Oklahoma! and Its Descendants:

A Question of Shifting National Identities

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Oklahoma!, the 1943 musical by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II based on the 1931 play *Green Grow the Lilacs* by Lynn Riggs, captures a territory on the verge of the statehood.[1] Taking place in 1906, it is situated on the precipice of the Oklahoma territory's adoption into the Union, which would occur on November 16, 1907.[2] This period of American history was transformative not only in the integration of additional land, but also in shaping shifting perspectives of "the West." In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner published "The Significance of the Frontier to American History" in which "he asserted that the contemporary crisis of American development had arisen from the closing of the 'old frontier' and the delay in finding a new one."[3] Richard Slotkin goes on to describe the period as "the moment when the landed frontier of the United States was officially declared 'closed,' the moment when 'Frontier' became primarily a term of ideological rather than geographical reference."[4] As the nation moved into the twentieth century, however, this "ideology" became convoluted by the historical realities of life in an untamed wilderness and the mythologizing of "the West" in popular culture. The myth of the West as an American backstory then raises questions of how this constructed reality can serve as a national identity, and also how it can be treated or manipulated to create the proper identity for a given period in history. Through the musical's placement in this transitory stage of history, the story is able to confront the "crisis of American development" by marrying the seemingly infinite potential of Western expansion with a structured society based on a monogamous family unit and supportive community. This marriage happens both literally and figuratively; literally in the nuptials between Curly McClain and Laurie Williams, and

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[1] "Oklahoma!" *IBDB.com*, accessed May 3, 2012, http://ibdb.com/show.php?id=6697.
[2] "Oklahoma Statehood," *National Archives*, accessed May 7, 2012, http://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/oklahoma/.
[3] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: the Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Antheneum, 1992), 3.
[4] Slotkin, 4.

figuratively through the presentation of objects, clothing, and architecture culminating in the iconic "surrey with the fringe on top."

In dealing with the musical *Oklahoma!* as a depiction of the American West, this essay will focus on two productions available on film: the 1999 London revival helmed by Trevor Nunn and the 1955 film directed by Fred Zinnemann.[5] A close study of this 1999 theatrical production of *Oklahoma!* offers a plethora of objects, architecture, and costumes, as well as a uniquely constructed environment to serve as "the West." This specific selection of materials, as read through the Rodgers and Hammerstein text, exposes issues of masculinity, femininity, economy, sociability, and immigration—all ideas that shape American identity. While this production will serve as the core of the discussion, strategic comparison to the 1955 film offers not only a more complex analysis of ideas of national identity, but also suggests how those ideas have changed in the second half of the twentieth century. Especially through costume, a clear distinction emerges between the two productions, particularly in regard to representation and perception of gender. As Jane Marie Gaines and Charlotte Cornelia Herzog say about reincarnations of the West: "These fresh signs work to bolster a new Western mythos that is ostensibly more true to the old reality, best defined as whatever it is that we so obsessively strive to retrieve."[6] Perhaps more interestingly than discovering new realities, these new signs offer areas in which creators mine for relevance today.

The original Broadway production of *Oklahoma!* opened on March 31, 1943. At that time, the United States was clearly in the midst of World War II. The musical thus utilized

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[5] Nunn's production would transfer to Broadway in 2002 with the same team of designers and Susan Stroman as choreographer, but with an American cast.

[6] Jane Marie Gaines & Charlotte Cornelia Herzog, "The Fantasy of Authenticity in Western Costume," *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*, ed. Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pearson (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 173.

nostalgia for the West and served to reinforce American ideals, for which the country was sacrificing a great deal to defend. Many Jewish composers, seeing the turmoil in Europe (although not realizing the full extent of it until years later), dedicated their talents to positive, inspiring images of America—valentines, so to speak. This was the same year as Irving Berlin's musical *This is the Army*, which prominently featured the song "God Bless America," a song that had been resurrected in 1938 after the rise of Hitler in Germany.[7] Thus Oklahoma!, like most Golden Age Broadway musicals such as *South Pacific* (1949) and *The King and I* (1951), highlight romances between "unlikely" male-female couples with a surrounding community supporting them the whole way, despite an adversity. These ideas would become essential pillars of a stable society in post-war America.

By the late 1990s, revived interest in the show would probably not be attributed to a celebration of heterosexual, monogamous romance as a life-affirming social unit. The rise of the gay rights movement and the continuation of the Sexual Revolution had made those prior adjectives sound conservative rather than essential, even if still the norm. What the musical has become is instead a celebration of nostalgic notions of Americana and the perpetuation of an iconic, if dated, American identity. The end of the millennium elicited much speculation about the future of the world and the fate of humanity. The revival of the show at this time suggests a need to celebrate what we once believed in. Not to read too much into the timing of the productions, as it was probably more financially based than anything else, but the delay of the Broadway production until 2002 almost questions the fate of the American identity in the new millennium. It was not until a few years after a cataclysmic demise did not happen with Y2K that Broadway was ready to solidify America's cultural identity in the West.

