



# The Guide

## A Theatergoer's Resource

Edited by Collin Lawson and Ryan Mooney with contributions from Christine Siltanen for the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

### *Oklahoma!*

Music by Richard Rodgers  
 Book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II  
 Directed by Chris Coleman  
 Choreographed by Joel Ferrell

## Table of Contents

Introduction  
 A Fresh Perspective on a Golden Classic. . . . . 2  
 History of African-Americans in Oklahoma . . . . . 2  
 The Tulsa Lynching of 1921 . . . . . 8  
 Interview with the Director . . . . . 9  
 Background on Rogers and Hammerstein . . . . . 10  
 Throw Your Own Box Social! . . . . . 10  
 Further Reading . . . . . 11  
 Discussion Questions/Classroom Activities . . . . . 11  
 Facts Facts Facts . . . . . 12

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# Introduction:

## A Fresh Perspective on a Golden Classic

Portland Center Stage opens its 2011–2012 season with a revival of one of the oldest musicals on Broadway. When Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II premiered their innovative musical *Oklahoma!* in 1943, it was met with instant success. Audiences had never seen anything like it: song, dance and story all interwoven with a new level of sophistication that would set the standard for generations of musicals to come. Since then, *Oklahoma!* has been one of the most widely produced musicals of all time, with revivals ranging from Broadway to high schools, from annual festivals in the state of Oklahoma to the West End in London.

Directed by Chris Coleman, PCS takes a new look at this classic musical with an all African-American ensemble. The state of Oklahoma has a rich African-American history. At the time *Oklahoma!* is set (just after the turn of the century), all African-American communities were scattered throughout what was then Indian Territory. From the efforts of politician Edward P. McCabe to make Oklahoma a majority-black state to the horrific racial violence in Tulsa in 1921, the African-American experience has been central to the development of Oklahoma's cultural history. Portland Center Stage draws from this powerful cache of experience to re-envision Rodgers and Hammerstein's hit within the true racial history of the state of Oklahoma.

## History of African Americans in Oklahoma

*Oklahoma—the future land and the paradise of Eden and the garden of the Gods...here the negro... can rest from mob law, here he can be secure from every ill of the southern policies...*

—Edward P. McCabe

The first record of African-Americans in Oklahoma coincides with the forced migration known as the “Trail of Tears.” From 1831 to 1837, the displaced Choctaw and Cherokee tribes brought nearly 2,000 slaves into the territory of Oklahoma. The history of black Oklahomans is linked closely to westward expansion and the desire for land in nineteenth-century America. During that period white farmers craved cotton lands in what is now the American southeast, and they pressured the government to remove Indian tribes from the region. Indians, the Five Civilized Tribes, had lived upon this land for many years, growing crops, raising families, and developing their own culture. In response to farmers’ demands, however, the federal government began a systematic policy of Indian removal in the 1830s. Black slaves came with their Indian masters across the Trail of Tears to their new territorial home in the West, to what is now the state of Oklahoma.

Until its abolition after the Civil War era, slavery became a fixture in Indian Territory, but historians continue to debate

the nature of the institution among the Indians. Some argue that it hardly resembled the institution established in the Deep South, but was more akin to indentured servitude of early America. Others differ, contending that “bondage was bondage,” and that enthrallment implied a kind of brutality that made it similar to the chattel slavery of the Old South. Whatever the argument, slaves attempted to escape their bondage by running away, and they also revolted against their Indian masters in other ways. In Indian Territory, as elsewhere, both white and black abolitionists worked openly and clandestinely to overthrow slavery. After the Civil War the federal government granted freedom to Indian slaves, and it forced the tribes to grant allotments of lands to blacks. Although some Indians disliked that idea, most of the former slaves and free blacks among the tribes received some acreage.

As settlers sustained their demands for more soil, the federal government opened for settlement a section within Indian territory in 1889 called the Unassigned Lands, an area of land in central Oklahoma not granted to any group of Indians. In the Land Run of 1889 whites and a few black settlers descended upon the territory to stake out homesteads. The following year the U.S. Congress created Oklahoma Territory, roughly the western half of the present state.

