

# The New Criterion

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## Father Riggs of Yale

by Stephen Schmalhofer

We open in Venice. On an Italian holiday in 1926, early on in his Broadway career, Richard Rodgers bumped into Noël Coward. Together they strolled the Lido before ducking into a friend's beach cabana, where Coward introduced Rodgers for the first time to "a slight, delicate-featured man with soft saucer eyes." Cole Porter grinned up at the visitors and insisted that both men join him for dinner that evening at a little place he was renting. Porter sent one of his gondoliers to pick up Rodgers. At his destination, liveried footmen helped him out of the boat. He gazed in wonder up the grand staircase of Porter's "little place," the three-story Ca' Rezzonico, where Robert Browning died and John Singer Sargent once kept a studio. This was not the only dramatic understatement from Porter that day. In the music room after dinner, their host urged Rodgers and Coward to play some of their songs. Afterwards Porter took his turn. "As soon as he touched the keyboard to play 'a few of my little things,' I became aware that here was not merely a talented dilettante, but a genuinely gifted theatre composer and lyricist," recalled Rodgers in his autobiography, *Musical Stages*. "Songs like 'Let's Do It,' 'Let's Misbehave,' and 'Two Babes in the Wood,' which I heard that night for the first time, fairly cried out to be heard from the stage." Rodgers wondered aloud what Porter was doing wasting his talent and time in a life of Venetian indolence. To Rodgers's embarrassment, Porter replied that he had already written three Broadway musicals.

Porter's musical theater career had begun at Yale, where he met T. Lawrason Riggs, a thoroughbred patrician of the Riggs banking family. Riggs's grandfather helped the United States purchase Alaska and financed Samuel Morse's telegraph line. In Baltimore, the Riggses and Poes were considered the city's leading sporting families. (At the time there was genuine debate as to who was the more famous Edgar Allan Poe: the poet or his distant cousin, the All-American Princeton quarterback). Small in stature, T. Lawrason pursued English and drama at college. His contemporaries on campus included the writer Thornton Wilder, the poet Stephen Vincent Benét, the actor Monty Woolley, and the playwright Philip Barry. "In Porter's years, the Glee Club had usually twenty-three members, among whom were Charles 'Buddy' Marshall, Dean Acheson, J. V. Bouvier iii (the famous 'Black Jack' Bouvier, father of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis), and Averell Harriman," writes William McBrien in his biography of Porter.

But the undergraduate enthusiasm for drama was new and unsettling to some of Yale's older faculty members. Though it had been a while since the Puritans got a shock, the college still suspected that "to indulge a taste for playgoing means nothing more or less than the loss of that most valuable treasure . . . the immortal soul," as President Timothy Dwight had judged a century earlier. In the olden days before Yale went co-ed, when a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking, Yale dramaturgs cast college boys in female roles. Riggs was always ready with a falsetto and he earned appreciative applause when he donned the ample costume of Miss Prism in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. After one of Porter's performances, a *New Haven Journal-Courier* reporter declared that the "the tragedy of life is that no woman is as beautiful as a Yale man impersonating femininity."

Porter and Riggs were encouraged by William Lyon Phelps, the Langdon Professor of English at Yale, who added contemporary fiction and drama to the college's curriculum. Phelps fortified Riggs in his "refusal to pander to popular taste," a character trait he retained all his life.

After Yale, Riggs and Porter pursued graduate studies at Harvard. As alumni, the pair produced two Yale musicals, including a satirical show about the Mexican Revolution titled *We're All Dressed*

*Up And We Don't Know Huerto Go*. Together they wrote a musical comedy, *See America First*. Riggs supplied satirical lyrics and \$35,000 to open the show on Broadway in 1913. The title referenced President Taft's campaign to discourage European travel in favor of the beauty of America's national parks. Or, as the eponymous song puts it: "Don't leave America,/ Just stick around the usa." One song from the show endures in a recording by Fred Astaire and Bing Crosby; "I've a Shooting Box in Scotland" is perhaps the best early glimpse of what Porter could accomplish later with "You're the Top." Porter's lyrics could only be improved by Astaire's amiability and Crosby's baritone asides. A sample of the first verse:

