Allegro opened at the Majestic Theatre in New York on 10th October 1947 to the largest advance ticket sales in Broadway history. [1] But with mixed reviews it did not go on to become the hit everyone was expecting and closed after playing 315 performances, the shortest run of any Rodgers and Hammerstein musical except for 1955's Pipe Dream which ran 245 performances.

Allegro was groundbreaking pushing the boundaries of the musical theatre into new and exciting areas. It was a 'concept musical' long before that phrase had ever been coined. But in 1947 a 'concept musical' was not what the public wanted to see.

A recent 2009 complete recording of the score of Allegro reveals the invention and craftsmanship of the work proving that the musical has been unduly underrated for the last fifty years.

In 1947 Rodgers and Hammerstein were on the crest of a wave of popularity and critical acclaim. Oklahoma! in 1943 and Carousel in 1945 had been enormous successes, they had won an Oscar for their song "It Might As Well be Spring" in what turned out to be their only movie collaboration in 1945's State Fair, and had produced Irving Berlin's blockbuster hit Annie Get Your Gun. They dominated Broadway.

In early 1946 Rodgers and Hammerstein began searching around for a new subject for their next musical. It was Hammerstein's idea to write a show about the problems an ordinary man faces in a contemporary society. Rodgers was not enthused but on discussion warmed to the idea when the protagonist became a doctor's son. Rodgers was the son of a doctor and his brother was also one as well. [2]

By September the general theme of the story had evolved into "the struggle of the main character to avoid compromising his principles as he progresses through life." Hammerstein had initially wanted to write about a man from birth to death, but after having just killed off Billy Bigelow in Carousel he was reluctant to kill another protagonist. In the end the central character in Allegro moves from birth to age 35. [3]

Both men had been impressed with the simple staging of Thornton Wilder's small-town America classic Out Town in 1938 and because Allegro was set in small-town America they wanted to use this style. [4] They conceived it as taking place in an open space, using props and projections to convey scenery and time and place. In addition to the singing chorus, there would be a speaking chorus, in the manner of a Greek chorus, which would comment on the action, and speak to both characters and the audience. [5]

Hammerstein did background research by interviewing his own doctor. [6] He wrote a few pages of the book before embarking with his wife on a ship for Australia to visit her mother. On arrival in Brisbane he mailed Rodgers the rest of the material he had written on board. Rodgers, who did not compose until his lyricist supplied him with the lyrics, immediately set to work composing three songs. [7]

Hammerstein spent a year polishing and refining the first act. The second was very rushed because of the approaching production deadline and it was only completed one week before rehearsals began. [8]

Allegro begins in a small-town in the Midwest in 1905 with the birth of Joseph Taylor Junior the son of Marjorie and Joseph Taylor, the town's only doctor. We follow Joseph Junior from childhood to high school, his dreams of one day following in his father's footsteps and becoming a doctor, emotional complications with his childhood sweetheart Jennie, and his going away to college. While he is away at college Jennie realizes her ambitions so far beyond the wife of a small town doctor. But Joe's every thought is of her. He misses her and just prior to graduation rushes home...
The Children's Dance from the original Broadway production 1947

The College Dance from the original Broadway production 1947

The score opens with "Joseph Taylor, Jr." sung by the Ensemble in which they proclaim that except for her wedding, this is the "happiest day of Marjorie Taylor's life." This is followed by the grandmother singing "I Know It Can Happen Again," in which she expresses that babies grow up into men because she's seen it all before. "Pudgy Legs" follows and then "One Foot Other Foot" as Joe Jr. begins to walk. A Children's Dance introduces a new character, Jennie Brinker, who later becomes Joe's childhood sweetheart. Joe's grandmother's death is followed by "Winters Go By" and "Poor Joe," brief interludes which are used to transition Joe from a child to a teenager and sung by the Ensemble.

Next up is the first major song, a duet for Joseph Senior and his wife Marjorie, "A Fellow Needs a Girl."