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[7] *Broadway Musicals: A Jewish Legacy*, PBS.org, directed by Michael Kantor, New York: Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2013.

SETTING THE FRONTIER

It is easy to understand how it might be difficult to create a lush, bountiful, infinite landscape within the confines of a black box. And in depicting the American West, this landscape must be everything and nothing—mountains, valleys, plains. In the popular imagination, it has become an amalgamation of geographic forms highlighting the vast natural drama of North America. Perhaps ironically, this results in generic representations of the landscape. Charles and Mirella Jona Affron describe the Westerns of film: "The western is a genre that is primarily denotational and whose severely limited repertoire of sets would seem to tolerate neither opulence nor complexity."[8] But the importance of this landscape lies in its ability to embody the spirit of a nation whose identity is tied to the promise of that land. It is this spirit that must overcome the constraints of the proscenium stage and radiate with hope, optimism, and promise. Scenic designer Anthony Ward's construction of the Oklahoma territory thus strategically plays on the natural curve of the horizon to create the illusion of expanse (Figure 1). As Ben Brantley commented in his 2002 review of *Oklahoma!*: "Anthony Ward's harmoniously curved set, in which the sky seems to stretch into eternity, again pulses with the promise of a land on the verge of transformation."[9] The set itself is textured with a painterly application of browns and beiges that brings a nostalgic romanticism of natural wood. Generically rustic and optically expansive, this initial environment of Oklahoma evokes notions of development and a land of opportunity, and welcomes sentiments of the old West.

In his depiction of Oklahoma, Ward additionally employs a turntable, embedded within the territory's soil. Turntables in theater become a logistic tool in seamlessly and efficiently

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[8] Charles and Mirella Jona Affron, *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 70.
[9] Ben Brantley, "Theater Review; This Time, A Beautiful Mornin' With A Dark Side," *nytimes.com*, March 22, 2002, accessed February 18, 2013.

changing complex scenery, but also take on connotative meanings of their own. That meaning typically services the narrative and reinforces the presence and importance of time.[10] In *Oklahoma!*, however, the expanse of time is not reinforced by the turntable, but rather the expanse of space. What contributes to the feeling of expanse in this production is the circular reinforcement of the concave horizon line. The spinning of the table in tandem with the horizon creates the illusion that the whole world is spinning, creating the panorama of infinite space. Its first use in this production is to change the location from Aunt Eller's farm to the train station. While the table spins, a miniature train travels along the circumference of the circle. The train not only provides an additional kinetic dynamic to the space, intensifying the illusion of movement and distance traveled, but is itself symbolic of Western expansion. The train only makes this one subtle appearance (in both the stage production and only once in the film), but foreshadows the country's future of industrialization.

The turntable simultaneously focuses the pictorial image of the proscenium. When the community is together, there is a clear distinction between who is on the turntable and part of the group versus who is an outcast. Through this visual demarcation, the turntable itself takes on a greater symbolic meaning. While placing main characters in the center of the stage to garner focus can certainly be accomplished without a turntable, the table's movement breaks up the stable ground of the story and forces characters to literally be on board. This is perhaps most evident in the final scene with the wedding of Curly and Laurie. The newlyweds, family, and friends are seating at tables in the center of the turntable. When the feast concludes and the newlyweds go inside the house, the table turns and Jud appears stage left. This simple separation

[10] Musicals such as *The Lion King*, *Wicked*, and *Les Misérables* all utilized the concept of the circle to visually move the story and suggest the passage of time or its cyclical quality. The turntable itself also often has a regenerative quality.

creates much more perceived distance between Jud and the rest of the community. Overall the turntable and horizon work symbiotically. Through this harmonious staging, the themes of both expansion and community become more apparent and the stage environment becomes quite literal: the broad arc of the horizon (expansion) subtly bending toward the inherent curve of the turntable (community).

This shell of a frontier is further populated by traces of humans—houses, sheds, and of course fences to mark personal property in these vast acres. Their small scale in the face of the looming horizon behind them almost questions their existence on the Plains. The corn—high as an elephant's eye, allegedly—serves as the only literal representation of naturalia in the stage production (Figure 2). Because of the scarcity of other greenery, its size seems exaggerated. This overtaking of the space by the environment and the diminished size of architecture speaks to humans who identify with the land and geography. But more than appreciate, this identity linked to the land suggests ownership and personal growth of the surrounding environment as one's own.

