
Amy Savin
Third-Year Student (Bachelor of Arts, Music and English)
School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph, CANADA

In his book, Oklahoma! The Making of an American Musical, Tim Carter voices his concern about the way musical theatre has been neglected as an art form, despite its significant influence on American society during the twentieth century. Mark Grant shares a similar concern in his own monograph, The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical, admitting that there was a time when musicals were able to withstand the rising competition of other art forms, yet suggests that its fame was particular to the era in which it was born.¹ Carter agrees that during a time when America was still recovering from war, the Broadway musical served as a means of coping with nostalgia, and reconciling with the shifting political atmosphere. What is more, musical theatre became a forum wherein attitudes towards racial and social conflicts were also shaped. In the same way that art often reflects society’s culture and values, Carter recognizes Oklahoma! to be one of those musical theater landmarks that captures the essence of the American spirit during this time period, while also shaping, and being shaped by, the societal and cultural fabric of which it was a part.

¹ Mark N. Grant, The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004).
While Carter does not deny the existence of other literature written on *Oklahoma!* or musicals as a genre he does point out the lack of scholarly documentation that exists on the topic. Carter claims that most references concerning musical theatre are taken from contemporary journalism, full of accounts of individuals formerly involved with the stage who, in reflecting on their greatest achievements, leave readers with a polished yet selective point of view. Carter even feels that many scholarly treatments of Broadway musicals are biased, as they tend to focus on broader cultural, stylistic, or thematic issues rather than delivering the entire journey of a production, from its inception to its grand moment of fame. Thus, Carter sets out to provide for the first time a thorough and academic history of the making of *Oklahoma!*, with the combined use of personal autobiographies, oral histories, newspapers, journals, letters, and several drafts of scripts and musical scores. Carter’s intentions are really quite simple: to bring to light a part of musical history that deserves to be acknowledged with all the others art forms, and to demonstrate how research in this area provides a missing puzzle piece for the development of American popular culture.

Carter begins his study of *Oklahoma!* with a chapter called “Setting the Stage”, whereby he introduces the theatrical society of the Theatre Guild, founded in 1919. Director Lawrence Langer, partnered by Guild’s executive director Theresa Helburn, became two of the Guild’s chief founders, paving the way for several successful Broadway productions throughout the twentieth century. Carter explains how the Theatre Guild originated out of the Washington Square Players and was unique from other theatres in that its Board of Directors shared the responsibilities for repertoire selection, while also producing and managing the plays they chose. The goal of the Theatre Guild was to give Broadway productions a fresh platform and bolster interest (and thereby, ticket sales) by offering professional productions six times per year. While this vision was a good one, however, Carter reveals how the Great Depression of the 1930s caused much financial and emotional anxiety amongst Americans, resulting in a decline of public theatre attendance.

The pending questions that continued to surface over the course of subsequent years were: What was it that America needed to see? What story did they need to hear, and what did America have to say? As Carter continues on in his story, we see how *Oklahoma!* evolved out of an effort to resolve these questions. When directors like Langer and Helburn began pursuing Linn Riggs’ *Green Grows the Lilacs*, they did so because it contained stories of the American experience that few people had ever talked about. A letter written by Riggs expresses his own emotional motivations behind his play. Speaking of characters in his own life he writes, “I knew mostly the dark ones, the unprivileged ones… I wanted to give voice and a dignified existence to people who found themselves, most pitiably, without a voice, when there was so much to be cried out against…” (Carter 11). Even through this statement, Carter sets the mood for the
rest of his *Oklahoma!* study. What *Oklahoma!* would come to mean to people was very dependent on how it was crafted and prepared. The people involved would have to represent the American soul, from those producing, to those acting in it.

