

South Pacific Study Guide

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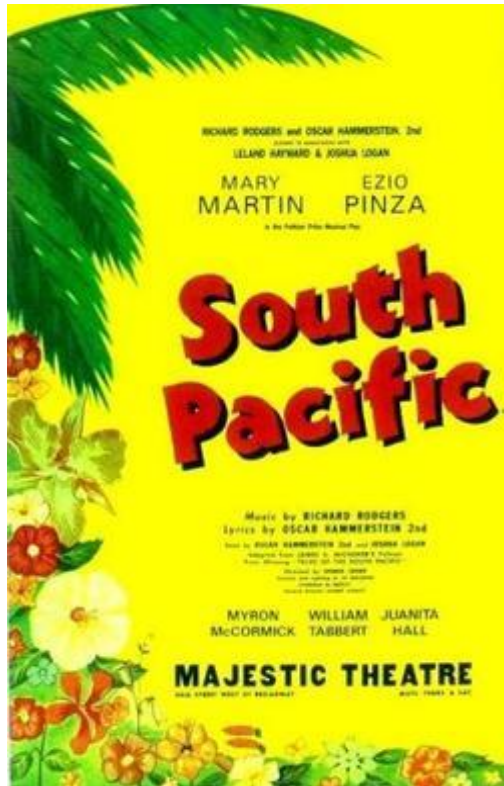


Figure 1: Show Poster: 1949's *South Pacific*

South Pacific: A Fundamental Musical

1949's *South Pacific* by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II was revolutionary in both its social progressivity and theatrical innovation for its time. *South Pacific* is based on the book *Tales of the South Pacific* by James A. Michener. Michener's book is a Pulitzer-Prize winning collection of stories based on his actual experience as a Lieutenant Commander with the United States Navy while stationed in the island country of Vanuatu. His book was adapted into the musical and, later, the 1958 feature film *South Pacific* (primarily filmed on Hawaii's island of Kauai).

Intent of South Pacific

The intent of *South Pacific* is to pose a question to its audience: What do YOU do when YOU are confronted with your own cultural and racial

biases? More so, is there a capacity for change? In its time, Rodgers and Hammerstein II trailblazed a creation that put prejudice at the forefront of society; this musical is a direct statement against racial bigotry. Seventy years later, the intent of *South Pacific* remains. As with innumerable productions of a similar time, innate stereotypical assumptions exist within the production's history. Producing *South Pacific* in 2021 has been an opportunity to progressively consider from an artful lens, what if Rodgers and Hammerstein II created *South Pacific* in 2021? Based on their provocative stance against prejudice and their forward-thinking dispositions (as reflected in their plethora of innovative works), it could easily be argued that the character and cultural Polynesian, Tonkinese, and South Pacific indigenous peoples portrayals weren't reverent or accurate; more so, Rodgers and Hammerstein II would recognize this in 2021. We've created a *South Pacific* that serves to erase orientalism and modernize the relationship of two of its main character's: Liat and Lt. Joseph Cable.

What is Orientalism?

Orientalism is the disposition that stereotypically characterizes people of Asian descent as exotic, backward, caricatures, distorted, farcical, uncivilized, degenerate, unintelligent, primitive, savage, and even dangerous. Orientalism often pits Asians as make-believe, invalidating their existence. Orientalism is often overlooked in the contemporary approach to combating prejudice, particularly from the perspective of a Westerner. Orientalism is often seen in American film and stage.

In the mid-19th century, socio-economic changes were rapid in the United States and a large increase in immigrants from Europe and Asia posed a threat to white Americans. Fear of people with Asian descent rapidly increased as the white labor-force demographic felt their economic-security was threatened.

