar los temas más oscuros que se presentaban en pantalla.

**Palabras clave:** Violencia doméstica, película, musical, estudios culturales.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When we talk about “the American Musical<sup>1</sup>”, we associate this type of genre with a product that shows certain specificities. Classical musicals usually are comedy films that are mainly concerned with entertaining the audience through spectacular musical numbers and intense love stories. Because of their “entertaining” nature, their study has been neglected within the field of film studies for decades. The first attempt to introduce the genre into the academic sphere was carried out during the 1980s. At that time, musicals began to be analysed from the perspective of their historical evolution and scholars focused on the study of their genre patterns and conventions. In recent years, a feminist approach has also been applied to their revision. Works such as *The Musical: Race, Gender and Performance*,<sup>2</sup> or *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*,<sup>3</sup> are excellent examples of the new cultural tendencies that seem to be revisiting musical plays and films from the perspective provided by gender studies. At the same time, there has been a proliferation in studies regarding the presentation of domestic violence in literature, cinema, and theatre, but these critiques seems to have eluded the musical genre. *Carousel* (directed by Henry King in 1956) is a musical film that makes an explicit allusion to domestic violence, although this aspect has not yet been analysed. Thus, the study of *Carousel* may show that the musical genre can offer dramatic situations even before analysis of *West Side Story*, the landmark of the “tragic musical”, appearing in 1961. This article studies the theme of domestic violence in the film *Carousel*. It is taken as an example that presents a clear ideology underlying the arrangement of its main themes.

Although the most popular and thorough study on musical genre to date has been carried out by Altman in his work *The American Film Musical*, his is a structuralist approach that relies too much on the formal characteristics of films. Cultural studies began to develop after Altman published his work, so although he refers to the cultural system in which musical *films*<sup>4</sup> were produced, he bases his theories mainly on the patterns and conventions that characterize the genre.

Musicals have always been closely related to American history and society. As Altman himself (1987: 1) pointed out, “to understand the musical is to understand the

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<sup>1</sup> We will mainly refer to American musical *films* or the so-called “Hollywood musical”, which has different conventions and patterns than the musical plays that were produced on Broadway’s theatres.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Susan (2005): *The Musical: Race, Gender and Performance*. London: Wallflower.

<sup>3</sup> Wolf, Stacy (2011): *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> It is also important to point out that Altman never indexes the films he analyses to the theatrical plays on which they were based. This is a fact that cannot be neglected when studying musicals from a *cultural* perspective.

overall cultural system in which it develops and makes its meaning.” Genres are often regarded as whims of a particular society at a specific historical moment, and this is the reason why we consider that cultural studies provide the most suitable approach for the analysis of this film, since there is a clear relationship between the text and the cultural system that produces it. As Benschoff and Griffin (2004: 14-15). Argue:

“In recent decades, scholars in various disciplines (sociology, political science, literature, communications, history, media studies) have begun to study and theorize concepts and issues surrounding culture and ideology. This interdisciplinary research has coalesced under the term cultural studies. As its theorists come from such different backgrounds, cultural studies as a field of academic inquiry has consistently focused on multiple aspects of how culture works (and needs to be analyzed), but one of the basic foundations for this new discipline has been that every cultural artifact –book, movie, music video, song, billboard, joke, slang term, earring, etc. –is an expression of the culture that produces it. Every cultural artifact is thus a text that conveys information, carrying the ideological message of both its authors and the culture that produced it. As a result, many cultural studies scholars are interested in how media texts express a view of the world, how these expressions create ideological effects, and how the users of such texts make meaning from them”.

It would be important, therefore, to first establish the relationship between *Carousel* and the historical moment in which it appeared, in order to later pay attention to the conventions that governed the musical genre at that time, both in theatre and in cinema.

## 2. CAROUSEL: MUSICALS IN THE 1950S

The film was an adaptation of the musical play *Carousel* (1945), by Rodgers and Hammerstein, based on *Liliom* (1909), a drama written by the Hungarian author Ferenc Molnár. The film presents the story of Billy Bigelow, a carousel barker who marries Julie Jordan, an innocent and naïve young woman who works at a mill. When they both end up without jobs, they have to live off of Julie's cousin Nettie. When Julie tells Billy that she's pregnant, he tries to steal some money in order to support his unborn child. As a consequence, he dies in an accident and is sent to the “stars”, some kind of purgatory, a place somewhere between Earth and Heaven. The whole film is presented as a flashback, as the Starkeeper asked Billy to tell the story of his life so that he might obtain permission to go back to Earth for a day and help his kinfolk. When he finally comes back to Earth, he meets his daughter Louise, who is now fifteen years old, and is very unhappy because she has been having problems with the rest of the kids due to her father's reputation as a thief and a wife-beater.