The black population of the two territories grew as boosters



Justin Lee Miller, Rodney Hicks and Brianna Horne in *Oklahoma!* Photo by Patrick Weishampel.

described them as a land of opportunity and freedom. Along with this growth went a movement for an All-Black state. Led by an energetic promoter and politician, Edward P. McCabe, founder of the town of Langston, the black statehood effort never had much chance of success. The work of McCabe and other boosters, however, did lead to the establishment of more All-Black towns in the territories. Some black towns had sprung up prior to the Civil War, but most came into being following that conflict. By some estimates, as many as fifty of these communities may have existed at one time in Oklahoma's history, far more than scholars once believed. Whatever the number, their significance resides in the determination of black people to escape discrimination, to seek reinforcement for their racial ideas, and to acquire some control over their own lives. Severe economic difficulty took its toll on black towns, and by the 1940s the majority of them had disappeared or were only small, unincorporated places. A few, such as Boley and Langston, still remained, but only as hopeful reminders of what may have happened had history taken a different course.

For a time, fluid social relationships existed between black and white settlers in the territories, despite a history of slavery in pre-Civil War Indian Territory. White migration from the deep South and the increasing number of blacks led to restrictive racial laws and customs. The growing economic success of blacks in particular affected race relations. Blacks

energetically established banks and other businesses, and a sizeable portion of African Americans bought their own land to start farms. By the turn of the twentieth century, black workers began to compete for jobs reserved for whites in the territories' cities. As historian Danney Goble has correctly observed, economic progress and black population growth made physical separation more difficult, if not impossible. Black advances challenged stereotypical attitudes toward race, and as a result a new social arrangement soon appeared.

National developments also played an important role in altering race relations between blacks and whites in the territories. The latter part of the nineteenth century witnessed a growth in white race consciousness that led to racial discrimination. In 1896 the U.S. Supreme Court issued its "separate but equal" doctrine in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case that helped to enshrine Jim Crow into law for more than a half century. That decision removed any doubt from the minds of whites who wanted to limit the rights of blacks, especially in education. In the early stages of Oklahoma Territory, separate schools for blacks and whites was optional, but in the late 1890s the territorial legislature passed statutes that effectively kept black and white children apart. Faced with the reality of white attitudes toward separation, blacks called for support of black educational institutions for their children, including the establishment the Colored Agricultural and Normal University at Langston in 1897.

# History of African Americans in Oklahoma (continued)

By the time delegates met in the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention at Guthrie in 1906 to organize a new state, both law and social customs had created an atmosphere for a completely segregated society. The battle over the place of blacks in the newly proposed state of Oklahoma became a heated issue during the selection of representatives to the convention. The Democratic Party promised to separate the races, and with that as a central part of its platform, it ultimately secured an overwhelming majority of the delegates at Guthrie. Led by the Negro Press Association, blacks waged a determined battle to defeat the forces of segregation but could not overcome the pro-southern sentiment that had taken root in the territories. The politicians at the convention wanted to redeem the commitment to keep the races apart in all areas of social life, but Republican Pres. Theodore Roosevelt had threatened to veto Oklahoma statehood if that took place. The spirit of the constitutional convention echoed in the racial language of its leader, William "Alfalfa Bill" Murray, who exclaimed that blacks would always remain bootblacks, barbers, and farmers. The future governor of Oklahoma believed that African Americans would never rise to the equal of whites in the professions or become informed citizens capable of grappling with serious public questions.

Despite Roosevelt's threat, the delegates at Guthrie included a section in the Oklahoma Constitution that required separate schools. Yet they stopped short of the total legal segregation that white citizens desired. Higher education in Oklahoma would stay separate until the 1940s, and public schools in the state until 1955. Although Murray and his colleagues had not mandated full separation of the races, representatives to

Oklahoma's First Legislature moved quickly to finish what the founding fathers had left undone. They passed a statute that separated blacks and whites in public accommodations, and they approved a bill that gave enforcement power to the constitutional provision for segregated schools.

