

they light the musical stage



by Joseph N. Bell

ONCE IN A GREAT WHILE, someone comes along so attuned to the people of his age, so sympathetic with their joys and problems, so steeped in plain ordinary decency that he establishes immediate rapport with almost everyone. Only a



Theatrical geniuses Richard Rodgers (left) and Oscar Hammerstein.

Since "Oklahoma!" first burst upon Broadway, no two men have given America more sheer enjoyment than Rodgers and Hammerstein.

few times in the history of the entertainment profession have a pair of men so endowed appeared.

Such a pair is Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. They have probably brought more genuine pleasure to more people than any two men alive today. Yet they never do it self-consciously or with any thought that they are contributing to humanity. They're just good guys with tremendous talents which they enjoy sharing.

Next November, Rodgers and Hammerstein's 10th collaboration, "The Flower Drum Song," will open on Broadway. As in so many other R & H operettas, "Flower Drum Song" will break with theatrical convention in several ways. This warm story of the efforts of a Chinese family to adjust to a new life in contemporary San Francisco is certainly a long way from the experience of most theater-going Americans. The show is being cast almost entirely with real Chinese-Americans, and there will be no stars.

"A lot of our people have become

stars later," says Dick Rodgers, "but there haven't been many Mary Martins or Gertrude Lawrences in our shows when they first came to Broadway. It's exciting to work with new people as we're doing with 'Flower Drum Song.'"

Yul Brynner is a good example.

"He came in cold to audition for 'The King and I'—just like any chorus boy," Rodgers recalls. "I'll never forget him sitting cross-legged on the floor of an empty stage, strumming a guitar and singing some gibberish I couldn't understand. He was perfect and we signed him on the spot."

Breaking theatrical rules is an old story to R & H. They've done it many times—and not always successfully, as witness "Allegro"—but the results have always been provocative and exciting. I visited with them at a backstage party given to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the opening of "Oklahoma!" which was revived on Broadway this Spring. Both R & H watched the performance that night even though they have seen the show several hundred times.

Afterward, Dick Rodgers was thinking back to the March night in 1943 when the first Rodgers and Ham-



merstein show burst upon Broadway. "Oklahoma!" broke all the conventions," he mused. "It opened with an off-stage song; we didn't bring any girls on for 40 minutes, and when we did they were wearing high-necked dresses; we had a villain who was motivated and we killed him—which just wasn't done in musical plays."

One reason that R & H have been able to get away with this sort of thing is that they are professionals through and through—competent, thorough, sensitive, sympathetic, and wonderfully gifted. There isn't a neurotic or temperamental impulse in either man; yet they are decidedly different.

DICK RODGERS is the businessman of the team. Rather short, broad of shoulder, slightly paunchy, with thinning gray hair carefully combed, he is genial, considerate, polite, and dapper. He keeps regular hours in a mid-town New York office and handles the team's business affairs.

When Hammerstein was asked to describe how the team collaborated on a song, he answered: "I labor for weeks over a lyric, deliver it to Dick—then get out of the way." Rodgers' speed with melodies is legendary.

"This makes for good conversation."