

The Musicals of the Masters

On May 31st I lucked into another great PBS special, a celebration of the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein. I came away astonished at how many of their tunes and phrases we still hear almost daily. The show began with “Oklahoma,” which brought back memories of my college days at NDSSS when our Melodic Caravan visited high schools hoping to coax their graduates into coming to Science. And the lyrics from that great play still visit my mind often, reminding me of the many ways nature sings into our lives.

I’ll focus here on Oscar H., because his lyrics, like many of Shakespeare’s, so amazingly enrich our daily choice of words. Like the Bard, Oscar really saw what was out there. Few who have enjoyed the latest lovely June morning would deny that his “Oh what a beautiful morning” aria simply captures it, and gives it life, from the “bright golden haze on the meadows” to that “old weepin’ willer is laughing at me.” He gives that willow tree a part in the play. And the breeze that’s “so busy it don’t miss a tree.” Even the wind has a personality as it “comes sweeping down the plain” causing “the waving wheat to sure smell sweet, when the wind comes right behind the rain.” After the rain, people “sit around and talk, and watch a hawk making lazy circles in the sky.”

One wonders how a Hebrew New Yorker could write such lyrics, and in “The Sound of Music” he does the same for Austria, where “The hills come alive with the sound of music.” And a little edelweiss flower gets a song of its very own, because “small and white, clean and bright” it paints the slopes and greets each waker each morning.

Amazingly, Oscar’s imagination can make magical “Bali Hai, where the sky meets the sea,” making us forget for a little while, the toll in young lives the war in the South Pacific exacted in that beautiful paradise.

And just as easily as he visits the South Pacific, Oscar delivers to us the world of the Carousel and the mind of Billy Bigelow, the roust about whose aria reveals his vision of a son who wins all the victories Billy himself never quite won: “Like a tree he’ll grow/ With his head held high/ And his feet planted firm on the ground/ And you won’t see nobody dare to try/ To boss him or toss him around.” Likely, Oscar met his share of bullies too, given all the antisemitism polluting the world in 1945 and even now.

A highlight of the PBS show was Andrew Lloyd Weber’s telling us that Hammerstein’s “Some Enchanted Evening” is the greatest of all show tunes. No faint praise from the man who gave us “Cats” and “The Phantom of the Opera.” He was especially taken by the lyrics revealing the miracle of falling in love: “Who can explain it?/ Who can tell you why?/ Fools give you reasons/ Wise men never try.”

Oscar also treats of that mystery in “The King and I,” in a song I loved in high school: “Be brave young lovers / And follow your star/ Be brave and faithful and true/ Cling very close to each other tonight/ I’ve been in love like you.”

The brilliance of Rodgers and Hammerstein proves for me, what a loss for humanity it would have been had Satan, via his puppet Hitler, succeeded in wiping out God’s chosen people. Looking at the amazing creativity of these two geniuses and countless others who have contributed to nearly every area of civilized advancement from medicine to physics to the arts, it’s easy to see the truth in the scripture which states, “In Israel shall all the world be blessed.”

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