

BOOK REVIEW

Dominic Symonds, *We'll Have Manhattan: The Early Work of Rodgers & Hart*

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Reviewed by Rachael Munro

Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart (known as Dick and Larry) are one of the most successful composer–lyricist duos in Broadway history, writing dozens of hit songs during their collaboration from 1919 until Hart’s untimely death in 1943. Many of their songs, such as ‘Manhattan,’ ‘Thou Swell,’ ‘Blue Moon,’ ‘The Lady is a Tramp’ and ‘My Funny Valentine,’ are revered works that have been immortalised with dozens of recordings by popular artists from Ella Fitzgerald to Rod Stewart. Although the duo’s later and more successful shows (such as *On Your Toes*, *Babes in Arms*, *The Boys from Syracuse* and *Pal Joey*) have been discussed in numerous scholarly and popular sources, their earlier works remain largely unexamined. *We'll Have Manhattan: The Early Work of Rodgers & Hart* is an enthusiastic and engaging yet meticulously detailed account of the formative and collaborative years of this successful partnership, from Rodgers and Hart’s meeting in 1919 at Columbia University to their move to Hollywood in 1931.

Author Dominic Symonds, Reader in Drama at the University of Lincoln, is a co-editor of the journal *Studies in Musical Theatre* and has co-authored a number of books that explore the practice and theory of musical theatre. *We'll Have Manhattan* is Symonds’s first book in a series of works to focus on Rodgers and Hart’s output. This work is also the latest in a series titled *Broadway Legacies* produced by Oxford University Press and edited by prominent theatre historian Geoffrey Block. The series now includes eight works, each of which focuses on a notable contributor, or contribution, to the Broadway musical.

Symonds’s book sheds light on Rodgers and Hart’s developing and maturing style and practices during the 1920s, which led to their success and renown in the 1930s. *We'll Have*

Manhattan focuses on three main aspects: Rodgers and Hart's use, development and exploration of music and lyrics within a narrative; the business of musical theatre and its influence on their works; and the portrayal of identity, both personal and national. The Introduction and Chapter 1 provide a brief history of Rodgers and Hart's childhoods and their earliest collaborative works, as well as a broad overview of the landscape of musical theatre in the 1920s. Like many historical accounts of Broadway musicals, the subsequent chapters (from 2 to 8) each focus on a particular show rather than a common theme, allowing for a mostly chronological narrative. Within each chapter the narrative is, at times, non-sequential, however the use of subheadings and multiple figures eliminates any possible confusion. The discussion of each show is augmented by historical, social, cultural, political and personal contexts as well as extensive musical and lyrical analysis. The final chapter discusses Rodgers and Hart's move from Broadway to Hollywood in 1931, following the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the ending of what had been a prosperous decade.

The 'Roaring Twenties' was a time of significant change in the United States. After World War I ended, Americans attempted to distance themselves from their European heritage and create their own identity. On Broadway, composers such as George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, and Rodgers and Hart were embracing jazz and other contemporary musical idioms to create new and exciting styles of music. For Rodgers and Hart, the 1920s was a period of experimentation, as they refined their skills with each show. Symonds's examination of this period of Rodgers and Hart's career bridges a gap in the scholarly understanding of their output.

The Garrick Gaieties of 1925 and 1926 (Chapter 2) was a turning point for Rodgers and Hart. The featured song, 'Manhattan,' became a commercial hit that launched their careers. Later in 1925, the duo, along with librettist Herbert Fields (who collaborated with Rodgers and Hart on many of their works), wrote their first integrated musical comedy, *Dearest Enemy* (Chapter 3). Symonds guides the reader through earlier manifestations of *Dearest Enemy* (originally titled *Sweet Rebel* during its out-of-town tryouts), outlining the differences seen with each new draft, as well as the positives and negatives of each version. Although many critics did not look favourably on this show, they praised the integrated plot—a feature that had become somewhat of a rarity on Broadway.

With the onslaught of talented writers in the business during the 1920s, securing financial backing was difficult, and more than once Rodgers and Hart were rejected in favour of more experienced and more famous writers. In Chapter 4, Symonds digresses somewhat to discuss Herbert Fields and his father, Lew Fields, who produced many of Rodgers and Hart's later shows. The partnership between the Fields and Rodgers and Hart began with *The Girl Friend* (1926). Despite Herb, Dick, and Larry's passion for an integrated musical, Lew cut the show dramatically during the out-of-town tryouts. By the time it was performed on Broadway, the show was more like a revue, earning lukewarm responses from critics. Nonetheless, Rodgers and Hart learnt how to maintain their artistic integrity whilst pandering to a producer's demands.

