

Shaping the American Audience in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*

Kim, Hye won

Contents

- I . Introduction
- II . *Oklahoma!*: An Artistic Approach with a Business Mind
- III . *Oklahoma!*'s Tryouts in New Haven and Boston
- IV . *Oklahoma!* on Broadway
- V . Shaping The American Audience
- VI . The Embodiment of Patriotic Strategy
- VII . Conclusion

I . Introduction

American musical theatre is considered to be a major American contribution to world theatre. From Oscar G. Brockett to Stacy E. Wolf, most theatre historians agree that musical theatre has played a significant role in the history of American theatre. Nonetheless, it had been dismissed in the narrative of American theatre history, and only recently has it been mentioned in theatre history books. When historians and scholars write about the important moments in musical theatre, it is inevitable to mention the musicals of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II to talk about the elements and the new forms they offered; *Oklahoma!* has been taken

up as a scholarly subject and used as a category in the periodization of American musical theatre—known as the golden age (1943–1968)¹⁾ and the beginning of the “integrated” musical.²⁾ Recent historians have re-shifted conversations about musical theatre scholarship and representation by interrogating the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein from a different lens. However, not much is known about how the duo shaped the American audience. In what follows, this study demonstrates how Rodgers and Hammerstein shaped the American audience in *Oklahoma!* through calculated media management and consciously planned deployment of patriotic strategy embedded within the show in respond to the cultural and historical context of the 1930s and early 1940s, and ultimately, my research explores how the collaborators are constructed as an all-American brand.

Rodgers and Hammerstein³⁾ wrote nine Broadway musicals together, and they were the first composer and librettist to establish an organization called Williamson Music, Inc. in 1944 to handle the business side of their work⁴⁾ (Gordon 20). With their experience with the Theatre Guild as their

-
- 1) Some historians refer it to the golden era, but for convenience, I will use the term “golden age.” Suskin, Stempel, Mordden, and McMillin all mark *Oklahoma!* as the pivotal starting point of the golden age, see: Ann Sears, “The Coming Of The Musical Play: Rodgers And Hammerstein,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008) 147–63; Steven Suskin, *Opening Night On Broadway: A Critical Quotebook of the Golden Era of the Musical Theatre, Oklahoma!* (1943), *To Fiddler On The Roof* (1964) (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990); Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: Norton, 2010); Ethan Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin’: The Broadway Musical in the 1940s* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999); Scott McMillin, *The Musical As Drama: A Study of the Principles and Conventions Behind Musical Shows from Kern to Sondheim* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2006).
 - 2) An “integrated” musical is where music, drama and dance all merge into a single expression. See: Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy E. Wolf, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), 97.
 - 3) I will refer them as Rodgers and Hammerstein for convenience.

producers for *Oklahoma!* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), and *Allegro* (1947), Rodgers and Hammerstein felt the need to have control over their work, and they became producers for later shows such as *South Pacific* (1949) and *The King and I* (1951). Rodgers and Hammerstein had similar backgrounds: they were both from middle-class families, grew up in the same section of New York, and even went to the same Summer camps and Columbia University, where Rodgers set his first Hammerstein lyric as students (Gordon 20; Block 181–82; Nichols “R.&H.”). In reality, they barely saw each other, and did not seem to like each other, but since the public connected the two men with resemblance, and knowing that public relations were a vital part in running a business, they carefully cultivated an image of a team of an all-American brand.

For the production of *Oklahoma!*, Rodgers and Hammerstein were hired by the Theatre Guild as collaborators, and press agents of the Guild arranged interviews for the core creators of the show. Joseph Heidt—one of the press agents—devised interviews with Rodgers and Hammerstein extensively; however, it was unusual for a composer or a lyricist to be involved in the advertising process in the early 1940s. Rodgers was better well known, more marketed, and took more interest in the business part than Hammerstein, and therefore he was often the key representative.⁵⁾ Hammerstein on the other hand, came from a family that dealt with numerous well-publicized feuds, and was well aware of the importance of publicity. He was born into a theatrical empire whose grandfather—Oscar Hammerstein I—was a theatre builder and impresario of the Manhattan Opera House in New York, and father, the manager of Victoria Theatre.

4) Williamson Music, Inc. was named after each of their fathers; they both had the same name, William. For the history of the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, see: www.rnh.com.

5) See: *Christian Science Monitor*, March 3, 1943; *The Boston Herald*, Mar. 13, 1943; *The Boston Morning Globe*, Mar. 14, 1943; *Boston Post*, Mar. 14, 1943; *The New York Post*, Mar. 29, 1943. Quoted in Carter, *Oklahoma!* 153.

The Hammerstein dynasty was notorious for its lawsuits—sometimes up to forty separate but simultaneous legal feuds took place (Fordin 4). Rodgers and Hammerstein both understood that public relations was integral in running a business, and both took active part from the show’s inception in providing ideas for the pre-performance publicity that conditioned subsequent reception of *Oklahoma!* The practitioners strategically intervened in making a public image of the team and the calculated image eventually became the Rodgers and Hammerstein brand, a brand the audience could trust.