I've a shooting box in Scotland, (Bing: Oh, may I be your guest?)  
I've a chateau in Touraine, (Wine country, I love it!)  
I've a silly little chalet (Where's this?)  
In the Interlaken Valley, (Uh huh)  
I've a hacienda in Spain, (;Olé, bravo!)  
I've a private fjord in Norway,  
I've a villa close to Rome,  
And in traveling  
It's really quite a comfort to know  
That you're never far from home!

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"I honestly believed I was  
disgraced for the rest of my life."

Critics hated it. "Don't see *America First*," one wrote. Most people didn't. After sixteen

performances, the show closed. Riggs lost every penny he invested in the production. Porter revealed to an interviewer in 1953 that he never forgot the night his first show closed: "As they dismantled the stage and trucked it out of the stage alley, I honestly believed I was disgraced for the rest of my life."

He persevered until he discovered the secret to success that he revealed to Richard Rodgers in Venice: "I'll write Jewish tunes." Rodgers laughed at what he assumed to be a joke. "But not only was Cole dead serious, he eventually did just that," writes Rodgers: "Just hum the melody that goes with 'Only you beneath the moon and under the stars,' from *Night and Day*, or any of 'Begin the Beguine,' or 'Love for Sale,' or 'My Heart Belongs to Daddy,' or 'I Love Paris.' These minor key melodies are unmistakably eastern Mediterranean."

Riggs felt defeated by the show's failure. He quit professional theater and returned to teach literature at Yale. He continued to support student drama. In 1916, Riggs wrote the finale to the monstrous Yale Pageant performed by a cast of eight thousand actors. The Pageant commemorated the bicentennial of Yale's removal from Saybrook to New Haven and depicted dozens of scenes from throughout the school's history. To thrill the forty thousand spectators, Riggs directed an actor in the persona of Mother Yale to appear in a chariot while nine characters representing the College, Law School, School of Forestry, etc., offered her homage at the midfield of the Yale Bowl. The tribute of the School of Medicine is representative of the tone:

My knights shall ponder Nature's healing laws,  
Till I my hard-gained accolade bestow;  
Their swords I consecrate to Mercy's cause,  
And forth to truceless war with Pain they go.

While the college's schools knelt before Mother Yale, she invited the entire cast to stream back into the Yale Bowl and lead the assembly in a new hymn set to the tune of "Adeste Fideles." Times have changed.

When America entered the First World War, there were overseas jobs available for any Tom, Dick, or Harry who could pass a medical exam. Riggs enlisted at age twenty-nine in the Yale Mobile Hospital Unit and deployed to France, where he transferred to a military intelligence unit. Removed from his comfortable life in New Haven

and inspired by Norman cathedrals and French congregations singing Gregorian chant, Riggs felt called to the Catholic priesthood. His piety proved difficult for Porter to endure. "Riggs is simply too too. I'm dodging him like a disease during Lent, as he's given up so many things he likes that it makes him mean," Porter wrote from France to a Yale classmate after Riggs left for Rouen. "I

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**Riggs wrote the finale to the monstrous Yale Pageant performed by a cast of eight thousand actors.**

said to him, 'Think of it, in five years, you'll be tied up in a lot of soiled old robes and I'll be happy and married.' And Riggs said, 'Well, you may be *married*.'" Several years later he found his friend easier to tolerate. While Porter was laid up with two fractured legs, Riggs arrived with a bouquet of Christmas roses from his garden and a bottle of Muscatel. "He was so grand and so funny, and I resent the fact that I see him so little these days," Porter wrote of his visit.

