

“Oklahoma!” (Original Cast Recording) (1943)

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Essay by Mark A. Robinson (guest post)*



Rodgers and Hammerstein



Original album



The musical's original cast

The 1943 Broadway musical “Oklahoma!” was a milestone and marked an important turning point in the history of the American theatre. Based on the 1930 Lynn Riggs play “Green Grow the Lilacs,” “Oklahoma!” commenced the enduring partnership of composer Richard Rodgers and librettist/lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, who, together, would go on to write some of Broadway’s most-beloved musical scores including “Carousel” (1945), “Allegro” (1947), “The King and I” (1951), “Me and Juliet” (1953), “Pipe Dream” (1955), “Flower Drum Song” (1958), “The Sound of Music” (1959), and the Pulitzer Prize-winning “South Pacific” (1949). Rodgers and Hammerstein’s template for creating musicals would be mimicked by writers in the genre for decades to come and their influence is still felt today. The duo’s chief contribution would be in cementing the idea of the “integrated musical,” crafting songs within a musical that grew out of the characters’ experiences, that furthered the plot, and offered a deeper understanding of character motivation.

“Oklahoma!” is set in the rugged Oklahoma Territory of 1906, when the region was on the precipice of becoming a state in the Union. The story is a simple love triangle with complicated undertones. Laurey Williams (Joan Roberts) is a spunky farm girl who lives with her Aunt Eller (Betty Garde) on a rural farm where she contributes to the daily chores. Laurey is pursued by two suitors: the cocky cowboy Curly McLain (Alfred Drake) and the obsessed farmhand Jud Fry (Howard Da Silva). It is clear that Laurey prefers the handsome, easygoing Curly, but she is intimidated by the menacing Judd who will stop at nothing to make her his bride. With a lunchbox social benefitting the erection of a new schoolhouse on the horizon, Laurey receives invitations from both men. She is conflicted, vacillating back and forth, trying to make a decision of who will be her escort. She ultimately settles on Jud, but in a terrifying dream, she imagines she is married to Curly and Jud murders him out of jealousy. When she awakes, she understands that it is Curly she loves, but she has no choice but to attend the lunchbox social with Jud. At the event, each woman has packed a lunch basket for the men to bid on. Curly and Judd get into a bidding war over Laurey’s hamper (the winner will have the honor of dining with

her). Curly wins, but Jud does not give up easily. The farmhand gets Laurey alone and confronts her about her feelings. She admits that she is not in love with Jud. He, in turn, threatens her and Laurey dismisses him.

A few weeks later, Laurey and Curly get married, but a drunken Jud shows up at the celebration and picks a fight with Curly. Jud pulls a knife and lunges at Curly, but the cowboy dodges the blade, causing Jud to accidentally fall on his own knife. Jud dies and Laurey and Curly are free to go on their honeymoon and live happily ever after.

“Oklahoma!” also features a secondary comedic love triangle (another oft-utilized convention of Rodgers and Hammerstein) concerning the libidinous Ado Annie Carnes (Celeste Holm) and her two engagements, one to the not-too-bright cowboy Will Parker (Lee Dixon) who really wants to marry her, and the Persian peddler Ali Hakim (Joseph Buloff) who has no interest in marriage whatsoever.

“Oklahoma!” (originally titled “Away We Go!” during its out-of-town tryout) was produced by the Theatre Guild. Under the direction of Rouben Mamoulian, it opened at Broadway’s St. James Theatre on March 31, 1943. Audiences and critics alike were both startled and delighted by the Rodgers and Hammerstein score, feeling that the duo had created something fresh and bold. The musical brimmed with memorable tunes and the lyrics supported the plot and characters’ motivations. From the gentle opening number “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’” setting the mood, to the rousing title number, the songs were tethered to the time, place, and the people that inhabited the story. There was the syncopated “The Surrey with the Fringe On Top” for Curly to flirt his way into Laurey’s heart. The tartly resolute “Many A New Day” for Laurey that gave us a look into her stubborn personality and romantic standards. The duo shared in the sly anti-love song, “People Will Say We’re In Love,” which cleverly revealed just how in love they really were. Jud Fry had the haunting “Lonely Room” that offered audiences an introspective look into his disturbing personality. The supporting cast were also given ample opportunity to sing, including Ado Annie’s saucy *raison d’être* “I Cain’t Say No,” Will Parker’s comedic fish-out-of-water “Kansas City,” and Ali Hakim’s blustering “It’s a Scandal! It’s an Outrage!”

