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Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma!**



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PMLA, Vol. 113, No. 1, Special Topic: Ethnicity. (Jan., 1998), pp. 77-89.

Stable URL:

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“We Know We Belong to the Land”: The Theatricality of Assimilation in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*

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JEWISH ASSIMILATION into mainstream American culture in the early part of the twentieth century was largely a theatrical venture. In Europe, Jews had been oppressed by racial definitions that labeled them darker than “white” members of society and hence less privileged.¹ In the United States, however, the presence of African Americans allowed Jews to launch an initiative to become white. Because Jews generally had few external markers, such as skin color, that immediately excluded them from racial privilege, they could often adopt the role of white American and pass as nonmarginal subjects. Playing this role involved all the theatrical devices an actor draws on to give a convincing performance: costume and makeup; studied language, accent, and gesture; and, of course, an appropriate stage name.

Depending on these theatrical strategies to gain power in a racialized and competitive early-twentieth-century America, Jews feared unmasking. No matter how well they performed, they worried they might be exposed as dark impostors by suspicious white Americans and forced into the dreaded category of the black oppressed. Therefore, in the 1930s and 1940s Jews intensified their efforts to secure solid footing among white Americans, refining and expanding their theatrical skills and becoming performers of American identity. For Jews, theater was both a metaphor for the presentation of self in everyday life and a cultural genre in which they participated in disproportionate numbers. Jewish writers, directors, and producers dramatically realized the act of assimilation on the stage and screen.² The Hollywood studio and the Broadway theater became sets on which Jews described their own vision of an idealized America and subtly wrote themselves into that scenario as accepted members of the white American community.

These idealized stage and screen communities often promoted an inclusive assimilatory ideology for “ethnic” immigrant characters. Unlike race, ethnicity was presented as a set of transient qualities that was nonthreatening because it could easily be performed away. As long as the characters could learn to speak, dress, and sing or dance in the American style, they were fully accepted into the stage or screen community. Ironically, to be labeled ethnic was an important step toward becoming a full-fledged member of the white community. Beneath different accents or clothing, according to many plays and films, lay essentially similar white people with common values and beliefs. The emphasis on ethnic inclusiveness did not preclude the perpetuation of racial stereotypes about blacks. Jews (and many other immigrant groups) found that a powerful strategy for becoming fully American was to adopt the prejudices of whites toward blacks. Racial imagery was often used as a deflecting tool, highlighting the ability of ethnic Americans to become white and distancing ethnic immigrant characters from the dangerous tar of the racial brush. Ethnicity thus became a protection from blackness.³

The American musical theater illustrates the theatrical strategies of Jewish assimilation. In its heyday, between the 1930s and the 1950s, the musical theater was dominated by Jewish writers and composers, such as Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, Jerome Kern, Lorenz Hart, and Leonard Bernstein (Cole Porter was the only notable exception).⁴ Through song, dance, and story, these Jewish artists popularized images of America and Americans during the most antisemitic⁵ period of the century. In these decades, the rise of the German American Bund (the American branch of the Nazi Party) and the expansion of the Ku Klux Klan in urban centers led to numerous violent antisemitic incidents.⁶ Increasing nativism resulted in the immigration quotas of the 1920s, which in the 1930s and 1940s severely limited the number of Jews who could be rescued from war-torn Europe, and isolationism delayed intervention in Nazi atrocities. After the war, McCarthyism focused virulently on Jewish artists, and even educated, wealthy Jews were still largely forbidden entrance to the elite

WASP establishment they admired, encountering restrictions and quotas in employment, housing, social clubs, and political organizations.

Shows such as *Of Thee I Sing* (Gershwins, 1931), *Oklahoma!* (Rodgers and Hammerstein, 1943), *On the Town* (Comden and Green, 1944), *My Fair Lady* (Lerner and Loewe, 1956), and *West Side Story* (Bernstein, 1957) became a fundamental part of American popular culture. Ironically, the Jewish writers and composers of these musicals helped define and popularize the mythic contours of American society but were excluded from its inner sanctum. They rarely alluded to their Jewishness in their plays or created overtly Jewish characters.⁷ While productions of the shows often included cues to Jewishness meant for New York Jewish audiences, this content was sufficiently submerged to avoid notice by others.

In this essay, I focus on arguably one of the most American (and least Jewish) of these musicals, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*, which initiated a new theatrical genre and redefined the myth of the American West. I begin by examining the innovations of the play and then show how the genre that developed from it was uniquely structured to promote assimilation while maintaining a racialist ideology. The type of theatrical community Rodgers and Hammerstein created in *Oklahoma!* and the ways in which they defined otherness offer a glimpse into the complex construction of American ethnic identity.

I

The opening of *Oklahoma!* in 1943 marked a transitional moment in the history of the American musical,⁸ a genre evolving from the vaudeville-derived revue of the 1920s and 1930s, exemplified by the Ziegfeld Follies, into more plot-driven musical dramas. The early musicals were nonlinear spectacles featuring virtuoso performances by singers, dancers, and comedians, who performed in elaborate costumes and settings. The shows typically opened with a bevy of dancing girls, and the first act closed with a number designed to bring the audience back for the second. If a story existed, it generally served only as filler connecting the musical numbers. Character was largely determined by the type of musical

number being performed: a love song usually called for an ingenue, a torch song for a vamp, a comic sketch for an ethnic type, and a large chorus number for a star.