"A fellow needs a girl
To sit by his side
At the end of a weary day,
To sit by his side
And listen to him talk
And agree with the things he'll say.

The action then moves to a college Freshman dance with "Mountain Greenery" played by a jazz band in the background. This sequence includes one of the few solos for Joe when he sings the brief "It's a darn nice campus," which extols the virtues of college life, but tags it with the fact that he is lonely and he wishes he were home.

A scene on the Football Field follows with a football song, "Wildcats" sung by the players, which segues into Jennie's garden and her reading a letter from Joe where "It's a darn nice campus" is repeated.

The next sequence is a composite of classrooms in which five Professors sprout their various subjects, Chemistry, Greek, English, Philosophy and Biology, in competition with Joe's daydreams about Jennie, during which the Ensemble comment in song "She is never away" (from her home in your heart). The sequence is interrupted by the song "So Far" sung by Jennie's sister Beulah on a first date with Joe;

"We have nothing to remember so far, so far,
So far, we haven't walked by night
And shared the light of a star"

But Jennie appears in Joe's thoughts and he returns to singing "You Are Never Away" (from your home in my heart) with the Ensemble.

The First Act ends with "What a Lovely Day For a Wedding" which includes a song by Joe's friend Charlie "It May be A Good Idea," and then segues into the Act One Finale inside the church where the gathered sing, "Wish them well, wish them well." "They have faith in the future, and joy in their hearts, wish them well."
Act Two opens during the depression in the backyard of Jennie and Joe's home with Jennie and her girlfriends singing the ironic waltz, "Money Isn't Everything."

"Money isn't everything
Unless you're very poor"

A brief reprise of "Poor Joe" follows by the Ensemble, which in turn is followed by Joe reprising "You Are Never Away." Hammerstein is at his most bucolic in his lyrics for this song;

"You're a rainbow I chase
On a morning in spring,
You're the star in the lace
Of a wild willow tree,
In the green leafy lace
Of a wild, willow tree."

Joe Senior is disappointed at his son leaving but resigns himself as Marjorie appears and sings a reprise of "A Fellow Needs a Girl."

A cocktail party is in full swing at Joe and Jennie's apartment in Chicago. The chorus sing "Yatata."

"The deep-thinking gentlemen and ladies
Who keep a metropolis alive
Drink cocktails
And knock tails
Ev'ry afternoon at five"

Disillusioned with her boss, Emily leaves the party and sings the sardonic "The Gentleman Is a Dope," a Hammerstein lyric in the style of Lorenz Hart.

"The gentleman is a dope,
A man of many faults,
A clumsy Joe
Who Wouldn't know
A rhumba from a waltz,
The gentleman is a dope,
And not my cup of tea –
(Why do I get in a dither?
He doesn't belong to me!)

Later, Joe, who is also disillusioned with his life sings with Charlie, Emily and the Ensemble, the title song, a cynical paean to big city life.

"May's in love with Kay's husband,
He's in love with Sue!
Sue's in love with May's husband,
What are they to do?
Tom's in love with Tim's wife,
She's in love with Sam!
Sam's in love with Tom's wife,
So they're in a jam!
They are smart little sheep
Who have lost their way
Blah! Blah! Blah!
Brisk, lively, merry and bright!
Allegro!

Musically Rodgers borrowed the ascending phrase at the end of the song from "Johnny One Note" his song from 1937's Babes in Arms. It's one of the rare instances when Rodgers took a direct quote from one of his own songs.

The song "Allegro" is followed by a dream ballet which depicts the confusion and the futility that pervades the society in which Joe practices medicine, before he decides to go home. The Ensemble and Marjorie then sing "Come Home."

"Come home, come home,
Where the brown birds fly
Through a pale, blue sky
To a tall green tree,
There is no finer sight for a man to see –"
There is no finer sight for a man to see –
Come home, Joe, come home."

The Finale Ultimo features a sequence that includes snatches of "Yatata," "Come Home," and "One Foot Other Foot."