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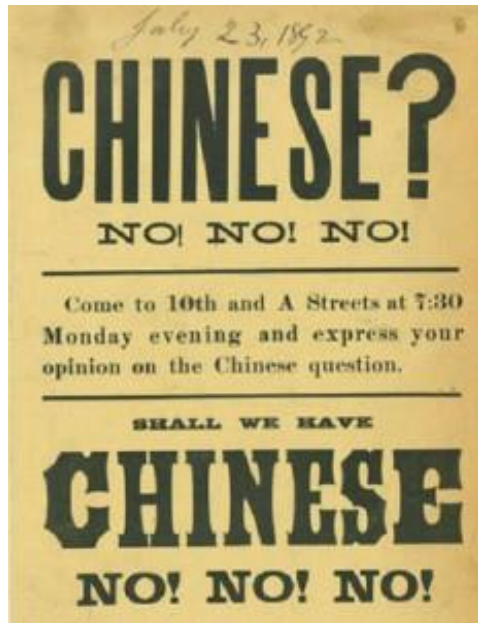


Figure 2: 1892 Anti-Asian Propaganda Poster

This continued for almost 100 years; this era ever-increasingly propelled Asian-negativity, exclusivity, and vigorously led to the misrepresentation of Asian cultures in film and on stage.

The Great Depression of the 1930's brought a new wave of Asian immigrants taking a stand to admonish the common belief that people of Asian descent were "unassimilable" and that the stereotypes were wrong and unfair; Asian immigrants began engaging politically and as the Great War approached, the way Americans thought of Asian people began to shift slightly. The bombing of Pearl Harbor took their momentum several steps back.



Figure 3: Attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7th, 1941

Fear and hatred toward Japanese people were fierce. Fearing they would lose China as an ally, the

US repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in December of 1943. The overall opinion of Asian-Americans continued to improve as a result. President Roosevelt publicly stated, "We regard China not only as a partner in waging war but that we shall regard her as a partner in days of peace". Asian-Americans played an important part in helping the allied forces win the war. While discrimination was certainly still alive, the post-World War II era saw a distinct change in perception of people with Asian-descent.

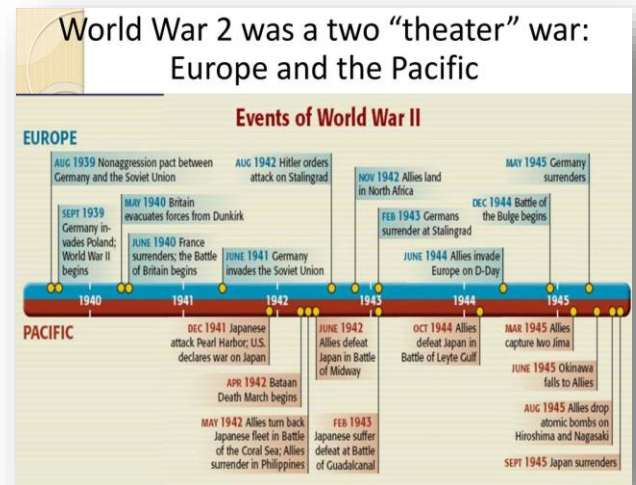


Figure 4: WW2: a two theater war timeline

Rodgers and Hammerstein II dedicated three musicals to the East and/or its denizens: the Pacific Islands in *South Pacific* (1949), Siam/Thailand in *The King and I* (1951), and San Francisco's Chinatown in *Flower Drum Song* (1958). While each of these works have inherent misrepresentations of Asian people, it must be noted that their focus on Asian culture was extremely progressive for its time and was a powerful attempt to modernize the stage and demolish prejudice. They didn't perfectly represent Asian cultures, but they did put Asian stories, ideas, characters, and feelings in the spotlight (with *Flower Drum Song* casting its original production with mostly Asian people).

