

Panoramic photo of the front of the Colonial Theatre, 1903. Public Domain



AN ABRIDGED HISTORY OF THE COLONIAL AND CAROUSEL

The Colonial Theatre: A look into 125 years of Boston theatre history

Boston is known around the US as a city with a rich and vibrant history – from the role it played during the American Revolution, to the storied halls of the city’s numerous academic institutions, to its nickname as “The City of Champions.” But even Bostonians may be surprised to learn that Boston was also where many Golden Age musicals hosted their pre-Broadway debuts. Boston has long been regarded as a popular “try-out town” for theatrical productions looking to make it to Broadway. In fact, as reported by the Boston Globe, “the city’s supporting role as one of the top pre-Broadway tryout towns in the nation was so vital that composer Richard Rodgers, of Rodgers & Hammerstein fame, used to say he wouldn’t open a can of tomatoes without first bringing it to Boston.”¹ At the center of this rich theatrical history is The Emerson Colonial Theatre, the venue for Boston Lyric Opera’s 2025 production of Rodgers & Hammerstein’s *Carousel*.





The Colonial, designed by architect Clarence H. Blackall and designer Henry Barrett Pennell, first opened on December 20th, 1900 with a production of *Ben-Hur*.

This opening production had a cast of 350 people as well as 8 live horses – in fact, the original stables can still be found backstage, and there are plans to convert them to increase backstage accessibility. After operating for over 100 years, the theatre was purchased by Emerson College in 2006 and subsequently closed in 2015 due to a decrease in touring productions. The college initially had plans to convert the theatre into a student center and dining hall, but after

much outcry from Emerson alumni, art- and history-loving Boston residents, and theatre makers across the US – including famed composer Stephen Sondheim – it was eventually purchased by the Ambassador Theatre Group. The Colonial remained closed for three years, during which its original architectural charm was revitalized and refurbished, eventually opening again in 2018 with the premiere of the stage version of Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!*

Now in its 125th year, The Colonial is considered the oldest operating theatre in the City of Boston. The Colonial has hosted many openings, most notably *Anything Goes*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Oklahoma!*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, and *La Cage aux Folles*. A spokesperson for the Rodgers & Hammerstein

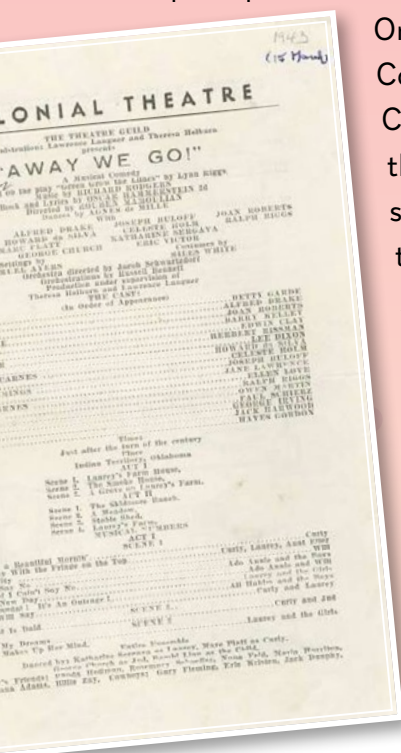
Organization said to *Playbill* of The Colonial, *Away We Go!* arrived at the Colonial in March '43 and it was on the theatre's famed gilt lobby grand staircase that the cast assembled to hear a new choral version of a song going into the show that week. The song was called 'Oklahoma,' and became a show-stopper at the Colonial, and a title song by the time *Oklahoma!* opened at the St. James on Broadway at the end of March."²



Cover of the souvenir booklet of the 1900 production of *Ben-Hur*. Public Domain.



Image from a souvenir booklet of the 1900 production of *Ben-Hur* with photographs by Joseph Byron. Public Domain



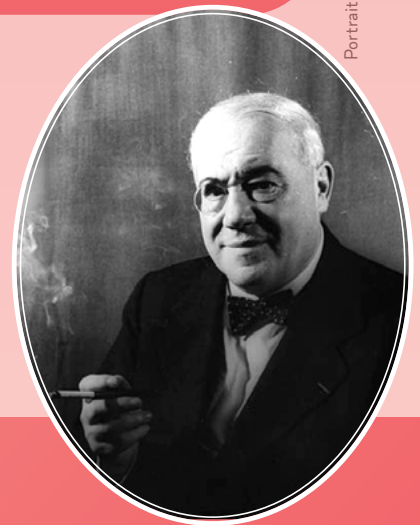
Artists Remember their Time at The Colonial:

The Colonial holds so many memories for the artists who have had the honor of performing on its stage. Don Scardino, who premiered the role of Johnny Parkins in the 1978 production of *King of Hearts*, recalls the magic of The Colonial:

“For all its size, the Colonial feels intimate and close. I felt like I could reach out and touch every single person in the audience, even in the balconies. The energy, the aura of the place, was palpable and it embraced our show and placed it like a shiny little jewel in a box full of the most radiant gemstones. I felt wrapped in the warm arms of the audience, and there was a connection that is unmatched in other houses. I know in my heart that it was the Colonial itself, with all its grand performances and thrilling memories still alive, that made our show feel so wonderful. Can a theatre, a building, hold a special magic? Are the ghosts of all those evenings, the players and audiences connected by thrilling theatrical art, still vibrating in that space, even now? I believe so and I know I felt it every night I played the Colonial. It was then, and is now, pure Heaven on Earth.”³

Carousel's Journey to The Colonial

One of the most notable out-of-town tryouts was Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Carousel*. This work was the celebrated duo's second collaboration together after the success of *Oklahoma!* (previously titled *Away We Go!*). The idea was pitched by Rodgers & Hammerstein's producers, New York's Theatre Guild's Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, who suggested adapting the 1909 Hungarian play *Liliom* by Ferenc Molnár.



