

7-29-1975

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Recommended Citation

Lazenby, Walter, "'Carousel' An Ambitious Undertaking" (1975). *Walter Lazenby Reviews*. 14.
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Tuesday 29 July 1975

TIMES-COURIER, Charleston, II.—3

'Carousel': An Ambitious Undertaking

By WALTER LAZENBY

When Rodgers and Hammerstein assembled their "Carousel," they took a Hungarian play about a "worthless" carnival barker, transferred the action to New England, prettied up its stark realism with large amounts of local color, sweetened its ironic fantasy, and came up with their second major hit, another big Forties musical in the style of "Oklahoma!"

For this nostalgic trip back to the 1880's they wrote varied tunes and lyrics ranging from the tuneful opening number, "The Carousel Waltz," to the ballad "If I Loved You," to the

unconvincingly optimistic "You'll Never Walk Alone" and the rousing numbers "June Is Bustin' Out All Over," a celebration of the rites of spring, and "Blow High, Blow Low," a sea chanty. One song, "A Real Nice Clambake," so fully catches the flavor of life in a particular region that it includes a recipe for clam chowder.

Whereas the original play had subtly raised a question about the goodness of the main character, the adaptors decided to take the simplistic, sentimentalist view that goodness of heart or of motives redeems failure and moral lapses and in another song

asked "What's the Use of Wond'rin' (if he's good or if he's bad)?" True, it presents the point of view of a character faithful in her love for the barker, and it may hint that abstract questions about

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goodness ought to be left to a higher tribunal, as they in fact are in both plays.

It is "Carousel" which, thirty years later, is closing out Eastern's summer theatre season, with final per-

formances this weekend.

The ambitiousness of undertaking this musical brings out some vocal limitations in the summer company (but none orchestral) and limitations in local facilities. Undoubtedly, much time and effort went into creation of an operable carousel for the opening scene — a pity, since the machine is used for only a few minutes. The rest of the show falls short of this elaborateness; yet a more artistic effect, I think, comes in the set for Nettie Fowler's Spa, with its nautical motifs. More could not have been done, considering that most of the actors have had to do double

duty for the show by handling technical details (the leading man on lighting, a supporting actor as stage manager and assistant to the director as well, etc.).

But the acting is in many places excellent. Peggy Burke proves even more than in her appearance in "Annie Get Your Gun" last year that she has a talent as a comedienne. A several-sided role, her Carrie Pipperidge calls forth pertness, naivete, and compassion. She handles Carrie's embarrassment at being surprised by Mr. Snow exceptionally well, and her scene with Jigger Craigin (John Malkovich) is a delight.

B. J. Heft, opposite her in the role of Mr. Snow, plays with finesse and makes "When the Children Are Asleep" another entertaining high spot in the show.

Jim Kleckner's experience pays off in his technically accomplished playing as the anti-hero, Billy Bigelow; and Jayne Ball's sincerity is apparent in her moving portrayal of Julie at the moment of her greatest grief.

Spirited supporting acting comes from Jan Lamos and Cindy Russell, and cheery faces and agile bodies enliven the large production number dance routines.