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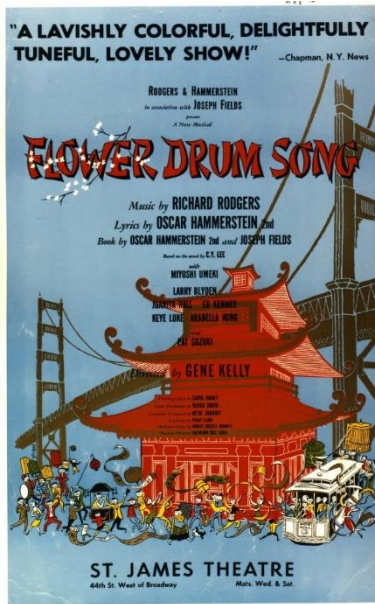


Figure 5: Show Poster: 1958's *Flower Drum Song*

Addressing the Problem of Orientalism in *South Pacific*

The often-stereotypical portrayals of Bloody Mary and Liat were in dire need of being progressed regarding their overall representations. Here are the changes our production implemented:

Bloody Mary: With complete reverence to the Tonkinese, Polynesian, and South Pacific indigenous cultures, we've cast Bloody Mary with an actress of Asian descent. We've created a Bloody Mary that is a softer intelligent mother trying to survive the war with an entrepreneur demeanor. She is not peddling her daughter (as it's so often conveyed). Our Bloody Mary demands respect and people listen when she speaks. She is not the brunt of a joke or a caricature-cartoon with a brassy attitude, loud voice and ignorant presence. She is loving. She does not wear savage costuming but, rather, well-researched attire appropriate to her respective culture/status. Her broken English is refined and serves to empower her character with artful means. We've created a playful, mischievous, eccentric, and wise mother. She cleverly manipulates the sailors, highlighting her savvy business prowess. Those around her do not dismiss her or demean her, giving her a dignity that serves to remove orientalism.

Liat: Without adding lines, we've given Liat a voice. She is not a willing sex object; she is a

young adult woman who consensually falls in love with Cable. We've removed her so-often-seen childlike actions, expressions, and all references to her character being a "kid". Our insertion of Liat's ballets tremendously align with Rodgers and Hammerstein II's innovation of utilizing dance to further plot and reflect heightened emotion; this is how Liat speaks. Her dance reflects the tragedies of wartime and, more so, serves to subjectively progress her relationship with Lt. Joe, furthering our goal of expressing a consensual and loving relationship.

You've Got to Be Carefully Taught

"You've Got to Be Carefully Taught" in Act Two of *South Pacific* is a prime example of Rodgers and Hammerstein II's fight against prejudice. In its preliminary days of early drafts to casting to rehearsals, Rodgers and Hammerstein II were told on many occasions that the song was too liberal, too controversial, and "too much". Lt. Cable is singing about how racism is something that is not born within a person, but rather an idea instilled by a child's parents and environment. Nellie is the poster child regarding the effects of being raised in an environment and by people who epitomize racist ideologies. Many challenges were presented, even by legislatures, to remove this song from the musical. A bill introduced in Georgia strove to outlaw entertainment containing an underlying philosophy inspired by Moscow; meaning, people were saying Rodgers and Hammerstein II's *South Pacific* was rooted in Communism. The bill was defeated.

Rodgers and Hammerstein adamantly defended their song. When faced with the innumerable requests to remove the song, "...the authors replied stubbornly that this number represented why they had wanted to do the play, and that even if it meant the failure of the production, it was going to stay in," (as James Michener, author of *Tales of the South Pacific*, recalled).

Where is the real Bali Ha'i?

South Pacific is based on the book, *Tales of the South Pacific*, written by James Michener who was stationed in the South Pacific islands of Vanuatu

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during WW2. Bali Ha'i is based on the real island called, Ambae. This island is visible on the horizon from Espiritu Santo island, as James Michener references. Both Ambae and Espiritu Santo are islands within the island country called, Vanuatu.



Figure 6: Vanuatu Map (island country)