The Theatre Guild’s dual image of theatrical and financial success served as the initial propelling force for the branding of Rodgers and Hammerstein and their tactics for audience reception. The Theatre Guild was founded in 1918, and it was run by a board of members: Lawrence Langner, Maurice Wertheim, Helen Westley, Philip Moeller, and Theresa Helburn, and as Brook Atkinson—an influential theatre critic of the *New York Times*—stated, the Guild was “a primary influence on bringing a childish theatre to maturity”⁶⁾ (Nadel viii). By the mid-1920s, the Guild was acknowledged as the foremost producer in America, and the *New York Times* published a full-length article on the Guild’s fifth anniversary in 1924 titled “The Amazing Story of the Theatre Guild,” and called the Guild “New York’s most able producing group” (4). Howbeit, not all critics had positive remarks. Oliver M. Saylor, in his book on American theatre in 1923, criticized the organization for neglecting American authors over foreign plays. Saylor argued that the Guild had staged twenty-one foreign to four American plays, and that the production record was exclusively made up of European plays (88). The Guild argued back that in order to compete professionally with other Broadway producers, they had to rely on

6) For the production history of the Theatre Guild, see: Nadel *A Pictorial History*, Helburn “Art and Business” 268–74. For more information on the Theatre Guild, see Langner, *The Magic Curtain*, and Helburn, *A Wayward Quest*.

works that had been proven a success and that they could not take risks on untried American playwrights. That is to say, the Guild needed to earn money. Yet the Guild, wanting to maintain its high reputation in the field, decided to venture by recruiting fairly unknown American authors like Eugene O'Neill and to explore American themes with plays such as Lynn Riggs's *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which *Oklahoma!* is based on.⁷⁾

By 1931, the Guild had wisely and successfully combined the image of commercial success and the appearance of economic disinterestedness, which had become the primary factor for its stand as an "art theatre." In order to reach out and appeal to the right audience, the Guild had established a subscribing membership. Helburn—who was the actual leader of the Guild and co-producer—explained that they were not patrons but advance ticket holders whom the Guild sold its season tickets at reduced rates with special privileges attached ("Art and Business" 272). Atkinson supported Helburn in that the Guild could have earned more money if they had kept the plays running in New York, rather than ending it on schedule for the subscription audiences. In this way, the Guild managed to shape the audience reception specifically for its target audience, and simultaneously was able to maintain its high artistic reputation. All Broadway producers wanted a commercial hit, and the Guild was no different: the Guild had promoted *Porgy and Bess* in 1935 as a folk opera to match the high artistic reputation of the Guild, but it had failed, and they were in no position to take any financial risks. Nevertheless, they needed to appear as if they were pursuing a highly conscious aesthetic by seemingly showing no interest in commercial success, and this image becomes the dominant component in shaping the American audience in *Oklahoma!* by Rodgers and Hammerstein.

7) The Promotion of the Federal Arts Project (1935–1943) stressed All-American art for the people. I will explain this in detail later when dealing with Patriotic strategy embedded in *Oklahoma!*

II. *Oklahoma!*: An Artistic Approach with a Business Mind

Rodgers and Hammerstein were on the same path with the Guild in search of a new form of musical, and all three had one additional thing in common: they were talented businessmen. Despite the Guild's pursuit of high artistic reputation by targeting the upper class with their shows, and its theatre-going public image of an "art theatre," Helburn emphasized the importance of business, and found the theatre "frankly commercial" ("Art and Business" 268). In an interview with the *New York Times* on August 1, 1943, Rodgers is compared to "a logical frame provided for an emotional content" ("Mr Rodgers Insists"), and Langner, in his autobiography, states that Rodgers was a practical man of the theatre, and excellent businessman, whereas Hammerstein was a big, slow-moving man with a broad kindly face with interests wide and his knowledge of philosophy, economics and world affairs greater than almost any other man he had met in the theatre (369). John Steele Gordon, a journalist for *American Heritage* concurs that the two practitioners fully understood that "the show is just half show business. The other half is business" (20).

Rodgers and Hammerstein's knowledge of business is demonstrated in the theatre advertisements that surrounded Broadway shows of the 1940s. The 1940s was a time when theatre programs were filled with articles about business, stocks, and Wall Street trades. In the early 1940s, all articles in the "Legitimate" page of *Variety* magazine were advertisements of shows, and all theatre productions emphasized the box office gross profits in the title: "Oklahoma' \$63,000 in 2 SRO D.C. Weeks," "Oklahoma' 60G in 2 Wash. Wks," "Philly Siffy; 'Jones' 20G in 6," and "Robeson-'Othello' Latest Smash Hit on Broadway; \$19,700 in 1st 7 Shows, 'Genius' Big \$11,500 in Four" filled the titles on the pages of

Variety magazine. The production advertisements of the *Variety* magazine of the early 1940s indicate that producers conceived and appealed to their audience with a business mind, and that it was the norm for Broadway. So, it was not unusual for producers to have a business mind, but it was not usual for a composer or a librettist.

The music of *Oklahoma!* was approached systematically and logically more than emotionally. Helburn, in her autobiography, reminisces how Rodgers maintained his calm when all around him were going mad, and praised his fine business sense. Once they were going over a production report, and she asked, "Dick how can such a great creative artist be such a good businessman?," and Rodgers answered, "You forget that music is largely numbers" (A *Wayward Quest* 287). When working with Lorenz Hart, Rodgers usually wrote the music first to provide the inspiration, but with Hammerstein, it was the lyricist who wrote first and Rodgers would structure his tunes on top of it (Green 103). This method of collaboration used for *Oklahoma!* set the template for their future shows. In such a way, logical thinking was always involved, and from the meter, range, mode, use of chromatics in melody and harmonic devices in accompaniment were all carefully planned to set the mood of each song, as they were "architectural problems and the solutions for them could be reached only by logic" ("Mr. Rodgers Insists"). Nothing came out of luck; everything was consciously planned out by the artists.