Even though this study focuses on the analysis of the representation of domestic violence in the film, the analysis would not be complete without a brief summary of its process of adaptation. The first step was taken by Rodgers and Hammerstein during the decade of the 1940s, when they tried to adapt the bitter and dark drama *Liliom* into the more colorful musical *Carousel*. Although this team is very well-known for including transgressive themes in their musicals –such as suicide, domestic violence, racism, or even Nazism, they confronted a difficult task when they tried to adapt the dramatic elements of *Liliom*, including the suicide of the main character. As Ann Sears (2008: 155) explains:

“They thought that the Hungarian setting and the bitterness of the second act presented insoluble difficulties.... [which] was overcome by moving the play to the coast of Maine in 1873, turning the leading lady into a wife rather than a mistress, and finding a more acceptable approach to the ending”.

But Rodgers and Hammerstein kept many of the original dialogues and the main themes of the play, including the episodes of domestic violence. The final product presented a “sanitized” version of the story, but it also maintained the dark tone and atmosphere that characterized Molnár’s work. On the one hand, the play followed the conventions of the traditional Broadway musicals, presenting a very romantic and intense love story through the lyrics and the music of its soundtrack. But, on the other hand, the plot included the troublesome relationship between the protagonists, something that was quite innovative at the time but that was starting to become a new tendency in the Postwar musical theatre. Of course, and as Aronson explains, musicals at that time could become darker regarding their content if at the same time they maintained the audience’s belief that these plays were mainly comedies through the soundtrack:

Since musicals were more widely known through the cast recordings than the actual production, for many people the musical was tantamount to its score or, more precisely, its cast album; the book became secondary at best and a show’s themes and ideas could become divorced from its music if the songs did not directly address them (Aronson, 2000: 98).

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s soundtrack was considered one of their best and finest works. As Sears points out, “although some critics found the second act too slow and the ending peculiar, the opening reviews were generally enthusiastic” (Sears, 2008: 156).

Looking for material that could become an easy hit on screen, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox released the film version of *Carousel* in 1956. During this decade

—that has been known as both the zenith and the downfall of the musical genre, musicals tried to be more socially concerned in order to appeal to the audience. But at the same time, and since the conventions of this genre were so fixed, producers did not want to risk their potential audience by failing to fulfil their expectations. The film industry's financial problems also conditioned some of the decisions taken by directors, writers, and producers. At that time the censorship office, that is to say, the Breen Office, was so powerful that producers had to follow its orders very carefully so they would not put their investments at risk.

Regarding the issue of marriage, musicals and comedies always favoured a conservative view of gender roles, a fact that acquired greater relevance during this decade. The portrayal of the “American family” was at the core of the American Dream, and it stood as a symbol of democracy and freedom in the nation. The famous Kitchen Debate (July 24, 1959) showed Vice President Nixon's stand on democracy, consumerism, and the American family among other topics. As Tyler May (2008: 19-20) explained:

“For Nixon, American superiority rested on the ideal of the suburban home, complete with modern appliances and distinct gender roles for family members. He proclaimed that the ‘model’ home, with a male breadwinner and a full-time female homemaker, adorned with a wide array of consumer goods, represented the essence of American freedom”.

What is surprising, nonetheless, is the fact that it was precisely in the 1950s when the musical films dared to confront the realm of marriage “so long shunned by the genre” (Altman, 1987: 268). Although many films showed different sorts of gender problems, *Carousel* was the only one that tackled the issue of domestic violence so openly. As will be seen in the following section, the interest we may have in the analysis of this film does not rely solely on the representation of this type of social disease, but also on the transformation of its presentation due to the conventions marked by the genre.

### **3. CAROUSEL AND THE PRESENTATION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.**

Firstly, it is necessary to explain why the term domestic violence is used here instead of a more common term nowadays, such as that of “gender” violence. The main reason rests on the “domestic” concept, which refers to the private, familiar

sphere. Since the term ‘domestic violence’ first appeared in the 1970s, it is clear that it did not exist when *Carousel* was produced, but neither did a social understanding of this type of abuse. As Ooms (2006: 2), states, “rape and domestic violence were still treated as personal rather than social problems” –a situation we can actually see in the characters of the film *Carousel*. Although they all condemn Billy for hitting Julie, none of them takes action against him, and the scenes where he either hits his wife or his daughter, take place in their house, in the domestic sphere where nobody can interfere.

