A Note from Skylight Artistic Director Michael Unger

Welcome to the opening musical of Skylight Music Theatre’s 60th anniversary season. Oklahoma! is a ground-breaking musical that changed, and paved the way, for how musicals were told ever after. We are thrilled to present this oft-performed musical in Skylight’s intimate style as rendered by the gifted director, Jill Anna Ponasik. We hope this audience guide offers you some insight to not only the background of this deserved classic, but also to our current production. So, don’t sit back, relax, and enjoy the show — lean in, get engaged and be a PART of it.

Michael Unger
Artistic Director

Broadway’s Dynamic Duo

Richard Rodgers & Oscar Hammerstein II

After long and highly distinguished careers with other collaborators, Richard Rodgers (composer, 1902-79) and Oscar Hammerstein II (librettist/lyricist, 1895-1960) joined forces in 1943 to create the most consistently fruitful and successful partnership in the American Musical Theatre. Oklahoma!, the first Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, was also the first of a new genre: the musical play, blending Rodgers’ sophisticated style of musical comedy (which he had perfected in a twenty-five year partnership with lyricist Lorenz Hart) with Hammerstein’s innovations in operetta (conceived in collaboration with such composers as Sigmund Romberg, Vincent Youmans, Rudolf Friml and Jerome Kern). 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 also wrote one movie musical, State Fair (1945), adapted to the stage (1995), and one for television, Cinderella (1957), adapted for Broadway in 2013.

Collectively, Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals earned 34 Tony Awards, 15 Academy Awards, two Pulitzer Prizes, two Grammy Awards and two Emmy Awards. In 1999 they were jointly commemorated on a U.S. postage stamp.

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**Oklahoma! Synopsis**

A radiant summer morning. Curly, a local ranch hand, comes serenading (Oh a Beautiful Mornin'). Aunt Eller, the first to hear his singing asks if he’s there to invite her niece Laurey to the box social that evening. She knows they are smitten with each other. Curly offers to take Laurey to the party in style (The Surrey with the Fringe on Top), but Laurey doesn’t believe he’s being truthful. Jud, the hired hand asks her himself. Angry with Curly, and afraid to turn Jud down, Laurey accepts Jud's invitation. An injured Curly is left escorting Aunt Eller to the social.

Will Parker returns triumphantly from Kansas City where he won enough prize money at the rodeo — $50! — to earn the hand of Ado Annie, but... he spent all of the money on pre-sents for Ado and her Pa, and no longer has $50. To complicate things, while Will was at the rodeo, Ado Annie took up with the peddler Ali Hakim. Annie explains why she can’t possibly choose between Will and Ali (I Can’t Say No).

As the box social nears, folks gather at Aunt Eller’s. Much to Laurey’s chagrin, Curly is now the object of affection of the shrieking Gertie Cummings. Laurey attempts to brush away her frustration (Many a New Day).

Left alone, Curly and Laurey admit that folks are beginning to talk (People Will Say We’re in Love). Curly asks once more if Laurey might consider attending the social with him. But he can’t change her mind. Stung, Curly visits Jud in the smokehouse.

Trying a novel approach with the unpopular Jud, Curly attempts to convince him that though people may not seem to appreciate him now, they surely would if he were dead (Pore Jud is Daid). But the obvious purpose behind Curly’s visit is Laurey. Both men want her, both are willing to fight for her. Jud, desperate to have what others have, is determined to win Laurey at any cost (Lonely Room).

Earlier, Laurey purchased a vial of smelling salts the peddler claimed was The Elixir of Egypt — a potion to help clarify one’s thoughts. Now, jumbled by her feelings about Curly and Jud, she gives the Elixir a try (Out of My Dreams).

Visions begin to unfold before Laurey: scenes from earlier in the day, the possibility of romantic love, fear of Jud, confusion about sex. As things grow increasingly surreal, Laurey sees a violent conflict between Curly and Jud. She wakes from her nightmare just as Jud is offering his arm, ready to head for the social.

Despite tension between farmers and cowmen, the community unites to raise money for a new schoolhouse (The Farmer and the Cowman). The different factions dance, fight, and bid on picnic hampers prepared by the girls. In order to wiggle his way out of marrying Ado Annie, Ali has contrived to pay Will $50 for all of the gifts he bought in Kansas City. With cash in hand, Will can once again claim Ado Annie. But, when he extravagantly bids $50 for Ado Annie’s hamper, her Pa points out that he just lost his money again, for it now belongs to the schoolhouse. Ali, desperate to retain a bachelor bids $51 and wins the hamper so Will can win Ado Annie.