Rodgers and Hammerstein were not trusted names in the early 1940s, and early press releases and reviews focused only on dance and music, Agnes de Mille, Rodgers's past experimental shows with Hart, and the Guild's reputation for high quality art (O'Leary 79), but in early February of 1943, the Guild made a change in marketing the show. The Theatre Guild started to feed information on *Green Grow the Lilacs* into the press with its first official report on July 23, 1942, and from January 1943

onward, factual information on the work in progress, casting, photographs and advertisements as the “greatest musical show since *Show Boat*,” were released (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 152). But the change of the title to *Away We Go!* was officially announced in the *New York Times* on February 15, 1943, and the musical was labeled as “bright and breezy”—a phrase that would appear regularly in subsequent advertisements and articles (O’Leary 86–87; Carter, *Oklahoma!* 150). The production advertised the show as a light-hearted musical comedy for entertainment because musical comedy was marketable to the American audience of the early 1940s.

The Guild had a press office, but it was Helburn who provided press notes for *Oklahoma!* from the beginning to establish a number of themes that would regularly appear in subsequent newspaper articles—she focused on the “revolutionary Guild production” that had “American qualities,” “new and different music,” “Richard Rodgers,” “an unjaded cast,” and the “twenty-eight-piece orchestra,” which was unusual for Broadway shows (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 152). The show’s planned concepts are repeated verbatim in the later articles, which indicate that origins of the text came from the Theatre Guild’s press office. It was guided by Helburn, who provided publicity ideas and was headed by Joseph Heidt. Heidt would spin out information to the newspapers and persuade critics to write at much greater length than the usual factual statement of a show’s opening (Carter, *Oklahoma!* XV), and the provided information would be repeated in reviews to shape the audience.

III. *Oklahoma!*'s Tryouts in New Haven and Boston

The Theatre Guild's consciously planned out pre-performance publicity for the New Haven tryout worked for the local presses, and I argue that all reviews of the New Haven tryout reflect the press notes provided by Helburn. *Oklahoma!* was different from the mainstream Broadway musicals of the late 1930s and early 1940s: popular Broadway musicals consisted of an opening with long-legged girls dancing to music with crowd-pleasing jokes, but *Oklahoma!*'s opening number "Oh What a Beautiful Mornin'," was sung by Curly, the male lead, with a 15-minute dream ballet with serious undertones. The critics answered to Helburn's notes of "American qualities," "unknown cast," "new and different music," and the "revolutionary Guild project" that refused to conform to the Broadway musical stereotypes of big-name stars, the chorus of dancing girls with light-hearted jokes. Tryouts were a great way to trim and tune the show and to garner pre-performance publicity, and the creators used it as a tool to structure their publicity strategies to shape reception for the New York premiere in addition to making slight revisions on the show.

The New Haven tryout opened on March 11, 1943 for three evenings and a matinee, and the cast performed in front of an audience of managers, backers,⁸⁾ playgoers, Yale students, and critics (Langner 373). Langner admits that the reports were pessimistic regarding the second act, and at the end of the tryout, almost all of the backers and the staff involved in the production seemed to have doubts about the success of the show—Kurt Weil thought it was not good but it might succeed, the local press reviews were entirely favorable, but the New York critics and their representatives showed mixed reviews (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 157–59). *The Waterbury*

8) They would call investors the "backers" of the show.

American claimed that “This entire creation is close to the soil,” *The New Haven Journal Courier* noted that “many of the players are well known and there are many who are not well known who will be soon,” and Cecil Smith in the *Chicago Tribune* wrote that the show “will not be an unqualified success unless a great deal of revision does take place, despite its attractive decors and hummable score” (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 160). Then, there was the infamous telegram sent to the New York columnist Walter Winchell by the producer Mike Todd, during the intermission of the New Haven opening—“No legs. No jokes. No chance” (Wilk 17). Although the tryout was greeted with mixed reviews, it is clear that the reporters have followed the press releases of the Guild. The Theatre Guild’s consciously planned out pre-performance publicity for the New Haven tryout had worked for the local presses, but to condition the reception of the New York critics and representatives was another question.

Now that they received good reviews from the local playgoers and newspapers, the creators once again needed to target the sophisticated New York critics whose responses were crucial in projecting the image of the musical as high art, and Hammerstein was the first to take action to this shift in publicity tactics. The motivation for Hammerstein’s shift of tone of the ongoing publicity was due to the reception of the New Haven tryout. James O’Leary, in his extensive research on *Oklahoma!*, asserts that the Guild’s rhetorical strategy changed with Hammerstein’s interview with the *Boston Post* printed on March 14, 1943 (O’Leary 88–89). The change of strategy with Hammerstein’s interview on March 14 points out that the interview must have taken place in the hours right after the New Haven tryout and just before the Boston tryout, which took place March 15, 1943—Hammerstein was responding to the reviews. Also to prove the definite shift of the marketing concept, during the New Haven tryout, there was a dance number titled “The Farmer and the Cowman,” as it was a

custom of the time for all musicals to have a dance number; it was a show-stopper to which the audience responded, but the creative team thought it interrupted the plot, so they deleted it (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 156). The dismissal of audience response demonstrates a new change in the marketing strategy taking place to shape the American audience.

