South Pacific -The Writers of the Musical and The Book

From Lincoln Center

The Writers: **Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II With Richard Rodger**s composing the music and Oscar Hammerstein II writing the words, Rodgers and Hammerstein became perhaps the most successful writing team in the history of musical theater.

Through a series of groundbreaking shows throughout the 1940’s and 1950’s, they changed the face of the American theater. Richard Rodgers (1902–1979), achieved fame through twenty years of writing songs, from the 1920’s through the early 1940’s, with lyricist Lorenz Hart. Together they wrote more than 40 lighthearted, sophisticated musical comedies, including On Your Toes, Babes in Arms, The Boys from Syracuse, I Married an Angel and Pal Joey. At the same time, Oscar Hammerstein II (1895–1960) became famed for his work writing the words for operettas, or “light opera” which had its roots in 19th century Europe. He collaborated with a number of composers, including Rudolf Friml and Sigmund Romberg.

The shows he wrote include The Desert Song, Rose-Marie and The New Moon. He tackled many challenging issues in his work, including racial issues. Show Boat, written in 1927 with Jerome Kern, and Carmen Jones, was an all-black revisiting of Georges Bizet’s tragic opera Carmen.

Rodgers and Hammerstein first collaborated in 1943 on Oklahoma!, a show that is widely considered to be the first true musical play, combining elements of musical comedy and operetta to create a more integrated, dramatic musical form than had been seen before. Their subsequent works include

Carousel, Allegro, South Pacific, The King and I, Me and Juliet, Pipe Dream, Flower Drum Song and The Sound of Music.

They also wrote the movie musical, State Fair, and for television, Cinderella. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals won many honors, including a total of 35 Tony Awards, 15 Academy Awards, 2 Pulitzer Prizes, 2 Grammy Awards and 2 Emmy Awards.

Oscar Hammerstein II died in 1960, but Rodgers continued to write for the Broadway stage. No Strings, the first show he wrote without a partner, won Tony Awards for both music and lyrics. He followed it with Do I Hear a Waltz?, Two by Two, Rex and I Remember Mama, which opened on Broadway in 1979, only a few months before Rodgers died.

The Co-Author: Joshua Logan Joshua Logan brought the idea for South Pacific to Rodgers and Hammerstein, although originally he only intended to be the show’s director. But Hammerstein found himself having trouble writing military jargon and Logan, who had served in the military, offered to help. Although, at this point Hammerstein had not co-written a libretto for almost 20 years, he discovered that Logan was a helpful sounding board. And so Logan became Hammerstein’s co-author. Joshua Logan was born in Texarkana, Texas in 1908 and became a leading director, writer, and producer in theater and in movies. He attended Princeton University but left before graduating to study with the famous Russian director and acting teacher, Konstantin Stanislavsky in Moscow.

**The Book that inspired the Musical**

The Novelist:

James Michener James Michener wrote the original book, Tales of the South Pacific, which Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, and Joshua Logan adapted into South Pacific.

James Michener was born in New York City in 1907 and grew up in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. His first career was teaching teachers, after which he edited textbooks until he joined the Navy during World War II.

As a lieutenant junior grade, he was stationed at Espiritu Santo in the South Pacific. When he returned, he published Tales of the South Pacific, based on his wartime experiences, and the book’s success began his career as one of America’s leading authors.

Tales of the South Pacific won Michener the 1948 Pulitzer Prize, and was, of course, the basis for South Pacific. Over the next 40 years, he wrote 23 novels, 5 art books, a book of sonnets, and literally hundreds of articles, introductions, contributions to collections, and other works. He became particularly known for well-researched historical fiction, such as Hawaii, Chesapeake, Space, Texas, and Alaska. Michener also ran for Congress and took on political roles including serving as a cultural ambassador to many countries.

He was a member of the Advisory Council to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the advisory committee of the U.S. Postal Service. In addition to his Pulitzer Prize, Michener received many honors, including the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award given by the United States, and an award from the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities.

He died in 1997, at age 90

# Into The Woods - Lecture

Into The Woods Lecture

Hopefully, you have read or watched Into The Woods (ITW) before reading this short lecture. I am keeping it short so I leave you something to talk about when you write your response to the discussion questions. I do want to give you a little more context for the show.