As the century progressed, Broadway musicals were influenced by the increasingly dominant realist drama of playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Clifford Odets, and Lillian Hellman, which tended to foreground realistic stories about a character's psychological development. Music-hall vaudeville merged with realist drama to create the musical play, characterized by the unprecedented integration of story and numbers.⁹ Rodgers and Hammerstein inaugurated this new form with the opening of *Oklahoma!*¹⁰ Responsible for other classics of the American stage, such as *The King and I*, *South Pacific*, *Carousel*, and *The Sound of Music*, Rodgers and Hammerstein are often credited with "irreversibly changing the face of American musical comedy" (Nolan i). Yet while *Oklahoma!* and other Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals are innovative, they retain a residual reliance on the theatrical elements of earlier musicals—a sharp distinction between dialogue and numbers and a self-consciousness about their theatricality. Numbers are still associated with particular types of characters and still serve more to showcase virtuosity than to reveal complex psychological information. Although the story struggles to subsume the musical numbers, the shows always end with rousing finales that celebrate community and assert the priority of the theatrical event. Audiences exit elated by the tunes rather than by a profound connection with a character's psyche.¹¹

Recognition of *Oklahoma!*'s two representational modes—the more realistic development of character through dialogue and plot and the celebratory energy of the musical numbers—offers insight into the way in which the play's subject, America, is constructed through a deceptively simple story of frontier romance and of Oklahoma's maturation from territory to state. One of the complex functions the juxtaposition of psychological realism and theatricality serves is to reveal the American tension between individual desire and communal cohesion. The story presents a set of characters with individual problems that demand resolution. On the surface, the story seems to be about the importance of choice and freedom in romantic love. The dialogue

centers on questions such as, What does Laurey want? How can Curly get his girl? Will Ali free himself from Annie? Will Jud have his revenge? But the driving energy of the musical numbers contradicts the overt message of the plot—instead of privileging individual choices and dilemmas, this energy celebrates a utopian melding of differences into a unified loving American community. Access to this community is determined not by character but by function: anyone willing and able to perform the songs and dances can join.¹²

A utopian energy infuses the cowboy Will's first song in the play, which describes how "ev'rythin's up to date in Kansas City" (15). He draws those around him into the song and dance, teaching his chorus-community how to adapt to the modern world. First he instructs the matriarchal Aunt Eller in the two-step while the cowboys look on, initially skeptical.¹³ As Will's performance escalates into an impressive tap number, the cowboys slowly learn a few steps and join in the dance. When the number finishes, the full chorus of cowboys are tap-dancing together, the rhythmic sounds of their steps ringing out a happy, unified acceptance of modernity.

Most of the musical sequences in the show involve a similar communal vision. Only three songs are solos, and two of them—"Oh, What a Beautiful Morning" and "I Cain't Say No"—include an on-stage audience. In the famous opening number the hero, Curly, sings a paean to the land, to youth, and to the limitless opportunity of the frontier, as Aunt Eller and the heroine, Laurey, watch:

Oh, what a beautiful mornin',
Oh, what a beautiful day.
I got a beautiful feelin'
Ev'rythin's goin' my way! (8)

The song's initially individualistic message is redefined when the number is reprised twice by a large portion of the ensemble in unison. In the first act, when wagons stop at Laurey's farm on the way to a "box social," a chorus of happy young couples sings the refrain and waltzes to its sweeping melody. And in the triumphant finale, as the happily married Curly and Laurey rush off to their honeymoon, the entire ensemble reprises the song "lustily," "gaily," and "loudly," according to the stage directions (84),



The farmer and the cowman unite in song and dance in Old Man Skidmore's barn, in the 1943 production of *Oklahoma!* Detail of a photograph by Vandamm Studio. Museum of the City of New York; gift of the Burns Mantle Estate; 48.210.1836.

so that the individualism of the line "Ev'rythin's goin' my way" becomes a communal celebration of "our way."

The flirtatious Ado Annie expresses individual desire in the solo "I Cain't Say No," but her bubbly rebelliousness in the first act is tempered and directed into more acceptable (and marriageable) channels in the second. She agrees to marry Will, settle down, and give him "all 'er nuthin'" (66–67). Even Curly and Laurey's love song, "People Will Say We're in Love," a moment that seems the ultimate expression of personal desire, emphasizes how their love will appear to those around them:

Don't throw bouquets at me—
 Don't please my folks too much—
 Don't laugh at my jokes too much—
 People will say we're in love! (37)

Communal cohesiveness is equated in the play with maturity. *Oklahoma* cannot become a state and join the Union until the members of the community have learned to get along. In "The Farmer and the Cowman," some members of the company at first side with the cowboys' interests and others with the farmers'. A fight ensues until Aunt Eller, the matriarchal disciplinarian, halts it with a gunshot. The chorus meekly returns to the refrain:

Oh, the farmer and the cowman should be friends.
 One man likes to push a plow,
 The other likes to chase a cow,
 But that's no reason why they cain't be friends!

