

SHOW BOAT

Program Notes

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Show Boat is a monumental American classic and a revolutionary masterpiece of the lyric stage. With Hammerstein and Kern's groundbreaking work on the production, a new art form emerged in the American musical theatre. For the first time, visionary writers dared to integrate music, humor, libretto, lyrics, and décor into a single artistic entity. Arguably, this approach left the traditions of the American musical comedy and Viennese operetta behind, giving birth to the first "musical play."

Long before *Show Boat* opened in 1927, a renowned composer of the American musical theatre, Jerome Kern, had grown weary of the standard musical-comedy formula. The typical 1920s musical was lacking meaningful social commentary; dramatic truth; a plot with a rational, believable line; three-dimensional characters; and authenticity of background and atmosphere. After the "Princess Theatre" shows such as *Very Good Eddie* and *Oh, Boy!*, Kern's work hadn't diverged significantly from the artistic endeavors of his fellow composers.

However, after reading Edna Ferber's sprawling family saga Show Boat, he endeavored to be the first to compose a popular musical version of a serious novel. Kern was a bibliophile who had long admired Ferber's work and Show Boat's title immediately caught his interest. Kern adored the richly romantic plot, filled with tenderness, humor, and high drama. He was confident that Show Boat was the novel that could help him bring artistic dignity to the American Musical Comedy.

Kern telephoned the thirty-one-year old Oscar Hammerstein II and suggested they create a Broadway musical version of Ferber's novel. This demonstrated Kern's faith in Hammerstein, enabling his first solo attempt to write both book and lyrics for a Broadway show. Hammerstein quickly agreed and they immediately turned their attention to securing the rights.

Kern was introduced to Ferber at the opening night of his show *Criss Cross*, October 12, 1926. When Kern met Ferber, he promptly asked her for permission to adapt Show Boat into a musical-comedy. Ferber could not imagine her novel as musical-comedy material. Undeterred, Kern explained his artistic vision and Ferber hesitantly offered the rights. Kern and Hammerstein immediately set to work and on November 26, 1926, they demonstrated their progress to the legendary impresario Florenz Ziegfeld. The next day, Ziegfeld sent the following message to a tenor named Harry Fender:

"...last night I heard the first act of the *Show Boat*, and Jerome Kern's music. This is the best musical comedy I have ever been fortunate to get hold of; it looks wonderful, and there are two of the greatest parts that have ever been written. I don't know if you have read the *Show Boat* by Edna Ferber, but the gambling lover is a part I think you can play.... This show is the opportunity of my life, and is an opportunity that comes once in a lifetime..."

Ziegfeld or the "glorifier of the American girl" as he was known, was famous for producing a series of lavish and spectacular revues. His flamboyant productions consisted of extravagant sets, hilarious comedians, and a plethora of gorgeous dancing girls. Ziegfeld's publicist, Will Page, described Ziegfeld's Follies as "musical entertainment for tired business men which should represent almost the possible limit of what could decently be done upon the stage." Given his previous work, it was a testament to Ziegfeld's ability as a producer to have immediately recognized *Show Boat*'s possibilities. That being said, Ziegfeld was not without trepidation. His daughter, Patricia Ziegfeld Stephenson, recalled the following in a TV documentary:

"*Show Boat* was really a step for him that was terrifying. And although he loved doing it, it was rather a sad story, and he said, 'We cannot do this musical with all this sadness.'...He was so afraid that people would not like what he was doing,

because it wasn't the kind of Follies the audience expected. They expected laughter and beautiful girls."

Despite his apprehension, Ziegfeld previewed the production on tour from November 15 to December 19, 1927. On Tuesday, December 27, 1927, *Show Boat* opened on Broadway at the magnificent 1632-seat Ziegfeld Theatre. It proved to be an absolute hit and a momentous artistic achievement for Kern and Hammerstein. Kern's score interplayed various musical styles to become an innovative treasure-trove of brilliant melodies, arguably the greatest ever written for the musical theatre. Some would say Hammerstein's libretto began a new genre in musical theatre, becoming the first "musical play;" it put black and white performers on stage together for the first time, it masterfully adapted a serious novel into a musical, and it successfully spanned three generations of time.

Despite *Show Boat's* importance, the traditional scope and size of the show has been a deterrent for Goodspeed in the past. However, acclaimed director Rob Ruggiero has been at the helm charting a unique course by which we navigate through this epic story. Ruggiero will emphasize the personal show-business-family aspect of the production. He envisions "a family that reaches beyond any biological connection, to a place that represents a very deep connection and love." Surely, the Goodspeed Opera House will provide an intimate performance space and inviting atmosphere to serve that vision. Goodspeed's *Show Boat* is based on the 1946 published script, with adjustments made in conjunction with Rodgers & Hammerstein. We are honored and overjoyed to revive this immortal triumph of the Broadway stage.



Photo: Oscar Hammerstein II, Florenz Ziegfeld, and Jerome Kern outside the National Theatre in Washington, Dc before the first performance of Show Boat, November 15, 1927