



## Rodgers and Hammerstein's Broadway Production *Oklahoma!*

OKLAHOMA HISTORY CENTER EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

*Oklahoma!* is a popular and well-known musical and the first **collaboration** by famed creative musical duo **Richard Rodgers** and **Oscar Hammerstein II**. The musical, set in Indian Territory, is an exciting love story with fighting, trickery, and of course, the great state of Oklahoma. Curly and Laurey, the main characters, love each other, although they will not admit it. The **cast** is full of crazy characters: tough Aunt Eller with a big heart; sneaky traveling **peddler** Ali; a mysterious farmhand Jud who wants to marry Laurey; and Annie, who is in love with every boy! *Oklahoma!* first opened in New York City on March 31, 1943, at the St. James Theatre where it would be performed 2,212 times before ending its **run**. The song "Oklahoma!" from the musical became the official state song of Oklahoma in 1953. *Oklahoma!* changed the way musicals were performed and is still in **production** today.



The 2017 Sooner Theatre production of *Oklahoma!* in Norman, Oklahoma (courtesy of *The Oklaboman*).<sup>1</sup>

## Green Grow the Lilacs

A member of the Cherokee tribe, Lynn Riggs was born on a farm near Claremore, Oklahoma, on August 31, 1899. He attended the University of Oklahoma in 1920 and studied English. He wrote many plays set in Indian Territory and incorporated elements of his childhood into the plot and the characters.

In 1931 Lynn Riggs published and debuted the play *Green Grow the Lilacs*. The play tells the story of farmers living in Indian Territory in 1900, seven years before Oklahoma became a state. The play involves a **love triangle** between cowboy Curly, farm girl Laurey, and farmhand Jeeter. The character Aunt Eller was based on Riggs's own Aunt Mary, whom he adored. The play is named after a popular Irish **folk song**. In January 1931, *Green Grow the Lilacs* opened in New York City at the Guild Theatre. The show closed after sixty-four performances.

In 1942 Lynn Riggs was drafted into the US Army. While Lynn Riggs was in the army, he gave Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II the **script** for *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which they had been considering developing into a musical. Oscar Hammerstein II said he kept many of the lines from the original play without changes because they were so well-written.



Lynn Riggs at his home (2012.201.B1089.0220, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).<sup>2</sup>

## Rodgers and Hammerstein Create a Musical

Richard Rodgers was born in New York City on June 28, 1902. He started writing songs in high school and composed many musicals early on with his original **lyricist** Lorenz Hart. Oscar Hammerstein II was born in New York City on July 1, 1895, into a family very involved with theater. He quit law school to pursue his love of musicals. Rodgers and Hammerstein's first major collaboration was in 1943.

After receiving the *Green Grow the Lilacs* script, Rodgers and Hammerstein went to work adapting the play into a musical. Oscar Hammerstein II wrote the script (also known as the book) as well as the lyrics while Richard Rodgers **composed** the musical **scores**. Hammerstein wrote the lyrics to the songs before the music was even finished! They originally titled the musical *Away We Go!* and opened the show in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1943. Later the title of the musical was changed to *Oklahoma!* and two more songs, including the title song, "Oklahoma!" were added. On March 31, 1943, *Oklahoma!* opened on Broadway at the St. James Theatre with Rouben Mamoulian as the director and Agnes de Mille as the **choreographer**. The musical received excellent reviews and the first run closed May 29, 1948, after 2,212 performances.



Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II (2012.201.B1102.0114, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).<sup>3</sup>

## Cultural Impact of *Oklahoma!*

After the success of *Oklahoma!*, several national touring companies took the musical on the road performing in 250 cities over ten years. During World War II, the musical was performed overseas for the troops. The original cast of the Broadway show came together and recorded the songs for an album. This would be the first cast album to feature an original Broadway cast.