As the group looks ahead to the future in the next verse, the merchant (the most likely representation of the Jew in the American Midwest) is subtly slipped in next to the farmer and the cowman—an integral part of this emerging utopian community:

And when this territory is a state,
 And jines the union jist like all the others,
 The farmer and the cowman and the merchant
 Must all behave theirsels and act like brothers.

Finally, Aunt Eller voices the liberal sentiments that will allow for all sorts to be assimilated into the community. The assimilation will occur through dance, romance, and intermarriage, she explains. The chorus cheers the notion and reprises Aunt Eller's verse:

I don't say I'm no better than anybody else,
 But I'll be damned if I ain't jist as good!
 Territory folks should stick together,
 Territory folks should all be pals.
 Cowboys, dance with the farmers' daughters!
 Farmers, dance with the ranchers' gals!

At the end of the number, the stage directions call for a “gay, unrestrained dance” (54). Once the parameters of the community have been established, the members can celebrate their individual freedom within those bounds.

In Rodgers and Hammerstein’s worldview, becoming a member of the union is a process of subordinating individual needs to communal interest. Cowboys must settle down and become farmers; the frontier must be tamed into a useful agricultural resource; young people must marry and bring up new Americans. As Curly says once Laurey agrees to marry him:

Oh, I got to learn to be a farmer, I see that! Quit a-thinkin’ about th’owin’ the rope, and start in to git my hands blistered a new way! Oh, things is changin’ right and left! Buy up mowin’ machines, cut down the prairies! Shoe yer horses, drag them plows under the sod! They gonna make a state outa this, they gonna put it in the Union! Country a-changin’, got to change with it! Bring up a pair of boys, new stock, to keep up ‘th the way things is goin’ in this here crazy country! (71)

Marriage becomes the metaphor not only for the maturation of the play’s characters but also for the relation between a state and the Union. The political maturation outlined in “The Farmer and the Cowman” is realized toward the end of the second act in the title song, “Oklahoma.” The song begins when Curly and Laurey emerge from a farmhouse as husband and wife:

AUNT ELLER. They couldn’t pick a better time to start in life!
 IKE. It ain’t too early and it ain’t too late.
 CURLY. Startin’ as a farmer with a brand-new wife—
 LAUREY. Soon be livin’ in a brand-new state!
 ALL. Brand-new state! (75)

The song and the dance that follow convey infectious feelings of exaltation and possibility. In 1943 this celebration of American statehood and democratic values tapped into wartime nationalism.¹⁴ Yet audiences have continued to adore this moment in the play, for the number also celebrates the communion of the audience with the players. The joyous applause that inevitably follows the number

joins audience members and performers in the communal utopian vision of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s America.¹⁵

In this vision of social unity, everyone shares the same homeland: immigrant (Ali) and native (Curly and Laurey) alike sing, “We know we belong to the land” (76). This insistence that the merchant belongs to the land as much as the farmer and the cowman was particularly important for Jewish Americans, since centuries of persecution had been based on Jewish homelessness. Rodgers and Hammerstein also seem to have been influenced by the Zionism of the 1940s, which promoted a utopian socialist vision of a homeland where Jews could return to the soil, become farmers, and claim the land as their own.¹⁶ The show’s poignant and nostalgic rendering of the Oklahoma land mirrored a long-sustained Jewish dream of homecoming. The story represented not just a sentimental rewriting of a time in American history when everyone behaved “like brothers” but also a plea for greater inclusiveness in the present. By creating a mythic time when nobody was “better than anybody else,” when the health of the nation depended on the people’s acceptance of one another, Rodgers and Hammerstein constructed a new idea of what America should be, an idea that entailed openness to ethnic outsiders.¹⁷

II

Like America, “otherness” in *Oklahoma!* is defined by the juxtaposition of realistic exposition and theatrical numbers. There are two opposing representations of the other in the play: Ali Hakim is a theatrical, assimilable ethnic (“white”) immigrant, and Jud is a realistic, unassimilable, and racially defined “dark” man. The tension between the two is exposed in a set of parallel love triangles. In the central love story, Laurey, an innocent farm girl, and Curly, a cowhand, are clearly meant to be together, but they tease each other throughout the first act, and Laurey finally agrees to attend a box social with her farmhand Jud rather than with Curly. Jud ends up threatening both Laurey’s sexual innocence and Curly’s safety. After disrupting Curly and Laurey’s wedding, Jud dies in a fight with Curly. The secondary love story is a comic one concerning Ado Annie; Will Parker, her faithful but slightly

daft cowboy admirer; and Ali Hakim, a happily single Persian peddler. Annie flirts with Ali, who gladly returns her attentions until her father insists on a wedding. Ali cleverly extracts himself from the union, but in the second act Ali's flirtation with another farmer's daughter lands him in marriage after all. As the story ends, he is preparing, rather unwillingly, to settle down in town and run a store.