Having gained some notoriety, Rodgers and Hart were commissioned to write their first show for the West End (Chapter 5). *Lido Lady* (1926) received dichotomous responses from critics and audiences. English audiences had already been introduced to American musical styles of jazz and ragtime, and were eager for more toe-tapping music. Critics, on the other

hand, lamented the use of jazz and ragtime instead of more traditional 'English' music. Their lament was partly due to the critics' racist views toward African Americans, which, as Symonds suggests, was only thinly veiled in their reviews. Despite the criticisms, Rodgers's music—which was described as having a 'discreet' use of jazz—was generally well received. This is not terribly surprising as both the music and lyrics borrow heavily from Gershwin's *Lady, Be Good* (1924). Rodgers and Hart's next two shows in London—*One Damn Thing after Another* (1927) and *Ever Green* (1930)—were more successful, but, despite their preference for integrated narratives, Rodgers and Hart returned to the revue format in both shows; it was a style the producer, Charles B. Cochran, favoured.

Returning from England, Rodgers and Hart threw themselves into two parallel projects: *Peggy-Ann* (1926), a Cinderella story with fanciful and exaggerated characters, and *Betsy* (1926), a revue for eminent producer Florenz Ziegfeld (Chapter 6). To be commissioned by Ziegfeld signalled a meteoric rise in Rodgers and Hart's success. The duo's relationship with Ziegfeld, however, turned sour almost from the beginning. At the show's New York premiere, Rodgers and Hart discovered that Ziegfeld had removed some of their material without informing them. This included the song 'The Funny World,' which was intended to be the hit of the show. That song was replaced with 'Blue Skies,' a work by Irving Berlin. According to Symonds, this was particularly hurtful for Rodgers and Hart, who were often compared to the likes of Berlin and Gershwin, but with little of the same praise (p. 178).

The following year, 1927, Rodgers and Hart produced their most successful show to date, *The Connecticut Yankee* (Chapter 7). Symonds provides a detailed account of the origins of the story in Mark Twain's book *The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. As Symonds explains, however, Twain's book was underpinned by a social commentary on modern society, yet the musical had little, if any, of the same commentary. Instead, the work was purely comedic, capitalising on the combination of Arthurian and modern language (as exemplified in one of their most popular songs, 'Thou Swell'). In an extended analysis of the show, Symonds seamlessly transitions between lyrical, musical and dialogical analysis, whilst also providing historical context, and explaining the many topical references in the show and lyrics.

Three years later, Rodgers and Hart produced perhaps their most daring experiment, *Chee-Chee* (Chapter 8). Based on a series of popular and provocative novels, *Chee-Chee* tells the tale of the Grand Eunuch of China who wishes to retire and hand over his duties to his reluctant son, whilst his sixteen-year-old daughter wishes to become a concubine. Critics found the focus of the show on castration and prostitution to be distasteful and puerile, and their reviews lambasted the show accordingly. Symonds suggests, however, it was not the more daring sexual content of the show that made it a failure—after all, overt displays of sexuality were becoming increasingly common during the 1920s—but the homosexual subtext, a topic deemed unacceptable at the time. Rodgers's account of this show is dismissive at best, painting his involvement in a rather rosy manner. Symonds's analytical commentary on Rodgers's biography, however, is less forgiving, challenging Rodgers's claims of indifference (p. 218–20). Perhaps most interesting, however, is the discussion of Rodgers's excitement and increasing desire for an integrated narrative and score: a feat Rodgers believed they had achieved in *Chee-Chee*. As Symonds discusses, it was this driving interest that led to Rodgers's most famous work, *Oklahoma!* (1943), which is generally considered to be the first fully integrated musical, setting the standard for everything to come (p. 220).

With the closure of *Chee-Chee*, approximately one month after its opening, the duo appeared rattled. They wrote a few shows, but none received the praise of their previous works. When the Stock Market crashed in 1929 and the country was plunged into the Depression, Rodgers, Hart and Fields turned to Hollywood (Chapter 9), writing shows such as *Spring is Here* and *Love Me Tonight*. Symonds's final chapter is disappointingly brief, barely touching on Rodgers and Hart's output in Hollywood. But Symonds concedes this omission in his acknowledgments, suggesting this topic will be covered in his second volume, *The Boys from Columbia: Rodgers and Hart, 1932–1943*.

When reading Symonds's work, I was left with the impression that he has a great deal more to say. In fact, each chapter seems worthy of a book unto itself, which would have allowed for significantly more detail, but would almost certainly be less engaging. The omission of superfluous or excessive information, coupled with concise yet accessible language, made for easy reading. The musical and lyrical analysis, which can often be presented in a dry manner, is diffused by interesting anecdotes and synoptic details. But perhaps the most impressive feature of Symonds's book is the wide range of contextual information, from the public fascination with Expressionism and Freudian theories influencing the plot of *Peggy-Ann*, to the analysis of Mark Twain's writings. This publication is truly a masterful summation of the early collaborative years of Dick Rodgers and Larry Hart.

About the Reviewer

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