Hammerstein's cardinal role in changing the tone of publicity of *Oklahoma!* that would contribute to the show's artistic and commercial success, marks the start of Rodgers and Hammerstein cultivating an image of a team of the all-American brand popular to the public, while pursuing high artistic reputation. O'Leary asserts that Hammerstein started to condition the reception of their show in the media by self-consciously theorizing and redefining what kind of representation the musical theatre could hope to achieve (87–89). Hammerstein's strategy was to deliver an image of high art but at the same time he contained the "honest-to-goodness American feeling" by delivering his theoretical ideas in a tone of sincerity in an article he wrote for the *Boston Post*. ("Away We Go"). In this manner, he could appeal to the intellectuals as well as invoke a feeling of familiarity to the public. With Hammerstein's tonal shift in the media releases on March 14, 1943, implying high art and rural folkness, critics were quick to follow the integration story he had presented.

The Boston tryout was a period for Hammerstein's interviews and the Guild's press releases to settle in amongst the critics and to provide a firm framework of the production for the media and potential audience interpretation. *Away We Go!* opened at the Colonial Theatre in Boston on March 15, 1943, and it had an overall positive reception—the audience reception was more in favor with the show with theatregoers regarding it as the hit of the season and a respectable box office gross making profit the first week⁹) (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 164–67). On March 16, one day after

the Boston tryout was staged, Heidt released a notice to *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, announcing that a title change from “Away We Go!” to “Oklahoma”—without the exclamation mark—have taken place (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 167). On March 19, Heidt reiterated it in another release:

Oklahoma, new Theatre Guild musical comedy formerly known as *Away We Go!* which is currently playing at the Colonial Theatre, Boston, will have its Broadway premiere at the St. James Theatre on Wednesday evening, March 31. *Oklahoma* has music by Richard Rodgers with book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein 2d, and is based on the Lynn Riggs stage comedy, *Green Grow the Lilacs*. Rouben Mamoulian is directing, and the cast is headed by Betty Garde, Alfred Drake, Joseph Buloff, Joan Roberts, Lee Dion, Howard da Silva and Celeste Holm. (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 168–69)

Again, on March 22, Heidt issued another release that commented on the principal cast being all actors as well as singer and dancers and the twenty-eight-piece orchestra, and on March 24, the exclamation mark for *Oklahoma!* appeared on the first display advertisement for the show in the *New York Times*, and Helburn ordered Heidt to make manual alterations to ten thousand press releases and other publicity materials regarding the exclamation mark (Hanff 83–84). On March 26, Heidt sent out a brief note for *Oklahoma!*—this time with an exclamation mark—when distributing complimentary opening night tickets to critics. But even after the Broadway debut, some critics would still use *Oklahoma*, without the exclamation mark (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 169–70), meaning that it took time for the press releases to circulate into the populace.

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s effort to consciously construct advertising

9) On March 16, 1943, the *New York Times* announced advance sales of \$25,000 and on March 29, gross receipts of more than \$50,000.

strategies for potential audience response is shown in the posters and programs during the Boston tryout. Since programs and posters were printed in advance, they could not keep up with the changes and could not reflect the actual state of the show at the performance, and changes in programs suggested some reorganization of the choreography, and also of its theme (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 154, 161–62). This confusion was a result of the constantly changing strategies to label and promote the show. The final alteration of the show's label occurred right before the Broadway opening. In the earlier press releases, the Guild had labeled the show as a musical comedy to target the light hearted, commercial quality, but they relabeled it as a musical play (O'Leary 91). Hammerstein had started to express overt antagonism to musical comedy in his series of press junkets that started one day before the Boston tryout, regarding vaudeville and revue as a lower mode of entertainment. Hammerstein contended:

The average musical comedy doesn't bother much with the story. The story goes along for a while, and it stops. A fellow comes out and sings a song or does a dance routine, and then goes off, and you accept it. That's the musical-comedy tradition we've built up here, and with most musicals it does well enough, though I never liked it much." ("Unconventional")

During the New Haven and Boston tryouts, *Oklahoma!* was still billed as a musical comedy in print, but some reviewers had caught on to Hammerstein's interviews, and started to call it a musical play (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 174). Nonetheless, it was not until the Broadway run that the term was strongly associated with the show.

IV. *Oklahoma!* on Broadway

Images of *Oklahoma!*—established by Rodgers and Hammerstein and circulated by the Theatre Guild’s press office into the media—slowly conditioned the audience and shaped potential interpretation, but it was not enough for a sold out performance for the opening night in New York. Despite the pre-performance advertisements, the show had a small advance sale, and the first night was not sold out (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 169; Green 109). Although the creators of the show note that the New York audience responded with an outburst of applause after the first act, Helburn admits that the first radio reports of the performance were dismissive: at midnight, the news commentator said, “the show won’t last a week” (*A Wayward Quest* 290). However, the next day, newspaper critics praised *Oklahoma!* with mostly favorable reviews except for one unfavorable and one mixed review (Suskin 499–503; *New York Theatre* IV:25). The review of Lewis Nichols, the *New York Times* critic, is the perfect example of how the Guild’s and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s pre-performance advertisement shaped reception:

[*Oklahoma!*] relies not for a moment on Broadway gags to stimulate an appearance of comedy, but goes winningly on its way with Rouben Mamoulian’s best direction to point up its sly humor, and with some of the Agnes de Mille’s most inspired dances to do so further... The Guild has known what it is about in pursuing talent for its new departure. Mr. Rodgers’s scores never lack grace, but seldom have they been so well integrated as this for “*Oklahoma!*” ... The play has an excellent collection of players, none of whom yet is world-famous... Possibly in addition to being a musical play, “*Oklahoma!*” could be called a folk operetta: Whatever it is, it is very good. (“The Play”)

Lewis had updated the Guild's latest press release on the addition of an exclamation mark on *Oklahoma!*, as well as the most recent information Hammerstein had fed into the press on the show billed as a musical play. While some critics still spelled *Oklahoma* without the exclamation mark, it is evident that the critics had responded to the earlier press releases that originated from the Guild—most critics mentioned the musical's rural American theme and the “unjaded” and unknown cast.