FRONTIER FEMININITY: DELICATE FLOWER OR GIRL POWER?

Physical and logistic capabilities of film versus theater aside, the most notably difference in the two presentations of *Oklahoma!* is the depiction of Laurie Williams. In both presentations, she is fated to be with Curly, and it becomes immediately evident through the second song ("Surrey with the Fringe on Top") that they will indeed end up together. But through subtle changes in clothing and environment, each Laurie takes up a unique relevance to her time. The 1955 film Laurie, Shirley Jones, is the consummate vision of femininity. The actress's blonde hair and blue eyes and the artistic choices made around the character set her up to be an ideal wife. The 1999

iteration of Laurie, played by Josefina Gabrielle, takes on a more rustic, possibly more realistic persona. These differences become clear reflections of their time.

Comparing Laurie's first appearance in the film to the stage production serves as a crucible for these differences. In the film, she comes into view by exiting the house. This immediately suggests that she was either taking care of indoor domestic duties or preparing herself to go outside into the public realm. Either way, the emphasis is on female domesticity and beauty. She is costumed in a white frilly blouse and pink skirt while carrying a bird in a cage. Both her outfit and the object indicate she did not intend to engage in physical labor once outside. Through her appearance and behavior, it becomes evident she came outside to interact with Curly.

In Laurie's initial stage appearance, she enters from an unspecified outdoor location offstage wearing jean overalls and carrying chopped wood (Figure 3). While possibly more accurate for working on a farm, Laurie's activity and the costume's departure from the usual day dress worn by the character is a subtle subversion of femininity. The jeans themselves are significant: "Jeans were seen as informal, classless, unisex, and appropriate to city or country; wearing them was a sign of freedom from the constraints on behavior and identity that social categories impose."[11] She was already outside and is dressed to continue working outside, the traditional realm of men. The white bow in her hair is a startling feminine contrast to the otherwise masculine ensemble. In turn, her initial interaction with Curly is more combative; this does not undermine the inevitability of their romance, but rather gives Laurie a stronger attitude from which to operate.

[11] John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2.

Contrasting the two presentations of the song "Many a New Day" additionally alludes to progressing ideas of femininity. The film sets the scene in the interior of Aunt Eller's house while the women "get cleaned up" before the evening's social. While Laurie remains fully clothed, the rest of the female chorus strips down into their undergarments. They are filmed in close-up delicately applying makeup to their faces and coiffing their hair. The ballet that ensues creates a sea of lace and ribbon that is the epitome of traditional femininity. Laurie does stand out from the chorus, being fully clothed, but she is prepared and ready. While the others are in undergarments or various stages of preparation, she emerges as the completed picture of a woman. The decoration of the interior in the film is also in stark contrast with the rustic, outdoor quality of the rest of the film and the entire stage production. The interior reeks of Victoriana, with Belter-inspired couches, sideboards, and astral lamps. This styling designates the interior and domestic setting as the feminine realm.

In the stage production, Laurie is still wearing jeans. This not only visually separates her from the female chorus, costumed entirely in dresses, but also serves to heighten her proto-feminist attitudes toward romance. She sings:

> Why should a woman who is healthy and strong
> Blubber like a baby if her man's gone away?
> A weepin' an' a whalin' that he's done her wrong
> That's one thing you'll never hear me say!
> Never gonna think that the man I lose is the only man among men!
> I'll snap my fingers to show I don't care
> I'll buy me a brand new dress to wear
> I'll scrub my neck
> And I'll brush my hair
> And start all over again![12]

[12] Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rodgers, *Oklahoma!* (New York: Williamson Music, Inc., 1943).

While wearing the jeans that have come to define the character in Act One, these lyrics sound almost defiant of the conventions of romance expected of her. These sentiments are ultimately an expression of denial for her feelings toward Curly, but construct a unique identity around the jeans. The next scene in which she appears in jeans, her and Curly sing, flirtatiously denying the rumors of their romance ("People Will Say We're in Love"). The final time she is seen in this costume, guns shots have been heard at Jud Fry's house, and she with other characters come to see what has happened. Upon entering Jud's shed, she takes an empirical look around the interior and notes the tasteless pictures on the wall. The next time the audience sees her, during the song "Out of My Dreams"—which serves as a segue into her dream sequence—she has changed clothes into a summery dress that reflects the clothing of the other women. Her hair is taken out of a ponytail and worn down; the bow in her hair, once a feminizing contrast to the gender neutrality of the jean overalls and plaid shirt, now meshes with the rest of her ensemble, creating a vision of virginal beauty. The dream sequence that ensues proves to her the importance of a relationship with Curly and her possible danger in even momentarily entertaining Jud's infatuation with her. Thus the jeans become her metaphoric independence; once she thinks she needs Curly, she adopts the more feminine and costume of a dress.