Jud and Ali play parallel roles in the love stories, but their otherness is radically different. Ali, a comic figure who sings, dances, and performs bits, is a product of the theatrical side of *Oklahoma!* Jud is portrayed realistically and psychologically, and he does not cross over into the communal realm of the musical numbers. The play is loaded with cues that connect Ali's and Jud's otherness to submerged ethnic and racial motifs rooted in American cultural mythology. Ali serves as a thinly veiled representa-

tive of the Jewish immigrant. Jews, particularly Jews of German descent, were the majority of the peddlers on the American frontier; the number of Persian peddlers was negligible, to say the least.¹⁸ Groucho Marx was the first actor considered for the role on Broadway, but Joseph Buloff, a veteran of the Yiddish theater, ultimately took the part and played it with such a pronounced "Jewish inflection" that the character was generally assumed to be Jewish despite his Persian alibi (Mordden 39).¹⁹

Jud, in contrast, is dark and evil. Described in the stage directions as a "burly, scowling man," "bullet-colored" and "growly" (17), he lives in a smokehouse with rats. His sexuality, like that of the stereotypical black man, is threatening. He keeps postcards of naked women on the walls of his room, which make Laurey suspicious:

LAUREY. He makes me shivver ever' time he gits clost to me. . . . Ever go down to that ole smokehouse where he's at?

AUNT ELLER. Plen'y times. Why?

LAUREY. Did you see them pitchers he's got tacked onto the walls?

Laurey toys with Jud, but she fears the barely restrained sexuality that she senses in him:

LAUREY. Sumpin wrong inside him, Aunt Eller. I hook my door at night and fasten my winders agin' it. Agin' *it*—and the sound of feet a-walkin' up and down out there under that tree outside my room. . . . Mornin's he comes to his breakfast and looks at me out from under his eyebrows like sumpin back in the bresh som'eres. I know what I'm talkin' about. (19)

Laurey fears the racial other—Jud is something outside, barely human (she fastens her door and windows against *it*, not him)—that threatens to invade the white woman's private space and steal her virginity. Laurey uses racist imagery in comparing Jud to an animal, "sumpin back in the bresh som'eres."

In the "Dream Ballet" sequence, Laurey's fears of Jud's sexuality become more explicit. Wondering which man should take her to the dance, Laurey falls asleep and dreams an answer in ballet form. A joyous dance between Laurey and Curly in the dream is about to culminate in a wedding when



The Yiddish actor Joseph Buloff as Ali Hakim and Celeste Holm as Ado Annie in the 1943 production of *Oklahoma!* Museum of the City of New York; gift of the Burns Mantle Estate; 48.210.1842.

“the ballet counterpart of Jud walks slowly forward and takes off ‘Laurey’s’ veil. Expecting to see her lover, Curly, she looks up to find ‘Jud.’ Horrified, she backs away. . . . She is alone with ‘Jud’” (50). He drags her into a seamy world of cancan girls and bawdy dance halls and leaves her to watch the women perform a sexual and satiric dance. Curly arrives to save Laurey, and Jud kills him. As Jud carries her off triumphantly, the real Laurey awakens and decides to ride with Jud to avoid risking Curly’s life. On the way to the dance, Jud makes his move, an encounter only hinted at in the script, as Laurey races onstage, frightened and closely pursued by Jud. In the movie version, which in other respects follows the play closely, the scene has heightened sexual intensity and racial undertones. The film Laurey is played by Shirley Jones, an actress with golden hair, lily-white skin, and an attractive naïveté. Jud, played by Rod Steiger, is perpetually unshaven and smeared with dirt. As the wagons head to the Skidmore farm for the dance, Jud holds his cart back to be alone with Laurey and then grabs her roughly and tries to kiss her. Laurey snatches the reins from his hands and sends the horses off in a frenzy, losing control of the wagon as it rushes headlong toward an oncoming train. The horses halt just before colliding with the train, and Laurey jumps out of the wagon and runs away.

Curly’s interactions with Jud also evoke images of racial strife. Angered by Jud’s seeming sexual power over Laurey, Curly tells her he is going to “see whut’s so elegant about him, makes girls wanta go to parties ’th him” (38). Curly discovers that Jud lives in a dirty little smokehouse, “where the meat was once kept” (39). Jud’s surroundings recall late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century derisive references to African Americans as *smokies*—*smoked Irishmen* in the North and *smoked Yankees* in the South—terms derived from the darkened color of smoked meat (Allen 19). In a tense confrontation, Curly suggests that Jud might hang himself from a “good strong hook” in the rafter (40), a notion that evokes images of black men lynched for supposedly assaulting white women. This scene spins into a song, “Pore Jud Is Daid,” in which Curly imagines his rival’s funeral, where the townspeople will show Jud respect they never expressed while he was alive. Jud, a lonely and miserable man, is

drawn into this utopian vision of a world that lovingly accepts him, and he begins to respond to some of Curly’s lyrics:

CURLY. Nen [the preacher] he’d say, “Jud was the most misunderstood man in the territory. People useter think he was a mean, ugly feller. (*Jud looks up*) . . . But—the folks ’at really knowed him, knowed ’at beneath them two dirty shirts he alw’ys wore, there beat a heart as big as all outdoors.