There was one song that was dropped before rehearsals started called "My Wife."

"You are so lovely, my wife,
You are the light of my life."

Rodgers later used the melody in 1949s *South Pacific* where it became popular and known as "Younger Than Springtime." [10]

In an unprecedented move Rodgers and Hammerstein hired Agnes De Mille to not only choreograph the musical but also direct it. [11] It was the first time the two functions had been done by one person in a Broadway musical. De Mille had choreographed both *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* creating the innovative 'Dream Ballets' in which the characters' psychological states were conveyed to the audience. She appeared to be a good fit for the project. [12]

But De Mille was concerned about the cohesion of the script as she received it from Hammerstein. A few days before rehearsals began she asked him what the show was all about. He replied, "It's about a man not being allowed to do his own work because of worldly pressures." [13] De Mille answered, "That's not the play you've written. You haven't written your second act." Hammerstein replied, "But we're already committed to the theatre in New York." [14]

De Mille was not the only one who did double duty on the musical. Jo Mielziner created sets and lighting. With minimal sets and only projected images to set the scenes, lighting became an important element in the design. The first time lighting served as the principal staging factor in a Broadway musical. [15] There were 500 lighting cues, at the time a Broadway record.

Stephen Sondheim was employed on the production during his summer college break as a $25-a-week gofer. [16] He was 17 at the time. It was his first job in the theatre. He remembers.

"Jo Mielziner designed a serpentine curtain that hung from an "S" shaped track, which allowed sets to be revealed and concealed as the curtain was pulled to one side. One set could be placed behind the curtain on Stage left while a scene was being played on Stage Right and subsequently revealed when the curtain slid across in the other direction. This movie-wipe technique satisfied Oscar enough for him to use it in his next show, *South Pacific*, where wipes and dissolves were used throughout. Hal Prince has often acknowledged that this production was one of the main influences of his style – seeing those cinematic effects employed in the theater. *Allegro* initiated that approach, but because it was a failure few people paid attention." [17]  

Rehearsals took place in three different New York locations, for principals, singers and dancers. [18]

John Battles played the role of Joseph Taylor Jr. He'd previously appeared in Cole Porter's *Something for the Boys*, and as Gaby in Leonard Bernstein's *On the Town*. Roberta Jonay was Jennie Brinker. A Hollywood actress, it was her Broadway stage debut. It was also William Ching's Broadway stage debut playing Dr. Joseph Taylor. He also came to the show direct from Hollywood. Annamary Dickey was Marjorie Taylor. She was a former Metropolitan Opera performer with Broadway credits in *Rhapsody* and *Hollywood Pinafore*. [19]

John Conte and Gloria Wells both left the production of *Carousel* to appear in *Allegro*, as Charlie Townsend and Beulah respectively. Conte had been playing the role of Jigger Craigin in *Carousel* whilst Wells had been Arminy. [20] The part of Emily went to Lisa Kirk whose previous Broadway experience had only been in a show called *Good Night Ladies*.

Australian-born Muriel O'Malley was Grandma Taylor. She had started her career at 17 when she had sung in the Williamson-Melba Opera Company in 1928. At the time her most recent Broadway credit had been appearing as Aurelia in a revival of *The Chocolate Soldier* in March 1947. [22]

Rodgers' longtime orchestrator Robert Russell Bennett was credited with orchestrations, and although he did the bulk of the work, he was helped by Menotti Salta and Ted Royal. Salta orchestrated "The Gentleman Is a Dope," "So Far," "Wildcats," and "You Are Never Away" whilst Royal did "It's a Darn Fine Campus." [23]

Trude Rittman arranged the dance music, with Salvatore Dell'Isola conducting the orchestra. The choral director was Crane Calder, while Josephine Callan directed the choral speech. Costumes were by Lucinda Ballard. Like they had with *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* the Theatre Guild were on board once again to Produce.

