

ARENA'S PAGE

STUDY GUIDE

CONTENTS

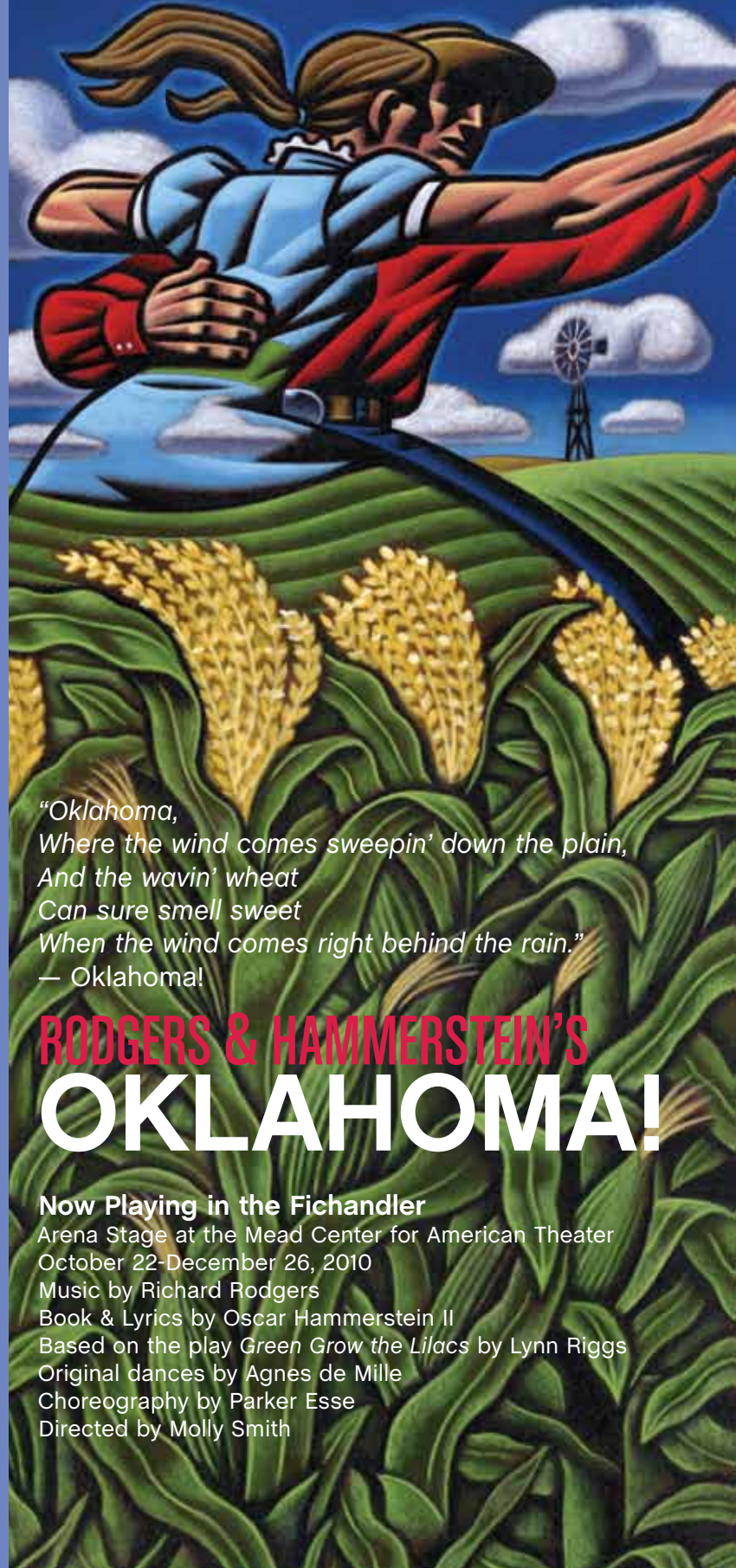
The Play
Meet the Creators
A New Type of Musical
Farmers & Cowmen
Life in Early Oklahoma
"Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" for
Arena Stage!
Additional Resources

THE PLAY

Oklahoma! tells the story of young lovers growing up in Indian Territory at the turn of the 20th century. When **Laurey**, an independent farmgirl, falls for a charming cowboy named **Curly**, their romance is threatened by **Jud**, the sinister farmhand who claims Laurey as his date for the town social and, ultimately, as his possession.

Meanwhile, the flirtatious **Ado Annie** considers marriage with two suitors, one a Persian peddler named **Ali** and the other a longtime love interest, **Will**.

As the town prepares to auction off dates at the box social (see article), tension rises within the love triangles. Dreams — and nightmares — present themselves, but there's no telling which will become reality. Will the couples part ways forever or will they unite?



*"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!*

RODGERS & HAMMERSTEIN'S OKLAHOMA!