These contrasts in the character of Laurie also indicate a greater sexualization of the female body as presented in the film. Laurie's second appearance in the film depicts her swimming nude in a pond. She emerges and towels off behind a bush. During this sequence, Ado Annie arrives on a wagon with Ali Hakim; Ado Annie soon joins the naked Laurie behind the bush where they talk. Both the suggestion of Laurie's nudity and her juxtaposition with Ado Annie, who is characterized as flirtatious and sexually aggressive for the period, place a greater emphasis on Laurie's sexuality by way of hiding it. What is additionally interesting about this

contrast between film and stage is Phil Patton's comment on females wearing jeans: "Jeans on female dude ranchers were the tightest pants ever seen on American women. The sexuality introduced was a critical turning point."[13] Laurie's jean overalls do not offer this body-fitting shape and thus do not sexualize her body. Rather, they distinguish her as a different type of woman, particularly one that has priorities that come before love or presenting herself in a way desirable to a man.

The two depictions of Laurie expose the feminist attitudes that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. The capacity for a stronger, less dependent woman had been built into the script, but it took a broader social and national shift in thinking for her to come alive. This dichotomy within one character encapsulates progressions and shifts in cultural attitudes, and how those attitudes manifest in evolving ideas about national identity. There exists a questioning in the dynamic between masculine and feminine and an uncertainty about how the two should relate. But significantly, it has become important in contemporary popular culture to create female depictions who are empowered because it is through these characters that contemporary women can relate to the narrative.

ADO ANNIE/ALI HAKIM

Any discussion of gender and sexuality in *Oklahoma!* can and should be extended to include Ado Annie and her suitors. She is characterized by an innocent, whimsical sexuality. She does not possess any of Laurie's more refined or girlish femininity, such as the delicacy of a white bow or pink skirt, but rather she has a more bombastic feminine presence. In costuming, she tends to wear her evening attire during the day—seen in her hat, which the other ladies will not

[13] Phil Patton, *Made in USA: The Secret Histories of the Things that Made American* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992), 302.

adopt until the social—and the comic pairing of discordant patterns and colors in her ensemble. Annie's presentation of this kind of femininity represents sexuality in a different vein than that of Laurie. Referring back to the themes of the show, Laurie embodies a structured, rational society while Ado Annie can perhaps be viewed as the "untamed" West. Her seeming inability to control herself is in direct odds with the rules of society that the territory will come to represent. Therefore, if the sexual conquest of Ado Annie's body is a metaphor for Western expansion, then the pursuit of Western expansion and an identity in America is a conflict between Caucasian settlers (Will Parker) and immigrant populations (Ali Hakim), for both of whom America represents a land of opportunity. It is important to note that Ado Annie's willingness to engage in each of these romances and the disdain with which Will Parker views her flirtatious behaviors do not suggest an exploitation of women in pursuit of social dominance. Rather, it suggests the Native American notion of the female body as representative of "Mother Earth," and exclusive claim to that body as attainment of a national identity. This idea is at the heart of the potentiality of the West, but it has been co-opted and used in a far less spiritualized context.

Through her romantic interactions with Ali Hakim, this discussion of Ado Annie raises the issue of immigration, as Hakim presents the plight of the immigrant. Hakim's role as the only immigrant highlights the musical's unique handling of the issue in many ways. He does not come to the territory as downtrodden, but rather is joining the white countrymen in exploring the potential of the West. However, he is greatly contrasted with the other men and approached with exoticism. His collection of objects for sale reflects a wide range of travels and experiences with foreign cultures. Whether this exoticism is contrived for marketing purposes is not definitely known, but it certainly fools the locals, particularly when he sells Laurie the Elixir of Egypt.

Ali Hakim is also not confronted with overt racism, but rather experiences cultural difficulty in assimilation. He is clearly distinguished through his costuming in both the stage production and film (and thousands of high school productions across the country). His flamboyant plaid suit and colorful bow tie are in direct contrast to the "Western" uniform worn by the other men. This costume is also one of the few indications of class differentiation in the entire story. His attire, following more formal conventions of Western dress and being in colors presumably created from artificial dyes suggest affluence unseen elsewhere in the men's fashion. The bright colors perhaps are more aligned with the fashions of Persia and India. This disconnect between his clothes and those of the other men hints at his difficulties with assimilation into the Western American culture. While other Western films would vilify the Native Americans for their inability to assimilate or construct affirming narratives of their willingness and benefit from assimilating successfully, Rodgers and Hammerstein take a more sophisticated approach.[14] Instead of highlighting a partially nude and barbaric "Other," they analyze more minute cultural differences between east and west. While treated comically, Hakim's immersion into a monogamous society after coming from a polygamous one proves difficult for him, as seen in his interactions with numerous women and altercations with their fathers. His difficulty becomes a larger metaphor for other immigrant populations in America. Certainly not always as comical as Hakim's experience, immigrants face the task of entering a nation that is itself still morphing into what it wants to be. Through his dress, he tries to fit in with formal conventions of Western attire, but does so with flare from his heritage.