*Allegro* opened out-of-town at the Shubert Theatre, New Haven, Connecticut, on the 1st September 1947. The first preview was disastrous. Scenery collapsed during William Ching singing "A Fellow Needs a Girl," dancer Ray Harrison caught his shoe in a track, tore the ligaments in his
Reviews hurt, and more importantly, so did word-of-mouth. Audiences either loved it or loathed it. There was no middle ground.

All in all there were four raves, one favorable, two unfavorable and two pans. The large advance helped, as did the rave reviews, but the bad definitely made history" for De Mille's giving "form and substance to material with little of either."

Agnes De Mille's direction and choreography were reviewed positively with the New York Times dance critic John Martin stating, "lives," while George Jean Nathan New York Journal American thought it was "as pretentious as artificial jewelry and just about as valuable." Cecil Smith in Theatre Arts claimed "Telegram, and Louis Kronenberger of New York P.M. The latter also said it was "an out-and-out failure."

But then there were the negative, three of which called it "a disappointment"; Wolcott Gibbs in The New Yorker, William Hawkins in the World Richard Watts Jr. in the Post said it was "a distinguished musical play, beautiful, imaginative, original and honestly moving." Robert Garland in the Journal American claimed "Allegro is bigger and better than anything Messrs. Rodgers and Hammerstein have written." Richard Watts Jr. in the Post said it was "a distinguished musical play, beautiful, imaginative, original and honestly moving."

But then were the negative, three of which called it "a disappointment"; Wolcott Gibbs in The New Yorker, William Hawkins in the World Telegram, and Louis Kronenberger of New York P.M. The latter also said it was "an out-and-out failure."

Cecil Smith in Theatre Arts claimed "Allegro fails where Our Town succeeded...Joseph Taylor Jr.'s life has little or nothing to tell us about our own lives," while George Jean Nathan New York Journal American thought it was "as pretentious as artificial jewelry and just about as valuable."

Agnes De Mille’s direction and choreography were reviewed positively with the New York Times dance critic John Martin stating, "Allegro has definitely made history" for De Mille's giving "form and substance to material with little of either."

All in all there were four raves, one favorable, two unfavorable and two pans. The large advance helped, as did the rave reviews, but the bad reviews hurt, and more importantly, so did word-of-mouth. Audiences either loved it or loathed it. There was no middle ground.

Expectation was high in New York for Allegro which by the time it had opened on 10th October 1947, had amassed $750,000 in advance sales, at a time when the top price ticket for a Broadway musical was $6. $100,000 advance would have been considered astronomical. [31] Allegro’s top ticket price was $4.50.

A special performance the afternoon of the opening for friends and associates generated wild applause however the audience at the official opening in the evening clapped little.

Brooks Atkinson in the New York Times said the work "just missed the final splendor of a perfect work of art," with Robert Coleman in the Daily Mirror stating "Allegro is perfection," and adding that it was "a stunning blending of beauty, integrity, intelligence, imagination, taste and skill...it lends new stature to the American musical stage."

Ward Monkhouse of The Sun called it “distinguished and tumultuous. It takes its place alongside of Oklahoma! and Carousel as a theatrical piece of taste, imagination, and showmanship."

Robert Garland in the Journal American claimed “Allegro is bigger and better than anything Messrs. Rodgers and Hammerstein have written.”

But then were the negative, three of which called it “a disappointment”; Wolcott Gibbs in The New Yorker, William Hawkins in the World Telegram, and Louis Kronenberger of New York P.M. The latter also said it was “an out-and-out failure."

Cecil Smith in Theatre Arts claimed "Allegro fails where Our Town succeeded...Joseph Taylor Jr.’s life has little or nothing to tell us about our own lives,” while George Jean Nathan New York Journal American thought it was "as pretentious as artificial jewelry and just about as valuable."

Agnes De Mille’s direction and choreography were reviewed positively with the New York Times dance critic John Martin stating, "Allegro has definitely made history" for De Mille’s giving “form and substance to material with little of either."

