

British Theatre Guide

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Carousel

Rodgers and Hammerstein

Opera North

Barbican Theatre

15 August–15 September 2012

The clever choreography and subtle yet stunning set changes make an exciting start to Opera North's well-received *Carousel* tour. But could the rest live up to the opening sequence?

Led by conductor James Holmes, Opera North is the first British opera company to attempt to set this well-loved classic musical. The vocal timbres match much more cohesively to the musical voices typically heard in the forties than the modern day belters. And vocally this show certainly doesn't disappoint, with only a few front stage mics being used for the soloists.

Vocally there are no weak links; especially enjoyable is Katherine Manley who grows into the role of Julie throughout the show. Sassy Sarah Tynan (Carrie Pipperidge) is a ball of indignant squeaks and witty repartee. It's when there's no singing that *Carousel* falls a little flat, the dialogue missing the pace and energy so needed for this very long musical.

Opera North is no stranger to the musical genre, having staged Sondheim, Kern, Gershwin and Weill in recent years. They certainly have most of the elements for success: beautiful sets (Anthony Ward) on which director Jo Davies concocts the simple American village life of the *Carousel* characters. The lighting designs (Bruno Poet) are magical, infusing the stage with warm summer evenings and starlit nights. Kay Shepard's choreography ensures the stage is alive with movement in the ensemble scenes. "June is Bustin' Out All Over" brings all the excitement of spring onto stage and Yvonne Howard (Nettie Fowler) is the life and soul of the party.

Unfortunately, despite this stellar team concocting *Carousel*, it is the cast themselves that struggle to make the transition into this genre with the spoken dialogue. The American accents often head to other continents, and the emotion infusing the songs instantly feels more insincere as the orchestra quietens. The most convincing performance was from the menacing Jigger Craigin (Michael Rouse).

Despite being a musical that touches the darker themes of death and abusive relationships, it is overall a timeless tale of love. This infuses the whole work to the point where one should be distraught by the death of Billy Biggalo. Although the music makes your spine tingle in "You'll Never Walk Alone", the audience was dry-eyed. By the time we reached heaven's back yard scene, the audience wasn't overwrought with emotion, and the sentimentality that followed felt saccharine and indulgent without the build-up. This was tipped over the edge with a Disney-style shooting star ending across the back wall.

The saving grace was Kim Brandstump's stunning, spiraling, fluid choreography for the pas de deux, danced with graceful tenderness by Beverley Grant. The brilliance of this desperate swirling duet only served to highlight that the rest of the ending was lacking.

This show is a tricky beast to tackle. Hailed by *Time Magazine* as the best musical of the century, it is nevertheless a long and repetitive tale. Opera North has made cuts, but it requires more than this to sustain excitement through the three hours.

This genre mix up is so close to being a huge success; they have the musical experience in the production team but the cast can't quite pull it all together. Each large ensemble number stands alone as a showcase gem, but as a whole is tarnished by the intervening dialogue and ending.

Reviewer: [Louise Lewis](#)