JUD. As big as all outdoors.

CURLY. Jud Fry loved his fellow man.

JUD. He loved his fellow man. (41)

Jud attempts to sing along with Curly reverently, according to the stage directions, “like a Negro at a revivalist meeting” (42).

As the confrontation between the two men intensifies, Curly invokes the image of America as a new Eden and accuses Jud of being the hidden snake that threatens to spoil paradise for those who enjoy the natural landscape:

CURLY. In this country, they’s two things you c’n do if you’re a man. Live out of doors is one. Live in a hole is the other. I’ve set by my horse in the bresh some’eres and heared a rattlesnake many a time. Rattle, rattle, rattle!—he’d go, skeered to death. Somebody comin’ close to his hole! Somebody gonna step on him! Git his old fangs ready, full of pizen! Curl up and wait!

Jud’s poverty, meanness, and loneliness are his own fault, in Curly’s view:

CURLY. How’d you git to be the way you air, anyway—settin’ here in this filthy hole—and thinkin’ the way you’re thinkin’? Why don’t you do sumpin healthy onct in a while, ’stid of stayin’ shet up here—a-crawlin’ and festerin’! (44)

Jud’s surroundings reflect the deep darkness within him. This fiercely individualistic, primitively sexual, and lawless presence is an obstacle to the white utopian vision of love, marriage, and statehood that *Oklahoma!* promotes. Jud will never be able to assimilate into the community, and he must die to allow the musical to reach its celebratory conclusion.

At Curly and Laurey's wedding party, Jud grabs the bride roughly, the groom rushes to her rescue, and Jud pulls a knife. In the ensuing scuffle, Curly throws Jud onto the knife, killing him as the crowd of wedding guests looks on. Curly's role in the death is accepted by his community—he acted to defend his wife against a dangerous outsider. The trial is peremptory and its outcome predetermined. Curly is tried by a court of insiders, in the living room of his wife's home. The judge is a member of the wedding party. Although some in the community suspect that the proceeding is not fair, Aunt Eller's comic pragmatism convinces them they need not worry about legal formalities:

CORD ELAM. Best thing is fer Curly to go of his own accord and tell the Judge.

AUNT ELLER. Why, you're the Judge, ain't you Andrew?

CARNES. Yes, but—

LAUREY. Well, tell him now and git it over with.

CORD ELAM. 'T wouldn't be proper. You have to do it in court.

AUNT ELLER. Oh, fiddlesticks. Le's do it here and say we did it in court.

CORD ELAM. We can't do that. That's breaking the law.

AUNT ELLER. Well, le's not break the law. Le's just bend it a little. (82)

Although lighthearted, this banter is a reminder of the times in American history when a white man (or mob) could kill a black man with impunity. No one speaks for Jud at the trial, and he is forgotten moments after the not-guilty verdict is proclaimed. The chorus bursts into a rousing "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" as the play draws to its celebratory close.²⁰

Unlike Jud, Ali Hakim retains the sympathy of the audience throughout the play. Whereas Jud desperately wants Laurey, Ali is playful with women. He flirts harmlessly with Annie, ultimately ensuring that Will wins her hand. One of the most clever characters in the play, Ali makes money off the gullible and adroitly evades marriage to Annie. In fact, his name is probably derived from the Yiddish and Hebrew word *hacham*, a popular term that Rodgers and Hammerstein would have known means "clever man." Ali is assimilable because he can draw a

chorus to perform with him and can create theater for those around him. His sexuality, unlike Jud's, is largely performance, on the surface and nonthreatening. His famous "Persian goodbyes," which leave Annie gasping for breath, seem as much for the audience's benefit as for hers. In contrast, Jud broods on his pornographic pictures in his lonely room. His sexuality smolders in privacy.

"Hoodblinked" into marrying Annie, Ali fumes about his situation in his comic number, "It's a Scandal! It's a Outrage!," a tirade against the "marriage trap." A group of men gather around him and burst into song, addressing him as "friend" and asking, "What's on your mind?" (33). Ali explains in song the scandal of shotgun marriages, and the men commiserate:

It's a scandal! it's a outrage!

When her fambly surround you and say:

"You gotta take an make a honest womern outa Nell!"

(34)

As Ali and the cowboys join together to plan a "revolution," the girls undercut their efforts, singing, "All right, boys! Revolve!" (35). The number ends with an upbeat dance in which the boys are each caught by a different girl. Ali has gained power and sympathy by theatrically establishing his distance from Jud and by aligning himself with the musical community—the chorus.