Now Playing in the Fichandler

Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater
October 22-December 26, 2010
Music by Richard Rodgers
Book & Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II
Based on the play *Green Grow the Lilacs* by Lynn Riggs
Original dances by Agnes de Mille
Choreography by Parker Esse
Directed by Molly Smith

MEET THE CREATORS: Richard Rodgers (music) and Oscar Hammerstein II (book & lyrics)



Whenever I get an idea for a song, even before jotting down the notes, I can hear it in the orchestra; I can smell it in the scenery; I can see the kind of actor who will sing it; and I am aware of an audience listening to it.”

— Richard Rodgers

Better known as simply Rodgers & Hammerstein: the creators of *Oklahoma!* are the most famous partnership in American musical theater.

Before they were Rodgers & Hammerstein, Richard Rodgers began playing the piano at age 6. During his early teenage years, he attended a summer camp where he composed some of his first songs. Meanwhile, Oscar Hammerstein’s father disapproved of his son’s desire to pursue theater. Nonetheless, Hammerstein dropped out of law school to do so.

Both men grew up in New York City and attended the same college, although they didn’t know each other at the time. After meeting in 1943, they went on to have a fruitful partnership because their working styles fit together well: Hammerstein preferred to write a complete lyric (words) before it was set to music, and Rodgers preferred to set completed lyrics to music.

Together, Rodgers and Hammerstein created award-winning, beloved musicals like *Carousel*; *South Pacific*; *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music*. ●

“Not only is Oklahoma! the most important of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, it is also the single most influential work in the American musical theater.”— Thomas Hischak, playwright and theater writer

A NEW TYPE OF MUSICAL

Before *Oklahoma!*, most musicals were a series of jokes strung together to showcase the main attraction: the songs or, in some cases, the star. *Oklahoma!* marks a major change in musical form.

It is the first musical of its kind: a book musical. Each song and dance is part of a story that has a beginning, middle and end. It also demonstrates the emotional depths of its characters and deals with serious social issues, like land disputes and violence.

Oklahoma! features another element new to musicals: the dream ballet. A dance number showcasing major themes of the story, the dream ballet does not contain any singing or speaking. The dream sequence is significant because it brought dance to a nearly equal level of importance as text and song. ●

BOX SOCIALS

“Wake up, Laurey. It’s time to start for the party.”

— Jud Fry, *Oklahoma!*

A box social was a dance or fundraiser for an organization, like a school or church. Women decorated cardboard boxes or lunch hampers that held enough food for two people. At the dance, men would bid against one another for the box of their choice. The prize for the highest bidder? Sharing the meal in the box with the woman who made it. ●

What is a surrey?

A surrey is a horse-drawn carriage typically ridden for pleasure and not for traveling long distances. What would owning a surrey symbolize for a farmer or cowboy in *Oklahoma!*



FARMERS AND COWMEN

Most settlers that arrived after the land runs in the late 1800s farmed, growing crops to make a living or provide food for their families. At the same time ranchers and cowboys had cattle that grazed freely on the open range (government-owned land), sometimes eating farmers’ crops or trampling young plants.

These conflicting livelihoods led to competition for land and clashes between farmers and ranchers. ●

The invention of barbed wire escalated rancher-farmer relationships. It separated one person’s land from another and established property lines that, if crossed by a trespasser, could be punishable by law. Some ranchers who grazed their cattle on the open range started cutting fences to be able to drive their cattle between tracts of state land and to water.



ACTIVITY: Look through headlines in a recent newspaper to find some articles about territory laws or conflicts. What strategy would you use to negotiate between the opposing groups? How are these issues like or unlike the disagreements between the ranchers and farmers?

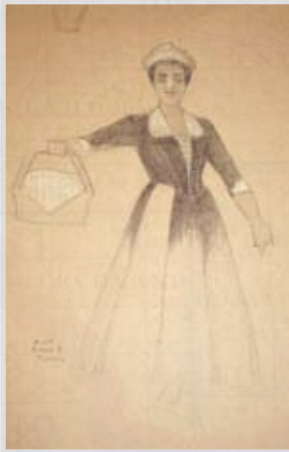
LIFE IN EARLY OKLAHOMA

The first settlers in the new territory generally did not have enough money or materials to build wooden houses. Often, they would live in makeshift dugouts or sod houses, which were shelters built out of soil and grass. Their first crops usually did not grow well, and sometimes turnips were the main food available for the settlers to eat.

Even when rural areas and towns began to prosper economically by the early 1900s, Oklahoma's residents still struggled to make ends meet. ●



ACTIVITY: Imagine that you have just settled in a new territory during the late 1800s in Oklahoma. Write a journal entry describing your experiences.



The costumes have details to make them seem authentic to Oklahoma in the early 1900s. Since the characters do not have much money, you may notice clothes that look mended or old. Altering a garment to make it seem less new is called distressing. A craftsperson may artfully wash, wrinkle, paint, beat or even tear a costume piece to make it seem lived-in.