As has been already stated, one of the reasons that made the presentation of domestic violence in a musical possible was the search for serious themes and the questioning of marriage during the 1950s. Nevertheless, one cannot forget that this was a highly traditional decade, when the Motion Pictures Production Code was still enforced at the Breen Office. The film’s treatment of marriage and of domestic violence puts forth a crucial dilemma: on the one hand, one of the Code’s premises stated that “the sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld” (Hayes, 2009) but, on the other hand, it also defended the idea that violence –of all kinds– had to be chastened. Billy, the perpetrator of the aggression, is punished with death both in the play and in the film. But while the play presents the protagonist as a clear antihero, a few changes were made during the adaptation from stage to screen, which transformed the protagonist of the film version into a more sympathetic figure for the audience. For example, while in the play he has to help his daughter in order to be redeemed, in the film he is granted his wish of going back to the Earth for a day in exchange for nothing.

In the original text *Liliom*, the theme of domestic violence was much more present than in any of the musical adaptations. All characters spoke their minds against the protagonist’s abuses, even Julie herself, the victim of her husband’s anger. When he commits suicide Julie cries over his death, although she also reproaches his behavior: “It was wicked of you to hit me... on the breast and on the head and face... but you’re gone now. (*She sits next to him and touches his face.*) You treated me badly; that was wicked of you. But sleep peacefully, Liliom<sup>5</sup>... you bad, bad boy, you. I love you.” (Molnár, 1999: 53). The scene when the audience hears about Billy’s exerting violence over Julie for the first time presented few but crucial differences with the original work by Molnár. In *Liliom*, it is Julie herself who confesses Liliom’s abuses and somehow condemns them. In the musical version, nonetheless, the authors introduced the character of cousin Nettie:

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<sup>5</sup> Liliom is the nickname of the protagonist. His original name was Andreas Zavoczki, but Rodgers and Hammerstein changed his name to Billy Bigelow for the play *Carousel*. The name of the female protagonist, Julie, was kept as in the original play, although her last name –Zeller– was also changed since it was too Hungarian.

“Nettie: You know something else, Carrie? Last Monday, he hit her.

Julie: Nettie!

Carrie: Did you hit him back?

Julie: Oh, no!

Carrie: Why, I would've. I'd leave him.

Julie: You don't understand, Carrie. You see, he's unhappy because he ain't working. That's why he hit me Monday.

Nettie: Fine reason for hitting you. Beats his wife because he ain't working”  
(*Carousel*, 1956).

With the new arrangement of this scene, the film establishes a greater contrast between the female leading character and all the other women surrounding her. Julie, who is the victim of her husband's violent nature, endures and even justifies his actions due to his frustration at being unemployed. The opposite attitudes of her friend, Carrie, and her cousin, Nettie, provide the positioning of two women who are clearly against female passivity and victimization, as well as against wife-beaters. Perhaps the representation of these contrasting attitudes could be seen as an attempt on the part of the authors to approach a more dramatic perspective on the theme of domestic violence. They do not attack marriage *per se*, but they do speak against Billy's behavior. Nonetheless, this dialogue constitutes the only attack on violence that is made explicit in the film.

Julie can be seen as the prototypically abused woman. She loves her husband above all, and forgives his rough attitude towards her and his beatings. She states her mind in her song “What's the use of wondering,” which was criticized by the Women's Liberation Movement, who were “one hundred percent against it” (Jones, 2004). These are some of its verses:

“Oh, what's the use of wond'ring/ If he's good or if he's bad?/ He's your feller and you love him, That's all there is to that./ Common sense may tell you/ That the ending will be sad,/ And now's the time to break and run away./ But what's the use of wond'ring/ If the ending will be sad?/ He's your feller and you love him,/ There's nothing more to say” (*Carousel*, 1956).

The examples of violence that appear in the film are very real and easy to identify by the audience. Even if there was not a social understanding or an academic definition of the term, the public was able to understand the situation because it reproduces one of the most common forms of domestic violence that might take place between a couple. According to some general definitions of domestic violence, what is reproduced in *Carousel* is an example of the so-called situational couple violence. Ooms defines it as “the most common form of intimate partner violence. It is the sort of violence that enters a relationship when a disagreement that turns into an angry argument escalates into violence” (Ooms, 2006: 3). When the Starkeeper tries to understand Billy's

relationship with Julie, he confesses his reasons for beating her and explains himself in the following terms:

“Billy: I... I couldn't get work. And I... I couldn't bear to see her... to see her...  
 Starkeeper: You couldn't bear to see her cry. Why don't you come right out and say it.  
 Why are you afraid to use the right word? Why are you ashamed you loved Julie?  
 Billy: I ain't ashamed of anything.  
 Starkeeper: Then why did you beat her?  
 Billy: I didn't beat her. I hit her.  
 Starkeeper: why?  
 Billy: well, we'd argue. She'd say this, I'd say that... and she'd be right. So I hit her.  
 Starkeeper: Are you sorry you hit her?  
 Billy: I ain't sorry for anything (*Carousel*, 1956).