[14] Richard Abel, "'Our Country'/Whose Country? The 'Americanisation' Project of Early Westerns," *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*, ed. Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pearson (London: British Film Institute, 1998).

For this unique treatment of other races, *Oklahoma!* should perhaps be reconsidered as part the general popular cultural discourse surrounding the Western genre. Turnerian thought partially blamed immigration for the closing of the Frontier. Richard Abel notes: "[Westerns serve] as models of exclusion and inclusion, defined sharply according to 'race' and gender differences, in the construction of national identity."[15] As seen so far in this discussion, *Oklahoma!* largely negates this conclusion in terms of race and gender. Hakim is in fact treated more favorably than the true "American" characters by being more intelligent and more economically viable. In his interaction with Will Parker, he is able to successfully manipulate Parker into taking Ado Annie back despite Hakim's engagement to her. This interaction is mediated over the sale of gifts Parker had purchased for Ado Annie, and once again reinforces the two parties' ideas of the West. Hakim uses his expertise in commerce to prey on Parker's emotional dependence on a relationship and structure. In the end, they both get what they want. This cognizant side step or more finessed handling of racist tendencies is readily evident in the Rodgers and Hammerstein canon, most notably in *Showboat* (music by Jerome Kern, 1927) and *South Pacific*.

GOING, GOING, GONE: CAPITALISM & THE FRONTIER

"You can live outdoors or in a hole. If you live in a hole, you're scared."[16] This view of residence is articulated by Curly when visiting with Jud in Jud's shed on Aunt Eller's property. His residence, being a shed, is barely a home, and even so it is presented as a dark, fragmentary structure. This is the first opportunity for comparison between Curly, the charming cowboy, and Jud, the pugnacious hired hand. When Curly knocks at the door, Jud does not even have the

[15] Abel, 88.
[16] Hammerstein and Rodgers.

manners to cordially open the door and greet his guest. The only decoration is pictures of naked women. While the other men also engage in viewing such pornographic images with the kaleidoscopic Little Wonder, his overt display of such imagery and general appeal to a more carnal sexuality is one of many factors that alienate him from the supposedly more moral community.

Through his presentation, Jud becomes the personification of the untamed West. Simple observation of his costume throughout the story indicates his unwillingness or inability to fit in with established society. When working, he is far dirtier than the other men, and even when dressed to impress at the social, his clothing is disheveled and worn with a visible disdain. When manipulated and mediated by pretty boy Curly, he is acceptable, but on his own he is unstable and unsuitable for not only Laurie, but also for partaking in the community. The tension between Curly and Jud not only signifies acceptable and unacceptable modes of masculinity, but also underscores the reassuring positivity of community. Also, Curly's residence is never presented. This alludes to profession as a cowhand, migrant in nature, but also reinforces his reliance on an existing and stable force. His environment is not depicted because he can only be viewed as the suitor and ultimate husband of Laurie, whose home takes a prominent place on stage throughout much of the production.

The contrast and tension between Curly and Jud are dominant themes throughout the narrative. While the tension comes to cathartic resolution after Jud's death by his own knife, it is most poignant during the auction at the social, as anticipated by the song "The Farmer and the Cowhand Should Be Friends." Though taking place at only the beginning of Act Two, the number serves as the thematic culmination of the show. It quite literally reinforces the paramount importance of community through its title and lyrics, but also through the situation and

environment. The social is a fundraiser for the schoolhouse, the skeletal framework of which looms over the proceedings (Figure 4). The incompleteness of the structure gives it an empathetic quality, which depending on the mood of the characters oscillates between vulnerability and hopefulness. When everyone is getting along, singing and dancing jovially, the schoolhouse seems to rise up out of the crowd, an emblem of the future and a symbol of progress. However, as the tension once again begins to formulate during the auction, the skinny beams seem so precariously unstable that the whole building might fall over. Aunt Eller must reassure: "It's all for the school house, all for education and learnin'."[17]