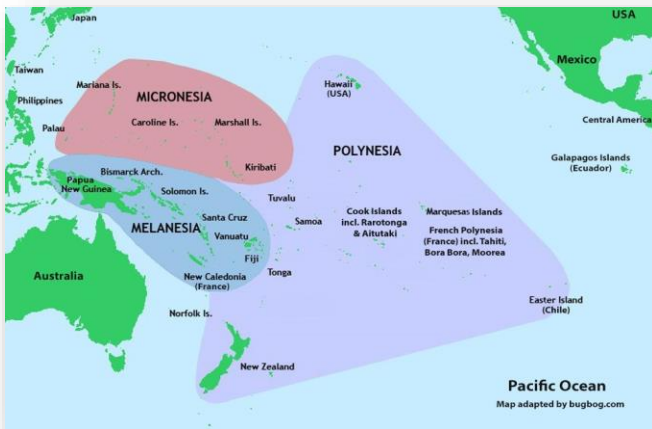


Figure 7: Vanuatu is situated within Melanesia and Polynesia

Rodgers and Hammerstein II: The Duo

Composer Richard Rodgers and Lyricist-Dramatist Oscar Hammerstein II epitomize the Golden Age of Musical Theatre. Their 1940's and 1950's collaborations immersed American audiences and transformed the musical theatre genre

with their multiplex plots and, often, provocative themes for the time. Their outstanding successes include quintessential musical classics such as *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, *Cinderella*, *Flower Drum Song*, and *The Sound of Music*.

The massive theatrical triumphs the duo built stem from their innate connection garnered at Columbia University. In 1920 Rodgers, a freshman, wrote (along with Lorenz Hart) the musical, *Fly With Me* as part of the university's historical Varsity Shows.



Figure 8: Show Poster; 1920's Fly With Me

Hammerstein II, having graduated in 1916, was on the judging committee and added two of his original songs to the show. While it would be 20 years before Rodgers and Hammerstein II would join forces again, their individual success during this period is substantial.

Individual Success: Richard Rodgers

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Figure 9: Richard Rodgers

The industry has often referred to a love at first sight connection when a seventeen-year-old Richard Rodgers met a twenty-three-year-old Lorenz Hart. Of their first professional meeting, Rogers wrote many years later, “I left Hart’s house having acquired in one afternoon a career, a partner, a best friend, and a source of permanent irritation,” (*A Ship Without a Sail*). Their collaboration spanned over twenty years; they trailblazed their way through musicomedy’s traditional, “...sameness, its tameness, its eternal rhyming of June with moon”, as *Time Magazine*’s notable September 26th, 1938 edition referenced, and uniquely innovated the craft.



Figure 10: *Time Magazine*’s September 26th, 1938 cover of Rodgers and Hart

Hart’s lyrics were witty, sophisticated-yet-simple, direct, and at times melancholic; his polysyllabic rhymes and versification are trademark. Together they elevated the musical theatre genre by integrating music, dance, and story as *equal* and *essential* parts versus the typical libretto underscoring a comical revue-esc story or bit. Their quality of creation was unparalleled, yet came to a tragic end. Lorenz suffered from alcoholism. His lyrical prowess became clouded with the inability to stay sober and it couldn’t be controlled; he often disappeared on drunken binges and when he did show up he was belligerent - his genius buried. Rodgers’s final proposal to Hart encompassed turning the play *Green Grow the Lilacs* into a musical (which later became *Oklahoma!*). Ultimately Lorenz couldn’t accept the project nor could he accept Rodgers’ affectionate offer to go to a sanitarium *with him* to persuade him to receive help. (*The Atlantic*)



Figure 11: Rodgers (left) and Hart (right)

“Alone in the boardroom Dick sighed, the burden of tolerating an increasingly truant, irresponsible partner over the course of twenty-four years having been lifted in an instant. And then he wept,” (*A Ship Without a Sail*). Their Broadway hits and film works of the 1920-30’s lay the foundation to the Rodgers and Hammerstein II 1940-50’s collaboration and contemporary musical theatre as a whole.

