



Study Guide for *Oklahoma!*

Music by Richard Rodgers, Book and Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II

Feb 17–Mar 18, 2012

RODGERS & HAMMERSTEIN'S
OKLAHOMA!

In the decade before *Oklahoma!* opened in '43, no other hit show had run over 500 performances; *Oklahoma!* ran for 2,212. The show was the first real phenomenon in modern Broadway history.

fun fact

Page and Stage Event | Sunday, February 26, 2012
Study guide prepared by Cristopher Tibbetts

About the Show

Synopsis

Rodgers & Hammerstein's first collaboration remains, in many ways, their most innovative, having set the standards and established the rules of musical theatre still being followed today. Set in a Western Indian territory just after the turn of the 20th Century, the high-spirited rivalry between the local farmers and cowboys provides the colorful background against which Curly, a handsome cowboy, and Laurey, a winsome farm girl, play out their love story. Although their road to true love never runs smooth, with these two headstrong romantics holding the reins, love's journey is as bumpy as a surrey ride down a country road. That they will succeed in making a new life together we have no doubt, and that this new life will begin in "a brand-new state" provides the ultimate climax to the triumphant *Oklahoma!*.

Production History

In 1942, composer **Richard Rodgers** and his lyricist-collaborator, **Lorenz Hart**, were at the top of their field, writing musical comedies universally praised for their wit, sophistication and innovation, most notably *On Your Toes* (1936), *Babes in Arms* (1937), and *Pal Joey* (1940), introducing the world to such songs as "My Funny Valentine," "Johnny One-Note," "Bewitched," and "I Could Write a Book." A decade earlier, **Oscar Hammerstein II** had been at the top of his field, writing operettas that consistently challenged and reshaped the art form; his *Show Boat*, written with composer **Jerome Kern** in 1927, is considered a landmark of the American stage. The book of *Show Boat* deals frankly with interracial romance and marriage, and features the iconic songs "Bill," "Can't Help Lovin' That Man," and "Old Man River."

Independent of each other, both Rodgers and Hammerstein were attracted to **Lynn Riggs'** folk play of life in his native Oklahoma, *Green Grow the Lilacs*. When Kern declined Hammerstein's invitation to write the musical adaptation with him, and when Hart bowed out of his commitment to musicalize the work with Rodgers, it became inevitable that the ensuing musical play would become the first work by the team of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

Directed by **Rouben Mamoulian**, choreographed by then-unknown ballet choreographer **Agnes de Mille**, the musical version of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, entitled *Away We Go*, was given its world premiere engagement at the Shubert Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut in March 1943. Only a few changes were made out of town, but they were significant. One number, "Boys and Girls Like You and Me," was cut (and saved for the Rodgers and Hammerstein film *State Fair*). A number about the land originally planned as a duet for Laurey and Curly became instead a show-stopping chorale called "Oklahoma." This number was so successful during the musical's pre-Broadway engagement in Boston that the decision was made to add an exclamation point to the title of the song, and to make that the name of the show.

Oklahoma! opened at the St. James Theatre on Broadway on **March 31, 1943**. At that time, the longest running show in Broadway history had run for three years. *Oklahoma!* surpassed that record by two more years, running for 2,212 performances. The national tour ran for a then-unprecedented ten years, visiting every single state, and playing before a combined audience of more than 10 million people.

In 1947, *Oklahoma!* opened at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London, where it ran for 1,548 performances, the longest run of any show up to that time in the 267-year history of the theatre.

To date, more than 600 productions of *Oklahoma!* are licensed per year in the US and Canada. Productions have been seen throughout Great Britain, Australia, Japan, and in Berlin, Johannesburg, Stockholm, Oslo, Copenhagen, Reykjavik, Tel Aviv, Budapest, Belgrade, Paris and beyond.

Awards and Honors

In 1944, Rodgers and Hammerstein received a Special Citation from the Pulitzer Prize Committee for the music and lyrics of *Oklahoma!*.

In 1953, the Oklahoma State Legislature named “Oklahoma!” the official state song.

In 1993, the United States Postal Service honored *Oklahoma!* with its own commemorative stamp, making it the first Broadway musical to be so recognized. The stamp was one of the top sellers of 1993, and in the state of Oklahoma, was the top seller, exceeding the national top-seller, the Elvis Presley stamp.



In 1993, *Oklahoma!* received a special Tony Award in honor of its fiftieth anniversary.

Oklahoma! didn't win its first competitive Tony Award until 2002, when **Shuler Hensley** won a Tony Award for Best Supporting Actor in a Musical as Jud Fry.

Oklahoma! on Film



In 1955, the film version of *Oklahoma!*, starring **Gordon MacRae**, **Shirley Jones** (in her film debut), **Rod Steiger**, and **Eddie Albert**, and produced by Rodgers and Hammerstein, was released to great success.

Although there were early plans to shoot on location in Oklahoma, the producers opted to shoot elsewhere, apparently because the oil wells would be a distraction for exterior scenes.

Among the many actors who auditioned for the role of Curly were **James Dean** and **Paul Newman**. **Joanne Woodward** was offered the role of Laurey. **Eli Wallach** and **Ernest Borgnine** were considered for the role of Jud.

Rodgers and Hammerstein personally oversaw the film themselves to prevent the studio from making the changes that were then typical of stage-to-film musical adaptations, such as putting in new songs by different composers.

