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The hidden history of ‘Oklahoma!’

Contemporary reinterpretations of the classic American musical may be getting back to its root: It's based on a play by a gay Cherokee man.

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By DANIEL POLLACK-PELZNER

Seventy-five years ago, as Rodgers and Hammerstein’s new musical *Oklahoma!* was beginning its sellout run on Broadway, the Times ran [an indignant letter](#) from Eva Paul, of Provincetown. “It is rather amusing to notice the insouciance and naïve bravado with which all the perpetrators of *Oklahoma!* eliminate all mention of Lynn Riggs,” she wrote. “After all, did he or did he not give them a plot to which they more or less adhered and a galaxy of characters which none of them ever approached in their other undertakings?”



Original poster for
“Oklahoma!” on Broadway,
1943. Wikimedia Commons

He did: a decade earlier, Riggs had enjoyed a brief Broadway success at the Theatre Guild with his play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which evoked the cowboys and farmers of his childhood in Indian Territory, before Oklahoma became a state. Traditional folk songs and picturesque dialogue enlivened a courtship triangle: whether Laurey, a young homesteader, would go to a party with Curly, a cocky cowboy, or Jeeter Fry, a rough farmhand. In 1942, the Guild’s producer, Theresa Helburn, saw a revival of *Green Grow the Lilacs* and thought it could furnish the material for an American folk opera on the model of *Porgy and Bess*, which the Guild had also staged. She engaged Richard Rodgers—his partnership with Larry Hart dissolving as Hart fell prey to alcoholism and depression—to compose the music and Oscar Hammerstein—longing for a hit after a series of flops with his *Show Boat* partner, Jerome Kern—to adapt Riggs’s play and write the lyrics.

Hammerstein showed up at Rodgers's country house one Friday evening with words for an opening number, "Oh, What A Beautiful Morning"; by Saturday morning, [he recalled](#), Rodgers had written the loping, romantic tune: a throwback waltz for a cowboy headed for marriage in a territory at the dawn of statehood, confident that "everything's going my way." That mix of nostalgic optimism—recalling a frontier past that promised a bright, patriotic future—proved irresistible to American audiences in the middle of World War Two, and when *Oklahoma!* opened in 1943, it broke every box office record, even packing in troops for special matinees. An estimated 600 revivals now take place around the world every year—including ones recently running in New York and Oregon that offered contrasting visions of the musical's contested history.



Cherokee playwright Lynn Riggs (1899 – 1954), the only American Indian dramatist writing for Broadway in the first half of the 20th century. Smithsonian Institution / Courtesy U.S. Naval Academy

Hammerstein responded to Eva Paul's charge of eliminating Riggs with [his own letter](#) to the Times, a tad cheeky and defensive: "As a perpetrator of *Oklahoma!* I deny this." He acknowledged keeping many lines from Riggs's script and trying to preserve the values of *Green Grow the Lilacs*—"lusty melodrama, authentic folk characters and a sensitive lyric quality"—in the musical. (Riggs's opening stage direction, for instance, evoking a "radiant summer morning" with cattle and corn in a meadow "giving off a visible golden emanation" became Hammerstein's lyric for "Oh, What A Beautiful Morning": "There's a bright golden haze on the meadow.") He concluded: "Lynn Riggs and 'Green Grow the Lilacs' are the very soul of *Oklahoma!* Okay, Miss Paul?"

In a sense, though, Paul wasn't wrong to suggest that the musical's perpetrators had eliminated the play's author—even as he enjoyed a playbill credit and box office royalties. Riggs was a gay Oklahoman of Cherokee descent; he said that he was born "outside the rush of light," like the characters in his play *The Cherokee Night* (1932), a lament for the dissolution of Native American identity in the years after Oklahoma statehood. ("Too much Indian," a mixed-blood outlaw says he's been told as an explanation for his crimes; "Not enough Indian," a Cherokee elder replies.) *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which premiered a year earlier, is in part an elegy for Indian Territory. It climaxes with a sovereignty dispute: after Jeeter dies in a knife fight with Curly, the locals want to turn him over to the federal marshal until Laurey's

Aunt Eller denounces them as “dirty ole furriners” for siding with the United States. Citing their “Indian blood,” the locals declare their allegiance to Indian Territory, but the play ends with Curly singing “Green Grow the Lilacs,” a melancholy ballad of unrequited love.