Rodgers and Hart's Works

- (1920) *Fly with Me*
- (1925) *The Garrick Gaieties*
- (1925) *Dearest Enemy*
- (1926) *The Girl Friend*
- (1926) *Betsy*
- (1926) *Peggy-Ann*
- (1926) *The Fifth Avenue Follies*
- (1926) *Lido Lady*
- (1926) *Garrick Gaieties* - 2nd Edition
- (1927) *A Connecticut Yankee*
- (1927) *One Dam Thing After Another*
- (1928) *Present Arms*
- (1928) *Chee-Chee*
- (1928) *She's My Baby*
- (1929) *Heads Up!*
- (1930) *Spring Is Here*
- (1930) *Ever Green*
- (1930) *Simple Simon*
- (1931) *America's Sweetheart*
- (1932) *Love Me Tonight* (film)
- (1932) *The Phantom President* (film)
- (1933) *Hallelujah, I'm a Bum* (film)
- (1935) *Mississippi* (film)
- (1935) *Jumbo* (1962 film Billy Rose's Jumbo)
- (1936) *On Your Toes* (1939 film)
- (1936) *The Show Is On* (Broadway revue with one song by Rodgers and Hart)
- (1937) *Babes in Arms* (1939 film)
- (1937) *I'd Rather Be Right*
- (1938) *The Boys from Syracuse* (1940 film)
- (1938) *I Married an Angel* (1942 film)
- (1939) *Too Many Girls* (1940 film)
- (1940) *Higher and Higher* (1943 film)
- (1940) *Pal Joey* (1957 film)
- (1940) *Two Weeks with Pay*
- (1942) *By Jupiter*
- (1943) *A Connecticut Yankee* (revised, with additional songs, their last collaboration)

Individual Success: Oscar Hammerstein II



Figure 12: Oscar Hammerstein II

Hammerstein II's first professional collaboration included Herbert Stothart, Frank Mandel, and Otto Abels Harbach (lyricist, librettist, and Hammerstein II's mentor). Their connection ignited Hammerstein II's first ever musical in which he wrote both the book and the lyrics for titled, *Always You*.

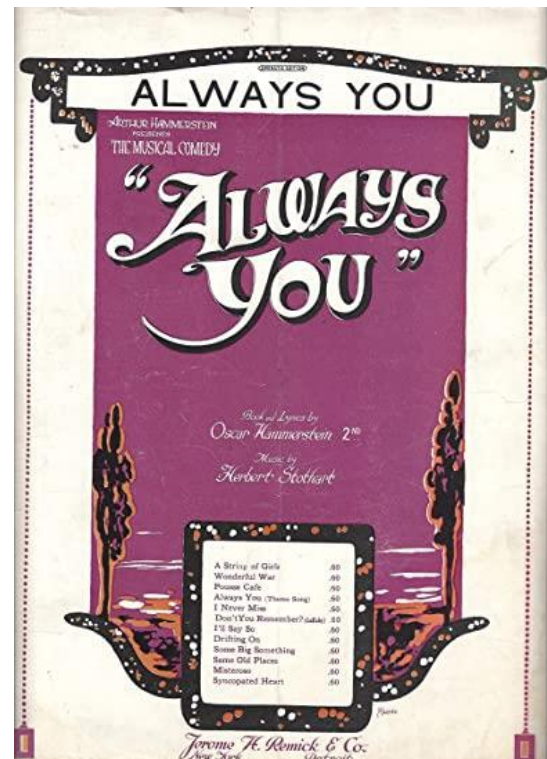


Figure 13: Show Poster: 1920's *Always You*

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Harbach and Hammerstein II's work on this show led to over twenty years of collaboration. Harbach encouraged Hammerstein II to treat the craft of musical theatre with reverence and as a serious art form. Together, among their many projects, they wrote the book and lyrics for *Tickle Me* (1920), *Jimmie* (1920), *Wildflower* (1923), *Rose-Marie* (1924), *Sunny* (1925), *Song of the Flame* (1925), *The Wild Rose* (1926), *The Desert Song* (1926), *Golden Dawn* (1927), and *Good Boy* (1928).

In 1921, Hammerstein II joined the infamous theatrical social and charitable organization, The Lamb's Club. "Originally restricted to gentlemen only, today's club is attuned to modern sensibilities and has emerged and thrived as a society for both ladies and gentlemen," (Lambs club website).