The auction, while a more concrete narrative device to pit Jud against Curly and motivate his more devious actions, takes on broader symbolic consequences for national identity. Auctions and negotiation are the essence of capitalism, and thus a community social whose main entertainment is predicated on such events must thus embrace the principles and consequences of the economic system. While possibly inciting a larger conversation of economic systems, it is important to not overlook the presence and use of objects within the auction. Jud, more prepared to bid and win a date with Laurie, forks over crumpled wads of cash. He bids with certainty, but his mannerisms and the money itself express an uneasiness and inability to engage in this economic game. Meanwhile, Curly arrives late and financially unprepared; but he makes a bold entrance wielding a large saddle. Through this and the subsequent series of objects forfeited by Curly in order to win Laurie's basket, the auction converts the myth of the West into a modern fable of capitalism for the sake of heterosexual, monogamous love. The three objects he sells—the saddle, his horse, and his gun—come to represent three components of the larger societal structure that comes to dominant the West through Manifest Destiny. An onlooker exclaims:

[17] Hammerstein and Rodgers.

"Your saddle? You can't do your job without it!"[18] With this comment, the saddle is designated as a symbol of economy. Additionally, by selling his horse, he is abandoning his prior social entanglements for the sake of the romantic relationship.

Finally, he offers his gun for sale to scrap up the final cash necessary to win the auction. Guns, with their obvious destructive powers, play a vital role for intimidation and masculinity. The auction is not the first appearance of the weapon in the story; Ado Annie's father threatens Ali with it when he finds out the peddler has been "spending time" with his daughter and coerces him into an engagement. Later, in response to Ado Annie's question as to why he married the girl who becomes his wife, he responds: "I wanted to marry her when I saw the moonlight shine on the barrel of her father's shot gun."[19] Perhaps more significantly, in Curly's first interaction with Jud, the gun becomes a third character. When there is a knock at the door, Jud grabs his gun to stage a scene of him cleaning it, clearly aware of its persuasive powers of intimidation. Once Curly enters and the tensions rise, Jud fires his gun into the air as a non-verbal statement of retort. Not to be overpowered by this eruption of emotion, Curly takes the gun to prove his skilled handling of the weapon. This scene is the closest the musical comes to a gun fight, which Jane Marie Gaines and Charlotte Cornelia Herzog describe as sexually charged: "The gunfight itself is a masterful example of the ritualisation of sexual tension and release, the elongation of anticipation in the cross-cutting between two men faced off against one another, exposing their weapons, cupping trigger-ready hands, opening, the coat, readying for what viewers and diegetic onlookers know will be short ejaculations of fire."[20] In these circumstances, the gun has been presented for its capacity to intimidate, an assertion of masculine dominance. With all of the

[18] Hammerstein and Rodgers.
[19] Hammerstein and Rodgers.
[20] Gaines and Herzog, 179.

testosterone flooding discussion of the gun, Curly's sale of the object is then indeed an emasculating gesture.

But perhaps the most decisive gunshot fired is that of Aunt Eller during the song "The Farmer and the Cowhand Should Be Friends." A brief (and highly choreographed) scuffle breaks out and she lurches for a nearby gun to call the community back into order. The female handling of the gun is significant. Because she is an older, widowed woman, it would be inappropriate to supply sexual connotation to her actions. Rather, it allows her to rise above the masculine connotation of the object and take her place as matriarch of the community. As demonstrated by this scene and her behavior throughout, she takes on a unique role as a matriarch mediating the convergence of two dominant patriarchies, the rural West and the rising, dominant social structure. These patriarchies are, as already alluded to, allegorically represented in Jud and Curly. In light of Aunt Eller's mediation, Slotkin discusses women in Westerns: "As in the traditional Western, women incarnate the Christian moral principles essential to a civilized order. Those principles are set off against the 'male' propensity for violence—although the safety of female order will depend on the assistance of at least one violent male."[21] In this light, the expanding, masculine West becomes codependent on feminine order.

FRINGE ON TOP: ABUNDANCE AND MOBILITY

While Curly has supposedly sold off everything he owns in the auction to be with Laurie, classic Rodgers and Hammerstein optimism cashes in to produce a surrey on which Curly and Laurie will ride off into the promising Western horizon. Notably, the themes of the musical as a whole culminate in this iconic vehicle. The chorus sings: "We know we belong to the land, and the land

[21] Slotkin, 291.

we belong to is grand."[22] The land has produced an abundance allowing the people to have an extravagant wedding feast. In this way the musical almost assumes a fairy tale quality like that of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Baum's "capitalist fairy tale" is characterized by abundance of resources, a celebration of industry, and a lack of personal danger.[23] Not all of these characteristics hold true in *Oklahoma!*, but the earth yields abundance when the characters emerge from circumstances in society-affirming formulations. When it seems that all might be lost for Curly, financially speaking, his marriage to Laurie resolves all problems. It is almost as if the characters are being rewarded for adhering to the dominating social structure.