*Oklahoma!* revolutionized the theater business. The play was the first musical to blend comedy, drama, dance, and song. The songs are used to move the **plot**, not just a break from the story. *Oklahoma!* also created a musical formula, comprised of a **baritone** lead, a **soprano** lead, a supporting **tenor** lead, and a supporting **alto** lead. Today, *Oklahoma!* is still a popular production all over the world.

A movie version of the musical was released in 1955 with Gordon MacRae and Shirley Jones starring as Curly and Laurey. Actress Barbara Lawrence from *Carnegie, Oklahoma*, played Gertie Cummings. Rodgers and Hammerstein were involved with the making of the film, and Agnes de Mille, the original choreographer, also worked on the movie. Ironically, the movie was filmed in Arizona because the state of Oklahoma looked too modern. The movie received four Academy Award nominations and won two for Best Music, **Scoring** of a Musical Picture and Best Sound, Recording.



Shirley Jones and Gordon MacRae as Laurey and Curly (courtesy of the Denver Public Library).<sup>4</sup>

## State Song

In 1935 the state song of Oklahoma was “Oklahoma—A Toast,” written by Kingfisher native Harriet Parker Camden. The song was very reverent, and the lyrics described iconic images of Oklahoma including sunflowers and fields of cotton. **George Nigh**, the youngest **legislator** elected to the Oklahoma House of Representatives at the age of twenty-three, thought the song was too old-fashioned. Nigh remembered the first time he heard the song “Oklahoma!” at home in McAlester and thought it would be more cheerful and celebratory of the state.

In 1953 Nigh introduced a bill to officially change the state song to “Oklahoma!,” which he believed captured the spirit of the state better than the somber “Oklahoma—A Toast.” He had one major opponent to the bill, a man he called Old Man Huff, who did not believe the state song should be written by a non-Oklahoman. Old Man Huff sang “Oklahoma—A Toast” on the legislature floor and was overcome with emotion.

Representative Nigh had to act fast if he wanted his bill to pass. He **tabled** the measure for one legislative day and called the representative from the town of Chickasha, where the Oklahoma College for Women (now the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma) **chorus** had just finished a production of the musical. Nigh also called **Ridge Bond**, the only Oklahoman to perform the character Curly on Broadway. Bond still had costumes from the musical and was asked to visit the legislature to perform some songs from the show—with no chance to **rehearse!** The next day George Nigh gave the floor to the women’s choir, who began singing a couple of songs from the musical. Suddenly, Ridge Bond burst through the door singing “Oklahoma!,” and everyone stood to cheer. After the performance was finished, George Nigh’s bill passed, and the state song was officially changed to “Oklahoma!”



Ridge Bond with the Oklahoma College for Women chorus (courtesy of Ridge Bond Archives).<sup>5</sup>

## Key Character List

Curly McLain—A strong-headed cowman adored by many women in the town. Although he is in love with Laurey, he will not admit it.

Laurey Williams—A young woman who lives with her aunt on a farm. Although she is in love with Curly, she will not admit her feelings.

Ado Annie—The boy-crazy daughter of a farmer.

Will Parker—A shy cowman who wishes to marry Ado Annie, despite her father’s disapproval.

Aunt Eller—A mother figure to everyone in the town. She is Laurey’s aunt and caretaker.

Jud Fry—The hired hand for Aunt Eller and Laurey. He is not well-liked by others and has strong feelings for Laurey.

Ali Hakim—A mysterious traveling salesman from Persia.

Gertie Cummings—The pretty girl from the other town who takes a liking to Curly. She is known for her laugh.

Andrew Carnes—A farmer and the father of Ado Annie. He is very skeptical of cowmen, especially Will Parker.

## Song List

Act One:

**“Overture”**

“Oh What a Beautiful Mornin’”

“The **Surrey** with the Fringe on Top”

“Kansas City”

“I Cain’t Say No!”

“Many a New Day”

“It’s a Scandal! It’s a Outrage!”

