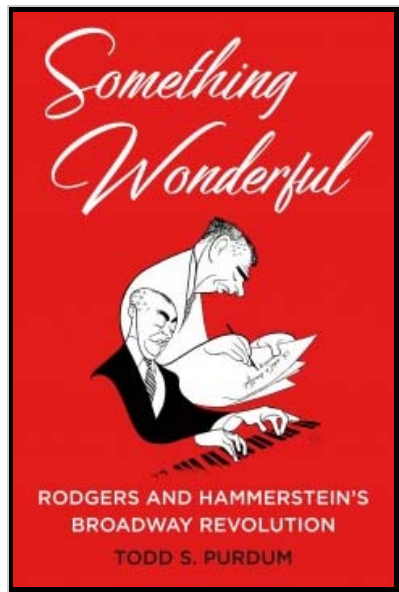


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Something Wonderful: Rodgers and Hammerstein's Broadway Revolution

by Todd S. Purdum

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From the Publisher: A revelatory portrait of the creative partnership that transformed musical theater and provided the soundtrack to the American Century They stand at the apex of the great age of songwriting, the creators of the classic Broadway musicals Oklahoma!, Carousel, South Pacific, The King and I, and The Sound of Music, whose songs have never lost their popularity or emotional power. Even before they joined forces, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II had written dozens of Broadway shows, but together they pioneered a new art form: the serious musical play. Their songs and dance numbers served to advance the drama and reveal character, a sharp break from the past and the template on which all future musicals would be built. Though different in personality and often emotionally distant from each other, Rodgers and Hammerstein presented an unbroken front to the world and forged much more than a songwriting team; their partnership was also one of the most profitable and powerful entertainment businesses of their era. They were cultural powerhouses whose work came to define postwar America on stage, screen, television, and radio. But they also had their failures and flops, and more than once they feared they had lost their touch. Todd S. Purdum's portrait of these two men, their creative process, and their groundbreaking innovations will captivate lovers of musical theater, lovers of the classic American songbook, and young lovers wherever they are. He shows that what Rodgers and Hammerstein wrought was truly something wonderful.

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About The Author

Todd S. Purdum
Todd S. Purdum is the author of An Idea Whose Time Has Come and A Time of Our Choosing. He is a contributing editor at Vanity Fair and a senior writer at Politico, having previously worked at The New York Times for more than twenty years, where he served as White House correspondent, diplomatic correspondent, and Los Angeles bureau chief. A graduate of Princeton University, he lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Dee Dee Myers, and their two children, Kate and Stephen.

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This brisk and lively biography of the greatest team in musical theater history remains happily focused on what matters most: the shows. Author Todd S. Purdum begins with one chapter for Rodgers and another for Hammerstein, covering their lives and careers up to that fateful partnership. This is rather bracing, for it reminds us that Oscar Hammerstein ("Show Boat") and Richard Rodgers (Rodgers & Hart) accomplished enough before they ever met to be remembered forever in musical theater. Then Purdum devotes about a chapter to each major work, as well the increasing activity that surrounds a commercial juggernaut like Rodgers and Hammerstein. First up is "Oklahoma," the ground-breaking work that is the "Citizen Kane" or "Sgt. Pepper" of musical theater, the show that changed everything. Then came the equally dark and daring "Carousel," followed by the bland film "State Fair" (Rodgers & Hammerstein were both rightly wary of Hollywood). While Purdum emphasizes the negative impact of their "flop" hit "Allegro" along with the positive impact on a young Stephen Sondheim, that show ranks alongside "Oklahoma" in terms of pointing the way forward for decades to come. And there were more hits ("South Pacific," "The King And I"), admirable misses ("The Flower Drum Song") and finally the epic success of "The Sound Of Music," the show that embalmed them for decades as middle-brow pap rather than the path-breaking innovators they had been. Purdum highlights the many signal contributions of others along the way, from Agnes de Mille to director/writer Josh Logan to actors and orchestrators on down, along with the reluctance of R&H to give fair credit where credit was due. (Genius is not always generous.) Did I mention the outstanding triumph that was the TV special "Cinderella" starring Julie Andrews? Purdum persuasively echoes the familiar argument that movies and TV were key to their falling reputation. Film versions of "Oklahoma," "Carousel" and "South Pacific" were sanitized of their bold topics, poorly cast or just plain awful. However commercially successful, they ruined the team's image. And their two biggest hits were by far the sweetest and simplest. Even though film version of "The Sound Of Music" notably improved on the stage show, it didn't help. But there's a happy ending: with R&H gone, bold new directors weren't forced to mount old-fashioned museum pieces. Suddenly, from the 1992 London revival of "Carousel" onward, the memory of treacly high school productions faded and startling, imaginative revivals revealed what adherents always knew: Rodgers & Hammerstein were the boldest and most fascinating of talents. They were pushing boundaries on what stories a musical could tell, how they would tell them and doing it all with songs so precise and deceptively simple that everyone can sing them. And yet, in the right hands those "simple" songs reveal passionate depths. Purdum doesn't shy away from the personal, like Hammerstein's insecurities, Rodgers chasing after show girls or his battles with depression and alcoholism. But it's always in the context of how personal matters affected their relationship and their work. "Something Wonderful" doesn't rock the boat with any unexpected claims for this show or damning of that one. It's a solid, affectionate description of artists who look more important today than at any time since, oh, 1945. -- Michael Giltz

What Others Say

"Todd Purdum's skillful dual biography...strips away the accretions of time and reputation to retrieve the craft and dynamism with which his subjects created a new kind of musical."—The Economist "Readers will learn the stories behind the music and how this most successful of writing duos crafted some of the finest musicals to grace the American stage...Something wonderful, indeed." —Booklist (starred review) "Joyous, brisk, and gossipy...An exuberant celebration of musical genius." —Kirkus Reviews "Purdum's anecdote-filled account is a sterling primer on the influential duo, both for newcomers to their work and to those looking to rekindle an old flame." —Publishers Weekly "A scrupulously researched and infinitely fascinating history of the collaboration of Rodgers & Hammerstein—two giants who propelled the musical theater to uncharted heights. Todd Purdum acknowledges the contribution of directors, orchestrators, composers of incidental music, designers, and performers who helped produce the seamless integration that influenced those of us who were their disciples. His book is a fair-minded appreciation of these gods but acknowledges that they had feet of clay. It is an impressive addition to the literature celebrating the American musical theater." —Harold Prince "Rodgers and Hammerstein drew pictures, made lists. They understood and rewrote the longings of the heart. My favorite of their songs happens to be the book's title: 'Something Wonderful.' I have sung it live, on stage, on recordings, and with the man I felt the same way about. I love the intimacy of the stories Todd Purdum tells—he shows himself to be especially sensitive to Oscar Hammerstein's special connection with Richard Rodgers." —Carly Simon "Before there was Netflix and Hulu, some of the most gifted writers on the cultural landscape wrote beautiful and clever songs. And of the composers who bundled those songs together to accompany a story and thus gave us the Broadway musical, none have had more of an impact on the genre, or the business, than Rodgers and Hammerstein. Todd Purdum's book is a piece of American history you should devour, as nothing tells us about our times and ourselves quite like our songs." —Alec Baldwin "A reminder in these tribalized times that musical theater, once so central to our culture, is still vividly alive - and that the art's twin titans, Rodgers and Hammerstein, still matter deeply. Clear, precise, and passionate, this is a necessary book, and even better, one that is a joy to read." —James Kaplan, author of Frank: The Voice and Sinatra: The Chairman

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