

THEATRE MUSIC

BY RICHARD RODGERS

THE daughter of a gent, who shall be nameless but who is the author of this article, at the age of four was normally familiar with Prokofieff's *Peter and the Wolf* recordings. One day the child's father sat at his desk working and listening vaguely to Station WQXR. The recording of a Prokofieff symphony was being broadcast at the moment the child passed the open door. The father asked the child how she liked the music. She said, "Fine." He then asked her if it reminded her of anything. She listened for a second or two and said with a good deal of confidence, "Yes, *Peter and the Wolf*."

If all the above sounds like baby talk, I should like to submit that it has important meaning in so far as public taste is concerned. Certainly if a four-year-old child can be discerning enough to recognize the similarity of style in two compositions by a Russian composer, there is no reason on earth why the adult listener cannot be offered better musical fare than that to which he has been accustomed.

The old cry of the commercial music publisher is that the public will

not accept anything which does not come readily to it. I know one tremendously successful publisher of popular songs who once said to me that the only safe way to begin the melody of a refrain was on the first note of the bar, in four-quarter time, in the tonic chord and with the first note of the scale. This sort of incredible thinking is indulged in not only by publishers but by writers, producers, and sometimes even critics.

That there is no validity in this attitude can be proved by a ridiculously large number of exceptions, and my own feeling is that there is only one question that can be asked of any piece of music — "Is it good to listen to?" I strongly suspect that the limitations of any art form are set by its creators and not by the public, and I can think of no field in which this viewpoint can be better substantiated than the musical theatre, with the probable exception of the screen. Too often have I heard the producer say in all his expensive smugness, "If I don't understand it, neither will the public." What he doesn't understand is that the public is a lot smarter than he

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is, or I am, for that matter. Its taste is enormously catholic and in its choice of entertainment it is precise and knowing. To the public *Parsifal* is good and *Mexican Hayride* is good. The range is large indeed and the entertainment need only be good of its kind to attract hordes of people. The qualitative disparity between *Tobacco Road* and *Othello* is enormous, yet both have done very well and most of us have been capable of enjoying one as much as the other.

Modesty does not prevent my pointing to *Oklahoma!* to prove my case as I do not intend to discuss the intrinsic quality, or lack of it, of the music. Certainly the universality of the play's appeal cannot be doubted, but what makes it noteworthy to my mind is the fact that its appeal comes from its "art" qualities and its unwillingness to compromise with commerce. The result is a thoroughly integrated evening in the theatre. The scenery looks the way the music sounds and the clothes look as though they belonged to the characters rather than the management. The public does not know "why" this is, nor is it likely to find appropriate words for it. The audience simply knows the show makes it "feel good" and it tells its friends to buy tickets.

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I had a rather bitter argument with a producer several years ago. I felt that I needed a certain number of men in the orchestra to play my score.

With an eye fixed firmly on his budget, he offered me what was an obvious rationalization. He said, "Aw, the audience won't know whether you have twenty-four or twenty-six men in the pit." That was true, but it was also untrue. Mathematically, he made good sense, but he was dead wrong in discounting the aural perception of the audience. Naturally, the customer will not say, "Ah hah! Only twenty-four men." He is likely to say, however, "My, my! Not a very interesting score, is it?"

When we began to prepare *Oklahoma!* for production I thought long and hard about the orchestra problem. In my past few shows I had yielded to the demands of fast, furious "hoofing" on the stage and had filled the pit with saxophones and brass. Against this metallic battery were opposed four frustrated fiddles. Now, with *Oklahoma!*, I felt the time had come to be radical, so I did an outrageous thing. I went back to the orchestra of grandfather's day. That meant cutting out the saxophones, reducing the brass to a minimum, enlarging the string section to sixteen, and replacing the piano with a harp. Point to be made: the man in E 112 at *Oklahoma!* has no technical knowledge whatsoever about orchestras, but he has said to me repeatedly, "What is that lovely sound the orchestra makes?" That question becomes my answer and I must have been artistically (forgive the word) successful in giving the play its appropriate orchestral accompaniment.

If my confidence in the responsive-

ness and perception of the entertainment public is justified, it ought to lead us somewhere, and I think it does. Certainly there is a great need for a form of musical theatre more serious in its intent and more lasting in its nature than that to which we have been accustomed. You will ask me to name it, and I will not say "opera," though I do not find the word frightening despite the fact that it connotes the Metropolitan to me, with its long-haired posturings and continental strutting. It could be a creation of our own. It could be an extension of our musical comedy (perhaps our greatest contribution to the theatre) into a field where music has emotion as well as rhythm, where lyrics become poetry, where design has artistry, and where dancing has meaning and is not a succession of hammer blows on a wooden stage. The choice of subject matter would become infinitely wider. One could sing of tragedy or a love that had an emotional depth not to be expressed adequately by "Let's Steal a Kiss in the Moonlight."

The temptation to be "arty" would be there, of course, but not to the extent in which we find it among the so-called seriously contrived works. The European opera form is not comfortable for us, with the result that each attempt thus far has been a sorry imitation and an ultimate failure. We must, I feel, take the form which we have created and with which we are therefore at home and build up from it, rather than down from something which is unelastic and moribund.

Our public loves its musical comedy. It will love it more as it expresses more, as it tells a better story, sings a better refrain, and presents a better picture to the eye.

The Oscar Hammerstein, 2nd — Billy Rose production of *Carmen Jones* does all these things. The old-fashioned, somewhat boring recitativé has been replaced by good dialogue which makes the audience laugh and holds its attention. Actually, the piece would have achieved the goal which I would like to see set, if it were not for one rather important item. The music is not native. It is beautiful to an intense degree, but the inflection is Latin-Gallic. To offset this, Mr. Hammerstein has written lyrics that are creative, witty, and warm, and completely indigenous to the American scene. Had the music been invested with the same American personality, I feel that something close to perfection would have been reached. Again, if you will agree with this critical estimate of the "art" qualities of *Carmen Jones* it might be advisable to examine the box office statement. I have before me the current issue of *Variety*, the theatrical trade magazine. It credits *Carmen Jones*, for its thirty-second week, with a gross of slightly under \$25,000. All that money for "art"? No, all that money for a fine, lush evening in the theatre, an evening made enjoyable by the beauty of a production and the intelligence of its creators.

In its search for escape through entertainment, one would naturally

expect a country at war to turn to the "leg" shows, with their jokes and light-minded stories. That this sort of spectacle has prospered cannot be denied, but there is another side to the picture. Two important ballet companies have been doing enormously well both on tour and in New York. The Strauss *Rosalinda* is turning them away all over the country, and *The Merry Widow* is still playing right merrily around the country. Add to these pieces *Carmen Jones* and two

companies of *Oklahoma!* and it becomes apparent that the American public is paying literally millions to see and hear quite serious projects in its theatres.

I conclude from all this that the public is not only willing but anxious to go along with us in the theatre in our search for better things, and that if we continue that search with honesty and feeling the day may not be far off when an American art form of its own will have been evolved.



PORTRAIT OF AN OLD WOMAN

BY ETHEL BARNETT DE VITO

SHE does not mind dimmed sound and sight:
Her world of ebbing warmth and light
Knowing how much is better blurred
And best unsaid and best unheard.

She does not mind the blanks that stay
Erasing last week, yesterday
Knowing how she recalls the glow
Of more than fifty years ago.

She does not grieve the lessened view,
The narrowed scope of things to do
Knowing her task as scarce begun:
So much remembering to be done —

Her memories of crowded hours
Are like rare fragile glass-blown flowers
And she the last for knowing, seeing
The way to blow them into being —