Into The Woods, the 1988 Tony Award winner for both Score and Book of a musical, is a brilliantly conceived exploration of what happens after “happily ever after.” The show, which has an enchanting, moving, and profound score by Stephen Sondheim, and a powerful, witty book by James Lapine, opened on Broadway on November 5, 1987, at the Martin Beck Theatre under the direction of Mr. Lapine. ( MTI)

BRIEF HISTORY of a main event 1987 that influenced Sondheim:

ITW was produced at the height of the AIDS crisis in the United States in 1987. Also the year I graduated from High School - so I have very clear memories of that time. There was this pandemic, AIDS, that was killing a lot of people. As a theatre person, I lost a lot of friends. You see when AIDS first presented itself the government didn't care. They ignored it and called it a "gay" disease and said it would go away. Even if it didn't homosexuals were disposal, not really a valued part of society. The government had very little interest once Doctors did identify the cause, in curing the disease. Even though the disease could easily have been stopped in its tracks if people had worn protection.  And surprisingly it didn't just affect homosexual men.  People who were diagnosed were ostracized and socially distancing wasn't an issue. Even though people knew blood or other bodily fluids had to be exchanged to contract the disease - the fear was rampant.

So re-cap. Pandemic, a certain population were supposedly the only people who could catch it and they were thought of as disposable, the government denied it was a big deal and failed to act to protect people, easily protected against by wearing protection - Millions died.

It is important that you have this context to understand the themes, Sondheim and Lapin were addressing and why. "Sondheim and Lapine bring us through a maze that mirrors the complexity of everyday existence. Like the characters in Into The Woods, we end this journey aware of the moral consequences of our actions and the power of tolerance, community, and shared sacrifice. "

It is a POWERFUL message dressed in fun songs, beautiful music, and FAMILIAR characters.

HOWEVER let me be clear. Sondheim does not say it is about AIDS. He does call it a study on society and community. There has been a lot discussion on this over the years since it first premiered on Broadway.

Stephen Sondheim wrote a musical based on some Grimm fairytale characters and a made up story ( the Baker and his Wife). Please note in the first act unless you are familiar with Grimm's original fairytales they may have held a bit of horror for you ( cutting off heels and such).  This was Grimm's original version, not our beloved Disney ( I do like my happy endings).

Sondheim and Lapine had read "The Uses of Enchantments" by Bettlehiem (if you dig deeper you will find this gentleman is not without his controversy but he is not our focus). This is book looked at the darker sides of Grimms Fairytales ( yes - they could get even darker!) and beyond the very few "Happily Ever After" stories the brothers wrote. Bettlehiem dug into the deep psychology of the fairytale. So did Sondheim and Lapine.

Back to pandemics: One of the major themes of ITW is the community, the world, sacrifice or scapegoating, care of community, or isolation. One of the original questions asked in 1987 by the theatre's education department was:

"Can you think of instances when disasters have caused members of communities to respond selfishly? Can you think of examples when the opposite has been the case?"

Here are some other questions Sondheim asked his audience when they first released ITW.

* "What is truth?
* What is a lie?
* What is the difference between a small lie and a big lie?
* Some of the characters in Into The Woods freely employ deceit to accomplish their goals. Is lying ever justified?
* **How does deceit contribute to the downfall of the community**?
* Is the presence of deceit inevitable in human relationships?

The one I bolded was directly aimed at the lies President Ronald Regan was telling that allowed the needless spread of AIDS.

The last question I will share with you from there education department is:

"Write an essay about individual responsibility for a major community problem such as homelessness, hunger, water pollution, **or the care of patients with AIDS."**

These questions are for you to think about - they are not our discussion question for the week, but if you explore these questions, they could inform your answers in our assigned discussion. I think they give insight into what Sondheim and Lapin were trying to tell people.

At the end of Act 1 everything seems blissful and looks like we will have our happy ending - but in Act 2 we see the consequences of the choices that the character's made in the first act. We also see the maturation that all the characters make - or do not make.

It is a cautionary tale. It points us in the direction of solutions. A complicated solution.  More about that in the discussion prompt.

| Midterm Rubric | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Criteria** | **Ratings** | **Pts** |
| This criterion is linked to a Learning OutcomeClass outcome: Identify the connection between the text of the musical and the finished product.  In both questions does the student fully explore the musical and the themes and ideas presented by the writers? |  | 40 pts |
| This criterion is linked to a Learning OutcomeCourse outcome: Analyze the relationship between American culture and Musical Theatre.  In question two does the student explore this relationship? Do they use tethered and integrated quotes from all materials to support their ideas? |  | 75 pts |
| This criterion is linked to a Learning OutcomeClass outcome: Analyze how the songs, dances and book all work to tell the story of a musical. |  | 75 pts |
| This criterion is linked to a Learning OutcomeExplore themes and ideas completely  Does the student state their opinion and justify that opinion with personal analysis and citations from the material? |  | 70 pts |
| This criterion is linked to a Learning Outcome:Clear that the student understood the material  Is the student familiar with the characters? The themes of the shows? The song titles? The history provided in the lectures? |  | 40 pts |

**Midterm Rubric**