Disfranchisement of blacks also stood high on Oklahoma's legislative agenda. Blacks had not been fooled by the politicians at Guthrie who wrote into the constitution that the state "shall never enact any law restricting the right of suffrage on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Democrats who controlled politics in Oklahoma drew little comfort from the lingering strength of the Republicans and black allegiance to that party. The election of a black man, A. C. Hamlin of Guthrie, to the First Legislature also made an impact upon those persons anxious to rid blacks from state politics. Here, then, were incentives for white Democrats to remove the ballot from black hands.

The law passed by the state legislature and ratified by the people in 1910 to disfranchise blacks was the so-called "grandfather clause." This measure stipulated that potential voters must take and pass an examination that demonstrated an ability to read and write. However, it exempted descendants of citizens eligible to vote on January 1, 1866, a provision that adversely affected blacks but favored whites as most of them met that requirement. For nearly five years the grandfather clause remained virtually intact until the U. S. Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional in the 1915 *Guinn v. United States* case. Nevertheless, a subsequent measure passed the legislature and limited black voting; this law would remain on the books until it met with Court disapproval in 1939. The unrestricted right to the ballot, however, did not come to all black Oklahomans until the Civil Rights era of the 1960s.

For nearly half a century the Jim Crow code established by the state of Oklahoma and its localities touched practically every facet of life that involved contact between the races, or the exercise of political and social relationships. Blacks experienced some of the worst discrimination in the area of economic opportunity. Although the Oklahoma Constitution and local ordinances did not prescribe low-paying, menial jobs for blacks, custom and community attitudes proved as limiting as law itself. Clearly, whites realized the position they wanted blacks to occupy within the economy. The difference in ways of making a living between black and white Oklahomans measured the distance between them in a number of areas: education, health, housing, recreation, and other facets of life.



# History of African Americans in Oklahoma (continued)



Tensions between blacks and whites in Oklahoma occasionally led to outright racial violence. Violation of the Jim Crow rules or the unwritten etiquette of race relations could put blacks at considerable risk. Although many white Oklahomans defended segregation as a means of ensuring racial peace, it encouraged random lawlessness and lynchings or provided a defense for anti-black actions. During the territorial period racial intolerance had led to attacks against blacks, and the beginning of the twentieth century saw an increase in the brutality against them. The irrational belief by whites of possible black domination in the state, fear of economic competition, and efforts to silence blacks politically, helped to foster an atmosphere for violence.

The most notorious act of racial conflict in Oklahoma history took place in Tulsa in 1921. Significantly, the violence in the state was part of a broader story of national intolerance that followed World War I. Yet the Tulsa riot represented a defining moment in Oklahoma's history, for it forecast the extent to which some white citizens would travel to achieve the ultimate subjugation of blacks. Much like the other riots of the period, the Tulsa disaster developed from a number of immediate and remote causes, among them irresponsible journalism, rumor, racial fears, tensions related to urban migration, and weak law enforcement. Although historians cannot specifically indict the Ku Klux Klan in starting the riot, the organization created a spirit of lawlessness that made it easier for some citizens to engage in mob activity.

A chance encounter by two people who had never met each other led to the Tulsa riot. When a young white woman,

Sarah Page, accused Dick Rowland of making advances toward her in a downtown Tulsa elevator, she set the stage for the most disastrous racial episode in Oklahoma. Rowland's flight from the scene and his subsequent arrest by Tulsa authorities confirmed his guilt in the minds of citizens who believed that white womanhood must be protected at all cost. False newspaper reporting of the incident, describing Page as an orphan whose dress had been torn by the black man, inflamed Tulsans and stoked the embers of racial hate. When black men heard of plans to lynch young Rowland, they went to the jail in downtown Tulsa to protect him, but instead they confronted a group of white men determined to drive them back to their section of the city. The whites achieved their objective and then proceeded to burn down a large part of North Tulsa, where the majority of blacks in the city resided. Gov. J. B. A. Robertson called out the National Guard to help police Tulsa, but by that time many homes and businesses, including the ones along Greenwood Avenue (Black Wall Street) had been destroyed by fire, with the loss of dozens of lives. Scholars may never know how many people perished in the tragic events of 1921, for it was difficult to account for those who were burned to death, buried in secret graves, or dumped in the river. Even a special study of the riot eighty years later could not determine the number of persons who lost their lives.

