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Carousel



"My boy Bill, I will see that he is named after me, I will," sings the brawny and ill-mannered Bigelow, dreaming of a day when his soon-to-be-born child will grow up to be "the spittin' image of his dad." Given to fits of hitting his wife, he has now been infused with the passion for change that comes with impending child birth. Bigelow talks to us when insisting that his boy can be "the president of the United States," but only if he wanted to, then sings the line "not Bill" immediately after, creating a feeling that the soliloquy was voiced not sung. Perhaps one of the best moments of things-that-are-not-to-be, Bigelow realizes that "could it be, what if he is a girl?" The music changes from triumphant to lovely, as he understands "my little girl gets hungry ev'ry night and she comes home to me."

In one of the great moments of musical history, Bigelow vows "to make certain that she won't be dragged up in slums with a lot o' bums like me," that he doesn't know how to get money, but he'll "go out and make it or steal it or take it, or die." The progression from depression to triumph to love to conviction in Bigelow's "Soliloquy" is a microcosm for Reprise Theatre Company's production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Carousel," a show with impeccable singing, adventurous dance numbers, brilliant acting, and above all, a perfectly timed progression of the story emphasizing the minutest detail, causing tears to swell up even in those who have encountered "Carousel" before.

Julie Jordan (Alexandra Silber) is serenaded in "Carousel Waltz" by the carousel worker Billy Bigelow (Robert Patteri) in a coastal town in Maine. The carousel owner Mrs. Mullin (Tracy Lore) is unhappy with Bigelow's flirting because she's secretly in love with him. When Bigelow refuses to dismiss Julie, Mrs. Mullin fires him, and both him and Julie are out of a job because her factory has a curfew. Bigelow tells Julie "You're a Queer One Julie Jordan," because she can't be robbed (if you asked her for money she'd give it to you) and never had a fella of her own. Julie imagines "If I Loved You" how she'd be longing to tell Bigelow but is afraid and shy and he'd leave without ever knowing how she felt. In return, Bigelow wonders what life is about (which he tries to figure out by himself) in a sea of stars with two little people in it. Bigelow replies to Julie about "If I Loved You" and how his golden chances'd pass him by. They fall in love and are married. Later, the company, led by Julie's cousin Nettie Fowler (Victoria Strong), sing "June Is Bustin' Out All Over," while the whalers sing "Blow High, Blow Low," both great ballet arrangements credited to Agnes DeMille. Billy has become an abusive husband who can't make enough for his family to live on. This is when he finds out that Julie is having a baby, prompting him to motivate himself to commit murder with the shady Jigger Caignin (James Leo Ryan) in order to get money. The "Soliloquy" is one of the few songs in the genre of musical theatre in which the action is pushed forward within the song itself by a transformation of the protagonist's way of thinking.

During "A Real Nice Clambake," Jigger and Billy drop out of the hunt to go rob David Bascombe (Gregory North), the owner of a cotton mill. Unfortunately, the knife Billy kept in his shirt is useless as Bascombe comes out with a pistol to stop the perpetrators. Instead of ending up in jail, Billy does the unthinkable, prompting his wife to have to raise the unborn child on her own. Nettie prompts Julie to sing "You'll Never Walk Alone" at Billy's death, and it recurs during a climactic scene involving Billy's future daughter Louise (Kimberly Mikesell) during her graduation, as she listens to the graduation speech. In short, Billy is given a chance to come back for one day to right his wrongs and to help his daughter get over her loss of a father during her upbringing, which has its consequences Louise's rebellious nature and her being jilted in love.

One of the highlights of this production is the role of Enoch Snow (Andy Taylor), the "bold and daring, big bewhiskered, overbearing" fisherman in a round-bottomed coat who "can't seem to lose the smell of fish." Snow is the betrothed of Carrie Pippidge (Jane Noseworthy), whose idealized love with Snow recurs

throughout the work as a contrast with the turbulent but romanticized love between Julie and Bigelow. In "When the Children Are Asleep," Enoch sings of getting married, and turning his one little boat into two, then four, then eight and a flotilla of little boats, getting rich on sardines. Meanwhile, Pipperidge sings the dual of having one little kid, then another little kid, then eight little kids. Taylor's first appearance is hilarious, as we see Carrie's idealized image of Snow and the audience's real image of the dorky and proper Snow are completely different. Even so, it's not hard to believe their love as they give voice to "when the children are asleep I dream with you."

Snow's relationship with Carrie is later threatened when the tricky Jigger "teaches" Carrie self-defense. In the "Stonecutters Cut It On Stone" song, Jigger and company tells Carrie how "there's nothing so bad for a woman as a man who thinks he's good." James Leo Ryan's role as Jigger is brilliant. He gives the air of both a sinister crook and a lady's man (especially with Mrs. Mullin). Jigger prompts Snow to sing of "Geraniums in the Winter" and how "we might have been a happy pair of lovers."

The discussion of infidelity leads the women to suggest that with any man, women are doomed to wail, until they look to Julie Jordan for confirmation. In one of the strongest performances in the play, Alexandra Silber gives a bitter-sweet rendition of "What's the Use of Wond'rin." In some sense the entire musical flashes by in the phrase "common sense may tell you that the ending will be sad, ... but what's the use of wond'ring if the ending will be sad, he's your feller and you love him, there's nothing more to say." Silber has a strong voice that shows through especially well during this scene, and her character's devotion to Bigelow can be heard in every note, especially when she tells all that "something made him the way that he is, whether he's false or true," which provides an insight into the story of Bigelow at the doorstep (backdoor actually) of heaven.

Of the many acrobatic dance numbers in the piece, the most dramatic is that of the development of Louise. Performed to both music and voice, the ballet features the Carnival Boy (John Todd) taking Louise (Kimberly Mikesell) up in the air in many positions, evocative of the acrobatic whalers in "Blow High, Blow Low." Moreover, Mikesell does a wonderful job of representing a rebellious youth fueled by spite. She is best remembered for being hit hard by her dad as a spirit, but not hit to be hurt, a moment similar to the one where Bigelow finally tells Julie he loves her, because as long as one person remembers him, he is not really dead.

Also worth noting is the dance associated with "June Is Bustin' Out All Over." As Nettie triumphantly sings "the sheep aren't sleepin' anymore" (because June's a time for making new sheep), the company presents some of the most acrobatic moves in the piece, including one person doing a backflip off another person's arms. Nettie's role also gets a boost in the song "You'll Never Walk Alone," ironically the last piece of music we hear. A spiritual that commands "when you walk through a storm keep your chin up high," it signals an end for both Bigelow and Julie in their different stations. It's singing like this in the performance that will keep you believing that "Carousel" might just be the greatest musical of all.

"Carousel" is performed by Reprise Theatre Company (<http://www.reprise.org>) at Freud Playhouse at UCLA, California, until 7th of February, 2010.