Ali's Jewish identity is most clearly established by the authorial role he plays throughout the show. A seller of stories, fantasies, and myths, Ali seems the most logical representation of his real-life creators. (On the invitation to a first-anniversary party for the show, Hammerstein billed himself "Mister Ali Hakimstein" [Wilk 256].) When Ali first enters, he is selling not only ribbons, notions, and eggbeaters but also dreams and magic: "Don't anybody want to buy something? How about you, Miss Laurey? Must be wanting something—a pretty young girl like you." As Laurey engages in a reverie of consumption, her desires become more fanciful, shifting from objects to the experiences that advertisements promise:

LAUREY. Course I want sumpin. (*Working up to a kind of abstracted ecstasy*) Want a buckle made outa

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shiny silver to fasten onto my shoes! Want a dress with lace. Want perfume, wanta be purty, wanta smell like a honeysuckle vine! . . . Want things I've heard of and never had before—a rubber-t'ard buggy, a cut-glass sugar bowl. Want things I cain't tell you about—not only things to look at and hold in yer hands. Things to happen to you. Things so nice, if they ever did happen to you, yer heart ud quit beatin'. You'd fall down dead! (24)

Ali sells her a bottle of "The Elixir of Egypt," saying that the potion will help her to "see everything clear" (25). Laurey takes a sniff of the elixir, which puts her to sleep and induces the "Dream Ballet." Ali's magic tonic generates this dance sequence and hence the plot twist that drives the entire second act.

Ali is similarly the author of Jud's fantasies:

PEDDLER. What I'd like to show you is my new stock of postcards.

JUD. Don't want none. Sick of them things. I'm going to get me a real womern. . . . I'm t'ard of all these pitchers of women!

PEDDLER. All right. You're tired of them. So throw 'em away and buy some new ones. (47)

Instead of more pictures of women, Jud wants a "little wonder," a kaleidoscope of pornographic pictures that hides a blade: "It's a thing you hold up to your eyes to see pitchers, only that ain't all they is to it . . . not quite. Y'see it's got a little jigger onto it, and you tetch it and out springs a sharp blade." Ali is taken aback at Jud's request: "I—er—don't handle things like that. Too dangerous" (46; ellipsis in orig.). The device represents Jud's anger, which seeks to explode the bounds of the musical-theater utopia that Ali props up. The "little wonder" also offers a metaphor for the relation between Ali and Jud. By embedding Jud's weapon within Ali's world of pictures, the play reveals anxiety about the reliability of theatricality and visual evidence. Jud's dark presence and anger expose the welcoming

On the invitation to the first-anniversary party for *Oklahoma!*, Oscar Hammerstein, as part of "the territory's peerless singing and dancing team," becomes "Ali Hakimstein." The joke both Judaizes Ali Hakim's name and conflates the character with the writer of the play. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

openness of the white world as a deception. Jud is the knife within the picture, endangering the illusion. Although Jud and the darkness he represents seem to be successfully eradicated in the triumphant ending, his barely acknowledged death raises questions about the suppression on which the theatrical illusion of *Oklahoma!* is built.

Jud's one solo, "Lonely Room," provides clues about the suppression that his death represents and complicates his function within the play. A short, tragic operatic soliloquy, in an otherwise celebratory, upbeat score, "Lonely Room" reinforces Jud's marginality:

The floor creaks
The door squeaks,
There's a fieldmouse a-nibblin' on a broom.
And I set by myself
Like a cobweb on a shelf,
By myself in a lonely room. (47)

As Jud begins to dream in the song about "all the things [he] wish[es] fer," he momentarily enters the theatrical world of romance and community. But he quickly returns to his initial solitude, rejecting theatricality as a cruel illusion:

And the sun flicks my eyes—
It was all a pack of lies!
I'm awake in a lonely room. . . .
(48; ellipsis in orig.)

While he embodies many of the characteristics and functions of the black man in racist thinking, Jud's inability to survive in the theatrical world makes it difficult to read him as a stereotype. He is associated not with "black" entertainment forms in the play but with elite European performance genres. Jud appears in the ballet but not in the tap-dance number ("Kansas City"), which is based on a form identified with black minstrels. Likewise "Lonely Room" is an operatic aria and not, for example, a blues song. Jud is both uncivilized and too civilized. These contradictory negative characteristics are similar to those ascribed by antisemites to Jews, who were perceived as both poverty-stricken ghetto dwellers and powerful bankers threatening to control the world. Jud thus is not specifically a black in a white

body but an uncomfortable projection onto a "black" character of the nonwhite and un-American traits that Jews feared being persecuted for.

Like the knife and the pictures in the "little wonder," Jud and Ali are inextricably linked. No matter how convincingly Ali looks, plays, and even writes his part as an assimilable white ethnic, his success in this role depends on distancing himself from Jud, the embodiment of the dark qualities Ali fears others will find in him. Jud reminds him of the possibility of exposure and exclusion that always lies beneath the performance. While Ali represents Jews' hopes of moving into white America, Jud personifies the qualities that Jews feared would make them black.²¹ If Jud absorbs the negativity of being black, Ali can move into a more powerful position as part of the white community, despite his immigrant background.²² Jud's threatening otherness throws the harmlessness of Ali's ethnicity into relief and deflects the xenophobic energy of the community away from Ali. Jewish desire to assimilate and escape discrimination is thus expressed in this musical at the expense of blacks.²³