It is important to notice that this scene takes place after Billy's death, and therefore, after the audience has witnessed his eight-minute soliloquy about how he is going to take care of his wife and his unborn child. Although the audience and the critics saw this soliloquy as a turning point in his life, it might be that his final words in the aforementioned scene lead us think otherwise, and the proof appears when he later hits his daughter Louise during their first meeting.

The reasons behind his abuse could be attributed not only to economic motifs, but also to an uncontrollable wrath and a sense of social inferiority on the part of Billy. He felt important being a carnival barker, a job that mainly consisted of seducing women and depending on his physical attributes. He had never met a woman like Julie before, and was not “cut for a respectable married man” (*Carousel*, 1956) as Mrs. Mullin tells him later. His sense of inferiority is somehow inherited by his daughter Louise, who is cast out from the social events of her community, and she reacts against her neighbors almost as violently as her father had done. Billy's abuses are attributed; perhaps, to his untamed nature by making Louise repeat some of his actions and gestures. They are both outcasts in the same community; wild animals that are confined in a cage and that are unable to control their own strength.

Julie was the only member of the community<sup>6</sup> who loved Billy despite his wild nature. His daughter Louise has yet to learn how to survive with the temper that she has inherited from her father, and has to try to transform it into love. Or, at least, that is what the final scene seems to convey. In this final scene, after Billy has slapped his daughter, there is a very controversial dialogue between mother and child. The two women are talking about Billy's physical aggressions, but neither of them seems to feel abused. On the contrary, they describe Billy's acts as proofs of love:

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<sup>6</sup> Besides Mrs. Mullin, who cannot be considered as a “full time” member of the community since she is the owner of the carousel. She is, thus, associated with the nightlife and the world of the carnival.

“Louise: There was a strange man here, Mother... and he hit me, hard. I heard the sound of it, Mother. But it didn't hurt. It didn't hurt at all. It was just as if he'd kissed my hand.

Julie: Go into the house, Louise.

Louise: What's happened, Mother? Don't you believe me?

Julie: I believe you.

Louise: Then why don't you tell me why you're acting so funny.

Julie: Oh, it's nothing, darling.

Louise: But is it possible, Mother, for someone to hit you hard like that, real loud and hard, and not hurt you at all?

Julie: It is possible, dear... for someone to hit you, hit you hard, and it not hurt at all” (*Carousel*, 1956).

This scene has been the topic of much controversy. As actress Shirley Jones admitted in an interview, people gasped, outraged, during Julie's final statement. Nevertheless, there are people –like Jones herself– who defend the idea that this dialogue is nothing but metaphorical.

#### 4.CONCLUSIONS

*Carousel* has been read by generations as an “unconventional” love story, but neither the critics nor the audience ever regarded the issue of domestic violence as a primary concern in the plot. The playwright, lyricist and composer Stephen Sondheim defines it as a story in which “love conquers death” (*Broadway: the American musical*, 2004), and the critic Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen justifies the existence of violence in the following terms:

“Billy fundamentally loves Julie. His violence is somehow permissible or at least bearable. A contemporary audience will recognize this as a classic case of domestic violence but in 1945 the connection would have been more opaque. This is not to suggest that these problems did not exist, but simply that our attitudes toward them have” (Lundskaer-Nielsen, 2008: 123).

Despite what Lundskaer-Nielsen argues, I think that since this film has its roots in a play, the “connection” is not as opaque as she argues but, instead, the conventions of the genre disguise the themes of the film and make the audience overlook the social criticism that is being presented on screen. It is important to remember that in the 1950s people were not used to seeing taboo themes such as this so bluntly presented in a musical, not to mention the fact that they were not used to thinking about this type of violence as something that could be exposed outside the privacy of the domestic sphere. In any case, it is undeniable that *Carousel* made one first step towards a more mature musical genre, something that would be finally achieved years later with the production of tragic musicals such as *West Side Story*.

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