A scene from Lynn Riggs’s “The Cherokee Night” as presented at the Provincetown Playhouse by the Community Theatre Division of the Federal Theatre Project, July 1936. Wikimedia Commons

Oklahoma!, by contrast, presents a heterosexual union as the counterpart to national union, with Curly embodying the country’s future in the title song: “Startin’ as a farmer with a brand new wife / Soon be livin’ in a brand new state!”—a celebration of westward expansion with nary a mention of Native Americans, beyond the musical’s stated setting in Indian Territory. Stephen Sondheim, whom Hammerstein took under his wing in the summer when he was writing *Oklahoma!*, said in [a recent interview](#) that his mentor “took a play that was about homosexuality in the West and turned it into a sunny musical...beyond what Lynn Riggs had written, about the opening of territories, the promise of America.” (“The play had distinct homoerotic undertones in the relationship between Curly and Jeeter,” Sondheim clarified in an email to me; Hammerstein changed Jeeter’s name to Jud in the musical.)

The promise of America certainly rings through *Oklahoma!* and its insistently jubilant exclamation point, although its sunniness has a dark side. Mary Kathryn Nagle, a Cherokee lawyer and playwright, puts the musical’s accomplishment differently: “Oklahoma statehood is the result of a series of legislative acts that attempted to render my nation’s government illegal. Thus, the erasure of the sovereign tribal nations on whose land *Oklahoma!* takes place constitutes both an erasure of my Nation and an erasure of the story’s original Cherokee author: Lynn Riggs.”



The ensemble kicks up its cowboy-boot heels in Ashland's 2018 "Oklahoma!"
Photo: Jenny Graham / Oregon Shakespeare Festival

"I LOVE *OKLAHOMA!*," Bill Rauch, the artistic director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, told me last fall as he prepared to stage a new production of the musical, "and even as I love it, I'm aware that it's one of the ultimate artistic expressions of cisgendered heteronormativity, and that the puritan founding of the country in terms of sexual expression hovers over the relationship between heteronormativity and white supremacy." American audiences may be growing familiar with this relationship of late: in Paula Vogel's *Indecent*, Rodgers and Hammerstein's cast album signals a postwar end to the Yiddish theater's lesbian potential; in Young Jean Lee's *Straight White Men*, the musical's title number is repurposed as a satiric hymn to the KKK; in Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over*, a recording of Curly's affirmation in "Oh, What A Beautiful Morning" that "everything's going my way" plays in ironic counterpoint to the young black men's lives on stage, subject to police brutality. Most recently, Daniel Fish's [stripped-down revival](#) of *Oklahoma!*, at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, revealed an American community forged through violence, with a wall of firearms flanking the stage and a blood-spattered finale, as the audience was uncomfortably invited to clap along to the reprise of "Oh, What A Beautiful Morning" after Curly guns down Jud Fry. The musical's timeliness, it seems, comes from our awareness of its complicity with oppressive power structures—and our own complicity in applauding them.

