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## "Carousel" dazzles

**NJ Youth Theatre wows audiences with yet another big number**

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The New Jersey Youth Theatre has done it again.

Last year, it gave the state the best musical production of 2006, thanks to its stirring "Ragtime."

Right now, it has the best musical production of 2007, with Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Carousel."

While "Ragtime" seemed an impossible task -- until the troupe's teens and college students just went out and did it -- "Carousel" would appear to be more daunting still.

After all, "Ragtime" has little dancing, while "Carousel" begins with the swirling (and beloved) "Carousel Waltz," performed by the entire company. Virtually everyone must then tackle two enormous production numbers and a hornpipe. Plenty would have to perform the demanding second-act ballet, too.

Finally, "Carousel" sports the most difficult material ever given to a male musical performer: the eight-minute "Soliloquy" in which Billy Bigelow muses about becoming a father. He must reach greater emotional heights as every minute passes -- and hit higher notes en route.

Audiences at the Victoria Theater in Newark this week and at the Algonquin Arts Center in Manasquan next week will relax a bit after they see choreographer Sherry Alban's dazzling "Carousel Waltz." Then, as soon as Alexander Diaz opens his mouth to sing "If I Loved You," they'll be convinced this Billy will be able to handle the "Soliloquy."

He's equally matched by Lauren Palmeri as Julie Jordan, whom he meets at the carousel, to the consternation of his jealous boss, Mrs. Mullin. Palmeri does full justice to "If I Loved You" and brings great poignancy to "What's the Use of Wond'rin'?"

Both act superbly as well. Billy and Julie soon find that losing their jobs because of their love for each other causes an unresolvable problem -- especially for him, for he truly relishes his work. These characters are in serious trouble, and Diaz and Palmeri makes the audience ache for them.

Next to Billy, the toughest vocal role is Nettie, Julie's cousin. How magnificently Kelsey Thompson maneuvers "You'll Never Walk Alone," after she's had some fun with "June Is Bustin' Out All Over." Kevin Melendez shows a marvelous voice, too, as Enoch, the entrepreneur who marries Julie's best friend, Carrie. She's played with delightful insouciance by Jaclyn Ingoglia.

Mrs. Mullin isn't asked to sing, but Arielle Casner is extraordinary in the part. She shows she truly loves Billy. It's a small role, and it rarely makes an impression. Casner changes that with her fierce performance.

Though the entire company shows itself to be expert at dancing, Brianna Stimpson and Corey Mosello are standouts in the ballet. "Carousel" may be nearly three hours long, but director Cynthia Meryl -- who also helmed "Ragtime" -- keeps a firm grip on making it pass quickly.

Too quickly, in fact. When a theater does a lengthy show like this and makes it fly by, it isn't just doing something right. It's doing something spectacular.