All in all there were four raves, one favorable, two unfavorable and two pans. The large advance helped, as did the rave reviews, but the bad reviews hurt, and more importantly, so did word-of-mouth. Audiences either loved it or loathed it. There was no middle ground.

With a weekly payroll of forty stagehands, eighteen principal actors, twenty-one supporting players, twenty-two dancers, thirty-eight singers and thirty-five musicians, Allegro was an expensive show. The production generated bad publicity when the producers proposed to dismiss several orchestra and chorus members to cut costs so the show might continue through the summer of 1948 with the fired performers alleging dismissal for hard-line unionism. [32]

On 19th July 1948, Allegro folded after a run of nine months. It cost $400,000 to produce and needed a year to break even and ended with a loss of $50,000. [33]

A national tour, which visited sixteen cities, commenced in November 1948 and played for eight months. The ads for the tour proclaimed “Direct from one year on Broadway” which was a gross exaggeration. [34]

There were no international productions. During the 1950s the show was popular with community theatres because of its large cast, no stars and no scenery, but there have been few
The flop of Allegro did more harm to the long-term Rodgers and Hammerstein association than it did in the short term. As Thomas S. Hischak states, "The show was a failure, and it did more harm to the long-term Rodgers and Hammerstein association than it did in the short term." [41] Although Rodgers never set out to write any hits, two of the songs in the score became popular; "So Far" and "A Fellow Needs a Girl." It has been said that because of their popularity it helped the show stay around as long as it did. Both songs were recorded by Perry Como whose version of "So Far" reached No. 11 on the Hit Parade with "A Fellow Needs a Girl" reaching No. 25. Frank Sinatra also recorded both songs, while Doris Day recorded "A Fellow Needs a Girl" and Margaret Whiting did "So Far."

In 1947 Victor records released five 78rpm recordings of songs from the score. These 78s became an original cast LP in the 60s. It was later reissued on CD in 1993. The complete studio recording was released by Sony Masterworks Broadway in 2009. It featured Patrick Wilson as Joe, Nathan Gunn and Audra McDonald as his parents, Marni Nixon as the Grandmother, Laura Benanti as Jennie, Liz Callaway as Emily, Norbert Leo Butz as Charlie, Judy Kuhn as Beulah, with guest performances by Danny Burstein, Kurt Peterson, Harvey Evans, Stephen Sondheim and the voice of Oscar Hammerstein who was heard as one of Joe's college professors. Peter Filichia on theatermania.com called the release "utterly glorious."

In the 1947 Donaldson Awards Allegro won Best Score, Lyrics and Book of a Musical. Lisa Kirk was the only member of the original cast to go on to have a major career on Broadway appearing as Bianca in the original production of Cole Porter's Kiss Me Kate and Lottie in Jerry Herman's Mack and Mabel in 1974.

Oscar Hammerstein was embittered about the public reaction to Allegro. He felt the audience did not understand what he was trying to say and according to his biographer Hugh Fordin, "he knew it was his fault that the message was not clear." [39] To many Allegro came across as a "success corrupts" morality play in which the wholesome virtues of America's heartland were set against graft and greed in the big bad city. [40]

Sondheim believes "the show is autobiographical – Oscar wanted to show what had happened to himself. As a result of the success of Oklahoma! and Carousel he had become so successful that he was an icon, and a useful one. He was elected Vice President of the World Federalists, made President of the Authors League, spent time travelling the country receiving honors and awards by the score and so forth – all because of his clout, his presence and his celebrity could help promote and raise money for good causes. In Allegro he was writing about the conflict between responsibility to your community and responsibility to yourself. He found that the more public appearances he made, the more speeches he gave, the more he traveled to support those causes, the less time he had for writing, the thing he was born to do. That is what he was trying to convey in Allegro. And nobody got it. He thought it was the fault of how he had handled the second act – that he hadn't made this clear. [41]

According to Steven Suskin in Show Tunes, "the insurmountable problem was quite simple: the songs weren't good enough." [42] Sondheim claimed "It was a seminal influence on my life, because it showed me a lot of smart people doing something wrong." [43] He also called it "the first really good experimental show." [44]