Only Laurey’s basket remains. Both Jud and Curly bid every penny they have. Finally, Curly makes the winning bid after selling his saddle, his horse, and his gun. The two men shake hands, but the tension between them is now enflamed.

Will Parker tells Ado Annie that she is going to have to play by his rules (All Er Nuthin’). Ado Annie agrees, so long as she can play her own way.

Face to face with Laurey, Jud tries to explain how he feels, but his clumsy attempts turn to threats. In a pique of anger, Laurey fires him, warning him to never set foot on their farm again. She calls for Curly, and shares what has happened. Her terror turns to relief as they admit what everyone else already knows (People Will Say We’re in Love; reprise).

Several weeks later, Curly and Laurey wed. Aunt Eller explains that the two couldn’t have picked a better time to start life, since the territory is on the threshold of statehood (Oklahoma). A chill descends upon the wedding party at the entrance of Jud, drunk and despairing. Jud attacks Curly, and pulls out a knife. The men struggle and Jud falls on his own blade. A short while later, Jud is dead and Curly has been charged with his murder.

This frontier community must make its own laws, and set its own terms of justice. No one wants Curly to spend his wedding night in jail. A rushed trial takes place and with coaching from the ‘judge’, Curly is acquitted on self defense. With the sun rising on another radiant morning, Curly and Laurey ride into their new life together (Finale Ultimo).

**Were the Cowboy and the Farmer Really Friends?**

In 1906, when Oklahoma was not yet a state, agriculture was the territory’s biggest economic element and leading industry. In earlier years, cattle ranching had been the main financial contributor to the territory’s economy. But when the land rushes of the 1890s brought more people to the future state, there was a greater demand for land and the dynamics changed, leading to tension between the cowmen and the famers and the ranchers. In order for the territory to become a state, however, the two separate groups and economies had to work together. This push towards coexisting is seen in Aunt Eller’s “The Farmer and The Cowman should be Friends.” It urges “Territory folks should stick together, territory folks should all be pals”. The groups eventually put aside their differences and on November 16, 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt declared the territory of Oklahoma the forty-sixth state. Reference: The Oklahoma Historical Society.
Broadway Before Oklahoma!

Once upon a time, most musicals were stories with songs added in where convenient; they didn't really advance the plot, they were more for entertainment. Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma! was the first, fully integrated musical play, using every song and dance to develop the characters or the plot. They wrote dialogue between characters in song. Laurey's dream ballet also explains that she is really in love with Curly, even though there is no spoken dialogue. After Oklahoma! The musical would never be the same.

Tracing the Roots of Oklahoma!

Oklahoma! is based on Green Grow the Lilacs, a play by Lynn Riggs, a poet, playwright and screenwriter born on a farm near Claremore, Indian Territory (Oklahoma) in 1899. His mother, who was one-eighth Cherokee, died when he was a small child, and his father remarried. But Riggs never forgot his Cherokee heritage. More than half of his 30 plays were set in the Southwest, and vividly depicted life in the old Indian Territory with all its comedy and tragedy. His best-known play, Green Grow the Lilacs, was produced by the Theatre Guild and performed on Broadway, opening on January 26, 1931, and closing March 21, 1931.

In his preface to his original script, Lynn Riggs stated that his intentions in writing the play were "solely to recapture in a kind of nostalgic glow, the great range of mood which characterized the old folk songs and ballads I used to hear in my Oklahoma." In creating the musical, Oscar Hammerstein II thought it would have been a crime to banish Riggs' picturesque images, so he incorporated them into his lyrics and was inspired by Riggs' own poetic stage direction which reads: "It is a radiant summer morning several years ago, the kind of morning which, enveloping the shapes of earth — men, cattle in a meadow, blades of the young corn".

Riggs was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1943 and in 1965 to the Hall of Great Westerners of the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. He died in New York City in 1954.