Riggs returned to the States to seek admission to the seminary with a vision for creating a Catholic chaplaincy serving Yale students. But his bishop hesitated when Riggs recommended that he could pay his own way and be ordained "under his own patrimony." The local clergy, especially the priests at St. Mary's in the shade of Yale's campus, resisted the idea of an independent Catholic community separate from a parish. Riggs did not help himself by staying aloof from the Irish-American clergy, confiding in his diary that "I've yet to meet one born a gentleman, this isn't snobbery but a fact." Perhaps the Irish clergy were simply too busy to bother about Riggs. Responding to the needs of a growing Irish Catholic population in New Haven and Connecticut, Father Michael McGivney, along with Cornelius T. Driscoll (Yale Class of 1869) and eight other laymen, had founded the fast-growing Knights of Columbus at St. Mary's in 1882. The Irish Dominican Friars took over the parish from the diocesan clergy in 1886 and began to warn, in their thick brogues, about the "infidels," "young atheists," and "rowdies" among the student body, as the Yale historian Peter Alegi writes, and cautioned parents to keep their children away from them. Riggs's outsized profile on matters sacred and theatrical in local newspapers, in *Commonweal* magazine, and in parish halls as a guest speaker for lay groups probably did not increase his popularity with local clergy susceptible to Irish envy.

Although Riggs was kept busy in a working-class parish outside New Haven, his bishop finally granted permission for a full chaplaincy at Yale in 1936. "The bishop's apparent apathy is no doubt good for me, for it spurs me on to greater efforts," he writes. He said daily Mass and heard confessions at St. Mary's for the convenience of Yale students, but the celebration of Sunday Mass was still reserved for the clergy of the parish. He had long advocated for the establishment of more Newman Clubs serving Catholics at non-Catholic colleges to help them keep their "religious knowledge on a par with [their] general education, not as an irksome burden, but as a source of spiritual progress and intellectual health." His first meeting at Yale drew 124 students, and he rewarded them with a concert of Ukrainian music.

Riggs had little interest in politics and preferred interreligious dialogue. He embarked on a tour of the South in 1935 with a Protestant minister and Rabbi Philip Bernstein. Riggs's Catholicism "made him intolerant of humanism. His classicism made him despise vulgarity. He loathed anti-Semitism," Bernstein wrote in a 1942 tribute in *Commonweal*. Riggs was "uncompromising in his belief in the truth of Catholicism" but could surprise even the most liberal Protestant with his willingness to offer self-criticism.

Despite his distaste for the rote learning preferred by the local clergy, Riggs was a dedicated Thomist. Like Henry Adams, he believed that a combination of medieval philosophy and

theology, Gregorian chant, and other liturgical arts was a necessary anchor for man in the twentieth century. An expert in Gregorian chant, he lectured during the interwar years at the Pius X School of Liturgical Music at Manhattanville College, which Richard Rodgers later visited for inspiration as he wrote *The Sound of Music*. He even persuaded his Italian immigrant parish to drop operatic music during Mass and soon organized a respectable chant choir.

After his friend Maurice F. McAuliffe became his bishop in 1934, Riggs earned the opportunity to build a lasting chaplaincy for Yale students. Sargent Shriver, an undergraduate and chairman of the *Yale Daily News*, helped Riggs pitch potential donors in New York City. In 1938, he completed St. Thomas More Chapel at Yale with the architect William Douglas. In the lady chapel his two votive candles still hang, in the shape of the ships that first brought Catholics to Riggs's home state of Maryland. Unfortunately, the beautiful high altar built to Riggs's original plans is missing, while a free-standing altar crouches awkwardly in the cavernous whitewashed apse. Fortunately, the original linoleum is gone.