Figure 14: The Lambs Club

Notable members included: Fred Astaire, Irving Berlin, Cecil B. DeMille, Dwight David Eisenhower, and John Philip Sousa. Of The Lambs' charitable endeavors, member J. Lester Wallack was paramount in the founding of The Actors' Fund of America. The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), Screen Actors Guild and Actors' Equity Association are all in existence, in large part, due to The Lambs Club. Hammerstein II's intermingling and creative connections were vast; he joined together with

many composers and theatre artists, but no partnership (pre-Rodgers) created as infamous work as his collaboration with Composer Jerome Kern.

In 1925, the two met, beginning a lifelong friendship, unlike Kern's typical short-lasting collaborations with lyricists. They first wrote, along with Harbach, the show *Sunny*. This led to what is considered a masterpiece by the musical theatre industry, 1927's *Show Boat* (based on Enda Ferber's novel of the same name).

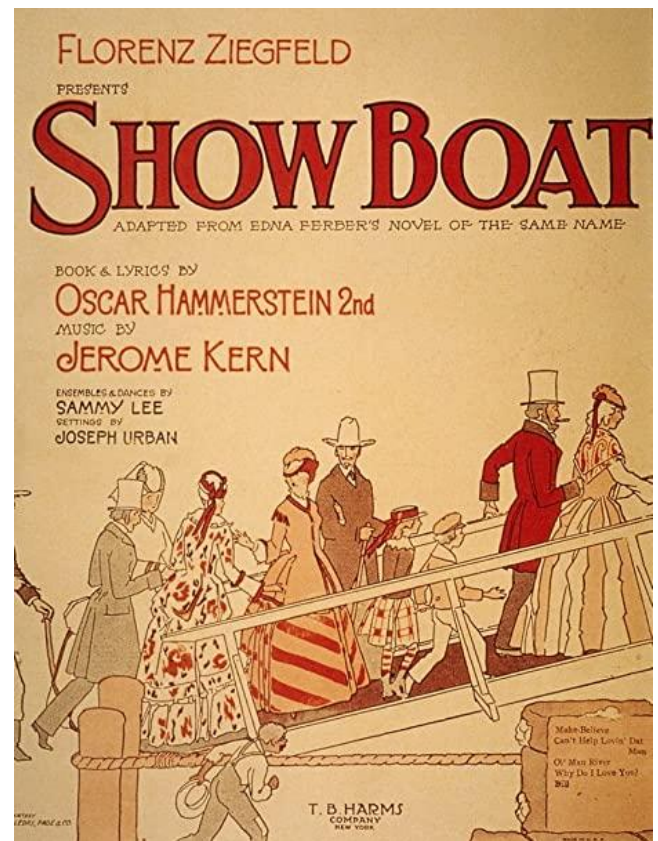


Figure 15: Show Poster: 1927's Show Boat

This monumental show (produced by Ziegfeld) is credited as the first musical to seamlessly transition from song to scene for the entirety of the show. But this wasn't its only innovation; the story of *Show Boat* focuses on progressive-for-the-time subjects including alcoholism, prejudice, racial injustice, marital strife, and abandonment. The intent of *Show Boat* was not to merely entertain or facilitate an escape, it enabled its audience the opportunity to relate. Hammerstein II and Kern worked to replicate Edna Ferber's flowing narrative. In a 1958 interview, Hammerstein II

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stated, "I thought that we lacked something to make it cohesive...I wanted to keep the spirit of Edna's book, and the one focal influence I could find was the river, because she had quite consciously brought the river into every important turn in the story: The Mississippi. So I decided to write a theme — a river theme." And thus, Ol' Man River was born.

Hammerstein II's collaboration with Jerome Kern continued through the 1930's and included *Sweet Adeline* (1929), *Music in the Air* (1932), *Three Sisters* (1934), and the score for the film versions of those musicals. *Very Warm in May* (1939) marks Hammerstein II and Kern's last musical together; Kern declined work on adapting the stage play *Green Grow the Lilacs* that Hammerstein II had been attracted to and wanted to pursue. It has been often documented that Hammerstein II was by Kern in his hospital bed when he died in 1945.