Hammerstein's series of interviews finally settled into the press, and his informal talks with the associated press during performances proved to be influential that the press began to react to Hammerstein's structured strategy of labeling the show as a high art, integrated musical play with rural undertones. He often attended the show with members of the press as late as May 28th (Field), and the following critics mention the intended labels of the show by Hammerstein: Gordon F. Allison of the *Newark Sunday Call*, called the musical “joyously and imaginatively conceived. Furthermore it is creative. And I have a strong suspicion that it may even be art,” and Robert Bagar, a critic for the *New York World Telegram* wrote in his article titled, “*Oklahoma!* Earns Musical Acclaim,” that “the most interesting aspect of the songs—to me, at any rate—is the ease with which they grow right out of the situations.” O'Leary asserts that Olin Downes, the classical-music critic for the *New York Times*, merged the two concepts into one coherent claim in his article on June 6, 1943. Thus, the folk tone and the concept of formal integration were in circulation by late May (O'Leary 99). Soon, the aesthetic claims of the musical made by the creative team were solidified.

V. Shaping The American Audience

Rodgers and Hammerstein intentionally fashioned their musicals with one thing in mind—a potential audience response. *Oklahoma!* was a huge success and it set the blue print for all future promotions and pre-performance advertisement tactics for Rodgers and Hammerstein's Broadway musicals. It was not until *Oklahoma!* that musicals started to develop through out-of-town tryouts in Boston and New Haven, where the audience reaction served as feedback for the audience appeal that directly influenced musicals' development. Wolf terms it “performative spectatorship,” meaning that the audience is part of the process of making a musical (Knapp, Morris, and Wolf 366, 368). I agree with Wolf considering that musicals are inherently commercial in form, and audiences are crucial as musicals depend on ticket sales to survive. As Rodgers once said, “The audience are the only smart people in show business” (Nolan 212). Rodgers and Hammerstein were fully aware of the importance of audience reaction, and they understood the presence of pre-performance publicity playing a key role in building the anticipated audience response.

The creators recognized the audience influence on the discourse of the artistic portion as well as the very intention of the show, and therefore the content of a musical's playbill, press release and advertisement were molded for the typical spectator they had imagined. According to O'Leary, scholars like Richard Butsch, James Ettema and D. Charles Whitney regard the audience as an identifiable market segment that fashions the process of production, acknowledging the power of the audience to shape the show: the producer's conception of audiences shapes the potential production, and they build the anticipated audience response with strategic artistic creation¹⁰⁾ (9–17). In the early 1940s on Broadway, theatre companies

10) For a clear description on how producers construct the audience through

had press offices that fed information to the newspapers and the media. In turn, most journalists reporting on theatre tended to rely on such press releases rather than taking time to do their own investigative journalism, as it were. So what happened with *Oklahoma!* was by no means unusual because something similar was going on with the Group Theatre in 1936 with *Johnny Johnson*, a play with music in three acts (Carter, "Re:"). Producers, press agents, and journalists were aware of the importance of the role of publicity and audience, and they would strategically invoke the spectators to fashion their shows in a projection of an intended image.

Rodgers and Hammerstein were actively involved with the publicity and interacted with the press agents—Michael Mok and Lawrence Weiner. With their reputation secured with *Oklahoma!*, they hired Mok and Weiner to handle publicity, public relations, and scheduling of major productions for Rodgers and Hammerstein. The script was provided well before the show was produced, and Mok, Weiner, and other advertising agents, were invited to live readings, performances and rehearsals, and they were educated on the show's concept. They also had meetings with advertisement executives to discuss the best way to promote a show. In an interview with James Weiner, who is the third generation of Lawrence Weiner and runs Lawrence Weiner & Associates Inc. up till this day, he comments on how Rodgers would meet publicity people directly, and play the piano himself as music would come as an important factor¹¹⁾ (Weiner). This was to let the agents understand the show and ultimately to shape the image of the

advertisement, see Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 2 and 9; David M. White, Robert S. Albert, and R. Alan Seegar, "Stereotype of a Nation's Taste," *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York: Free Press, 1957), 443–55; James S. Ettema, D. Charles Whiteny, *Audience-making: How the Media Create the Audience* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994), 11.

11) I thank James Weiner for the interview by phone on March 8, 2013.

production.

Mok was a press agent, casting director and journalist who used to work as a reporter for the *New York Post*, and he covered the media for editorial content, developed strategies for press conference, set out photos publicity of shows and press releases, and his telegrams were fed into the newspapers. He also wrote exclusive articles for the *New York Post* on the actors of the show. Mok's press releases are specifically marked "for release" in the archives titled "Michael Mok" at the New York Public Library¹²⁾ (Mok). Weiner was the advertisement agent for the producing firm, and it was his duty to take care of the sphere of purchased promotion such as full page advertisement in *Times* magazine, bought portions of pages in the newspapers for advertisement, and media advertising. However, covers and editorial spreads in *Life* and *Time* magazines were not purchased, but depended on the show's influence and newsworthiness, and it was both Mok's and Weiner's job to make Rodgers and Hammerstein's shows to make the cover of the influential magazines of the time. Newspapers, magazines, advertisements on buses and trains, push cards on streets, and billboards were the major forms of promotional tools for the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals of the golden age (Weiner).