In 1701, Yale's first trustees established the college "to propagate in this Wilderness the blessed reformed Protestant Religion." Although he was not a great professor, Riggs knew he was bound to issue an answer when Yale proposed that anything goes in the twentieth century. At roughly the same time in the 1940s, both Riggs and William F. Buckley Jr. were concerned about the spread of materialism and atheism at Yale. The Yale Professor of Religion Erwin Goodenough was considered "a good Congregationalist" on campus despite the former minister announcing he was "80% atheist and 20% agnostic." In *God and Man at Yale* (1951), Buckley alerted alumni that Goodenough's large introductory lecture course on early Christianity was confusing freshmen and pushing undergraduates away from their faith. Riggs piled on with a published pamphlet rebuking the professor's course, but the two men remained on friendly terms. Riggs helpfully supported Goodenough's push to establish the first Jewish Club at Yale. Whenever religious controversies bubbled up on campus, Riggs always let it be known in the pages of the college newspaper that his interlocutors could find him at his cottage for polite discussion and assured them that "there will be no thumbscrews concealed behind the arras."

In New Haven, Riggs bought an 1850s Gothic Revival cottage on Whitney Avenue, which was originally a gatehouse to the large estate of Ezra Read, the director of the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad. This symmetrical cottage was an archetype built by the architect Andrew Jackson Downing with an estimated construction cost of \$850. Arguably the first practitioner of American landscape architecture, he was an important influence on Frederick Law Olmsted and was commissioned to design the grounds for the National Mall, though he died in a steamboat accident before the project was complete. Downing had designed Riggs's cottage for lovers of "good proportion, tasteful forms, and chasteness of ornament." Modest exterior millwork avoided falling into the excess of "gingerbread." Downing could have been describing Riggs himself. Most of the original cottage still stands, with a modern extension by the current owner, Christ Presbyterian Church.

Riggs's house was tastefully decorated and maintained by his housekeeper "Irish Mary" and his trusted valet, "Silk," who spoke only when spoken to. Silk, an Anglican, would annoy Riggs by listening to the radio broadcasts of the infamous Father Coughlin while polishing the silver service. Riggs's rich hospitality was legendary among Yale students. He was a delightful host whose parties included professors, authors, playwrights, art collectors, students, and alumni from across the globe. After dinner, drinks, cigars, or a game of cards, he could be persuaded to take a seat at the piano and lead the college boys in a chorus from one of his undergraduate musical shows. Afterwards he often suggested a walk in the night air for those still standing. His equally enjoyable breakfasts and brunches held many students rapt around his table, to the point that his guests often missed their morning classes. Riggs was always present at opening nights in New Haven, usually bringing a crowd with him.

When Albertus Magnus College opened in 1925 in New Haven under the auspices of the Dominican Sisters, Riggs was encouraged by Mabel Hooper La Farge, the niece of Henry Adams, to accept the Sisters' invitation to teach religion. Riggs was an effective matchmaker between his young Catholic ladies at Albertus Magnus and his Catholic college boys at Yale.

He hated sports, but his cottage was always overcrowded with alumni guests for Harvard and Princeton home football weekends, during which Riggs would ask his dog "What would you rather do than go to Harvard?" To the delight of his guests, the dog promptly rolled over on its back and played dead. Later in life, when his customary trips to Europe became more difficult, he took up fishing. With a new hobbyist's enthusiasm, he placed a large order with his outfitter. "Returning from a first fishing trip, he was met at the door by Silk," recalled La Farge, "who removed with a flourish the rods, reels, and tackle [from his hands], then turned and asked 'and the fish sir?' Father felt mortified to confess that there were none."

While not a member of the faculty, he was made a fellow in 1933 of the newly formed Calhoun College when Yale adopted a residential college model. He pursued independent scholarly work, using his few spare minutes to complete a book on the trial of St. Joan of Arc and a translation of Rostand's *The Last Night of Don Juan*. Imagine Riggs's smile as he translated the final scene. Don Juan confronts the prospect of the eternal flames without fear. But his spirit is broken when the Devil reveals with glee the special pain he has prepared for Don Juan: "Eternal theatre!"

After a heart attack in 1943, Father Riggs received Holy Communion at home on Easter Sunday from one of the priests at St. Mary's. Death and duty dissolved any final trace of snobbery or envy between Riggs and the local clergy. Father Riggs died on Easter Monday. At his Requiem Mass in the chapel he built, Father Riggs was remembered as "God's Gentleman."

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