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival staging, by contrast, offered a different sort of timeliness that might prove even more radical and, perhaps, more sustaining: an expression of queer joy. (Disclosure: OSF hired me to write historical program notes for the 2018 season.) After twenty-five years gestating his concept, Rauch received permission from the Rodgers and Hammerstein estate to change the genders of the romantic couples: at OSF, Curley and Laurey were both women, and the secondary comic pair, Will Parker and Ado Annie, became a male duo: Will and Ado Andy. (Both couples were also interracial.) Aunt Eller, the territory matriarch, was transgender; Ali Hakim, the clever Persian peddler, was bisexual; and the chorus included a range of gender-nonbinary characters (and straight allies). "At the most core level, I was looking for access for myself as a gay man to the material," Rauch explained. "But as an artist it intrigued me: with cross-racial casting in so many classic musicals, could the material bear the weight of cross-gender casting, and what would it yield artistically?"

Rauch had tried cross-gender casting in OSF's racially inclusive Shakespeare productions, with women playing many traditionally male roles like Julius Caesar, Mercutio, and Hotspur, along with an all-female *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and Rauch had seen Molly Smith's multiracial production of *Oklahoma!* at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. in 2010, representing both the Obama era and the demographics of Oklahoma at statehood, which was majority non-white (and far from straight). OSF had also commissioned new work, like the genderqueer musical *Head Over Heels* (now on Broadway), which set a cross-dressing Renaissance romance to the Go-Go's hits. But recasting the goldenest of Golden Age musicals? "Honestly, I didn't think it could be done," Rauch admitted.



Will Parker (Jordan Barbour, left) and Ado Andy (Jonathan Luke Stevens) try to figure out their relationship in Ashland's "Oklahoma!". Photo: Jenny Graham / Oregon Shakespeare Festival

The result, however, played as a celebration of love in all its forms—and a radiant celebration at that, from the moment Tatiana Wechsler's irrepressible Curly, silhouetted against the sunrise, serenaded the "bright golden haze on the meadow," claiming the canonical American musical landscape for a queer voice, while Bobbi Charlton's tenderly tart Aunt Eller churned butter downstage, to the finale, when an LGBTQ+ chorus sang Rodgers and Hammerstein's refrain, "Let people say we're in love," as a declaration of pride beneath a rainbow-hued moon. Hardly more than the gender pronouns were changed, and yet the effect was of a familiar world refreshed, a founding American mythology expanded to represent territory folks who hadn't made it onto the 1943 stage.

"Country a-changin, got to change with it," Curly declares (in a line Hammerstein lifted from Riggs), and the audience at the performances I saw cheered—and then whooped when Curly and Laurey or Will and Ado Andy kissed. Shadows still lurked: Jud Fry festered among pinups in his smokehouse, seething that Laurey would choose a woman like Curly over him, and Laurey's dream ballet turned into a nightmare that Jud would enforce traditional gender roles and brutalize Curly for transgressing them. But unlike Daniel Fish's dark production, where Curly killed Jud with impunity, Wechsler's Curly tried to save Jud from killing himself, and her ensuing trial seemed less a kangaroo court than the flexibility of a community that would spare a black woman from frontier justice and defend her right to love Laurey. Even the show's corniness, its hoedown homily that the farmer and the cowhand (no longer

cowman) should be friends, seemed newly inclusive. Rather than turn a play about homosexuality, in Sondheim's terms, into a sunny musical about the promise of America, Rauch's production proposed that the promise of America at its sunniest comes from recognizing the range of identities that America has always encompassed (including two Native-identifying cast members).

"I've thought a lot about Lynn Riggs and our responsibility to that author," Rauch told me. "On the seventy-fifth anniversary of the musical that was to eclipse his original play, I hope he would feel his spirit would be honored by what we're doing." (New Yorkers will get to see Rauch's vision when he leaves OSF next year to become artistic director of the Perelman Center, a performing arts hub at the World Trade Center.)