The riot did not alter racial policies in Tulsa or the state of Oklahoma. Tulsa remained unrepentant. Many whites laid blame on the aggressiveness of black agitators for social equality, or on militant black groups from outside the state. A grand jury placed responsibility for the conflict squarely upon the shoulders of the black men who went downtown to protect Rowland. At the opening of the twenty-first century, the Tulsa riot continued to engender heated discussion. Oklahoma officially apologized for the tragic event, and in 2001 a Tulsa Race Riot Commission, established by the state legislature, called for reparations for victims of the violence.

Between the 1920s and the civil rights movement of the 1960s two pervasive themes appear in African-American history in Oklahoma: legal action against Jim Crow, especially in education, and black community building. What seems remarkable in retrospect is the intensity with which blacks sustained their assault upon segregation, violence, and intimidation. Black newspapers in Oklahoma played a key role in this effort, bitterly attacking racially conservative politicians who wanted to stifle black progress. The most crusading pro-rights journals were found in the larger cities of Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Muskogee. Although the newspapers had several notable black editors, none

# History of African Americans in Oklahoma (continued)

made as great an impact on the state as Roscoe Dunjee of the Oklahoma City *Black Dispatch*. For more than fifty years Dunjee followed practically every development within the black community in Oklahoma. A staunch believer in social reform, Dunjee guided the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Oklahoma to much of its success.

Changing the racial system in Oklahoma was no easy task for Dunjee and other black leaders, but their unrelenting efforts began to pay dividends in the period after World War II. Previous judicial challenges to segregation had brought few changes in black life, especially in education. A significant victory in that field, however, came in the 1948 *Sipuel v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma* case. Supported by

*Regents* that the university had to treat him the same as white students. For all practical purposes, the Sipuel and McLaurin cases destroyed the legal foundation for segregation in higher education in the state of Oklahoma.

The struggle for equality has been a central motif in the history of black Oklahomans, but the experience of African-Americans in the state has transcended racial protest. Behind the walls of segregation existed a vigorous social, cultural, and institutional life. Preeminently, the black church stood at the very center of black community life. It represented not only a place to worship, but a valuable social outlet in an era when Oklahoma limited black access to publicly supported facilities. Although Baptists and Methodists accounted for the overwhelming number of black worshipers, a small number of other religious groups appeared in the community. By the mid-twentieth century, roughly eighty thousand blacks had membership in the nearly eight hundred churches that dotted the Oklahoma landscape. Some scholars have viewed the African American church as religiously orthodox, but the state of Oklahoma had a number of ministers, such as E. W. Perry of Oklahoma City, who preached the social gospel and who taught that Christianity should reject injustice.

Oklahoma blacks established other social outlets and institutions designed to achieve some reasonable control over their own lives. Fraternal groups such as the Prince Hall Masons had come into existence before statehood. Women's clubs also appeared within the community and sponsored social activities for both young and old, fighting for stronger community institutions. The Oklahoma State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, organized shortly after statehood, worked successfully with other groups for a school for delinquent boys at Boley and for a black girls' facility at Taft. Also forming reading and recreational groups within the larger towns of Oklahoma, women were in the forefront in the battle for library facilities in cities such as Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Black masons and their women's auxiliary group, the Eastern Star, supported citizenship programs and educational advancement through college scholarships. To a great extent, the black community depended heavily on the church and community groups to provide a kind of safe haven from the harshness of racial discrimination. Through their own individual and collective efforts, blacks achieved agency through the development of their own institutions. Even after the disappearance of segregation, many of these historic groups continued to thrive in the black community.

