

## Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*: Beginning of the Golden Age of Musical Theater

When Mr. Gardener, the choir teacher, announced to our high school class that the year's musical would be *Oklahoma!* the room erupted in groans and complaints. To us, the students, *Oklahoma!* was an old musical with nothing fun or showy about it. There were no flashy scenes, colorful costumes, and extravagant dance numbers. Mr. Gardener argued that it was a less expensive production because the sets were plain and the costumes were simple. We did not have much more say in the matter; it was already decided and the school had received the rights to perform the musical. At the final curtain call on the last night of performance, we had all come to love *Oklahoma!* Not until college did I learn the substantial impact *Oklahoma!* had on musical theater and its producers, Rodgers and Hammerstein II, in beginning the Golden Age of Musical Theater.

The story of how *Oklahoma!* came to be and how the collaboration started is an interesting one, and before Rodgers and Hammerstein there were Rodgers and Hart. Their longest running show was *By Jupiter* and the collaboration was "one of the greatest partnerships in songwriting history" (Flinn 217). Around 1942, Lorenz Hart became an alcoholic. He was "a tortured man who could not reconcile his homosexuality with his nice Jewish upbringing" (Flinn 217). When Rodgers tried to convince his partner to drop the addiction, "Hart turned him down and headed for Mexico" (Naden 14). Rodgers needed a new partner to work on an adaptation for a new musical. Hammerstein was suddenly asked to go to lunch with Rodgers where he asked him if he would like to musicalize *Green Grow the Lilacs*. *Green Grow the Lilacs* by Lynn Riggs had been transformed into a musical in 1931. It was a flop, only running the minimum 64 performances guaranteed by its contract. The

Theater Guild was almost out of funds and needed Rodgers and Hammerstein to make a hit. Hammerstein agreed to work with Rodgers in creating the new musical.

While Hart's style was more serious and sarcastic, Hammerstein had "richer, more romantic ideas that . . . provided Rodgers [to unleash] a deeper, more romantic vein of melody in the composer" (Flinn 220). Theater critic Lewis Nichols of New York Times said that *Oklahoma!* has "a score by Richard Rodgers that . . . is one of his best" (Jones 142). The two men benefit one another and brought out each other's qualities which helped them in creating their record breaking work.

*Oklahoma!* is memorable in that it was unlike any other musicals performed in 1943. The first problem the collaboration faced with the musical was the opening act. Hammerstein himself admitted that "the traditions of musical comedy . . . demand that not too long after the rise of the curtain the audience should be treated to one of musical comedy's most attractive assets—the sight of pretty girls in pretty clothes moving about the stage, the sound of their vital young voices supporting the principals in their songs" (Flinn 219). The problem with this musical is that the opening scene did not call for that performance. It would not have made sense. Instead they agreed the opening scene would be a lone elderly woman churning butter with a man strolling in from off stage singing "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'." Hammerstein explains, "We agreed to start our story in the real and natural way in which it seemed to want to be told!" (Flinn 219). Hammerstein refused to let the popular style of musicals change what he thought would work the best even though there were risks involved. "I cannot truthfully say that we were worried by the risk. Once we had made the decision, everything seemed to work right and we had that inner confidence people feel when they have adopted the direct and honest approach to a problem" (Flinn 219). He knew his decision was the best and was true to it.

Rodgers and Hammerstein continued this trend throughout the musical by only including elements that helped the plot. One of the aspects the collaboration chose to use was dance. At the time, tap dancing and kick lines had been what people were used to seeing. "In premusical comedy productions, the action of the play would literally stop for a song or dance and then pick up again where the conversation had left off" (Naden 19). This tradition

was challenged when the choice to add a ballet into the musical was made. Agnes de Mille was hired to do the choreography of what is popularly known today as the Dream Ballet. As the leading lady, Laurey, tries to choose between two men and picture her life with either one, expert ballet dancers take her and the other character's place to display the dramatic scene. "For the first time, the choreography actually advanced the plot" (Naden 19).

The normal formula of musicals had been to employ the biggest stars. "The Theater Guild wanted a star's name on the marquee, such as Shirley Temple" (Naden 21); again Rodgers and Hammerstein challenged this. The cast consisted of new and talented actors. Many of these actors gained stardom from their participation in the show. Celeste Holm became so famous that she kept that fame into the next century, all from taking on the role of Ado Annie. Alfred Drake became Broadway's top musical star after playing Curley. The original cast recorded an album of the show, a new tradition which is now normally practiced.

During preview performances, the musical had been titled *Away We Go*. The critics did not approve the musical due to the fact that "there were no racy jokes; and chorus girls did not appear until forty-five minutes into the first act" (Naden 20). But, during a performance in Boston, "De mille staged a dance with chorus coming down to the footlights in a V formation. They sang O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A, Oklahoma, and then yelled, 'yeeeeow!'" (Naden 20). The audience showed so much approval the whole show's name was changed and the musical *Oklahoma!* opened on Broadway, March 31, 1943.

"*Oklahoma!* Became a runaway hit, playing 2,248 times – a record run for a Broadway musical that remained unbroken for two decades" (Jones 141). The audience escaped the city and the reminder of WWII. They were "transported to the sun-drenched plains of the Midwest" (Flinn 227). Here the characters were sincere and down to earth unlike other current musicals. There was little sex appeal and few scarcely dressed girls, but the presentation of American Folk Ballet. The men had a dance scene of their own as well.

"*Oklahoma!* marks the beginning of The Golden Age of Musical Theater" (Naden 19). Everything was integrated to fit the plot and nothing fit the current formula of musical theater. "It was a perfect blend of story, music, and dance as never before" (Naden 19). A

new musical was created and it was the Musical Comedy. The critics praised it and public flocked to it. The show was so affluent that:

A farmer working on Hammerstein's estate asked him for tickets for his son as a wedding present.

'Sure,' said Oscar. 'When is the wedding?'

'When you can get the tickets,' the farmer replied. (Flinn 227)

After that Rodgers and Hammerstein went on to create more musicals including *Carousel* and *South Pacific*. In *The King and I*, Agnes de Mille choreographed a ballet again to tell the story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The *Sound of Music* was "the last big show of the 1950s [and it] belonged to Rodgers and Hammerstein" (Naden 29). Hammerstein died shortly after its opening. The musical became timeless and the film version of *Sound of Music* became a top-grossing picture of all time. All the Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals reflexed their style of "well-integrated songs and books, with songs reflecting the characters' personalities in words and music" (Barranger 331). From 1943 to 1959, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II took liberties with musical traditions to create *Oklahoma!* and other musicals that impacted musical theater in such a way that it began The Golden Age of Musicals.

## Works Cited

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