

1940s: Oklahoma

The Facts...

- Produced by the Theatre Guild
- Directed by Rouben Mamoulian
- Music by Richard Rogers
- Lyrics and Book by Oscar Hammerstein II
- Based on the play *Green Grow the Lilacs* by Lynn Riggs
- Choreography by Agnes De Mille
- Opened March 31, 1943 at the St James Theatre
- 2,212 performances, which stood as the record for the longest run on Broadway until the mid-1950s.

The Composer...

The contributions made by Richard Rodgers (1902–1979) to the Broadway musical are almost immeasurable. He composed music for stage and screen for more than sixty years and won countless awards. His first writing partner was Lorenz Hart (1895–1943). In the first ten years of their work together they created two new shows every season, beginning with *Poor Little Ritz Girl* in 1920. Rodgers and Hart moved to Hollywood in 1931 and wrote the music and lyrics for several feature films. They returned to New York in 1935 and continued creating hit Broadway musicals. Some of the highlights from this period include *On Your Toes*, *Babes in Arms*, and *Pal Joey*.

In the early 1940s and by mutual agreement, Rodgers and Hart ended their writing partnership. In 1943 Rodgers teamed up with Oscar Hammerstein II. *Oklahoma* was the first show they wrote together and it marked the beginning of the most successful composer/lyricist partnership Broadway has ever seen. In the years that followed, they created *Carousel*, *State Fair*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and *The Sound of Music*. Together, they also wrote the score for the movie *State Fair* and created the music for the classic television special *Cinderella*.

Together with lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, Richard Rodgers was awarded 34 Tonys, 15 Academy Awards, two Pulitzer Prizes, two Grammys, and two Emmys. Rodgers died in 1979 at the age of 77. In 1990, Broadway recognized his enormous contributions by renaming the 46th Street Theatre the Richard Rodgers Theatre.

The Story...

Oklahoma is recognized as a landmark in the evolution of the Broadway musical for a number of reasons:

- Rodgers and Hammerstein created a show that did not depend on “star power” to bring in people. *Oklahoma* could stand on its own dramatic merits and would stand the test of time.
- In earlier musicals, the opening scene was always a big production number showing off the entire ensemble and impressive scenery. Breaking with all traditions, *Oklahoma* begins with a simple set and no music. Aunt Eller (the mother figure in the show) is seated in front of a simple farmhouse. Curly (who turns out to be the hero of the story) begins singing *a cappella* off stage. As the song continues, he saunters on stage. The song is, of course, “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning.”

Musicals Multiple Choice

Circle the answer that best describes an important aspect of each of these Broadway musicals.

1. ***The Lion King***

- A. The music and lyrics were written by Elton John and Tim Rice.
- B. Started as a Disney television show.
- C. Begins with a fight between Simba and Scar.

2. ***George Washington, Jr.***

- A. The longest-running show ever on Broadway.
- B. Features the George M. Cohan song "You're a Grand Old Flag."
- C. Includes a dream ballet.

3. ***Cats***

- A. Uses extensive dialog.
- B. Costumes, lighting and makeup are minor elements.
- C. Is based upon a collection of poems by T.S. Eliot.

4. ***Watch Your Step***

- A. A show written by Irving Berlin and Elton John.
- B. An Irving Berlin show without much of a plot.
- C. The first show to use a fog machine.

5. ***A Chorus Line***

- A. Uses several elaborate scene changes in Act I.
- B. Is based upon the lives of Broadway dancers.
- C. Began as a Disney animated movie.

6. ***Show Boat***

- A. One of the first shows to include well-developed characters.
- B. A large ocean cruise liner is the central focus of the story.
- C. Includes the song "I Hope I Get It."

7. ***Fiddler on the Roof***

- A. The story is set in New York City during the 1970s.
- B. Was written by George M. Cohan and Oscar Hammerstein II.
- C. Describes the traditions of the people living in a poor village.

8. ***Porgy and Bess***

- A. Opened at the Shubert Theatre in 1970.
- B. Is generally accepted as the most popular opera written by an American.
- C. Is set in the "Old West" during the Gold Rush.

9. ***West Side Story***

- A. Features the music of Leonard Bernstein and the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim.
- B. Tells the story of a rich couple who live in California.
- C. Is a revue with no real story or plot.

10. ***Oklahoma***

- A. A Western version of Romeo and Juliet.
- B. Tells the story of train engineers and stage coach drivers.
- C. Was the first show to break the tradition of a big "song and dance" number at the beginning.