It is obvious through the way Carter presents the progress of *Oklahoma!* that directors involved were constantly looking at the larger picture. It was not a project simply for the sake of entertainment and musical value, but it was the effort of a nation looking to rebuild an identity. While Carter paves the way for this kind of conversation, Raymond Knapp dedicates an entire book to this very idea of national identity in his work entitled, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity.* Here Knapp explores how musicals have been inherently tied to statements of American values. However, Knapp is also aware of the way in which some musicals have merely exploited American mythologies, stretching the truth about people’s freedom of rights or equality.²

Carter’s text continues to show in detail how contacts and relationships were developed that would make the production of *Green Grow the Lilacs* (which would later become *Oklahoma!*) possible. Finding the right librettist and musical composer, for one, proved to be a tedious job. Eventually, Helburn managed to bring on board Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein as the song-writing duo. Carter further explores networking in the chapter “Contracts and Commitments.” Though on the surface this section may appear a little more rigid or dry, Carter continues to provide an informative and entertaining glance at the behind-the-scenes work and obstacles of networking that plagued *Oklahoma!* Furthermore, Carter draws the reader into the more personal issues of individuals such as Larry Hart who, according to Rodgers, refused to be a part of *Green Grow the Lilacs* because he saw no future for it. What is more, the reader also sees Hart’s battle with alcohol, an addiction that leads to his demise. Other issues arise, including a lack of investors able to contribute to Guild’s vision, with rumours that the Theatre Guild would go bankrupt. Carter goes over the various methods for fundraising and plans to entice investors. How were the directors of the Guild supposed to present their case to make it seem a worthwhile investment? Consultants such as David Lowe reminded everyone to not give the impression that they were desperate, but rather that those who contributed would be part of a “once in a life-time” opportunity (Carter 68).

Funding aside, Carter proceeds to depict the pressures of finding the right cast and crew. What would be most effective, using big Hollywood names to draw in the public, or scouting out emerging talent to keep expenses more affordable? The answer would come as a compromise, involving a balance of both. If we take a look briefly at

one of Raymond Knapp’s other books, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, we see Knapp demonstrate that audiences look for characters they connect with and even, at times, through whom they can live vicariously.3 Helburn was also aware of this while on the search for specific cast members. She needed to consider who would be easily loved and most representative of the American spirit. Still, Helburn soon realized that many actors were simply not interested in a “lesser platform” like that of musicals. The theatre was losing many of their participants to the glamour of film and other entertainment mediums. Some actors were also unavailable. Carter describes how Helburn courted Shirley Temple enthusiastically, and yet she was unable to commit because Temple’s mother felt the script “too mature and Sexy for Shirley” (Carter 56). To add another layer of complexity, as the rehearsals later made evident, the initial cast continued to be revised when certain participants could not meet the acting or musical requirements. Carter paints a believable picture of the stresses involved in communicating back and forth between various cast members, also allowing the reader to see Helburn’s persistent, and determined character.

Carter does a commendable job of detaching his emotions or biases towards certain individuals so that his research might maintain an objective perspective. However, it is also worth noting that he plays the role of the interpreter, making his own judgments where he feels there is not enough evidence provided to render a complete picture. We see this in the chapter entitled “Creative Process”, where Carter feels Rodgers’s account of the creation of the show paints too rosy a picture. Regardless, it is a rewarding experience to read some of the correspondence between librettist Oscar Hammerstein and composer Richard Rodgers to get inside the minds of the creators. The two individuals seem quite down to earth. Responding later, during an interview, Hammerstein explained “Dick and I stay very close together while drawing up the blueprint of a play. Before we start to put words or notes on paper, we have agreed on a very definite and complete outline… After the blueprint stage, we then work together on the interior problems” (Carter 80). There was much dialogue between the two creators as their work underwent many revisions. Carter highlights the strengths of both individuals, expressing how, while Hammerstein appeared to have a clearer sense dramatic direction, Rodgers was always fluent and quick with his own writing, and completing songs in their final draft took him no time at all. Carter demonstrates how even though Hammerstein struggled at times to find the appropriate script or lyrics, he made sure to incorporate spoken dialogue over music to provide a kind of continuity and flow between speech and song (Carter 105). This was an art in itself: to be able to cause music to appear naturally within a scene, without disturbing the dramatic

The music had to fit the characters, the characters the story, resulting in everything being completely intertwined. Rodgers alludes to this concept when he shares, “When a show works perfectly, its because all the individual parts complement each other and fit together… no single element overshadows any other; In a great musical, the orchestrations sound the way the costumes look. That’s what made Oklahoma! work... It was a work created by many that gave the impression of having been created by one” (Carter 79).