This strategy of deflection and theatrical assimilation appears in other Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals produced during the 1940s and 1950s. In the parallel love stories of *South Pacific* (1949), for example, a French man (de Becque) loves an American woman (Nellie), and a Polynesian woman (Liat) loves an American soldier (Joe). Though the play includes a heartfelt song about prejudice ("You've Got to Be Carefully Taught") and Nellie marries the ethnically different de Becque, Joe's death neatly eliminates the possibility of his marrying the unassimilable, racially different Polynesian. Similarly, in *The King and I* (1951), the Siamese King makes valiant efforts to learn from Anna how to be European (which is suspiciously like American), but his racial otherness prevents him from convincingly adopting his new role. When he threatens to whip a young girl toward the end of the play, his essential nature is revealed as Anna cries, "You *are* a barbarian!" (439). Glimmers of romantic interest between them are dangerous and can never be fulfilled. Ultimately, the king dies from a broken heart, his efforts to assimilate and to win the white woman's love crushed by the barriers of his race.

Oklahoma! was instantly accepted as true Americana at a time when Jews in America felt increasingly marginalized. The musical does not reject the racist language that labeled the privileged members of American society white. Rather, to depict a less exclusive society, *Oklahoma!* makes a sacrificial scapegoat of a racialized other, who refuses to perform in socially acceptable genres and whose death cleanses the community of dark-

ness. However, this procedure reproduces the racial essentialism responsible for Jewish anxiety during the violently antisemitic 1940s. Thus, by creating Ali and Jud as “white” and “black” opposites, Rodgers and Hammerstein created their own “little wonder.” And within their joyous vision of American community they hid the knife—racial ideology—that they feared could destroy them.



Al Hirschfeld's rendering of the 1943 production of *Oklahoma!* emphasizes the “racial” facial features of the actors chosen to play Jud Fry (bottom) and Ali Hakim (right). © Al Hirschfeld. Drawing reproduced by special arrangement with Hirschfeld's exclusive representative, The Margo Feiden Galleries, Ltd., New York.

Notes

I would like to acknowledge those who contributed to the evolution of this essay: my professors Michael T. Gilmore, Eugene Goodheart, Paul Morrison, and Jonathan D. Sarna and my colleagues Rona Sheramy and Felicia Herman. I particularly wish to thank Alan Ackerman, whose rigorous scholarship on the American theater provides me with important inspiration and whose careful reading, incisive feedback, and steady support sustain me in my work.

¹For an analysis of the racialized perception of the Jew, see Gilman, *Jew's Body*.

²Jews participated actively in the American theater from the late eighteenth century on, and eastern European immigrants brought to the United States a vibrant Yiddish dramatic tradition that thrived for decades in immigrant neighborhoods. With the simultaneous explosion of the mass media and of Jewish immigration in the early twentieth century, however, the Jewish presence in American theater became more pronounced and distinctive.

³Frankenberg, in her study of white women's attitudes toward race, notes this fluid quality of whiteness: "Jewish Americans, Italian Americans, and Latinos have, at different times and from varying political standpoints, been viewed as both 'white' and 'nonwhite.' And as the history of 'inter-racial' marriage and sexual relationships also demonstrates, 'white' is as much as anything else an economic and political category maintained over time by a changing set of exclusionary practices, both legislative and customary" (11). Ignatiev analyzes the use of racial prejudice for assimilationary purposes among Irish immigrants.

⁴See Sachar 366–73, 764–65, for the Jewish backgrounds of these artists. Irving Berlin, for example, emigrated from Russia in 1893 as Israel Baline. Jerome Kern and Lorenz Hart came from New York German Jewish backgrounds. Richard Rodgers's mother was German Jewish and his father Russian Jewish. The Gershwins were children of Russian Jewish immigrants (originally named Gershovitz). Oscar Hammerstein II was the grandson of the German Jewish immigrant impresario and theater owner Oscar Hammerstein.

⁵The spelling of this word has shifted over the past few years. I have chosen to adopt the newer spelling, without a capital S. Lowercasing *Semitic* is an effort to deemphasize a concept that has commonly been used to support antisemitism.

⁶On the rising tide of antisemitism during the Depression and the war years, see Dinnerstein, particularly chs. 6 and 7.

⁷*Fiddler on the Roof*, produced in 1964, was one of the first Broadway musicals to present characters who were openly and proudly Jewish. (I thank Seth Wolitz for this observation.)

⁸Throughout this essay, the term *musical* generally refers to the genre of the musical play, in which musical numbers are placed within a cohesive narrative to further or deepen plot and character development.

⁹This merging was literal: *Oklahoma!* was based on a dramatic play, *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931), which attempted to portray the lives of settlers in the Oklahoma territory realisti-

cally. Rodgers and Hammerstein added songs and reworked characters for the musical version.

¹⁰Hammerstein acknowledged that *Oklahoma!* deviated from the established norm: "[T]he first act would be half over before a female chorus would make its entrance. We realized that such a course was experimental, amounting almost to the breach of implied contract with a musical comedy audience" (Wilk 76). Bordman argues that the claim of originality for *Oklahoma!* is exaggerated—a number of writers had been moving toward this sort of integration in the preceding decade (159). More important to me, however, is the *perception* that *Oklahoma!* was the first musical play.