“People Will Say We’re in Love”

“Pore Jud is Daid”

“Lonely Room”

“Out of My Dreams”

“Dream Ballet”

Act Two:

“The Farmer and the Cowman”

“All Er Nothin’”

“People Will Say We’re in Love (**Reprise**)”

“Oklahoma!”

**“Finale Ultimo”**

## Glossary

**alto:** A low singing voice for women.

**baritone:** A low singing voice for men.

**cast:** The people who perform in a play or musical.

**collaboration:** When people come together to create something.

**composer:** The person who creates music.

**choreographer:** The person who creates the dance moves and teaches them to the performers.

**chorus:** A group of people who perform songs.

**ensemble:** Can refer to the entire cast or a group of performers in the background of scenes.

**finale ultimo:** The closing song in a musical.

**folk song:** A song passed down from generations within an area.

**legislature:** A body of elected individuals who vote bills into law.

**love triangle:** A romantic predicament that involves three people.

**lyricist:** The person who writes the words for songs.

**overture:** The piece of music, traditionally instrumental, that opens the musical.

**peddler:** A traveling salesman

**playbill:** A printed list of the cast and characters given to the audience at a show.

**plot:** The events that happen within a play or musical.

**production:** The performance of a play or musical when viewed by an audience.

**rehearse:** Performance practice before a show opens to the public.

**reprise:** A shortened version of a song repeated later in a play or musical.

**run:** The amount of time the musical is performed.

**score:** The written form of a song.

**script:** The printed text of a play or musical.

**soprano:** A high singing voice for women.

**surrey:** A four-wheeled wagon attached to a horse.

**tabled:** To delay a decision or discussion.

**tenor:** A high singing voice for men.

## Fun Facts

- In 1944 *Oklahoma!* was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize for Drama.
- In 1946 the first performance of *Oklahoma!* in the state of Oklahoma debuted in Oklahoma City. Governor Robert S. Kerr held statewide celebrations. Rodgers and Hammerstein were made honorary members of the Kiowa Tribe.
- In 1950 the national tour of *Oklahoma!* opened in Cheyenne, Wyoming, marking the moment of the musical being performed in all fifty states!
- In 1950 the London production of *Oklahoma!* closed after 1,548 performances.
- During the filming of the movie *Oklahoma!*, a crew member was struck by lightning!
- In August 1955 Eddie Fisher, Shirley Jones, Ed Sullivan, Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, and the governors of New York and Oklahoma led an “Oklahoma Song-Fest” at the Central Park Mall in New York City before a crowd of 15,000.
- In 1967 *Oklahoma!* opened in Tokyo, Japan, with an all-female cast.
- In 1976 the original cast recording of *Oklahoma!* was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame.
- In 1993, its 50th anniversary year, *Oklahoma!* was awarded a special commemorative Tony Award.
- In 2002 a revival of *Oklahoma!* opened on Broadway for 388 performances and was nominated for seven Tony Awards.



Actor Hugh Jackman as Curly in 1998 (courtesy of *Entertainment Weekly*).<sup>6</sup>

## Activities

### *Oklahoma!* Quiz

- 1) What is the name of the play Lynn Riggs wrote, which the musical *Oklahoma!* is based on?
- 2) True or False: Oscar Hammerstein II was a composer.
- 3) In what state did *Oklahoma!* originally open?
- 4) Fill in the blank: “Surrey with the \_\_\_\_\_ on the top”
- 5) Ridge Bond, an Oklahoman, was in the musical on Broadway. What character did he play?
- 6) In what year did the movie version of *Oklahoma!* premiere?
- 7) What was the state song before it was changed to “Oklahoma!”?
- 8) True or False: The movie version of *Oklahoma!* was filmed in Oklahoma.
- 9) Fill in the blank: “Sit alone and talk and watch a \_\_\_\_\_”
- 10) Which state representative wrote the bill to change the state song?