Posters and programs of a show were also considered to be effective mediums of publicity. Rodgers and Hammerstein were active in developing the image and artwork of the show, and as Carter points out, *Oklahoma!*'s poster was edited several times (*Oklahoma!* 25) since it shaped the message the creators wanted to convey to the audience. Billboards were not a common form of advertisement back in the early 1940s when *Oklahoma!* was first promoted. With Rodgers and Hammerstein's emphasis on posters as a potent tool, Lawrence Weiner was the pioneer to first use large billboard forms on the tops of the buildings in New York City, where

12) I would like to thank the New York Public Library for allowing me access to the "Michael Mok" boxes.

they could build up signs (Weiner). Marvin Carlson, in his article, "Theatre Audiences And The Reading Performance," states that the basic information in theatre programs provide an orientation for the audience and affects their reading, and programs are far more involved in the process of affecting reading formations (82–98, 90–91). Carlson believes that even a single image can have a profound effect upon audience interpretation, and Rodgers and Hammerstein's conscious construction of potential audience response expanded into the theatre, up till the last minute before the curtain rose—the image on the March 31 program of *Oklahoma!* draws on scenic designer Lemuel Ayer's backdrop for the dream-ballet (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 213).

Other promotional tools used for Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals included pre-recordings of songs, and the entire scores were played on the radio and sometimes live in the New York clubs. Although commercial radio was invented in the 1920s, it was not a popular medium for the public until the 1940s, and in the mid-1940s, radio commercials had just started in a very small way (Dunning 25). Most people did not go home to watch TV, but they went out to movies, listened to live music in clubs and cabarets. New York was much smaller in the 1940s and 1950s, resembling more of a village, so it was easier to get the word of mouth in the city. Nightclubs and supper clubs were popular, and clubs were big and an efficient way to promote records. Weiner would hand out the score of the music, and the big bands in the clubs played the music of the show, and the songs of *Oklahoma!* resounded in the ears of the New Yorkers (Weiner).

VI. The Embodiment of Patriotic Strategy

Rodgers and Hammerstein recognized the audience both as a potential critic and collaborator, and to shape the American audience, it was important to understand the need of the populace—I assert that the patriotism embedded within the show, in the context of World War II, educated the audience providing solutions to wartime crisis playing a significant role in labeling the show and the creators as all-American. Americans had endured the stock market crash of October 29, 1929, the Dust Bowl that impoverished the country's rich farmlands in 1934, and the outrage of Pearl Harbor that moved the American public into World War II—*Oklahoma!* was staged at the midst of wartime crisis. Everyday Americans received reports of family members and friends killed in the battlefields, and the radio and newspapers were bombarded with news on the battles and casualties. The once ethnically homogeneous rural American towns with military training camps were now overflowing with young men from all over the country with different ethnicities (Wertheim 55, 103; Knapp 123). Lynn Riggs's *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which *Oklahoma!* is based on, was part of President Roosevelt's Federal Arts Project (1939–1943). The project pursued the creation of authentic American forms of art, and Riggs, who was born and raised in Oklahoma, was one of the playwrights that took part of a growing trend for homegrown drama¹³⁾ (Carter, *Oklahoma!* 9). In January 1943, the Office of War Information directed Hollywood producers to “depict democracy by showing persons of different race, religion and economic status mingling on even terms in factory or other war service and also in settings of everyday life.” Countless Hollywood films started to depict the diversity of race of Anglo, Italian, Polish, Hispanic, Jewish, and Irish soldiers all fighting

13) For information on the Federal Arts Project, see Walsh and Platt 105.

together to save American democracy, although African Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans were excluded from that diversity¹⁴⁾ (Most 99). The propaganda was not confined to the film industry, Broadway productions addressed the war and its issues, and Rodgers and Hammerstein were no exception. In fact, the creators were firm supporters of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Hammerstein was active on the Writer's War Board in 1942 to its expansion as a liaison with the Office of War Information¹⁵⁾ (Kirle 251, 255). The year 1943 was a time when the United States tried to embody the social changes brought on by the war through strategically embedding racial unity ideologies in shows to emphasize the importance of resolving differences. *Oklahoma*, representing the Midwest, was the ideal state that would offer the audience depictions of the land they once lived in peace.

Oklahoma! is set to the moment in the early twentieth century when the territories joined together to become Oklahoma—the forty–sixth state of America, which is situated in the heart of the Midwest. For Shortridge, the Midwest is “the most American part of America,” and a land inhabited by hardworking, pastoral and patriotic Americans. The Midwest is predominantly agrarian possessing a balanced combination of maturity and youthfulness; enjoying steady prosperity while remaining idealistic and progressive (*The Middle West* 33; “Emergence of ‘Middle West’” 215–16). Oklahoma is emblematic of the American people in its geographic landscape and in its historical context as Indian territories assimilating into a state. The importance of an American unity is reflected through the characters in

14) *Air Force* (1943), *Destination Tokyo* (1944), and *Pride of the Marines* (1945) were Hollywood war films produced with the direction of the Office of War Information.

15) During the 1930s and in the years immediately after Pearl Harbor, almost every American playwright of any note addressed the war and its issues. For a list of Broadway productions of the 1942–43 season, see: Wertheim 33, 41–47, 55–125.