Abundance and optimism of economy is not only presented through the wedding feast. During one of many argumentative flirtations with Laurie, Curly denies the existence of a surrey of which he sang so poetically. He insists he made it up. But at the conclusion of the wedding, a shiny and decadent surrey appears. It is really unknown who actually owns the vehicle (as once again, Curly is supposedly broke), but it emerges as both a narrative bookend for the romance of the story and a symbol of America. In the stage production, Laurie smartly takes a moment to run her fingers through the fringe, both calling attention to it as a culminating icon of the musical, but also expressing awe at its opulence. It is perhaps the only expression of opulence in the musical that is not met with claims of sacrifice. As upward mobility is more of an urban construct, the surrey's opulence again reinforces the hope of the future in the West. Through the lens of the West, the dominant social structure is able to take root in American nostalgia but also link itself the future of national identity. Michael Rockland states, "Mobility, perhaps more than

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[22] Hammerstein and Rodgers.
[23] William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

any other factor, has formed the American character."[24] At the end of the film, Curly and Laurie drive off in the surrey into the expanse of the landscape. Through their union and the support of the intimate community, the American Frontier is open to limitless possibility.

EPILOGUE: OSAGE COUNTY

While *Oklahoma!* certainly draws on shared ideas of America's past and the exciting characters it offers, the contemporary narrative of the West rejects nostalgic conventions of guns and cowboys. Although this really calls for (and is) a new genre, a number of parallels emerge. *August: Osage County*, the tumultuous story of the Weston family as they cope with the suicide of the family patriarch, presents the social conventions supported in *Oklahoma!*, but established and solidified over decades. This stagnant structure manifests in the initial description of the Weston house: "A rambling country house outside Pawhuska, Oklahoma, sixty miles northwest of Tulsa. More than a century old, the house was probably built by a clan of successful Irish homesteaders. Additions, renovations and repairs have essentially modernized the house until 1972 or so, when all structural care ceased" (Figure 5).[25] The setting sounds positive and progressive until the last few words, whose impact is the dominant visual image of the home. The house is dated, skeletal, and lurches with nihilism. The play and the setting fuse the geographic Western with domesticity; but instead of the reigning optimism described by Rodgers and Hammerstein, pessimism pervades the *mise en scène*, suffocating the once bubbly potentiality of the West and effectively pronouncing the death of dreams. In a way that is not altogether uncommon, the play subverts ideas of the nuclear family by depicting a clan so

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[24] Michael A. Rockland, "American Mobility," *Dominant Symbols of Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990), 59.
[25] Tracy Letts, *August: Osage County* (New York: Theater Communications Group, Inc., 2008), 9.

intoxicated with its own dysfunction that the family structure must be broken in order for any of them to live emotionally healthy lives. Beverly, through his suicide, becomes the victim of the lack of escape.

Out of pure coincidence of architectural practice, the bare framework of the schoolhouse in *Oklahoma!* parallels the skeletal structure of Jo Mielziner's famous design for the Loman house in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) (Figure 6). Todd Rosenthal's set for the Weston house in Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* echoes the Loman house's hauntingly sparse domestic appearance. Exposed and crudely painted posts and support beams dominate the structure, but are so thin to support the towering three-story structure that they seem to quiver in vulnerability. The setting, while furnished and livable, is far from welcoming as the architectural structure looms overhead in its agony. The lack of care taken to maintain the house suggests the discontent of its inhabitants. The playwright notes an additional quirk to the interior: "All the windows in the house have been covered with cheap plastic shades. Black duct tape seals the edges of the shades, effecting a complete absence of outside light."[26] This darkness, in an odd comparison, parallels the darkness and emotional starkness of Jud's shed. The idea of the West and the discontent it offers is therefore allowed to surface as the norm in contemporary depictions that do not deny misery through optimism and singing.

Characteristic of Letts as a playwright, the environment of *August: Osage County* offers a different interpretation of the idea of an expansive landscape as isolating and abandoning.[27] The optimism of potential symbolized by the expanse of natural landscape in *Oklahoma!* is literally shut out. While the backdrops of *Oklahoma!* and *Death of a Salesman* present the audience with

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[26] Letts, 10.
[27] Another play of Letts's, *Bug*, also takes place in the plains of Oklahoma and depicts a disenchanted people.

a broader context in which the microcosm of the story is to be read (the frontier and an encroaching apartment development, respectively), the backdrop of *August: Osage County* is black, denying the existence of an outside world and creating a surrealist isolation. One of the Weston daughters, Barbara, vocalizes this anxiety of how the West is now perceived:

