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Ohio Light Opera embraces the nuances of Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Carousel* (June 14)

by Stephanie Manning

If you've never seen Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*, don't let the title fool you. Although the carousel in question is literal, it's also a metaphor — for cycles of unhealthy relationships, social ostracization, and abuse.

Eighty years on from its Broadway debut, *Carousel* finds itself in a tricky position in the musical theater canon. Featuring some of Rodgers and Hammerstein's most beautiful songs, the work is so beloved that *TIME* Magazine named it the best musical of the 20th century. But it's also faced criticism for its portrayal of domestic violence.

Deftly directed by Steven Daigle and unafraid to face some thorny topics head on, Ohio Light Opera's *Carousel* made for a compelling start to the company's 46th season at The College of Wooster's Freedlander Theatre on June 14.

The musical revolves around the reserved but stubborn mill worker Julie Jordan (Rachel Weinfeld) and the brash carousel barker Billy Bigelow (Connor Burns). After Julie falls for Billy, their relationship turns sour when Billy, now unemployed, begins lashing out both verbally and physically.

Weinfeld and Burns treated their budding romance gently, with the sweet-voiced Weinfeld playfully emphasizing the "if"s in "If I Loved You." Although Julie later becomes defensive about Billy's abuse, Weinfeld played up her character's inner turmoil and sadness in "What's the Use of Wond'rin'" where Julie encourages other women to ignore

mistreatment in the name of love. Lit only by a spotlight Weinhold sang these lines as if Julie is trying to convince herself of her own words — and she's not entirely succeeding.

Connor Burns' Billy seemed molded more out of boyish ignorance than malice. When Julie becomes pregnant, Billy's fears about providing for his future child come to the fore in his passionate "Soliliquy" — when he realizes that "my boy Bill" might just turn out to be a girl instead. Still his actions towards Julie remain as ugly as ever.

When Billy dies in a robbery gone wrong, "Heavenly Friends" (Jack Murphy and Spencer Reese) and the Starkeeper (Stella Vodilko) inform him that he hasn't done enough to get past the pearly gates. We had been seeing those solemn characters dressed in white and silently observing from various corners of the stage ever since the curtain went up. For those who know the story, the trio make for an effective omen — but to those seeing the show for the first time, their early presence might be confusing.

But casting the Starkeeper as a young girl rather than the traditional grandfather-like figure was a thoughtful choice that drew parallels with Billy and Julie's daughter, Louise.

Saturday evening was *Carousel*'s opening night, so there were a few understandable bumps along the way. Occasional hesitations in dance numbers and early line deliveries will surely smooth themselves out as the summer goes on. The excellent orchestra, conducted by Michael Borowitz, similarly overcame a few early stumbles.

Contributing to the look and sound of this handsome production were set designer Daniel Hobbs, costume designers Jaysen Engel and Carly Holzwarth, lighting designer Brittany Shemuga, and sound designer Christopher Plummer.

The high quality of the OLO ensemble stood out thanks to the satisfying harmonies and infectious energy of numbers like "June Is Bustin' Out All Over" and "Blow High, Blow Low" — all enhanced by Spencer Reese's playful choreography.

Other highlights included the bubbly, charismatic Jordan Knapick as Julie's friend Carrie Pipperidge. And Kate Bilenko — one of OLO's standout dancers since her first

appearance with the company last season — was absolutely captivating as young Louise during her fluid dream ballet scene.

Billy can only watch as Louise begins to replicate her parents' unhealthy behaviors. And after his attempt to help her ends in another violent outburst, the production carefully hedges its bets on whether or not Billy will be escorted to a heavenly redemption.

"We believe it is important to acknowledge the realities of abuse and mental health struggles," writes Steven Daigle in the director's note. "Not to excuse them, but to open dialogue and foster understanding." These realities still resonate with us in 2025, and this show opens up avenues for conversations that shouldn't be ignored. Otherwise, life's ugliest carousels might just keep on spinning.

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