The vibrancy of a strong black culture, however, could not completely overcome the negative effects of an unequal



Dunjee, and represented by attorney Amos Hall of Tulsa, Ada Lois Sipuel applied for admission to the University of Oklahoma College of Law but was denied entrance. Upon appeal, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered Oklahoma to admit the Chickasha native. About the same time, another black student, George McLaurin, entered the university at Norman, and when the institution segregated him from white students, the Court ruled in 1950 in *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State*

# History of African Americans in Oklahoma (continued)

society. Only law could do that. The 1954 U. S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, destroyed segregation in education, but perhaps more importantly, it knocked the props from under the social principle that had sustained Jim Crow. Oklahoma readily complied with the decision, and unlike some other places, no major violence took place in the state. Much of Oklahoma's success resulted from the bold leadership of its governor, Raymond Gary, a native of Little Dixie, the southern part of Oklahoma. In 1955 Oklahoma voters approved a constitutional provision, the Better Schools Amendment, that effectively spelled the legal end to segregated schools in the state. Although some pockets of re-segregation reappeared in later years after an experiment with busing, a rebirth of the principle of legalized segregation never seemed likely in Oklahoma.

Sweeping changes took place in Oklahoma and the nation during the period that followed the *Brown* decision, the 1955 Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott, and the emergence of Martin Luther King, Jr., as a national leader. Infused with King's teachings of nonviolent resistance, a dynamic Oklahoma City black woman, Clara Luper, led the children of the NAACP Youth Council against segregated eating establishments in the city. Luper and her young army achieved some success with a "sit-in" movement that began in 1958, almost two years before the more celebrated one in Greensboro, North Carolina. Their efforts focused sharp attention upon segregation in public businesses and other establishments and brought some hard-won victories. Ultimately, however, total victory for equal treatment in public accommodations had to await the passage by Congress of the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964. Black Oklahomans took pride in the role they played in making that measure a reality, and for the support they gave to the successful Voting Rights Act a year later. Oklahoma heard the rhetoric and felt the impact of the so-called "Black Power" movement of the mid-1960s, but in its more militant forms Black Power never acquired a firm grip on the state. In Oklahoma the movement revitalized interest in racial pride and a stronger black demand for a truly just and integrated society.

Black people strongly emphasized black cultural achievements during the era of civil rights. The teaching of black history witnessed a rebirth in African American institutions and made its appearance in many predominantly white schools. Along with the movement went integration of faculties and staffs at white colleges and universities. Black intellectuals pointed proudly to the accomplishments of a long list of black Oklahomans in important areas of American life, including John Hope Franklin in history, Melvin Tolson in poetry, Ralph

Ellison in literature, Earl Grant, Jimmy Rushing, and Charlie Christian in popular music, and Leona Mitchell in opera. The establishment of museums, special exhibits, and archives that emphasized black achievement proliferated as interest grew among both black and white Oklahomans.

As they faced a new century, the black Oklahoma community and their political representatives turned their attention to a broad set of problems that continued to hamper racial progress. They were aware that a gap still existed between the economic status of black and white Oklahomans. Not surprisingly, then, black legislators worked to support black business and to promote affirmative measures that gave opportunity to persons once denied economic opportunity. They also addressed issues such as hate crimes, flying of the Confederate flag at the state capitol, the appointment of judges, better health care, greater access to education, support for Langston University, and the appointment of a commission to study the Tulsa race riot of 1921. As much as any generation before them, black Oklahomans and their leaders believed that there was reason for hope in a new century and that they could overcome the crippling legacies of the past.

At the close of the twentieth century, Oklahoma's 180,000 black citizens could look back at a history that had gone from slavery to freedom. Through their own institutional and community structures they became powerful agents for change. Indeed, few states in America made such a large impact upon the achievement of black freedom as Oklahoma. It initiated and won significant civil rights cases in the U.S. Supreme Court, and it successfully employed nonviolent direct action, the sit-in, to destroy restrictive racial barriers. The changes that took place in this evolving democratic process did not quickly erase injustices created by a segregated past, but advances did come.