Answers:

- 1) *Green Grow the Lilacs*
- 2) False. He was the lyricist.
- 3) Connecticut
- 4) Fringe
- 5) Curly McLain
- 6) 1955
- 7) “Oklahoma—A Toast”
- 8) False. It was filmed in Arizona.
- 9) Hawk
- 10) George Nigh

## A Song for Oklahoma

George Nigh believed that “Oklahoma!” was the perfect song to capture the attitude and spirit of Oklahoma. Take a look at the lyrics to the state song below. Can you create new lyrics to the state song while keeping the same tune?

Oklahoma, where the wind comes sweepin’ down  
the plain  
And the wavin’ wheat can sure smell sweet  
When the wind comes right behind the rain.  
Oklahoma, Ev’ry night my honey lamb and I  
Sit alone and talk and watch a hawk  
Makin’ lazy circles in the sky.

We know we belong to the land  
And the land we belong to is grand!  
And when we say  
Yeeow! Ayipioceay!  
We’re only sayin’  
You’re doin’ fine, Oklahoma!  
Oklahoma O.K.

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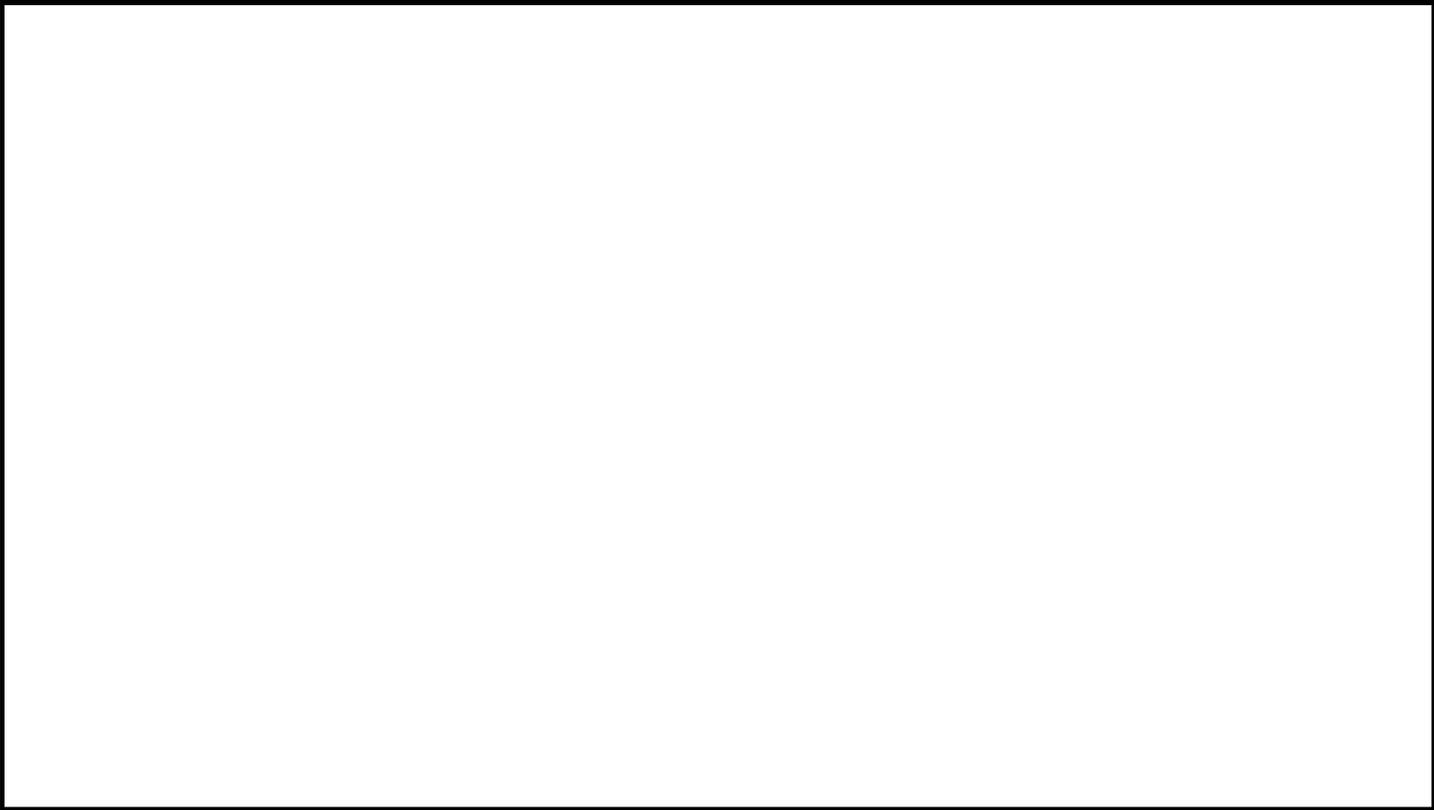
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**Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'**