> BARBARA: What were these people thinking?
> BILL: What people?
> BARBARA: The jokers who settled this place. The Germans and the Dutch and the Irish. Who was the asshole who saw this flat hot nothing and planted his flag? I mean, we fucked the Indians for this?
> BILL: Well, genocide always seems like such a good idea at the time.
> BARBARA: Right, you need a little hindsight.
> BILL: Anyway, if you want me to explain the creepy character of the Midwest, you're asking the wrong—
> BARBARA: Hey. Please. This is not the Midwest. All right? Michigan is the Midwest, God knows why. This is the Plains: a state of mind, some spiritual affliction, like the Blues.
> BILL: "Are you okay?" "I'm fine. Just got the Plains."[28]

This desolate description of the landscape, both visually and verbally, is diametrically opposed to the land celebrated in *Oklahoma!*. The rejection of happy nostalgia and instead a grim reality in *August: Osage County* speaks to a lost population of Americans. The bi-coastal elitism pervasive in the United States does not acknowledge and ultimately forgets the land between the country's two oceans. This expanse once celebrated as the heart of the national identity now becomes forgotten territory in the mythology of the West, a mere image of the country's past rather than its future.

[28] Letts, 29-30.

Images

Figure 1. The arched curve of the horizon creates a limitless expanse.

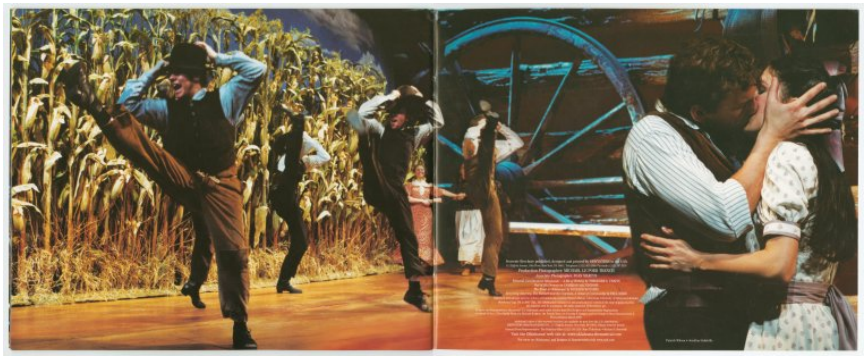

Figure 2. Corn and the environment tower over the people.

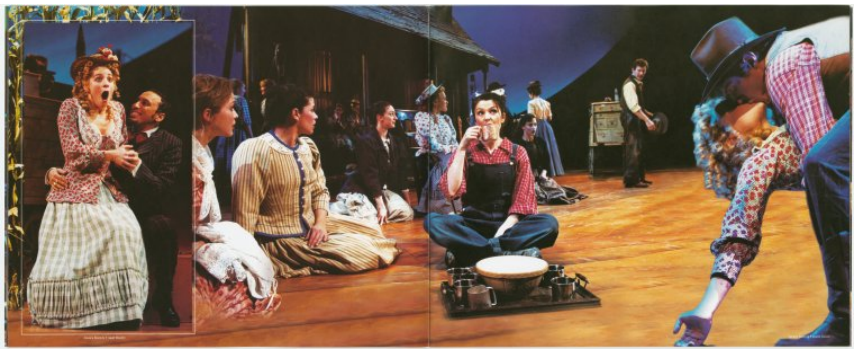

Figure 3. Laurie wears jeans that set her apart from the other female members of the community. Ado Annie is dressed to party, but in mismatched prints.

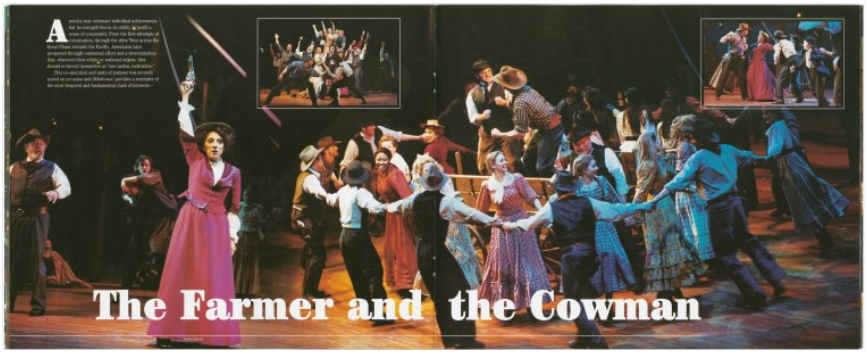

Figure 4. A clearly image of the schoolhouse was unfortunately not available, but its wooden beams can be seen behind Aunt Eller's raised gun.

Figure 5. The Weston house towers eerily over its residents, placed ominously before a surrealist black backdrop.

Figure 6. Jo Mielziner's famous skeletal Loman house in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

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