By the beginning of the new century most Oklahomans accepted the constitutional principle of equality, even though they may have disagreed about specific means to achieve that goal. They were certain, however, that the state and the country had traveled too far to turn back. Armed with a revitalized pride in their culture and hope for the future, black Oklahomans exalted the best in their past and paid homage to a proud heritage that spoke of trials and triumph. Yet, like other citizens of their state, they had a sense of a broader history in common with other groups that made them genuine Sooners.

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*Adapted from the Oklahoma Historical Society's Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*

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# The Tulsa Lynching of 1921

*[A glance into one of the darker moments of the African-American experience in Oklahoma]*

In 1921, Tulsa was considered the “Oil Capital of the World,” and the black community was among the most prosperous in the nation. The Greenwood section of town was known both as “Little Africa” and as “The Black Wall Street.” The film does an excellent job of concisely laying out the various conditions that set the stage for the riot, from the return of unemployed (and heavily armed) veterans from WWI to the popularity of the film “Birth of a Nation” and the growth of the Ku Klux Klan.

The catalyst for the violence was a misunderstood incident where a black man named Dick Rowland accidentally fell onto a white female elevator operator, who screamed for help. As historian Don J. Guy points out, though, this wasn’t the real incident -- that occurred at the local newspaper, The Tulsa Tribune, which published an afternoon article distorting the event and calling for a lynching. By that evening, crowds of white men were gathered at the jail seeking blood, and violence soon broke out between them and a much smaller group of blacks.

Supposedly to keep the public order, the sheriff began deputizing any white citizen who wanted to join the police force, and soon hundreds of Klansmen, now representing the law, began organizing what, in the words of historian and retired General Ed Wheeler, was effectively a military operation.

By the next day, over 300 blacks had been killed, over 1,200 homes had been burned, and the surviving African-American population of Tulsa was forced into confinement. Those who were vouched for by whites were released, but made to wear ribbons that immediately bring to mind the later yellow stars used by the Nazis to mark the Jews.

The newspapers continued to refashion the incident, and all copies of the initial incendiary article disappeared. The city council passed laws that effectively made it impossible for the black community to rebuild, and a tent city was created to house the impoverished homeless population.

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*By Steven Oxman, Variety Magazine, May 29, 2000*

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Rodney Hicks in *Oklahoma!* Photo by Patrick Weishampel.

# Interview with Director Chris Coleman

## **What is it that makes a production of *Oklahoma!* relevant almost seventy years after it premiered?**

At its heart the story is about what it means to be an American. How this community that has been stuck out in the last vestiges of the Wild West is about to be finally invited into the family of the American community. And as you look around at the wide variety of ‘communities’ that are currently vying to be viewed as legitimate and part of the American fabric today, even here in Portland—I think that that dream remains quite real.



## **What inspired the decision to put on the play with an all African-American cast?**

Casting for *Ragtime* two years ago in NY, I was struck by the depth of the African-American musical theater talent pool. Many of the young women came in singing pieces from *Carousel* [perhaps because Audra McDonald, who had originated the role of Sarah in *Ragtime*, had also played Carrie in the Lincoln Center Revival of *Carousel*.] It was quite striking to hear Rodgers & Hammerstein’s beautiful songs coming out of these mouths, and it just got me thinking about what other show you might be able to do with this talent.

Then as I began to research the history of the story, it became clear that the story of African-Americans in the Wild West, and indeed in *Oklahoma* – was quite rich, and hidden away. It was a moment of about 20 years in this area of the states, when African-Americans were building their own communities, free from the oppression of slavery, or the Jim Crow South – and they were succeeding. The wealthiest enclave of African-Americans in the country in 1900 was in Tulsa,

*Oklahoma*. And it seemed that the intersection of that history with this play might have even more resonance than we are accustomed to experiencing with the musical.