What is your idea of a perfect day in Oklahoma? Draw and explain! (courtesy of TeachersPayTeachers.com)



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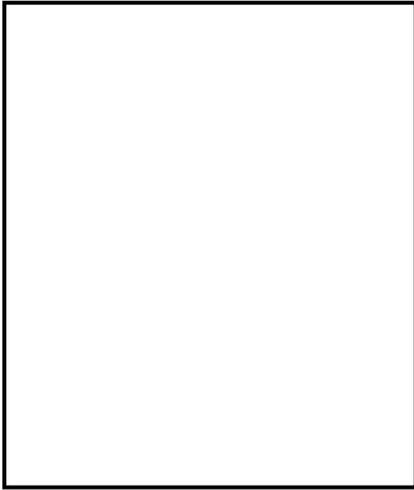
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## *Oklahoma!* Your Way

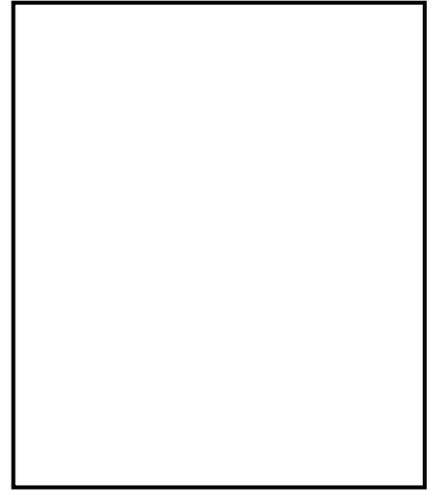
Recast *Oklahoma!* with your own actors or singers. Place their pictures in the boxes to create a **playbill**.