RAUCH EXPERIMENTED WITH WAYS to stage the title song that would reflect more critically on the musical's embrace of manifest destiny, particularly the troubling line for a bunch of settlers to sing: "We know we belong to the land / And the land we belong to is grand." He even enlisted the help of Ty Defoe, an Ojibwe and Oneida performance artist who identifies as two-spirit, to choreograph a circle dance that would "honor the original caretakers of the land," in Rauch's phrase. But he ended up feeling that a full reckoning with Native American tribes in Indian Territory could "not fit in the Rodgers and Hammerstein container." Hammerstein was politically progressive (more so than Rodgers, whom Sondheim recalled as a homophobe), writing a song against racist stereotypes, "You've Got To Be Carefully Taught," for *South Pacific* and adapting Bizet's opera *Carmen* for an American setting with an all-black cast. The film of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song*, though painfully dated, featured one of the largest Asian casts in any Hollywood production. Hammerstein also wrote an "Indian Love Call" for a 1924 musical called *Rose-Marie*, though its insipid warbling summons redface conventions more than any specific tribal language. And while he grappled with the sexuality of Riggs's script, writing that he had removed what he gingerly called its "vaguely Freudian flavor" and replaced it with a "healthy gayety," substituting laughter that was "lusty and boyish rather than smirky," he seems not to have engaged with the Indianness of Indian Territory.



In the world premiere of Mary Kathryn Nagle's "Manahatta," Toosh-ki-pa-

kwis-i (Rainbow Dickerson, right) tells Le-le-wa'-you (Tanis Parenteau) that Manahatta is no longer a safe place for the Lenape. Photo: Jenny Graham / Oregon Shakespeare Festival

At OSF, *Oklahoma!* ran in repertory with the premiere of Mary Kathryn Nagle's *Manahatta*, which chronicles the displacement of the Lenape people from New York to Oklahoma. The play pointedly interweaves two time frames: the 17th century, when the Dutch West India Company maneuvers for control of traditional Lenape trading grounds, erecting a wall in lower Manhattan to keep the Natives out; and 2008, when a Lenape woman, Jane Snake, leaves her Oklahoma hometown to work on Wall Street for Lehman Brothers, packaging mortgage-backed securities as the housing crisis unfolds and her grandmother's home is foreclosed. The history of American finance becomes an echo of capitalist land fraud—the erasure not only of Native sites but also of tribal languages, matrilineal networks, and sustaining myths—and yet Nagle's script also affirms Native resilience. “The Dutch built a wall, here, on this street, to keep us out. But I came back,” Snake says. “I am Lenape. We are still here.”



Truett Felt, Shaun Taylor-Corbett, Román Zaragoza, Lily Gladstone and ensemble in the 2017 world premiere of Randy Reinholz's “Off the Rails” in Ashland. Photo: Jenny Graham / Oregon Shakespeare Festival

“The whole world is doing *Oklahoma!*,” Nagle told me, “but most theaters have never produced a single play by a Native playwright.” She was excited that she was appearing alongside Lynn Riggs in the 2018 OSF playbill—two Cherokee artists, following Choctaw playwright Randy Reinholz's *Off the Rails* in the previous season, an adaptation of *Measure for Measure* set in the nineteenth-century world of Indian boarding schools. (Next season will bring the sketch-comedy troupe The 1491s' irreverent take on Native American history, *Between Two Knees*.) “The narrative that America has crafted for us is one of erasure,” Nagle said, “so most people who walk out of a theater learn that we no longer exist.” She continued, “I don't think we need to erase *Oklahoma!* or deny that it is one of the most popular musicals in the world. I just want American theaters to invite Natives to be part of the conversation—which means they must start actually producing our plays.”

That's a long-overdue conversation that's starting to happen more and more. In Portland, for instance, Artists Rep produced Sicangu Lakota writer Larissa FastHorse's satire *The Thanksgiving Play* and Portland Center Stage presented Cherokee playwright/performer DeLanna Studi's *And So We Walked*, about a modern-day retracing of the Trail of Tears, during the 2017-18 season. And in developing the *Oklahoma!* chorus at the Shakespeare Festival, Rauch invited the cast to create identities for their ensemble characters. One of the Native American actors, Román Zaragoza, chose the name “Riggs.”