The chapter titled “Heading for Broadway” also serves its purpose, providing animated insight into the many exhausting yet fulfilling rehearsals for Oklahoma. Costume designs, dance structures, scores, and scenes were continually revised, some at last minute. Even the very title Green Grow the Lilacs, changed to Away We Go!, before Oklahoma! was finally settled upon. At times, it appeared that much of the cast was doubtful. Actors questioned the longevity of the Broadway production in the face of low finances and undedicated members. Another scholar, also concerned with the intricacies of getting a show successfully onto the stage is John Kenrick. In his monograph, Musical Theatre: A History, Kenrick also addresses the various elements involved in a successful musical, noting that sometimes what is unpopular at first, in the right hands, can be revived into a masterpiece.4 With the brilliance of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s script and music, and the persistence of Helburn and other directors, Oklahoma! is only one example of a story that underwent several drafts, and modifications before almost miraculously reaching the level of fame that it did.

Still, Because of the various stresses that accompanied rehearsals, Carter appears surprised by Helburn’s calm correspondence when asked for feedback on performances. Once again, Carter assumes that there are simply “too few records of day-to-day events” to understand the situation in full. It is interesting to see how Carter sometimes appears frustrated or disappointed that he cannot arrive at more objective conclusions, and yet remains certain he is right about situations being far more complex in real life than what has been recorded. Thus, the reader is tempted to side with Carter’s interpretation, no matter how great the gaps left by the missing puzzle pieces.

Towards the end of the book, Carter begins to go into more detail about some of the bigger picture elements in Oklahoma! With the war breaking out in Europe, Helburn explained that “apart from the escape comedies and musicals, and the release of laughter, I believe that people will need greatness and beauty and emotional lift intensely” (Carter 174). Helburn admits that Rodgers and Hammerstein did an excellent job of addressing all the necessary elements of a great American masterpiece. The ideological take on community, nostalgia, and patriotism, were all intertwined in

song and script, along with sentimental and relatable characters. Carter argues that it would have been almost impossible for audiences not to identify with these themes, or become attached (Carter 174). What is more, Carter mentions that Hammerstein created a map of Oklahoma for distribution with the playbill, which even further provoked audiences to believe that these were real characters that occupied the land and could be located.

When Carter goes into character analysis, he is tremendously skilled at drawing parallels between the roles of the characters and the themes of the time. For example, the roles of men and women, and America’s attitudes towards race, sex, marriage, and justice are all addressed through the various characters. Each character is of equal importance whether they represent morality or not. For example, Carter points out how even though Curly is the more likeable, and suitable match for Laurey, Jud’s threatening and perverted nature forces Laurey to confront very mature subjects, prompting her necessary transition into womanhood. Carter also shows how the juxtaposition of Laurey (the American sweetheart) and Addie (the promiscuous one) serve as reflections of American femininity. With wartime statistics showing an increase in the divorce rate and concerns over sexually transmitted diseases and illegitimate children on the rise, Carter points out how although Oklahoma! favours Laurey’s disposition over Addie’s, it still paints both kinds of women in a sympathetic light. While Carter necessarily limits his to the characters of Oklahoma!, Robert Lawson-Peebles traces these same kinds of themes in his book Approaches to the American Musical. Here Lawson-Peebles demonstrates how musicals were inherently tied to American culture, serving both as entertainment and as a means of confronting various controversial issues of the twentieth century, just as we see Oklahoma doing through Carter’s treatment.

It is an extremely difficult task to document a production such as the American musical Oklahoma! since one can really come at it from so many different angles. How much time should one spend on the technical aspects, the political, or the social? After reading Tim Carter’s Oklahoma!: The Making of an American Musical, it is nice to be able to walk away with the feeling of being fed or informed in all aspects while also being able to trace the larger theme in question. Oklahoma! was loved because it celebrated America. It provided the opportunity for people to dream about a world such as the one portrayed in the musical—where justice and equality could reign.

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