Portrait of Ferenc Molnár, taken by Carl Van Vechten, 1941. Public Domain.

Operatic Connections: Renowned Italian composer Giacomo Puccini originally wanted to turn *Liliom* into an opera but was rejected by Ferenc Molnár. German composer Kurt Weill also sought adaptation rights and was also rejected.



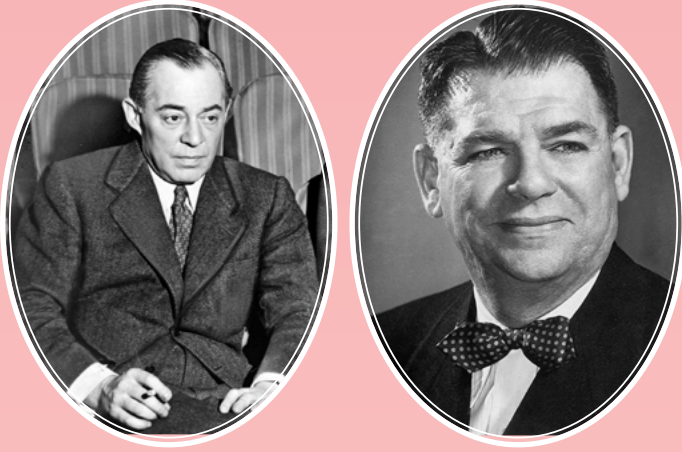
Production photo from The Theatre Guild's 1921 production of *Liliom* starring Joseph Schildkraut as Liliom, Evelyn Chard as Louise and Eva Le Gallienne as Julie. Photo taken by Ira D. Schwartz, 1921. Public Domain.

After attending a performance of *Oklahoma!*, Molnár was convinced that Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein would honor his original play and, after lengthy negotiations, allowed the pair to change certain plot points.

These plot changes were crucial. While writing *Carousel*, Rodgers and Hammerstein struggled with many of the darker aspects of

L. Photograph of Richard Rodgers taken by Al Aumuller, 1948. Public Domain.

R. Portrait of Oscar Hammerstein II by Z Arthur, 1940. Public Domain.



Molnár's play. Additionally, they struggled with making the plot relevant to American audiences – audiences who were still grappling with the daily household effects of World War II. To Americanize the Hungarian play, they attempted to set the musical in Louisiana instead of Budapest. However, after unsuccessfully attempting to write in a Creole dialect, Richard Rodgers suggested New England as the backdrop for their adaptation. Additionally, Rodgers and Hammerstein altered Molnár's original ending. The ending of *Liliom* was deemed to be too dark for an American musical comedy and was reworked to give Billy Bigelow a redemption arc.

The Cutting Room Floor: One of the other notable changes made to *Carousel* between the Boston and Broadway premiere was to the character of The Starkeeper. Originally, this role was meant to be two roles, known as Mr. and Mrs. God, and they were designed based on a New England minister and his wife.

Carousel is considered the most operatic Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, even though it has no overture but instead an opening waltz. Due to its orchestration and the limited number of scenes with spoken dialogue, as well as the innovative use of dance, music, and character to progress the storytelling, it became a new standard for the American musical. In April 1945, Oscar Hammerstein wrote in the New York Times, "We knew we wouldn't wind up with a conventional musical comedy. It was obvious that we would have to mix in values from the dramatic stage and opera."⁴ The music was written with classically trained singers in mind, and as Richard Rodgers wrote in his autobiography, "...to me, my [*Carousel*] score is more satisfying than anything I have ever written."⁵

On March 27, 1945, Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Carousel* opened for the first time in Boston. *Carousel*'s operatic return to The Colonial with Boston Lyric Opera marks 80 years of this American classic, and will be celebrated on March 27, 2025 with a gathering of Boston's arts community for World Theatre Day at The Colonial for a sing-a-long. Just like in 1945, today's Boston audiences will learn that they, too, will never walk alone.



An advertisement from *The Boston Globe* for the *Ziegfeld Follies* at the Colonial Theatre, 1920. Public Domain.

Footnotes:

1. Aucoin, Don. "A Comeback Role for Boston's Theater District?" *The Boston Globe*, July 14, 2018.
2. Jones, Kenneth. "Colonial Theatre in Boston, Birthplace of Follies, Oklahoma! and Porgy and Bess, Seeking Presenter." *Playbill*, July 6, 2011.
3. Schneider, Robert. 2016. "Hal Prince, Stephen Sondheim and More Reflect on Their Early Out-of-Town Days." *Playbill*, April 16, 2016.
4. Hammerstein, Oscar. "Turns on a Carousel: An Account of Adventures in Setting the Play 'Liliom' to Music." *The New York Times*, April 15, 1945.
5. Rodgers, Richard. *Musical stages: An autobiography*. Cambridge, Mass: Da Capo Press, 2002.