
Caption.

THE THRILL OF A CHESTNUT

Staging a new or relatively unknown theatrical work differs significantly from reviving a beloved classic that has achieved chestnut status. When Bradley Vernatter, the General Director & CEO of Boston Lyric Opera, approached me about directing Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's *Carousel* for the company, I responded with immediate and wholehearted enthusiasm. *Chestnut!*

The appeal of *Carousel* extends far beyond its powerful music and compelling narrative. It is a production that resonates deeply with audiences, evoking personal connections and cherished memories. Upon mentioning my involvement with the show, I am invariably met with a flood of personal anecdotes and spontaneous musical recollections. Some people share stories of their own high school performances, while others recount transformative experiences of watching the show at pivotal moments in their lives. The music of *Carousel*, particularly "You'll Never Walk Alone," has transcended its theatrical origins to become a cultural phenomenon. The song has been adopted by several football clubs, most notably Liverpool, where the tradition of singing the song before every home game has become an iconic part of football culture. In some areas of the United Kingdom and Europe the song became the anthem of support for medical staff, first responders, and those in quarantine during the Covid-19 pandemic. This universal response underscores *Carousel's* enduring impact and its status as a true theatrical *chestnut*. The musical has woven itself into the fabric of cultural memory, with its songs and themes that continue to evoke strong emotional responses decades after its 1945 Broadway premiere.

A *chestnut* in theater is more than just a play; it is a cultural artifact steeped in its own rich history. When staging such a well-known work, directors and actors face a unique set of challenges that go beyond the typical demands of production. Firstly, the audience does not arrive as a blank slate. They bring with them a tapestry of memories, expectations, and preconceptions woven from previous encounters with the work. These might be personal experiences, iconic interpretations they have seen, or simply the play's reputation in popular culture. This collective memory creates an invisible but palpable presence in the theater, one that the production must acknowledge and engage with.

The word *chestnut* carries with it negative connotations such as hackneyed or overused, or a story that has been repeated so often that it has become stale, trite, or uninteresting. James Parker, a staff writer at the Atlantic Magazine cited the example of the infamous poems of Robert Frost,

including "The Road Not Taken," or "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." These, he says, are not really poems anymore. Decades of mass exposure have done something to them, inverted their aura. He said that they are now more like "recipes, or in-flight safety announcements." Moreover, chestnuts often come with specific moments or lines that have transcended the play itself to become cultural touchstones. Think of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy – these words carry a weight far beyond their role in the play's narrative. They have become part of our shared cultural language, referenced and parodied countless times across various media. To stage a production of Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which has over time become a chestnut, where do you put Marlon Brando's portrayal of Stanley? What do you do with the expectations that audiences bring with them about how Stanley should look and sound? Do you pretend that Marlon Brando never played Stanley?

In staging a *chestnut*, the creative team must walk a delicate tightrope. On one side is the pull of tradition – the desire to honor the work's history and meet audience expectations. On the other is the drive for innovation – the need to breathe new life into the familiar and make it resonate with contemporary audiences. This tension between reverence and reinvention is at the heart of staging a chestnut.

With a *chestnut*, it is useful to consider the zeitgeist of the moment of a play's premiere and compare it to that of the current moment. In 1945, the year of *Carousel's* premiere, the United States was engaged in a massive war both in Europe and the Pacific. Young men were returning home with what we now might call PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). The character Billy Bigelow may have been an example of such a young man – violent and lost and full of unexplored aggressions. Imagine how "You'll Never Walk Alone" was received by audiences in 1945, many of whom were struggling, picking up the pieces of the war. Children were being raised in fatherless homes. A lot of these were encapsulated by the characters Julie and Louise. Rodgers and Hammerstein connected the source material of *Liliom*, the Hungarian play upon which the musical is based, and what audiences required in 1945. Billy has serious issues, but the play's ultimate messages of hope, breaking cycles of trauma, and working towards a promising future are still meaningful and potent.

How has *Carousel* evolved in meaning and interpretation over time as society changes? In 2025, connecting its themes to contemporary issues and audiences requires a nuanced approach that goes beyond simply recreating the original production. Perhaps the key question to ask is not "How do we recreate the original?" but rather, "Who needs to perform this play now and who needs to hear it?" This opens new possibilities for interpretation and relevance. When *Carousel* first premiered in 1945, it was groundbreaking for its sophisticated integration of music and drama. The musical tackled darker themes than previous musicals, exploring complex characters

and relationships. However, over time, certain aspects of the story have become contentious, particularly its handling of domestic violence and abuse. The key is to balance respect for the original work with the need to address its problematic elements. By doing so, *Carousel* can continue to evolve, offering insights into human nature and societal issues that remain relevant 80 years after its premiere.

Our *Carousel* is happening in the same theater as its final out-of-town tryout in 1945. This leads to intriguing questions about the presence of the past and about how memories and patterns might be stored and transmitted across time and space. Do physical spaces like theaters hold memories of past performances? Do the ghosts of the performers who originally played those roles lurk nearby? Do buildings store memories? The scientist Rupert Sheldrake proposed that there is a collective memory inherent in nature, allowing similar patterns to influence subsequent ones from across time and space. He calls this phenomenon *morphic resonance*. His theory offers an intriguing perspective on the idea of "ghosts of past performances" in theater buildings. Morphic resonance suggests that the building itself might "remember" past performances, creating a resonant field that new productions and audiences unconsciously tap into. Sheldrake is a controversial figure in the scientific community, and his theories remain debated. But they do provoke a framework for speculation about how past performances might subtly influence current productions in each theater space, creating a unique atmosphere or energy.

In essence, directing a theatrical chestnut is not just about putting on a play. It is about entering into a dialogue with history, audience expectations, and the cultural significance that the work has accrued over time. It is a complex dance between the past and the present, between the familiar and the fresh. But by reframing chestnuts as valuable cultural artifacts rather than tired cliches, we open new possibilities for interpretation, connection, and relevance. I see them as repositories of collective memory and shared cultural experiences. This shift in perspective invites us to appreciate the depth and richness that comes with works that have stood the test of time.

Ultimately, my interest in *Carousel* is not simply to the answer to the question "who needs to perform this play now and who needs to hear it?" The aim is to tap into the power of the original without altering its content. We are not changing or eliminating any of the words or music. In our version of *Carousel*, a group of refugees arrive from a great distance to perform the play, seeking to gain access and acceptance. The show's exploration of forgiveness and community aligns with the refugees' quest for acceptance. As the performance unfolds, it is my hope that the original power and alchemy of *Carousel* takes hold. Through this process, two separate communities, that of the audience and that of the performers, may transform into one, united in the intrinsic power of the piece.