Oklahoma! Aunt Eller wisely resolves the problems of the farmer and the cowman—who argue about how to make use of their land—into communal cohesion in “The Farmer and the Cowman.” The chorus repeats singing how the Farmer and the Cowman should be “friends” and “territory folks should stick together, [and] territory folks should all be pals,” and in the end, they all sing in unison. Furthermore, to become part of the Union, one must learn how to get along: Curly, a cowboy, realizes he needs to settle down as “a farmer with a brand-new wife” to assimilate into the brand new-state (*Rodgers and Hammerstein* 81–85, 118).

In Richard Dyer’s essay “Entertainment and Utopia,” he endorses the idea of musicals creating a utopian space and managing the basic contradictions generated by the gaps and inadequacies of capitalism; in this world, hard work is recognized and rewarded (19–30). I would like to build on Shortridge and Dyer’s assertions by suggesting that the social tensions of America in war are resolved in Dyer’s definition of utopian space created in *Oklahoma!* Oklahoma, the ideal nostalgic landscape of the Midwest, becomes the perfect getaway for the American audience who once lived in these towns and cities before the war and the Great Depression. Oklahoma represents the American people, defines national identity, and provides the nostalgic moment in time, which reality could not fulfill. Moreover, it directs the audience to envision a life that could be better. The utopian space is designed to inspire patriotism. Patriotism is permeated in the show through the landscape and by addressing the issues of the war in need of resolution—just as the characters in the show have to come together and learn how to get along for the territories to join statehood. Rodgers comments in his autobiography:

People could come to see *Oklahoma!* and derive not only pleasure but a measure of optimism. It dealt with pioneers in the Southwest, it showed their spirit and the kinds of problems

they had to overcome in carving out a new state, and it gave citizens an appreciation of the hardy stock from which they'd sprung. People said to themselves, in effect, 'If this is what our country looked and sounded like at the turn of the century, perhaps once the war is over we can again return to this kind of buoyant, optimistic life.' (227)

The all-American musical was designed to offer the American people a place where they can escape into—a world of hope. At the same time, the show invoked nostalgic sentiments of America before the war to inspire patriotism.

Oklahoma! was produced by the Theatre Guild, but if it were not for the composer and lyricist's recognition of the importance of audience reception, it could not have garnered reputation as the pioneer musical of the "integrated" musical. The names Rodgers and Hammerstein appeared regularly in the press since the inception of *Oklahoma!*, but it was not until after the New York opening that Rodgers and Hammerstein was branded and became a powerful tool in publicity. The playbill, advertising, and publicity were explicitly geared toward shaping the American audience, and each story was carefully fed into the press that originated in the minds of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

VII. Conclusion

While Rodgers and Hammerstein's creative talents in music played a crucial role, their ability to shape the American audience by promoting *Oklahoma!* as an all-American musical, was essential in the show's theatrical and financial success. With *Oklahoma!*, the collaborators became a household name, and they were the first songwriters to take on the roles

of the advertising process and become an essential part of publicity. The duo became an all-American trusted name that would become highly influential, and how they strategically fashioned publicity for *Oklahoma!* set the model for subsequent publicity strategies for their future shows. Not much scholarly research is done on audience reception, and especially on how the creators as producers are involved in changing the dynamics of audience reception in musical theatre. Scholarly endeavors began to create a new need to evaluate the significance of audience reception. There is not one scholar that could debate the fact that Rodgers and Hammerstein played key roles in developing the American musical theatre, but though the investigation of the media management, critic reviews, audience reception, and patriotism embedded in *Oklahoma!*, I have tried to situate Rodgers and Hammerstein as a brand for shaping the American audience in a new light to demonstrate the developing interest in multiple directions of American musical theatre scholarship, placing *Oklahoma!* in a unique historiographic place in American musical theatre history.

Works Cited

- Allison, Gordon F. "The Guild's 'Oklahoma!' an Occasion for Dancing in the Streets." *Newark Sunday Call* 4 Apr. 1943.
- Atkinson, Brook. "Evidences of the Theatre Guild's Good Faith at the End of Its Thirteenth Season." *New York Times* 12 Apr. 1931.
- Bagar, Robert. "Oklahoma! Earns Musical Acclaim." *New York World Telegram* 24 Apr. 1943.
- Block, Geoffrey Holden, ed. *The Richard Rodgers Reader*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.
- Butsch, Richard. *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Carlson, Marvin. "Theatre Audiences And The Reading Performance." *Interpreting The Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*. Ed. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce McConachie. Iowa: U of Iowa P, 1989. 82–98.
- Carter, Tim. *Oklahoma!: The Making Of An American Musical*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2007.
- _____. "Re: Research Inquiry." Message to Hye won Kim. 2 Feb. 2013. E-mail.
- D'Andre, David Mark. *The Theatre Guild, 'Carousel', and the Cultural Field of American Musical Theatre*. Diss. Yale University, 2000. Ann Arbor: UMI, 2000.
- Downes, Olin. "Broadway's Gift to Opera." *New York Times* 6 Jun. 1943.
- Dunning, John. *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Dyer, Richard. "Entertainment and Utopia." *Hollywood Musicals, the Film Reader*. Ed. Steven Cohan. London: Routledge, 2002. 19–30.
- Ettema, James S., and Charles D. Whiteny. *Audience-making: How the*