Bert Fink in the liner notes of the 2009 recording claims, "that the bold artistic chances taken in Allegro did eventually pay off: maybe not for the show itself and not even for Rodgers and Hammerstein, but certainly for the American musical. While Oklahoma! and Carousel changed the course of the musical overall, Allegro no less importantly signaled the start of a powerful new genre within the concept musical. Reverberations of Allegro have resounded over the years, from seamless staging that breaks time and space (Dreamgirls, Evita), to the introspective use of dance (West Side Story, Contact) and chorus (A Little Night Music, Ragtime), from the thematic (Company) to the metaphoric (A Chorus Line). [45]"
The Nop of Allegro did more harm to the long-term Rodgers and Hammerstein association than it did in the short term. As Thomas S. Hischak says in his book *The Rodgers and Hammerstein Encyclopedia*, "the failure of Allegro only partially tarnished the reputation of Rodgers and Hammerstein; after all it was a very respectable flop. Yet the long-term repercussions were more serious. Never again would Rodgers and Hammerstein experiment so boldly and risk losing their audience. They would continue to come up with surprising and wonderful things, but the days of radical and foolhardy innovation were over. From then on they would stick to the tried and true. Allegro marked the end of the Rodgers and Hammerstein revolution." [47]

References:
1. Fink p. 9
2. Hyland p. 167
3. Secrest p. 280
4. Fordin p. 252
5. Hischak p. 6
6. Hammerstein p. 182
7. Hyland p. 167
8. Fordin p. 254
9. Fink p. 11
10. Nolan p. 157
11. Hischak p. 6
12. Hischak p. 64
13. Fordin p. 254
15. Fink p. 12
16. Sondheim p. 15
17. Sondheim p. 16
18. Easton p. 266
19. Allegro Playbill p. 44
20. Ibid
21. Allegro Playbill p. 46
22. Allegro Playbill p. 44
24. Mordden p. 98-99
25. Ibid
26. Fordin p. 255
27. Secrest p. 282
28. Fordin p. 254
29. Hammerstein p. 182
30. Secrest p. 282
31. Fink p. 13
32. Mordden p. 98
33. Secrest p 283
34. Suskin p. 44
35. Hummell p. 12
36. Hischak p. 7
38. Fink p. 14
39. Forden p. 255
40. Fink p. 14
41. Sondheim p. 17
42. Suskin p. 46 – Opening Night On Broadway
43. Secrest p. 282
44. Fink p. 13
45. Ibid
46. Fink p. 14
47. Hischak p. 7

Bibliography:
* Fink, Bert. Liner Notes, Sony Masterworks Recording 2009
* Sondheim, Stephen. Liner Notes Sony Masterwork Recording, 2009

Published in Musicals | Read more...

Search ...

LATEST POSTS

Australian Early Colonial Amateur Theatre
The International Gilbert & Sullivan Festival at Harrogate, North Yorkshire
“An Swelligant, Elegant Party!”
Only Heaven Knows
Her Majesty’s Theatre, Melbourne: The Shows, The Stars, The Stories
Roxy Parramatta
Pansy “La Milo” Montague
Phil Day, comedian (1844-1887)
Framing the Past
Lola Montez

MEMBERS’ AREA

Why not join? Membership is free

Username

Password

Remember me

Login

Forgot your password?
Forgot your username?
Create an account

To become a member, click above.
are 676 Font characters in it. View Demo Download. As proper nouns the difference between merry and bright is that merry is originally a nickname for a merry person while bright is... Everyone was merry at the party. Brisk. The play moved along at a merry pace. Causing laughter, mirth, gladness, or delight. a merry jest. * Spenser. merry wind and weather. (euphemistic) drunk; tipsy. Some of us got a little merry at the office Christmas party. The clear light of the bright autumn morning had no terrors for youth and health like hers. *Sir (Francis Drake) (c.1540-1596). *:The earth was dark, but the heavens were bright.