Figure 16: Hammerstein II (left) and Kern (right)

Hammerstein II's Fight against Prejudice

- He was a board member of ASCAP—dedicated to protecting the rights of African American songwriters

- As a baseball fan he vigorously called for the integration of Major League Baseball
- He helped found the California Anti-Nazi League
- He also helped found “Welcome House” which was an adoption program that matched more than 7,000 orphans and children from around the globe with adoptive families in the US (his own family was integrated as his daughter adopted two of the mixed-race children from “Welcome House” making Hammerstein proud
- He had personal cause to fight the injustice surrounding the Japanese Internment Camps as his own brother-in-law was interred.

The Revolution

Separate from one another, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II were drawn to the notion of adapting Lynn Riggs' stage play *Green Grow the Lilacs* into a musical. Hart and Kern having both declined the project left Rodgers and Hammerstein II partnerless; this prompted Rodgers to reach out to Hammerstein II which began their first collaboration as a duo: 1943's *Away We Go!* (Title later changed to *Oklahoma!*)

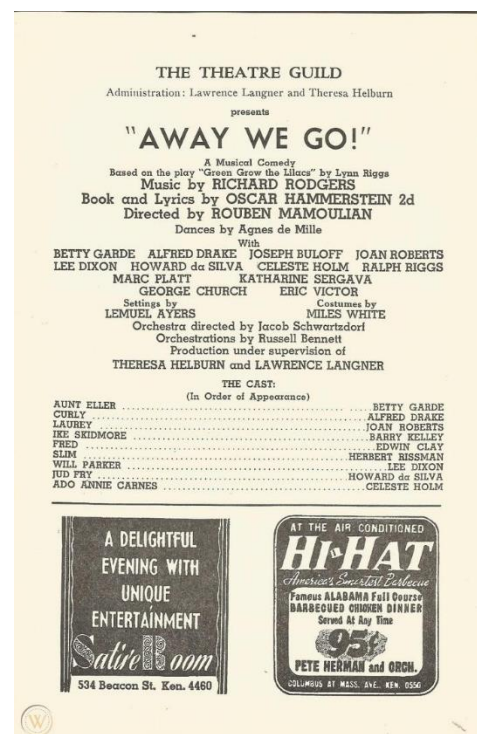


Figure 17: Show Poster: 1943's *Away We Go*

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Rodgers and Hammerstein II, propelled by their partnership with Hart and Kern respectively, innately fused together all they'd accomplished in the 1920's and 1930's independently of one another. Their "new musical" format was based on thought-provoking storylines, progressive themes, and further solidified the integrity of interconnecting story plot, song, dance, and drama into cohesive musical theatre unity. The hallmarks of what became known as a "formula musical" include spoken dialogue emotionally leading to a song, an often conditional love song (where they are unwilling or can't reveal their love just yet), a "want song", and frequently a dream ballet with a purpose of heightening the present emotion. While foretelling can be an inherent quality of a formula musical, it is an approach highly utilized in contemporary musical theatre.

While the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein II have comedic flair, excitement, cheer, and at times the "corniness" characteristic of the time, they implement and address social issues extremely progressive for the 1940's and 1950's. They knocked on the consciousness of America's mind by putting topics like racism, domestic violence, classism, and sexism among others at the forefront of their plots. This was taboo! When looking at the surface of musical theatre's Golden Age, contemporary misperception exists and often pigeonholes this era as happy-go-lucky, old-fashioned, and nostalgic rather than forward-thinking. This couldn't be further from the reality of its time. Rodgers and Hammerstein II were trailblazers, their work being the stepping stones for the innovations of contemporary musical theatre subject matter. For example:

***Oklahoma!* (1943):** Explores sexuality, gender roles, racial intolerance, and brought to mind the question of American identity

***Carousel* (1945):** Presents domestic violence as a social injustice rather than a private issue. This musical is also a great example of the beginnings of a female empowerment movement regarding its character Julie. Sure, Julie could seem I, but the stage direction from Hammerstein II details that she

is "...more complex, quieter, deeper,". She ends up utilizing an independence within herself to overcome life's complexities. Ethan Mordden stated, "Carousel dealt with gender conflicts- why women and men don't understand each other or even why women understand and men don't,".