- Media Create The Audience*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994.
- Field, Rowland. "Broadway." *Newark Evening News* 28 May 1943.
- Fordin, Hugh. *Getting To Know Him: A Biography Of Oscar Hammerstein II*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1995.
- Gordon, John Steele. "Rodgers & Hammerstein, Inc." *American Heritage* 41.6 (1990): 20.
- Green, Stanley, ed. *Rodgers and Hammerstein Fact Book: A Record of their Works Together and with Other Collaborators*. New York: Lynn Farnol Group, 1980.
- Hammerstein II, Oscar. "'Away We Go' Called a Labor of Love." *Boston Post* 14 Mar. 1943.
- Hanff, Helene. *Underfoot in Show Business*. Mt. Kisco: Moyer Bell, 1989.
- Helburn, Theresa. *A Wayward Quest: The Autobiography of Theresa Helburn*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960.
- _____. "Art and Business: A Record of the Theatre Guild, Inc." *Theatre Arts Magazine* 5 (1921): 268-74.
- Kirle, Bruce. "Reconciliation, Resolution, and the Political Role of *Oklahoma!* in American Consciousness." *Theatre Journal* 55 (2003): 251-74.
- Knapp, Raymond. *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005.
- Knapp, Raymond, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Ellen Wolf, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*. New York: Oxford UP, 2013.
- Langner, Lawrence. *The Magic Curtain: The Story of a Life in Two Fields, Theatre and Invention*. New York: Dutton, 1951.
- Mok, Michael. Michael Mok Papers, ca. 1947-ca. 1959, bulk (1053-1955). Manuscripts and Archive Division. New York Public Library, New York, NY. General Press releases, Mok: Rodgers and Hammerstein Go on a Look-See Trip to Coast. Box #1. New York Public

- Library, New York, NY.
- Most, Andrea. *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004.
- "Mr. Rodgers Insists that it ain't luck: it ain't luck." *New York Times* 1 Aug 1943.
- Nadel, Norma. *A Pictorial History Of The Theatre Guild*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1969.
- New York Theatre Critics' Reviews* IV.25 (1943).
- Nichols, Lewis. "R &H Co." *The Saturday Review of Recordings* 25 Oct. 1947.
- _____. "The Play: 'Oklahoma!' a Musical Hailed as Delightful, Based on 'Green Grow the Lilacs'." *New York Times* 1 Apr. 1943: 27.
- Nolan, Frederick W. *The Sound Of Their Music: The Story Of Rodgers & Hammerstein*. New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2002.
- O'Leary, James Ryan. *Broadway Highbrow Discourse and Politics of the American Musical, 1943–1946*. Diss. Yale University, 2012. Ann Arbor: UMI, 2012.
- Rodgers, Richard. *Musical Stages: An Autobiography*. New York: Random House, 1975.
- Rodgers, Richard and Hammerstein II, Oscar. *Oklahoma!: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical*. New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2010.
- Saylor, Oliver M. *Our American Theatre*. New York: Brentano's, 1923.
- Shortridge, James R. "Emergence of 'Middle West,' as an American Regional Label." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 74 (1984): 209–20.
- _____. *The Middle West: It's Meaning in American Culture*. Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1989.
- Suskin, Steven. *Opening Night On Broadway: A Critical Quotebook of the*

- Golden Era of the Musical Theatre, Oklahoma! (1943) to Fiddler on the Roof (1964)*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1990.
- “The Amazing Story of the Theatre Guild.” *New York Times* 14 Dec. 1924: 4.
- “Unconventional: Oklahoma Breaks Musical Play Traditions.” *Newark Star-Ledger* 28 Mar. 1943.
- Walsh, David and Len Platt. *Musical Theater and American Culture*. Westport: Praeger, 2003.
- Weiner, James. Personal Interview. 8 Mar. 2013.
- Wertheim, Albert. *Staging the War: American Drama and World War II*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2004.
- White, David M., Robert S. Albert, and Alan R. Seegar. “Stereotype of a Nation’s Taste.” *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*. Ed. Bernard Rosenberg, and David M. White. New York: Free Press, 1957.
- Wilk, Max. *OK!: The Story of Oklahoma!*. New York: Grove, 1993.

Abstract

Shaping the American Audience in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*

Kim, Hye won (Yonsei University)

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II are musician producers who gained both commercial and artistic success, and the names are always mentioned in the historiography of musical theatre. Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals have been studied for the new forms they offered, but the story of how Rodgers and Hammerstein shaped the American audience has yet to be explored. This study examines the branding of Rodgers and Hammerstein and how Rodgers and Hammerstein conditioned audience reception with combined methodologies from musicology, sociology, and performance studies in *Oklahoma!*. It explores the pre-performance advertising strategies—including press releases, critic reviews, public reception and the politics—of Rodgers and Hammerstein that shaped the composition, performance, and reception of *Oklahoma!*. Ultimately, my research demonstrates the craft of shaping the American audience by Rodgers and Hammerstein, within the context of World War II that links American values and patriotism, and how the publicity tactics helped establish Rodgers and Hammerstein as an all-American brand.

Key Words: Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, *Oklahoma!*, musical theatre, audience reception

리처드 로저스, 오스카 해머스타인 2, 오클라호마!, 뮤지컬, 관객 수용

논문접수일: 2015.05.31

심사완료일: 2015.06.15

게재확정일: 2015.06.24

이름: 김혜원

소속: 연세대학교 영어영문학과

주소: (120-749) 서울시 서대문구 성산로 262 연세대학교 영어영문학과 사무실

이메일: hyewon1027@gmail.com