One cannot discuss “Oklahoma!’s” impact on musical theatre without giving copious credit to choreographer Agnes de Mille and the mesmerizing way she incorporated dance into the idea of integration. Just as the songs had grown out of the plot and characters, so did de Mille’s choreography. In one particularly arresting sequence, Laurey is struggling with her feelings about Jud and Curly. In an effort to make up her mind, she takes a potion sold to her by Ali Hakim that he guarantees will help reveal her true love. Singing the song “Out of My Dreams,” Laurey takes the potion and falls asleep. De Mille seamlessly transitioned the action into a dream ballet where alternative reality versions of Laurey, Curly, and Jud play out the scenario through dance, resulting in Laurey ultimately realizing that it is Curly she loves. De Mille’s work on “Oklahoma!” would hold musical theatre to a higher standard of dance that was integral to its storytelling. De Mille would perfect this component of integration in her subsequent work with Rodgers and Hammerstein, choreographing “Carousel” and directing and choreographing their highly experimental musical “Allegro.”

In 1945, Decca Records assembled the original Broadway cast of “Oklahoma!” to make a recording of most of the show, minus four musical numbers. This was released as six 10-inch double-sided discs in 78 RPM format. Though Broadway scores had been recorded in their entirety before, “Oklahoma!” marked the first time in Broadway’s history that an original cast was preserved on an album. The recording sold over a million copies, inspiring Decca Records to call the cast back in to record three additional numbers. This was released as “Oklahoma! Volume Two.” When “Oklahoma!” was re-released in the LP format in 1949, that version only included the songs from the first album. It would not be until 2000 that Decca would release a complete ‘Oklahoma!’ original cast album combining the original recording and “Oklahoma! Volume Two.” It was the ground broken by Decca Records with the original cast album of “Oklahoma!,” however, that launched a tradition of preserving musical theatre history for posterity in this way.

Rodgers and Hammerstein didn’t invent the idea of the integrated musical, but both had individually contributed to projects with other collaborators that had stretched the form in new ways, demonstrating that integration was the direction musical theatre was heading. In 1927, Oscar Hammerstein II had partnered with composer Jerome Kern and co-lyricist P.G. Wodehouse to adapt Edna Ferber’s sprawling novel “Show Boat” for the musical stage, a story that spanned 40 years and dealt with controversial issues such as miscegenation and racial inequality. Hammerstein and Wodehouse penned lyrics that grew directly out of the story’s conflicts, including “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” and “Ol’ Man River.” “Show Boat” was an enormous hit, proving that audiences would embrace more serious content and that musicals didn’t just have to be frothy escapism or melodramatic operetta. Richard Rodgers would similarly employ the conventions of the integrated musical during his prolific output with lyricist Lorenz Hart. Though they only utilized it in fits and starts, integration shows up in such Rodgers and Hart musicals as “The Boys from Syracuse” (1938) and “Pal Joey” (1940). This merging of music, character, and plot could be found in other musicals leading up to 1943 as well, including the George Gershwin/Ira Gershwin/DuBose Heyward “Porgy & Bess” and the Kurt Weill/Ira Gershwin/Moss Hart production “Lady in the Dark” (1941). It was the phenomenal success of “Oklahoma!,” however, that would support integration as the essential component of musical theatre storytelling going forward. Rodgers and Hammerstein had changed the direction of the musical theatre. This is what makes the original cast album of “Oklahoma!” such an important documentation of a major turning point in Broadway’s history and evolution.

Mark Robinson is the author of the two-volume encyclopedia “The World of Musicals,” “The Disney Song Encyclopedia,” “The Encyclopedia of Television Theme Songs,” and “Sitcommentary: The Television Comedies That Changed America.” Robinson has written for “Playbill” magazine, “Lincoln Center,” “Broadway Records,” “Sorbet Magazine,” and ShowTickets.com. He maintains a theater and entertainment blog at markrobinsonwrites.com.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.