***Allegro* (1947):** Discussed facets of the American Dream that weren't necessarily ideal; the show's main character struggles with the exhaustion of trying to "make it" in America. The hustle that accompanies fulfilling the American Dream of becoming socially affluent and rich conflict with his true desires; he'd rather lead a simple, settled, and tranquil life.

***South Pacific* (1949):** Puts racism at the forefront of its plot. Issues of bigotry, intolerance, interracial romance, and prejudice within the main characters was an extremely forward thinking subject matter for its time.

***Flower Drum Song* (1958):** Japanese actress Miyoshi Umeki was cast in the leading role of Mei Li, among the many people of Asian descent who were cast. This was deemed extremely risky in the mindset of 1958 America.

***The Sound of Music* (1959):** The character of Maria embodies female empowerment; she is stubborn, independent, and cannot be tamed. She *chooses* to leave the abbey to fulfill her desire to love. Even Liesel, when seen through the lens of the late 1950's, isn't depicted like her typical counterparts at the time. She is rebellious, strong-willed, and overcomes the hurt of heartbreak. The Sound of Music's storyline regarding the takeover of Austria by the Third Reich was a powerful political commentary (still so close to the timeline of WW2). To convey the seriousness and deeply emotional dispositions of the show's main characters (i.e. Captain Von-Trapp ripping a Nazi Socialist Party flag) was progressive.

The combined genius and artistry of Rodgers and Hammerstein II resulted in thirty-four Tony Awards, fifteen Academy Awards, two Grammy awards, and two Pulitzer Prizes for *Oklahoma!* And *South Pacific*. The collaboration of Richard

Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II is revered as the greatest musical theatre partnership of the 20th century.



Figure 18: This stamp was issued in 1999, as part of the Legends of American Music series, on the Broadway Songwriters stamp pane.

Rodgers and Hammerstein II's Works

- **1943 *Oklahoma!***
 - 1955 film version
- **1945 *Carousel***
 - 1956 film version
 - 1967 TV version
- **1945 *State Fair* (film)**
 - 1962 remake
 - 1996 stage version
- **1947 *Allegro***
- **1949 *South Pacific***
 - 1958 film version
 - 2001 TV version
- **1951 *The King and I***
 - 1956 film version
 - 1972 TV series
 - 1999 animation
- **1953 *Me and Juliet***
- **1955 *Pipe Dream***
- **1957 *Cinderella* (television)**
 - 1958 West End version (pantomime-style adaptation)
 - 1965 TV remake
 - 1997 TV remake
 - 2013 Broadway version (rewritten book with added songs)
- **1958 *Flower Drum Song***
 - 1961 film version
- 2002 revival (rewritten book with one new song)
- **1959 *The Sound of Music***
 - 1965 film version
 - 2013 live television version
 - 2015 live television version (UK)
- **1993 *A Grand Night for Singing* (revue)**

Activity Ideas

1. Have students create a *South Pacific* show poster based on their research of the Ambae culture.
2. Reflect on Liat's ballets; what is her disposition? What story is she telling? What is she communicating and why? What is she feeling?
3. Have students create polysyllabic poems or songs and recite them to the class. Then facilitate a discussion regarding how simple or complex it may have been to create. Provide examples from Hart's repertoire.
4. Facilitate a lyrical study of the songs Ol' Man River and You've Got to be Carefully Taught. Play the songs for the class; how do these pieces make you feel? Why are they important?
5. Orientalism: Discuss what this means. Why is misrepresentation important to acknowledge? Pick an island within the island country of Vanuatu and research its culture. Communicate this to the class through a slide show or show the culture through its own art (share music, art, poems etc. indigenous to your chosen island)
6. GOTE Sheet: Create an actor/actress's character GOTE sheet. Pick a character from *South Pacific* and create a document

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detailing the character's **Goals** (what do they want in the story?), **Obstacles** (What is getting in the way of what they want?), **Tactics** (How do they get what they want?), and **Expectations** (What do they hope to accomplish? Did they achieve their goal?).

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