The film follows the original stage version extremely closely, more so than any other Rodgers and Hammerstein stage-to-film adaptation. However, it does divide the very long first scene into several shorter scenes, changing the locations (and lyrics) of several of the songs in the process. The film omitted very little from the stage production, cutting only two songs (Ali Hakim's “It’s a Scandal, It’s an Outrage,” and Jud’s “Lonely Room”). Because of this, the film runs two and a half hours, much longer than other screen musicals of the time.

Richard Rodgers on *Oklahoma!*

Our first meeting on the project that eventually became known as *Oklahoma!* took place at my home in Connecticut. We sat under the huge oak tree and tossed ideas around. What kind of songs were we going to write? Where would they go? Who would sing them? What special texture and mood should the show have?

We had many such sessions until we became thoroughly familiar not only with every aspect of the play but with each other's outlook and approach as well. Fortunately we were in agreement on all major issues, so that when we finally did begin putting words and notes on paper—which didn't occur until we'd gone through weeks of discussions—we each were able to move ahead at a steady pace.

The first problem was, appropriately, how to open the show. We didn't want to begin with anything obvious, such as a barn dance with everyone a-whoopin and a-hollerin'. After much thought and talk we simply went the way Lynn Riggs had opened his play, with a woman seated alone on the stage churning butter. For the lyric of the first song, Oscar developed his theme from the description that Riggs had written as an introduction to the scene:

It is a radiant summer morning several years ago, the kind of morning which, enveloping the shape of earth—men, cattle in a meadow, blades of young corn, streams—makes them seem to exist now for the first time, their images giving off a visible golden emanation that is partly true and partly a trick of imagination focusing to keep alive a loveliness that may pass away...

This was all Oscar's poetic imagination needed to produce his lines about cattle standing like statues, the corn as high as an elephant's eye, and the bright golden haze on the meadow. When I read them for the first time I could see those cattle and that corn and bright golden haze vividly. How prophetic were Oscar's words, "I've got a beautiful feelin'/Everything's goin' my way."

By opening the show with the woman alone onstage and the cowboy beginning his song offstage, we did more than set a mood; we were, in fact, warning the audience, 'Watch out! This is a different kind of musical.'

(From *Musical Stages: An Autobiography* by Richard Rodgers. New York: DaCapo, 2002.)

About the Authors

Richard Rodgers (1902-1979) and **Oscar Hammerstein II** (1895-1960) were individually successful in musical theatre and operetta when they joined forces in 1943. Their first



collaboration, *Oklahoma!*, was also the first of a new genre—the musical play—representing a unique fusion of Rodgers' musical comedy and Hammerstein's operetta. It also marked the beginning of the most successful partnership in Broadway musical history. *Oklahoma!* was followed by *Carousel* (1945), *Allegro* (1947), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), *Me and Juliet* (1953), *Pipe Dream* (1955), *Flower Drum Song* (1958), and *The Sound of Music* (1959). The team wrote one movie musical, *State Fair* (1945), which was adapted to the stage in 1995, and one for television, *Cinderella*

(1957), which remade in 1965 and 1997. Despite Hammerstein's death in 1960, Rodgers continued to write for the Broadway stage. His first solo entry, *No Strings* (1962), earned him two Tony Awards for music and lyrics, and was followed by *Do I Hear a Waltz?* (1965, lyrics by **Stephen Sondheim**), *Two By Two* (1970, lyrics by **Martin Charnin**), *Rex* (1976, lyrics by **Sheldon Harnick**), and *I Remember Mama* (1979, lyrics by **Martin Charnin** and **Raymond Jessel**). Rodgers also wrote the music and lyrics for the song "Something Good," for the film version of *The Sound of Music* (1965).

Collectively, the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals earned thirty-four Tony Awards, fifteen Academy Awards, two Pulitzer Prizes, and two Grammy Awards. In 1998, Rodgers and Hammerstein were cited by *Time Magazine* and CBS News as among the 20 Most Influential Artists of the 20th Century, and in 1999, they were jointly commemorated on a U.S. postage stamp. On March 27, 1990, Rodgers was honored posthumously with Broadway's highest accolade, when the 46th Street Theatre, was renamed The Richard Rodgers Theatre.

Questions for Discussion

1. Compare and contrast the experience of reading the text of a play, as opposed to seeing it onstage. Which do you prefer? Would you read a text even if you were not going to see a production? Does reading the text help you appreciate the production?
2. In what ways can you tell, based on the text, that *Oklahoma!* was revolutionary at the time of its writing?
3. *Oklahoma!* is one of the most widely-produced plays of the 20th Century. Why? Does familiarity breed contempt? What preconceived notions did you bring as a reader and do you bring as an audience member?
4. A convincing argument can be made for the power and popularity of escapism that *Oklahoma!* represented when it premiered in early 1943, as the US was in the middle of World War II. Do you think that *Oklahoma!* represented escapism to the audience of its time? Why or why not? What are examples of "escapism" (if any) that we could see in today's economically depressed culture?
5. Does knowing famous songs from the score ("Oklahoma!," "Surrey With the Fringe on Top," "People Will Say We're In Love") enhance your enjoyment of the show as a whole? These songs certainly prove that they stand alone, but do they also work in the context of the show, and helping move the story forward?
6. Having just read the text, what are you looking forward to seeing dramatized or staged or "acted out"? Was anything clarified by having read the text?
7. Who is the protagonist of *Oklahoma!*? Who is the play about? Is there an antagonist? Who is it? Explain.