



Behind the Scenes with OSF's
Oklahoma!

Rodgers and Hammerstein's reflection on the American frontier, brimming with show-stopping songs and heartfelt storytelling, broke box-office records and changed the history of musical theatre when it premiered in 1943. Much of the dialogue in *Oklahoma!* was adapted from Lynn Riggs's seminal play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, written in 1931. A native to Oklahoma, Riggs' goal for *Lilacs*, in his words, was "to give voice and a dignified existence to people who found themselves without a voice." In this spirit, our 75th anniversary production honors the story in its original form while breaking new ground with same-sex lead couples and LGBTQ2+ casting of various roles that affirms the identity spectrum in a delightful, insightful celebration of love in its many forms.

In harmony with OSF's mission to reveal our collective humanity through illuminating interpretations of classics and new plays, our production strives to re-claim a space in America's history and popular stories for peoples that have undergone relentless historical erasure and silencing. In recent years, OSF has sought and found ways to adapt a number of classic musicals through the lens of inclusion, gaining the trust and respect of licensing organizations along the way. With that, our 2018 production of *Oklahoma!* is altogether an expression of our core values while paying reverence to Rodgers and Hammerstein's revolutionary musical and Lynn Riggs's desire to give marginalized people a "voice."

This handout provides insight into our research, creation, and development of *Oklahoma!* from the page to the stage. Thank you for reading, listening, and being part of our audience.

"This production serves above all to celebrate, in the words of another musical theatre titan, 'Love is love is love.'"

-Bill Rauch, director

Royer Bockus, Tatiana Wechsler.
Photo by Jenny Graham.

WORDS AND PHRASES TO KNOW

To best support a shared vocabulary about gender and identity in the *Oklahoma!* rehearsal room, we compiled information from LGBTQ2+ sources and found the following definitions especially helpful:

Biological Sex: a medical term used to refer to the chromosomal, hormonal and anatomical characteristics used to classify an individual as female, male or intersex. Often referred to as simply "sex," "physical sex," anatomical sex," or "sex assigned at birth."

Gender: a socially-constructed concept relating to characteristics, attitudes, roles and behaviors sometimes understood on a spectrum of masculinity and femininity.

Gender Identity: the internal perception of one's gender and how they label themselves. Common identity labels include man, woman, genderqueer, trans and more. Often confused with biological sex, or sex assigned at birth.

Gender Expression: the external display of one's gender, through a combination of dress, demeanor, social behavior, and other factors.

Sexual Orientation: the scientifically accurate term for an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of a same and/or differing sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual (straight) orientations. Avoid the offensive term "sexual preference," which is used to suggest that being gay, lesbian or bisexual is voluntary and therefore "curable." People need not have specific sexual experiences to know their own sexual orientation, in fact, they need not have had any sexual experience at all.

What's On the Page. In the process of developing and conceptualizing the world of the production, we adjusted the *Oklahoma!* book and lyrics to reflect the spectrum of identity presented onstage. This included changing pronouns and re-writing certain words and phrases. However, the majority of the script has been left untouched to honor Rodgers and Hammerstein's and Lynn Riggs's original words.

All of the changes included in our version of the script were made in the spirit of the original production of the musical. For example, instead of the original "Farmer and Cowboy," our cast sings "Farmer and Cowhand;" we feel this change is more inclusive of everyone on stage—not every rancher on stage is a cowboy. Similarly, by making the language neutral around the "little wonder"—the kaleidoscope that Will Parker brings back from Kansas City—we create a more inclusive world while maintaining the original gesture of the little wonder being a newfound item of curiosity and intrigue. In the same vein, much of the staging follows the stage directions as originally directed by Rouben Mamoulian in the original 1943 Broadway production.

Special thanks to Ted Chapin, Chief Creative Officer of the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, and numerous others at the Foundation for approving and supporting our production. We would also like to give special thanks to our lead show sponsors Don Kania and Renee DuBois for believing in this vision from its inception to its fruition.



Diversity of the Oklahoma Territory

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the population of the Oklahoma territory between 1906-1907 reflected a racial and ethnic diversity more closely aligned with the demographics of Oklahoma today than the cast of Rodgers and Hammerstein's original production. By 1907, approximately 52% of the Oklahoma population comprised of Black Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Middle Eastern immigrants/Arab Americans. Towns such as Taft, Oklahoma were formed exclusively for communities of color with people of color assuming high-ranking political leadership.

In addition, Oklahoma in the late 1800s and early 1900s was noted as an area with less rigid gender and sexual boundaries than a good majority of America at the time. Oklahoma City has been cited by leading LGBTQ2+ historians as having a prominent gay male and bisexual subculture, with historical records replete of queer social clubs, drag shows, and gay bars.

In 1906, Oklahoma emerged as a leader in progressive reformation with unions that fought for civil rights and liberties. The desire to equalize tax burdens and confront national issues and trends remained present in Oklahoma well into the ratification of statehood on November 16, 1907.

Resources.

Looking for some further reading? Here is a list of some resources:

- [Transgender History](#) (2017) Susan Stryker
- [Tips for Allies of Transgender People](#)
- [Queer: A Graphic History](#) (2016) Dr. Meg-John Barker, Julia Scheele
- [Progressive Oklahoma](#) (1980) Danney Goble
- [Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past](#) (2011) Peter Boag
- [GLAAD Media Reference Guide, 10th edition](#) (2016)
- [The Challenges that Remain for L.G.B.T. People After Marriage Ruling](#), NYT
- [Coming Out as a Supporter](#), HRC

You can find the pdf of this document on our website:

<http://osfashland.org/BehindTheScenesOklahoma>

