

Theatre: Words and Music by Richard Rodgers

'No Strings' Opens at the 54th Street

By HOWARD TAUBMAN

RICHARD RODGERS need not have worried. He is still a magician of the musical theatre.

Carrying on without the late Oscar Hammerstein, the second of his two great collaborators, he has dipped into the freshest sources of his lyric gift. For his new musical, "No Strings," which arrived last night at the 54th Street Theatre, he has composed a score full of romance and vivacity. Approaching 60, he has written enchanted music like a youngster who has discovered the unimaginable wonders of the notes in the tempered scale.

He has taken on the challenge of being his own lyricist and met it like a professional. It will surprise no one that his lines have a touch of the wholesome ease of Hammerstein and a soupçon of the peppery impertinence of Lorenz Hart, his first companion in the musical theatre. If Mr. Rodgers is not yet as polished as either of his unforgotten colleagues, he is good enough to walk—and sing—alone.

Matching the unspoiled flow of Mr. Rodgers' songs is the imagination of the production directed and choreographed by Joe Layton. The conventions of a blaring band in the pit and of literal settings swung into place by invisible stagehands have been tossed aside. Samuel Taylor's book is at best a fragile sentimental fable of a love affair between two Americans in France, but styled in gay, inventive stage garb it has been wafted into a shimmering and delightful never-never land.

The mood is established at the outset. As the curtain goes up on what looks like an unmade stage, a flute sings a rueful phrase, and the musician sits at the side like a piper in reverie. A brilliant spot discovers Diahann Carroll, and she sings "The Sweetest Sounds," one of Mr. Rodgers' sweetest tunes. A clarinetist, dressed informally like the flutist, strolls in, and Richard Kiley follows him. He, too, sings "The Sweetest Sounds."

Thus, simply and engagingly, the two principals are introduced. They do not know each other, but they have met in a song. And the atmosphere of Paris with its invitation to youth and love is adumbrated with a few spots, several panels and a couple of minstrels blowing casually on wind instruments.

In this imaginative airy spirit "No Strings" tells its modest story. The theatrical manner of telling often is more charming than the tale. Since Miss Carroll plays a high-fashion model, much of the production is keyed to the trade. The girls in the chorus are dressed and moved like mannequins. A party thrown by a rich, hedonistic gal from Oklahoma has a stylized background of guests who take



Diahann Carroll and Richard Kiley in scene from musical

The Cast

NO STRINGS, a musical. Book by Samuel Taylor. Music and lyrics by Richard Rodgers. Staged and choreographed by Joe Layton; presented by Rodgers, in association with Mr. Taylor; scenery and lighting by David Hays; costumes by Fred Voelpel and Donald Brooks; musical direction and dance arrangements by Peter Maltz; orchestrations by Ralph Burns; associate choreographer, Buddy Schwab; production stage manager, Charles Atkins. At the 54th Street Theatre, 152 West Fifty-fourth Street.

Barbara Woodruff	.....	Diahann Carroll
David Jordan	.....	Richard Kiley
Jeanette Valmy	.....	Noelle Adam
Luc Delbert	.....	Alvin Epstein
Mollie Plummer	.....	Polly Rowles
Mike Robinson	.....	Don Chastain
Louis dePoufal	.....	Mitchell Gregg
Conforti O'Connell	.....	Bernice Massi
Gabrielle Bertin	.....	Ann Hodges
Marcello Agnolotti	.....	Paul Cambeilh

positions like figures in a fashionable shop window.

A ballet is a fantasy of mannequins come to life. Only a dance at a resort by the sea diverges from the mannequin motif, and even here the marvelous chapeaux worn by the daringly bikini-ed mermaids comment amusingly on the world of couturière.

The production, more than the story, catches this milieu with unflinching charm. A photographer and his assistant rush about their business of making fashion photos with the lightness of an April breeze in Paris. A few plants are set out and a bench is placed between them and we have a corner for a rendezvous. Everything—the camera, lights, scaffolding, panels, screens, furniture—rides on rollers as though the show declined to be earthbound.

In the first half "No Strings" rarely touches ground. It does little more than have girl meet boy and admit that they have fallen in love; yet it is sprightly and graceful. The second half turns sticky. The boy is really a mature fellow, "a Europe bum," a writer who starts novels. The girl, the model from "north of Central Park," is determined to return him to the typewriter. Why do all writers in fiction have such blocks about writing and why do enamored women think they have the cure to their afflictions?

But never mind. Let us remember that an unconventional musical has a right to some conventionality. Mr.

Diahann Carroll and Richard Kiley Star

personal beauty to the role of the model, and her singing captures many moods, notably a furious intensity in an angry blues, "You Don't Tell Me." Richard Kiley is ingratiatingly forthright and warm-hearted as the writer escaping from his frustration into pleasure, and he sings attractively alone and in duets with Miss Carroll.

Make a note to remember Bernice Massi, the hip-shaking heiress from Oklahoma, who is as comic as she is brassy. Noelle Adam, in her ballerina get-up and her floating grace, is the cutest photographer's assistant you are likely to encounter in a year of picture-taking. Polly Rowles, Don Chastain, Alvin Epstein and Mitchell Gregg are all delightful.

David Hays' designs and lighting, the handsome costumes by Fred Voelpel and Donald Brooks and the other theatre crafts have joined in turning an ordinary little story into a disarming experience. But give the chief credit to Mr. Rodgers, who has lost neither his zest nor his art.

Taylor recovers with a final scene of honest feeling. For the model, though no one has said so openly before, is a Negro, and the writer is white. And they face up to the fact that a happy ending for them as a married pair in his native Maine would be difficult.

Miss Carroll brings glowing