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Scott McMillin The Musical as Drama

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Chapter One

INTEGRATION AND DIFFERENCE

INTEGRATION: FROM WAGNER TO BROADWAY

THE American musical has been accompanied by a theory easily believed so long as it remains unexamined. The theory is that of the “integrated musical,” according to which all elements of a show—plot, character, song, dance, orchestration, and setting—should blend together into a unity, a seamless whole. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II were articulate proponents of this idea, and the historical moment when integration arrived on Broadway is often said, not least of all by Rodgers and Hammerstein, to have been the opening of *Oklahoma!* in March 1943. As Rodgers later put it, “when a show works perfectly, it’s because all the individual parts complement each other and fit together. No single element overshadows any other. . . . That’s what made *Oklahoma!* work. . . . It was a work created by many that gave the impression of having been created by one.”¹ Hammerstein’s version of the theory concerned the unity between music and libretto: the composer/lyricist “expresses the story in his medium just as the librettist expresses the story in his. Or, more accurately, they weld their two crafts and two kinds of talent into a single expression. This is the great secret of the well-integrated musical play. It is not so much a method as a state of mind, or rather a state for two minds, an attitude of unity.”²

There was nothing new about those statements insofar as they pertained to the action and character of what had long been called musical comedy. In 1917 Jerome Kern said that

¹ Rodgers, *Musical Stages*, p. 227.

² Hammerstein, *Lyrics*, p. 15.

“musical numbers should carry on the action of the play, and should be representative of the personalities of the characters who sing them,” and in 1924 Hammerstein refused to list the numbers in *Rose Marie* because he did not want to detract from the close fit between book and number he thought the show possessed.³ The best composers and librettists have always wanted that close articulation. The statements of Rodgers and Hammerstein in 1943 pushed the idea further. Read closely, they are about the unity of the collaborators who made the musical rather than about the unity of the musical itself. They have a “two minds as one” air about them.

Although the collaboration of Rodgers and Hammerstein is one of the high points of American drama, the musical has always depended on teamwork among composer, lyricist, librettist, choreographer, stage director, music director, designer, costumer, orchestrator, and others. When a show put together by so many creative minds takes to the stage via the creative minds and bodies of the performers and actually works, even comes across the footlights as something special, an experience for an audience to remember for the rest of their lives (as happened with *Oklahoma!*), one knows that the efforts of many have produced an extraordinary event. Great elation accompanies the run of a hit musical, and everyone involved knows the feeling. But that does not mean that the product of all this cooperation has been smoothed out into a unified work of art. When a musical is working well, I feel the crackle of difference, not the smoothness of unity, even when the numbers dovetail with the book. It takes things different from one another to be thought of as integrated in the first place, and I find that the musical depends more on the differences that make the close fit interesting than on the suppression of difference in a seamless whole. *Difference* can be felt between the book and the numbers, between the songs and dances, between dance and spoken dialogue—and these are the elements that integration is supposed to have unified. Sometimes the elements *are* integrated,

³ The Kern quotation is in Bordman, *Jerome Kern: His Life and Music*, p. 149. For *Rose Marie*, see Bordman, *The American Musical Theatre*, p. 392.

