

OKLAHOMA!: a Broadway Legend

It's always fun to ponder what might have been. In the case of *Oklahoma!*, what might have been would have been *Away We Go* with words and music by the legendary team of Rodgers and Hart. But then...would *that* show have been the runaway success that *Oklahoma!* has proved to be? Would we be performing it for you today – or would it have become one of the many once-loved, now forgotten musical-comedies...lost book, meaningless title, single remembered song from something they once did on Broadway? We will never know.

Back to reality. What we have is the Broadway show that broke the mould. Critics have claimed that it was innovative; no chorus to raise the curtain at the start, songs that were natural extensions of the dialogue, a story-led drama, choreography that was as integrated into the plot as was every other aspect of the show. All these things had been done before but nowhere had they been done quite like this. *Oklahoma!* sounded the death-knell for the sassy, star-led, plot-as-thin-as-paper, eager-to-amuse, musical comedy that had been Broadway's fare for a decade or more. Now we have a *play with music*. And that is how things would remain for the next 25 years or so.



Original 1943 production of *Oklahoma!*

New York's Theatre Guild staged Lynn Riggs' *Green Grow the Lilacs* in 1931. This tale of settlers in the territory that was to become a state was not a success for the usually high-brow Guild. Dialogue like "I ain't wantin' to do no hoe-down 'til mornin', and what would I want to see the sun come up fur, a-peekin' purty and fine, along side of you?" probably didn't go down too well with the usual audience. However, there was one spark of an idea that was important for later years: in order to liven things up a little, they had used a few traditional folk songs..."Skip to My Lou" and so on. They proved a minor success in an otherwise unsuccessful production.

Ten years later, a revival of the play at the Westport Country Playhouse built on this, also adding a square dance choreographed by none other than Gene Kelly. Theresa Helburn, one of the Guild directors and someone who had a fondness for the Guild's earlier production, saw the Westport audience respond to *Lilacs* as they had not done ten years before. She realised that the more music there was, the more they liked it. She asked Richard Rodgers to come and take a look.

Rodgers and Hart's relationship with the Guild went back to 1925 when it gave the struggling writers one of their most prestigious early writing opportunities. Now, in 1942, the cash-strapped Guild turned to one of its previous productions and determined that the time was ripe to call in the favour from the now-successful musical team. Rodgers saw the potential but Hart was not interested...a state of affairs that had become increasingly the norm for the last couple of years. Hart was a troubled soul and his lifestyle, always difficult for Rodgers to accommodate (he occasionally had resorted to locking the lyricist in a room to make sure he worked), became progressively dissolute and destructive. Despite the

pangs of guilt, Rodgers realised that he would have to find a new partner. That he did in Oscar Hammerstein.

They first met in 1917 during a Columbia University revue. The older Hammerstein had provided the spark that had fired the rest of Rodgers' career. Hammerstein enjoyed early success and was regarded in the 20s as one of Broadway's most gifted writers. But this was 1942 and success was long in the past. He was a "has been" with five years of flops in his recent CV. It was an unlikely partnership; the composer half of a currently successful duo specialising in the frothy, lively, smart and sassy musical comedy...and the nearly-forgotten lyricist and writer of no fixed working partner who favoured the committed, passionate, worthy drama. But it was Hammerstein that Rodgers wanted: no man who had given the world *Show Boat* could ever be counted out of the running.

Always the man of integrity, Hammerstein was reluctant to become involved whilst Hart looked like he might have a spark of interest. When it became obvious that this was a forlorn hope, he agreed. And so this rag-bag team, together with a director (Rouben Mamouian) that had bombed out in Hollywood, a cast of unknowns, a choreographer (Agnes de Mille) who was really only known in London, a theatre production company that had no money (and didn't do this sort of thing anyway) and a previously unsuccessful play did the audacious thing and put on a show.

The show had meaning – and this didn't go down well with the "I-want-to-be-amused" Broadway audience of the post-Depression era. It's more than a love story. It's how groups of partisan settlers deal with lawlessness in their community and how they prove their maturity to become proper American citizens and take their rightful place in The Union.

Under the title *Away We Go*, the show went into rehearsal...Mamouian and the actors in one place; Rodgers, de Mille and the singer-dancers in another. There were fights (often borne out of worry and insecurity), there was no money to make the sets, no costumes. Rodgers and Hammerstein would hawk the songs around to potential backers but no-one was interested.

In the midst of this disarray, Mamouian decided the time was right to put the pieces together that had been rehearsed. This amounted to staging the first Act without a set and it was at this moment, with all the parts coming together as one, they began to realise that they had something very, very special. Hammerstein was on vacation but Elaine Steinbeck ran to the phone to call Rodgers who was not, that day, at the Guild; "You had better get down here quick."

The added enthusiasm resulted in finding the backers they needed and *Away We Go* went into its out of town tryout. This is usually when the tinkering takes place. The first thing was the title: *Away We Go* sounded too much like the trivial musical comedies that this certainly was not. *Oklahoma* had been considered before, but everyone *knew* that a Western sounding musical would be a sure-fire flop. Audiences, however, warmed to this very thing and, when someone suggested the addition of a "!" might place less emphasis on "prairie" and put more on theatrical excitement, *Oklahoma!* it became.

It opened on Broadway at the St James Theatre on 31st March 1943 and closed on 29th May 1948 after 2212 performances, a record unbroken until *My Fair Lady* in 1956.