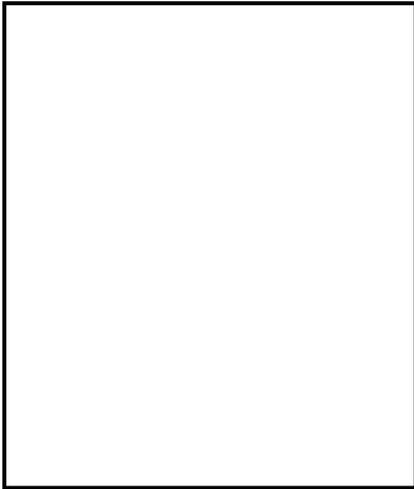
\_\_\_\_\_ as Curly McLain



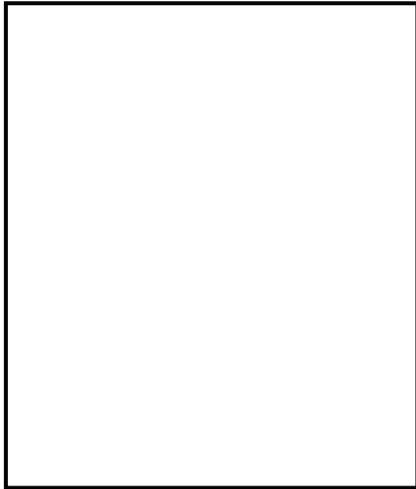
\_\_\_\_\_ as Laurey



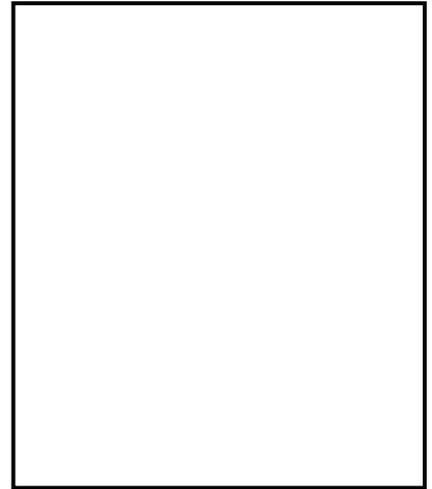
\_\_\_\_\_ as Jud Fry



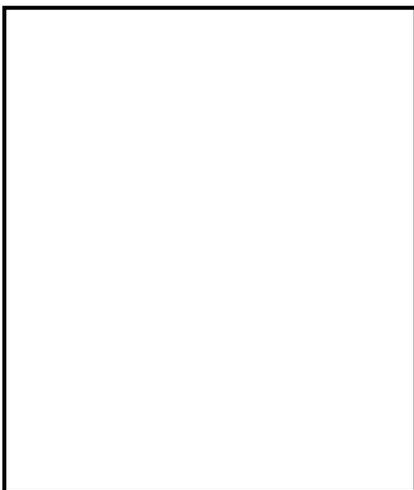
\_\_\_\_\_ as Ado Annie



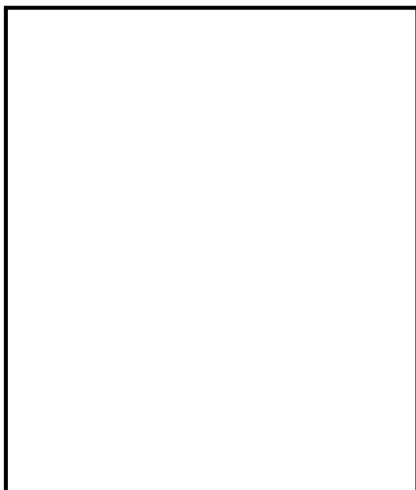
\_\_\_\_\_ as Will Parker



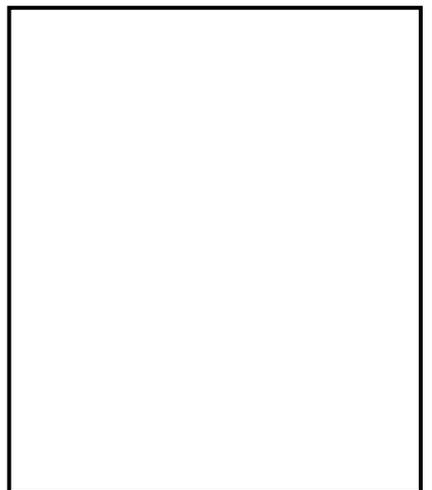
\_\_\_\_\_ as Aunt Eller



\_\_\_\_\_ as Gertie Cummings



\_\_\_\_\_ as Ali Hakim



\_\_\_\_\_ as Andrew Carnes

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## Photograph List

1. "Norman's Sooner Theatre to present Oklahoma!" *NewsOK*. August 2, 2017. <http://newsok.com/article/5558324>
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5. "Mr. Bond & The Oklahoma College for Women's Chorus Women's College Choir." Ridge Bond Archives. <http://www.ridgebond.com/image-gallery/#jp-carousel-168>
6. Farrell, Simon. "Actor Hugh Jackman as Curly in 1998." *Entertainment Weekly*. November 8, 2013. <http://ew.com/article/2013/11/08/hugh-jackman-oklahoma/>