

# PROGRAM NOTES

by Joshua S. Ritter, Education Manager & Library Director

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When *Oklahoma!* opened on Broadway in March of 1943, the USA was deeply entrenched in the monumental struggle of World War II. A conflagration of violence and suffering had enveloped much of the world, and the outcome was uncertain; brave American soldiers were fighting and dying alongside our allies in a global struggle. At this tumultuous time, The Theatre Guild offered GIs complimentary tickets so they could see the show before shipping off to war. The production was extremely moving to the troops, and their emotional response indicated how profoundly *Oklahoma!* would resonate with the American public. The show came to represent the homeland. Many GIs and their families knew they would need to sacrifice their own lives or those of their loved ones to defend the country from tyranny. *Oklahoma!*'s brilliant timing and poignant treatment of rural American life aided in making it one of the most successful musicals in Broadway history. The show's revolutionary artistic approach propelled it to legendary status and secured its place as one of the most frequently produced musicals of all time.

A match made in musical theatre heaven! In 1942, Richard Rodgers (Composer) and Oscar Hammerstein II (Librettist and Lyricist) initiated their first professional collaboration when The Theatre Guild commissioned them to adapt Lynn Riggs' little known play *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931) into a musical. The first title given to the show was *Away We Go!*, but the writers changed it to *Oklahoma!* after adding the iconic title song prior to its move to Broadway. Rodgers and Hammerstein dispensed with the antiquated folk songs featured in Riggs' play, but they kept the basic plot intact. While *Oklahoma!* is set in Native American Territory in 1906, *Green Grow the Lilacs* takes place in 1900, seven years before the state was founded. Both are folk tales about the young love of cowboy Curly McLain and his sweetheart Laurey Williams. When Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, co-directors of The Theatre Guild, hired Rodgers and Hammerstein to adapt the play into a musical, The Guild was in serious financial straits; it needed a hit more than ever. Fortunately, their instinct to stake the future of The Guild on an experimental adaptation of an obscure pastoral drama penned by a freshly paired writing team paid off beyond their wildest dreams.

In fact, the partnership that formed between Rodgers and Hammerstein on *Oklahoma!* ushered in the Golden Age of musical theatre. Prior to the Rodgers and Hammerstein collaboration, writers were accustomed to matching their book and lyrics to a previously written score. But, Rodgers was glad to permit Hammerstein's story to shape his brilliant music because it suited his style of working as well. This revolutionary approach to musical theatre writing helped story gain primacy.

Some writers had made significant progress before the Rodgers and Hammerstein partnership such as Hammerstein's work on *Show Boat*, Jerome Kern's Princess Theatre shows, and Rodgers' work on *Pal Joey*; but, the American musical did not realize full integration until the seminal *Oklahoma!* This was achieved when Agnes de Mille's (Choreographer) groundbreaking dream ballet made dance central to *Oklahoma!*'s plot on an emotional level. Finally, music, book, lyrics, and dance fused to tell one unified story. *Oklahoma!* not only pushed the artistic boundaries of the American musical theatre up to that point, but it also set an extremely high bar for many decades to come.

Despite its eventual success, *Oklahoma!*'s experimental approach, obscure source material, little-known cast, and newly formed writing team made it a particularly hard sell to investors. Alfred Drake (Curly McLain), Celeste Holm (Ado Annie Carnes), and Joan Roberts (Laurey Williams) landed major roles in *Oklahoma!*, but they were not household names at the time. Hammerstein was coming off a series of flops, and Rodgers had spent more than two decades working exclusively with his previous writing partner Lorenz Hart. Despite the daunting challenges, *Oklahoma!* ran for 2,212 performances (more than five years), making it the longest-running musical in Broadway history up to that point. The national tour played in every state throughout the country for a record breaking 10-plus years. Companies were formed to produce the show abroad and for military personnel stationed overseas during WWII. In 1943, Decca released the original cast recording of *Oklahoma!* on 78-rpm records, making it the first Broadway musical to have an original cast recording. An Academy Award-winning film version of *Oklahoma!* was released in 1955, and the stage show continues to be revived regularly in the USA and internationally.

Goodspeed's production of *Oklahoma!* is directed by Jenn Thompson (*Bye Bye Birdie*). Thompson hopes this production will invite audiences to question what it means to be American. She would like audiences to see past the bucolic, sunny exterior of the show into the contradictions that shape this country's history. She is excited to feature bold dance arrangements by Broadway's David Chase, fresh choreography from Katie Spelman, and a spirited, youthful cast. We are delighted and honored to produce this eminently exalted, trailblazing musical that ceaselessly enchants audiences, while personifying America's boundless pioneering spirit.