A Show Business Phenomenon

The saga of the trials and tribulations of Oklahoma! before it reached its première performance in New York became American theatre legend. Nearly everyone connected with the production was convinced it would be a box-office disaster. Here was a musical without stars; without "gags" and humor; without the sex appeal of chorus girls in flimsy attire. Here was a musical that strayed into realism and tragedy, with one of the main character's death as a climax of the story. Here, finally, was a musical which, for the first time in Broadway history, leaned heavily upon folk-ballet and ballet dancers. Getting financial backing proved to be back breaking. It was ultimately successful only because the Theatre Guild, which had undertaken the production, had many friends and allies. But there was hardly an investor who did not think their money was being thrown down a sewer.

When Oklahoma! opened out of town scouts sent back to New York the succinct message, "No Girls, No Gags, No Chance." After the New York opening, the line was revised to read: "No Girls, No Gags, No Tickets." The freshness, the imagination, and the magic of this musical play held the audience spellbound from the opening curtain to the thunderous standing ovation. The critics vied with each other in the expression of superlatives. One called it "folk opera."

Oklahoma! opened new vistas for the American musical theatre with its new and unorthodox approaches, the vitality and inspiration of Hammerstein's text and lyrics and Rodgers' music. It created box-office history and shaped many musicals to follow, even to this day.

The demand for tickets was unprecedented and it ran on Broadway for five years and nine months (2,248 performances). The show broke all of the then existing records both for length of run and for box-office receipts.

Its Broadway record would not be bested until My Fair Lady (1956). The Tony Awards and other awards now given for achievement in musical theatre were not in existence in 1943 so the original production of Oklahoma! received no theatrical awards. It did, however, win a special Pulitzer Prize.

A national company toured the United States for ten years, performing in about 250 cities before audiences exceeding ten million. In addition, when the New York engagement ended, the original company went on a tour of seventy-one cities. Companies were formed to produce the play in Europe, South Africa, Scandinavia, Australia and for the armed forces in all the theatres of war during the last years of the Second World War. In London its run proved the longest in the three-hundred year history of the Drury Lane Theatre.

The musical continues to have successful, often sold-out Broadway revivals: 1951, 1953, 1979, 2002, and the current Tony Award-winning revival (2019).
Agnes Mille (1905-1993), one of the dance world’s most innovative dancers and choreographers, developed the narrative aspects of dance and was noted for her creative use of American themes and folk dance. She choreographed the dances for *Oklahoma!* that not only added to the dramatic atmosphere, but also for the first time in American theatrical history, was instrumental in advancing the plot. In the *Oklahoma!* dream ballet, dancers doubled for the leading actors to provide key insights into the heroine’s emotional conflicts. It became one of the most famous scenes in the play. De Mille went on to choreograph over a dozen other musicals.

In 1976 she was awarded New York City’s Handel Medallion, which is the most distinguished honor the city can bestow on its citizens. In December 1980 she was given the prestigious Kennedy Center Honor by President Carter. She was also the recipient of two Tony Awards and many other awards, including an Emmy in 1987 for *Agnes: The Indomitable de Mille.*

Many of the most significant moments in theater history have been the shows that broke the rules. *Oklahoma!* is a prime example. Before it, musicals were mostly light entertainment filled with tunes, choruses, decorative scenery, and just enough of a thin plot to hold it together. Then Oscar Hammerstein II came along and changed that, starting with *Showboat,* which dealt with real social issues. Then *Oklahoma!* took it even further. It starts with nobody on stage, then only Curly. No chorus girls. Dramatic spoken scenes are a major part of the show. And especially significant is the incorporation of ballet, which could convey fantasy and conflict in a way that nothing else can.

*Oklahoma!* has very few specific scenic requirements for story telling. It doesn’t really matter if we’re on Aunt Eller’s porch or in her back yard. So that freed us to make a general environment that had some moving parts to change the space, without having to illustrate the locale of the scene. Also, if you approach it more literally, the dance could look out of place. It’s interesting that there is only one scene, the smokehouse, where there are any references to the place. And there are a bunch: the squeaky door, the creaky floor, the knotholes in the wall, the roof, the unmade bed, etc. And the number Jud sings is called *Lonely Room,* in the only interior scene. So we needed one variation on the scenic theme that we use only once.

The style of the design is meant to abstractly suggest both trees and structure. The vertical boards have diagonal pieces “branching off,” so they could be limbs or roofs. The long diagonals across the space are backed with irregular fabric shapes that can suggest tree tops, but those lines serve another function in the smokehouse. All of this is done with natural rustic materials and techniques to suggest the simple and unsophisticated physical world of territory folk, who think Kansas City is about as far as you can go.