¹¹This triumph of musical theatricality is not surprising, for Rodgers and Hammerstein were deeply influenced by and involved in the vaudeville and music-hall traditions of early-twentieth-century New York. Rodgers notes in his autobiography that his first encounters with the theater were through the sheet music from current musical shows that his father brought home to play on the piano and through early visits to Victor Herbert musicals. But Rodgers's most important childhood theatrical influences were the songs of Jerome Kern: "The sound of a Jerome Kern tune was not ragtime; nor did it have any of the Middle European inflections of Victor Herbert. It was all his own—the first truly American theatre music—and it pointed the way I wanted to be led" (20). In distancing himself from middle European influences, Rodgers seems to reject the Yiddish theater, which was thriving during his childhood. As the son of a wealthy American-born physician, he likely did not spend much time in the Second Avenue Yiddish theaters.

¹²While the American film and stage musical have many differences, they share this emphasis on communal acceptance. As Braudy notes, the musical, in its valorization of community, is opposed to the western, the other mythical American entertainment form: "In a musical there is no need for Shane to wander off, left out of the world he has united by his actions; instead the energy of the central character or couple can potentially bring the community together in an array around them" (140). As a musical about the West, *Oklahoma!* seems to foreground the tension between the "farmer" and the "cowman," but the play reveals its musical affiliation in its belief that they "should be friends."

¹³In 1943 Franklin Roosevelt's administration was promoting the idea that even the elderly could learn the "new steps" that Roosevelt was teaching the nation. (I am grateful to Jonathan D. Sarna for this observation.) The song's celebration of progress and material prosperity also evokes the optimism associated with the success of the New Deal and with the vigor of the wartime economy.

¹⁴Rodgers articulated this patriotic climate in his memoir: "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).

¹⁵The conductor for the original Broadway production, Jay Blackton (born Jacob Schwartzdorf), reminisced about the first time the song “Oklahoma” was included in the play: “The first night we did it I was conducting, and so I couldn’t see the audience behind me . . . but I certainly could *hear* them. They went wild! The number stopped the show, dead. The applause was so great that first time we did it that right after the performance Dick came to me and we decided to establish an encore chorus of the song. . . .” (Wilk 203).

¹⁶Zionist ideas were familiar in American Jewish culture by 1943, even among the most assimilated Jews. See Sachar, ch. 16, “The Zionization of American Jewry,” for a detailed account of the movement in America.

¹⁷In a discussion of what makes a musical work, Rodgers shows how the form of *Oklahoma!* promoted an egalitarian, assimilationist vision of America: “When a show works perfectly, it’s because all the individual parts complement each other and fit together. No single element overshadows any other. . . . That’s what made *Oklahoma!* work. . . . There was nothing extraneous or foreign, nothing that pushed itself into the spotlight yelling ‘Look at me!’ It was a work created by many that gave the impression of having been created by one” (227).

¹⁸Supple points out that by 1860 most peddlers in the United States were Jews (74).

¹⁹Even in *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the play on which *Oklahoma!* was based, the part of Ali Hakim was played by a notable Jewish actor—the young Lee Strasberg (Wilk 31).

²⁰The trial ends differently in *Green Grow the Lilacs*. In *Oklahoma!*, Rodgers writes, “we tied the strands together a bit more neatly than in the play by having Curly being found innocent of murdering Jud Fry, rather than being given his freedom for one night to spend with his bride” (218).

²¹The label of blackness was as much a class distinction as a racial one, and the fear of it offers a way of understanding the relation in the early part of the century between American Jews of German descent and eastern European Jewish immigrants. Middle- and upper-class German Jewish Americans like Rodgers and Hammerstein worried about becoming targets of the racial prejudice evoked among their non-Jewish neighbors by hordes of “dark foreigners.” These German Jewish Americans sought to preserve their hard-won white status by “civilizing” their working-class eastern European brethren into whiteness. For a good introduction to this subject, see Hertzberg, ch. 11.

²²In *Freud, Race, and Gender*, Gilman shows that Freud used a similar strategy to combat antisemitism in fin de siècle Vienna. By projecting onto women the qualities antisemites associated with the Jewish man, Freud deflected attention from the Jew-Aryan dichotomy and toward the male-female dichotomy, situating himself within the more powerful group.

²³This uneasy relation between American Jews and blacks is conditioned by the racist contours of American culture and has been the norm since the early nineteenth century, despite the alignment of blacks and Jews in the 1960s civil rights movement. Rarely have members of minority groups been able to work together to win tolerance from the majority culture. Racial

and ethnic divisions in American culture have made it more expedient for minorities to take on the prejudices of the majority than to ally themselves with other minorities. Frankenberg’s findings suggest that one experience of marginality (e.g., being lesbian or Jewish) does not necessarily lead white women to empathize with oppressed communities they are not part of and that participation in a nonracial liberatory movement is not a certain sign of antiracist convictions (20). For an exploration of black-Jewish relations in Hollywood film, see Rogin.

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