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Rodgers & Hammerstein's Carousel

Will Feature an Original Ballet

TULSA, Okla. – Six classically trained opera soloists will collaborate with members of the Tulsa Ballet's Center for Dance Education to perform in concert *Carousel*, a 1945 musical by Rodgers & Hammerstein, on the historic Will Rogers Stage at 3909 East 5th Place in Tulsa, Sunday, October 19, 2025, at 2:30 p.m. This event is produced by the nonprofit Will Rogers Stage Foundation.

The cast will be headed by American baritone Robert Mellon playing Billy Bigelow and Abigail Raiford, a renowned lyric coloratura soprano, as Julie Jordan. Mellon has been praised not only for his "glorious voice that bursts out brimming with life and vigor," but also for having "immense skill as an actor." He has performed in numerous opera houses across the country to much acclaim, including his Taddeo in the 2022 Tulsa Opera production of Rossini's *The Italian Girl in Algiers*.

Raiford also earned acclaim in the same production for her "powerful, luxurious soprano voice" and her "wonderfully comic" portrayal of Elvira. She was a runner-up this year in the prestigious Laffont Competition of the Metropolitan Opera and debuted at Carnegie Hall. She was raised in Tulsa by two opera performers who had careers in New York. "Abby's mother, Judy Raiford, heads the University of Tulsa music department and was her mentor. This is a homecoming for Abby," says Dick Risk, the show's producer.

The cast also includes several local performers who are known to Tulsa audiences: Sam Briggs (as Enoch Snow), Margaret Stall (Carrie Pipperidge), Christiaan Bester (Jigger Craigin) and Maddie Breedlove (Nettie Fowler).

Cathy Venable, who spent more than a decade in New York as a pit musician and conductor on Broadway, is music director and will conduct the 34-piece Will Rogers Stage Orchestra. Venable explains, "the Will Rogers Stage production of *Carousel* gives our audience the unique opportunity to hear this glorious music the way it was originally intended to be performed and enjoyed, with a live orchestra presenting the full orchestration, supporting our singing artists."

"We are excited to incorporate the *Carousel* ballet performed by an ensemble from the acclaimed Tulsa Ballet Center for Dance Education," Risk says. Lauren Richter, director of the center, will produce the ballet set to the music in the score, which Agnes DeMille choreographed for the original 1945 production. She trained in New York with

WILL ROGERS STAGE FOUNDATION - *CAROUSEL*

American Ballet Theatre's Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School, and in Monte Carlo at the Princess Grace Academy of Classical Dance.

Matteo Giulio Tonolo, originally from Moncalieri, Italy, will choreograph the ballet. Several original roles were created on him. His touring experience includes performances across Europe, the United States, and China. An ensemble from the center will appear as members of a touring carnival troupe: gypsy dancers, Arabian dancers, Chinese acrobats, and strong men. Jaelynn Autry will be featured as Louise Bigelow and Jose Maria Herrera Cuevas as the lead male dancer.

Gloria Friend plays Louise's non-dancing counterpart. Paxton Schuster is Enoch Snow junior, and Aubree Esau is his younger sister. All three are local area students with acting and singing experience.

Stage director Ben Robinson heads three arts organizations including Anchorage Opera. He has been recognized for his creative approach to his productions.

"When you hear about a musical being performed 'in concert,' it means the show is presented in a simplified, often stripped-down format compared to a full theatrical production," says Risk. "Concert performances usually have very basic sets. Primary focus is on the musical numbers, with less emphasis on acting and elaborate choreography. Despite the minimal staging, performers still act out the emotions of the script. Actors often read from scripts, which can be a creative choice or a necessity due to limited rehearsal time and a short run."

Risk adds, "Because of our relatively small, historic 1939 stage, we could not have accommodated our orchestra, chorus, and soloists—plus a ballet. So, we moved the 34-piece orchestra in front of the stage, fully visible to the audience, making room for the ballet. We define our scenes with artwork projected onto a cyclorama. *Carousel* is our most ambitious production to date. We hope its success will repeat itself as we bring other Golden Era musicals to life."

Carousel was named the Best Musical of the Twentieth Century by TIME Magazine. All seats are reserved. Tickets are available online at WillRogersStage.com.

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