## **What discoveries have stuck with you while working with the play?**

How clear the dark underbelly is. The character of Jud is so remote and twisted. Today if he were living in a city, he’d probably be working with a social worker or something. But out in the West, he’s able to just do his work and keep to himself, until his obsessions get the better of him.

The justice of the Wild West was still very much at work in *Oklahoma* at the turn of the century, so that it’s not wholly implausible that a young groom could be involved in a murder the night of his wedding, and be tried and acquitted by the community that evening.

## **How has the extensive production history of *Oklahoma!* influenced your artistic vision?**

Hmmmmmmmm. I think it’s been a springboard we have used to push against. We were keenly interested in creating something more grounded in reality, and less ‘cartoony’ if you will, than traditional productions.

It was intriguing to read about the conflict between Agnes de Mille and the original director. Musicals were accustomed to using pretty dancing girls to wake up the men in the audience, but De Mille insisted on and fought for real dancers who could connect to the inner drama she wanted to communicate in the Act I Ballet.

## **What is your favorite song from the score?**

That’s a hard one. Probably the title song—as I think it’s hard to top in terms of capturing the sheer euphoria of hope.

# Rogers and Hammerstein: Grandfathers of the American Musical

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II secured their seat in musical history with a series of winning collaborations, including *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music*. Rodgers composed the music and Hammerstein wrote the lyrics and books. Each artist had taken part in other collaborations before: . Rodgers, with Lorenz Hart, had produced a string of over two dozen musicals since the 1920s, including *Babes in Arms*, *The Boys from Syracuse* and *Pal Joey*. Among other successes, Hammerstein had written the words for *Rose Marie*, *The Desert Song*, and *Show Boat*.

However, they didn't realize their true creative potential until their partnership began with *Oklahoma!* in 1943. They worked perfectly together: Hammerstein preferred to write lyrics before having music underneath them, and Rodgers worked best composing music for lyrics that had already been written. This working relationship with an emphasis on putting lyrics first allowed Rodgers and Hammerstein to write a musical where story was given central importance. Previously, Broadway musicals had focused primarily on jokes and show-stopping numbers. Shifting the focus of the play to character and plot was one of the innovations Rodgers and Hammerstein made that would set their musicals on the cutting edge for years to come.

## Throw Your Own Box Social!

Do you want to impress your romantic interest without having to deliberately discuss your feelings? Do you enjoy bidding on boxed lunches associated with the love of your life, simultaneously showing your affection and giving money to a good cause? Then it's time to throw a Box Social!

1. First, decide whether the donated boxed lunches also include a lunch date with the maker of the meal. A box social may include a picnic with the maker of the box, or just the purchase of the boxed meal.
2. It's important to find a location for the box social. If the group is a church or organization with a building, use that. If there's no building, or if you want to eat outside, hold it at a public park.
3. You should obtain boxes to put the lunches in. The best boxes to use are waxed cardboard boxes designed for carry-out. Bakery boxes also work, though may not be oil-proof.
4. Decide on the basic menu. For example, you might encourage people to focus on sandwiches and salads, or create meals around seasonal produce. To avoid reheating problems, food needs to be served at room temperature. It also needs to be able to sit out at room temperature safely for at least two hours.
5. Assign each person in your organization the job of preparing a box lunch . To make it a little more fun, ask that they decorate the box that the lunch

comes in. Enlist each lunch-provider to help put on the event. For example, you'll need a decorator and people to run the auction.

6. Advertise or sell tickets. Decide whether you want outsiders at your box social. If so, publicize the event in the community. Determine whether participants can buy drinks, such as bottled water or soft drinks, and whether you'll charge admission.
7. Calculate a minimum bid for a boxed lunch. Each box lunch should have the same minimum opening bid.
8. Arrive early to set up the box social. Make certain that you have a committee to help you. If you've planned the box social details in advance the day should go smoothly.