“They gonna make a state outta this territory, they gonna put it in the Union!”

— Curly McLain, *Oklahoma!*

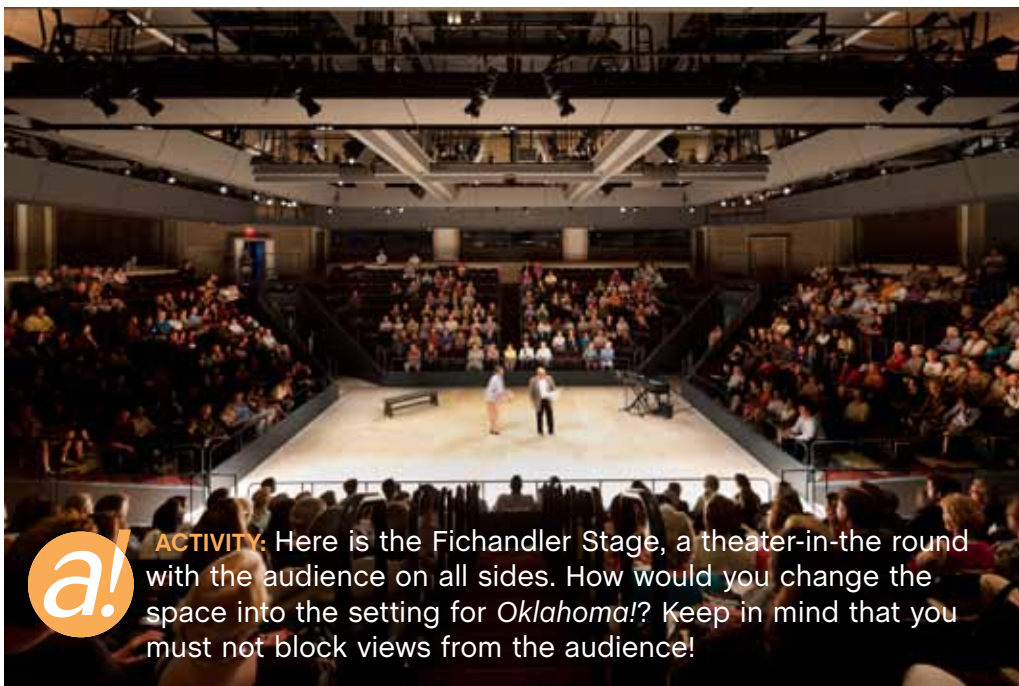
Once called Indian and Oklahoma Territories, the two combined and Oklahoma was declared a state on November 16, 1907.

How is land purchased? In 1889, Congress passed laws allowing white settlers to purchase Oklahoma land on a first-come, first-served basis. This race for land (and a new future!) was called a land run.

OKLAHOMA
AND
INDIAN TERRITORY.
SHOWING DISTANCES,
Municipal towns and Post Offices

“Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’” For Arena Stage!

Arena Stage is opening the doors to its new theater complex, the Mead Center for American Theater, with *Oklahoma!* You will be among the first audiences in the building, which houses Arena’s two historic theaters – the Fichandler & the Kreeger – and a new theater, the Kogod Cradle.



ACTIVITY: Here is the Fichandler Stage, a theater-in-the round with the audience on all sides. How would you change the space into the setting for *Oklahoma!*? Keep in mind that you must not block views from the audience!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books/Plays

Green Grow the Lilacs by Lynn Riggs
North Central Oklahoma: Rooted in the Past, Growing for the Future by the North Central Oklahoma Historical Association
Oklahoma!: The Making of an American Musical by Tim Carter
The Cowboy Encyclopedia by Richard W. Slatta

On the Web:

Technology in 1900: www.pbskids.org/wayback/tech1900/
The Musical: www.broadwaymusicalhome.com/shows/oklahoma.htm
Cowboy Museum: www.nationalcowboymuseum.org

On DVD:

Oklahoma! film adaptation: CBS Video, 1955
Real West: Cowboys & Outlaws documentary: History Channel, 2008

Museum Exhibits

Communities in a Changing Nation: The Promise of 19th-Century America, Ongoing at the National Museum of American History
Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories at the National Museum of the American Indian

Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 30 minutes early.
 - Visit the restroom before the show starts.
 - Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.
 - Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.
 - Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!
 - Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum.
 - Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.
 - Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.
 - Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.
 - Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.
 - Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.
- Enjoy the show!**



the mead center
for american theater

1101 Sixth Street, SW
Washington, DC 20024
Phone: (202) 554-9066
Fax: (202) 488-4056

Community Engagement
Phone: 202-234-5782
Fax: 202-797-1043
Written by Julia DePalma
Edited by Rebecca Campana
Illustration by Doug Fraser

Visit www.arenastage.org
for more information on
Arena Stage productions
and educational opportunities.