

A TRIBUTE TO RICHARD RODGERS

Narration by Herbert M. Baumgard

Music by Selma Baumgard and the Beth Am Choir

Narrator:

A) Because of their particular experience and background, Jews have made a distinctive contribution to the American scene. For example, because Jews who immigrated to America around the turn of the century settled for the most part in the New York area, there are many institutions in that area which bear the special imprint of the Jewish immigrants. There is no question that Broadway Theatre would have been different without Clifford Odets and Lillian Hellman. There is no question about the heavy input of the Jews into television and into the movie industry. The positive influence of the Jewish community can be seen in the art museums, in the symphonic halls and in the opera, as well as in the universities and the schools of learning.

B) One art medium has been almost the special province of the Jews. This is the Broadway Musical Theatre. One has only to think of some names like Irving Berlin, Harold Arlen, Marvin Hamlisch, Steven Sondheim and Leonard Bernstein to be reminded of this fact. None of these names, however, stands out more than the name of Richard Rodgers, who with several Jewish partners, Lorenz Hart and Oscar Hammerstein, produced some of the classical musical comedies. Tonight we are devoting a special choral program to Mr. Rodgers, who was recently deceased.

C) You might well ask, why is such a program being presented in a synagogue? What has musical comedy to do with religion? I can't give you a definitive answer to that question. I can only say that I have frequently found in musical comedy many of the same themes which I have found in Judaism.

What kind of themes are we talking about? Take, for example, the Jewish view of the Messianic Day. The prophecy is that a time will come when justice and peace will rule the world. The prophet Isaiah proclaims the time will come when the wolf will play with the lamb and a child will play harmlessly with the poisonous snake. So beautiful will the world become, says the prophet in the name of

God that, "They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain", saith the Lord.

The vision of the Messianic Day is a vision of the perfected world where love abounds and violence is non-existent. Such is the mood of musical comedy. On the musical stage the Messianic Day, fairy tales, and love become real. We might say that the musical comedy is a rehearsal in what the world ought to be and might be.

A Richard Rodgers was a master of telling us how the world ought to be. His message was told in glorious music. Rodgers had a song in his heart and he wanted to sing that song to all the world. It is fitting, then, that we begin our program with Roxanne Fines singing, "With a Song In My Heart" from "Spring is Here".

B The Psalmist in the Bible tells us of his love for nature. In the glories of sky and field, the Psalmist saw the handiwork of God. He wrote, "When I behold Thy heavens, the sun and the moon which are the works of Thy hands, I think what is little man that You are mindful of him..." Richard Rodgers had his Psalms also. One of them is called, "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning" from the musical, "Oklahoma". Harriet Potlock sings this for us.

For Richard Rodgers there were beautiful mornings and grand nights. In the play, "State Fair", Rodgers and Hammerstein tell us, "The moon is flying high, and somewhere a bird who is bound he'll be heard is throwing his heart at the sky." Iris Rosen sings this for us.

C In today's world, we hear many songs with many different verses. Frequently, the songs today have one word, or if the author was high class, there may be as much as a complete sentence in the song, not necessarily grammatically presented. Contrast now this verse of Hammerstein in Rodger's song, "It Might As Well Be Spring", also from "State Fair". The words go, "I'm as busy as a spider spinning day dreams, I'm as giddy as a baby on a swing, I haven't seen a crocus or a rosebud, or a robin on the wing, but I feel so gay in a melancholy way that it might as well be spring." The song is sung by Pauli Levine.

A)

The Psalmist told us, "The Lord is My Shepherd, I shall not fear." The Psalmist wanted us to have the faith that so long as God was with us, things would work out reasonably well. Richard Rodgers and his collaborator did not talk about God, but they did talk about the importance of conquering fear with faith in the goodness of the world. The song, "Whistle a Happy Tune", from "The King and I", tells us, "Make believe you're brave, and the trick will take you far. You may be as brave as you make believe you are." Merle Hamm sings.

B)

Of course, Richard Rodgers was the master of the love song. None was more popular than the song, "Some Enchanted Evening", from the musical, "South Pacific". Joe Rubin sings the words, "Some enchanted evening you may see a stranger across a crowded room, and somehow you know that you will see her again and again...."

C)

The theme of the musical, "Carousel" is truly a religious theme. The play is built around a handsome young man who is not able to express his love for his wife and daughter. One of the great tragedies of human life is this inability to express love. The grand ballad, "If I Loved You" expresses the paradox of being in love and yet not being able to verbalize that love. Steve Jenkins vocalizes for us.

B)

Rodgers wrote not only for the stage, he wrote for T.V. also. "Cinderella" is one such musical prepared expressly for T.V. Julianne Shorer and Danny Green sing a duet for us on the theme, "Do I Love You Because You're Beautiful, or Are You Beautiful Because I Love You?"

C

Unrequited love is one of the common experiences of human beings. We love someone, but they don't seem to share that love. Our profound emotions seem wasted, for love that is not appreciated rebounds to wound the lover. It is almost as if Cupid had shot one of his arrows and without finding the proper target the arrow boomerangs and wounds Cupid himself. This is the theme of "Love, Look Away" from "Flower Drum Song" sung by Sylvia Weinberg.

A) Judaism, like other religions, talks of places where the ideals of peace and quietude are fully realized. The Garden of Eden was such a place. Jerusalem, say the prophets, will be such a place when the Messiah comes. Rodgers and Hammerstein in "South Pacific" talk of a place where, "Your own special dreams bloom on the hillside and shine in the streams." Ann Aibel sings "Bali Hai" for us.

C) Cole Porter, one of the super-great composers for musical comedy, tells us that there was a certain holiness about the music of Richard Rodgers. That holiness comes through at its finest in the song, "You'll Never Walk Alone" from "Carousel". You remember the scene. The young hero of the story dies, and his daughter, much mistreated by her snobbish friends, feels very much alone at her high school graduation. While she is in her most melancholy reverie, she seems to hear a message from her dead father who says, "When you walk through the storm, keep your head up high and don't be afraid of the dark. At the end of the storm is a golden sky, and the sweet silver song of a lark..." Dr. Bob Brewster sings this majestic song for us.

C) Toward the end of his career, Richard Rodgers attempted to write the words as well as the music for his wonderful songs. The musicale, "No Strings" was not a big hit, but the words from one of the songs, called "The Sweetest Sounds" are truly beautiful. In this poem, Rodgers, now in his declining years, tries to tell us that his greatest work is yet undone. The words go this way, "The sweetest sounds I'll ever hear are still inside my head. The kindest words I'll ever know are waiting to be said. The most entrancing sight of all is yet for me to see..." Bernice Anapol sings this for us.

B) This tribute to Richard Rodgers concludes with a medley from "The Sound of Music". The entire choir joins in the finale.