## Further Reading

### **“From Sodom to the Promised Land: E. P. McCabe and the Movement for Oklahoma Colonization”**

By Martin Dann

- An article that contextualizes E. P. McCabe’s efforts to promote Oklahoma as an African-American majority state

### ***Journey toward hope: A history of blacks in Oklahoma***

By Jimmie Lewis Franklin

- A history beginning at Oklahoma’s induction to statehood in 1907, with emphasis on segregation, urban blacks, and the area of the Oklahoma Territory.

### ***Oklahoma!: the making of an American musical.***

By Tim Carter

- A history of Oklahoma! spanning the period in which it was written through its adaptation as a movie and its rise as one of the most widely produced musicals of all time.

## Discussion Questions

1. How did this production change your previous conceptions of *Oklahoma!*?
2. How is the history of the state of Oklahoma reflected in the play?
3. What is the significance of the famous ballet dream at the end of the first act?
4. How do Rodgers and Hammerstein use music to develop the story? Which song do you think is most important in the play?

## Group Activities

1. Think of a well-known story that is associated with a specific place or time. Who is this story about? In your groups, consider how this story might be adapted to be about a different group of people. How has the meaning of the story changed?
2. Think of a common interaction between a few people, like ordering lunch. Create a dialogue with your group about this activity, and perform the dialogue normally. Then, try singing the same words while you dance around. Compare the experience of just speaking the dialogue to performing it like a musical. How do the differences make you feel?

### Some facts about Oscar & Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*

- The musical is based on the play *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931) set in Oklahoma Territory outside Claremore in 1906
- This was the first collaboration between for Oscar & Hammerstein
- *Oklahoma!* was a huge hit, it ran on Broadway for 5 years 9 months. 2,248 performances.
- In his praise for show critic Lewis Nichols dubbed it: "Folk Opera."

### Facts from 1906

- The first Victor Vitrola (record player) was manufactured
- Only 8% of the U.S. had telephones
- This was the year of the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire (the city was destroyed)
- There were 45 States in the Union. New Mexico, Arizona, Alaska, Hawaii and Oklahoma had not yet been admitted.
- The Wright brothers secured their patent for the airplane
- Teddy Roosevelt was President
- Alpha Phi Alpha the first fraternity to be established by African Americans was founded on Howard University, Washington D.C.
- Automobiles were available but very expensive (they became affordable with the Model T was released in 1908).
- Average lifespan for a man: 46 years old. Average lifespan for a woman: 50 years.
- Children's boots: 99 cents
- Corset: \$1.00
- Women's dress shoes: \$4.25
- Sleds: 25 cents
- Chocolate: 30-60 cents a pound
- Flour: 20 cents a pound
- Salt: 10 cents for 8 pounds

### A Few Notable African Americans from Oklahoma History

- **Edwin P. McCabe:** Oklahoma's state auditor. He proposed that Oklahoma Territory be admitted as a Black state. He founded the town of Langston, Oklahoma and set aside land for Langston University (named after John Mercer Langston the first African American congressman (appointed to Virginia).
- **Bass Reeves:** In 1875 Mr. Reeves was deputized as a U.S. Marshall. Well known and respected, he served in his federal post for 32 years. He retired in 1907.
- **Kathryn Hall Bogle** b. 1906: Journalist, Social Worker, Community Activist. Kathryn spent most of her life in Portland, Oregon. However, she was born on her grandparents' farm in Oklahoma.
- **Drusilla Dunjee Houston:** b. 1876 Drusilla led the OFCWC (Oklahoma Federation of Colored Women's Clubs) in its early years. She protested lynching and championed women's right to vote.
- **Zernona Black:** b. 1906 Muskogee, OK. Zernona taught at Langston University and St. Philips University in San Antonio TX. She was also the wife of Civil Rights Leader, Reverend Claude Black.
- **Roscoe Dunjee:** Created the newspaper The Black Dispatch. The term "Black dispatch" was slang for gossip or mistruths, Roscoe took the name for his paper to: "attack racist attitudes and instill pride in Black Heritage" that such phrases degraded.