

The Development Of Music and Dance as Storytelling Devices in American Musical Theatre

Before *Oklahoma* hit the Broadway stage, “musical comedies” as they were then known consisted of songs written mostly to become hits or to sell tickets, as shown by the universal appeal of many showstoppers by Lorenz Hart and Cole Porter, for example. After *Oklahoma*, the composers and lyricists suddenly became dramatists as well as songwriters, and everything that was included and incorporated into the musical had to serve a purpose in relation to the story. Therefore, not only did the shows need big hits to become big successes, but their hits needed to have an actual purpose and function to tell the story of the musical. In *Oklahoma*’s case, this was the story of “*Green Grow The Lilacs*”, a play written by Lynn Riggs.

The influence of *Oklahoma* on the development of music in American musical theatre is far-reaching in its importance and impact. It was a landmark for its time, shown immediately from having its opening curtain rise not to a flock of chorus girls, but to a woman churning butter and the simple, unaccompanied opening lines of “Oh What A Beautiful Mornin’” sung offstage (figure 1).

This departure from what was considered the norm for musicals on Broadway was just one aspect which made *Oklahoma* such a landmark in the development of the modern Broadway musical.

Earlier musicals had already tried and succeeded with the book-driven approach to writing original musical comedies, but many elements within them served no storytelling purpose. *Show Boat*, a 1927 musical in two acts by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II (of later “Rodgers and Hammerstein”, and therefore *Oklahoma*, fame), featured two songs in its original cut that were removed in later stages of editing the show; “*Til Good Luck Comes My Way*” and “*Hey Feller!*”. These songs could be cut as they served no purpose to the story, having been written only to cover scenery changes. It is now typical for productions to merely pick and choose from the original material to create unique and distinct versions of the show. This highlights how little the music is necessary to advance and develop the story of the play. *Lady in the Dark*, a 1941 musical by Kurt Weill, Ira Gershwin and Moss Hart, gave Danny Kaye a show-stopping patter song called “*Tchaikovsky and Other Russians*” which, although providing much entertainment, also had nothing at all to do with the actual plot of the show.

Figure 1 – “Oh What A Beautiful Mornin’”

The image shows a musical score for the song "Oh What A Beautiful Mornin'" from the musical Oklahoma!. It consists of two systems of music. The first system includes a vocal line with lyrics: "up to the sky. / wink - in' her eye. / laugh - in' at me!" followed by "Oh, what a beau - ti - ful". The second system includes a vocal line with lyrics: "morn - in'." followed by "Oh, what a beau - ti - ful". The score includes guitar chord diagrams for Bbdim, Bb7, Eb, Ab sus, and Ab, and piano accompaniment with a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic marking.

“Oh What A Beautiful Morning” is the opening song of Oklahoma! It gives an accurate overview of the mood and character of the singer, without resorting to elements which may be completely separate from the story, like choruses and dances. Its simple 3/4 time and homophonic motion mean that the song is memorable and easily recognisable, as opposed to more complex songs like “I Can’t Say No”.

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, on the other hand, refrained from sinking into this form of distraction based storytelling and, with Oklahoma, created a musical whose elements all contributed to telling the story, as opposed to showing off individual star talents or just for the sake of writing hits.

Rodgers said that “the chief influence of Oklahoma! was simply to serve notice upon writers came up with something different, and in its ad merit, there would be a large and receptive audience waiting for it” (- Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages* (NY: Random House, 1975), p. 229.) This is the impact that Oklahoma had on the American musical; it persuaded composers, lyricists and librettists that by diverting from the common expectations and clichés of the musical and creating something different (in this case, a truly integrated musical with song, dance and dialogue which all advanced and told the story in their individual ways), audiences will respond positively, both emotionally and in the number of filled seats. Through breaking the traditions of the Broadway stage, which normally catered to the interests and allure of Broadway audiences, Oklahoma’s appeal stretched to all corners of the United States, making it the first Broadway show to go on tour throughout the country and, eventually, the world. Oklahoma ran for 2,212 performances; all musicals before then had only ran for a maximum of 500.

The use of dance to push the story onwards was also pioneered in *Oklahoma* by American ballet choreographer Agnes DeMille. DeMille choreographed and created dances that utilised the plot and characters, and fused together the songs and the libretto of the musical to use dance as a storytelling tool, rather than a distraction from the actual story. Quentin Crisp, a social commentator at the London premiere of *Oklahoma*, wrote “when I was young, a musical had a love-misunderstanding-reunion storyline enacted by a pretty boy and girl while behind them a line of chorus boys and girls did nothing more than link arms and kick their heels. When *Oklahoma!* arrived, the theatre – nay, the whole city – stood.” (- Quentin Crisp, as quoted by Max Wilk in *OK! The Story of Oklahoma* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), p. 245.) This is representative of the impact that DeMille’s choreography had on audiences around the world. Michael Kidd, another Broadway choreographer, said that “The dream ballet, *Laurey’s dream*, had never been seen on a Broadway stage, because the dancing became storytelling.” (- Michael Kidd, *Broadway: The American Musical*, PBS Series, 2004). The song featured in Laurey’s dream ballet is the fittingly titled “Out Of My Dreams” (figure 2)

Figure 2 – “Out Of My Dreams”

Lyrics by (Musical)

Fast Waltz

F6

The musical score for "Out Of My Dreams" is presented in 3/4 time. The piano accompaniment begins with a *mf* dynamic. The vocal melody is written in a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The lyrics are: "Out of my dreams and in - to your arms". Above the vocal line, guitar chord diagrams are provided for F, Fsus, F, Em, and Em7/9. The piano accompaniment continues with a *p* dynamic.

“Out of My Dreams” is sung by a chorus of characters all within Laurey’s troubled dream. In it, she dreams of being married to Curly, but Judy enters and ruins it for the both of them. To show the dream-like aspect of the story, this waltz was created as a ballet choreographed by Agnes de Mille. The song itself is not especially “catchy” or “memorable” on its own, which is how the dance and song complement each other.

Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls* opened in 1950 and ran for 1200 performances. It was choreographed by Michael Kidd, who had earlier had his big break with *Finian's Rainbow* in 1947. His "dynamic" (- John Kenrick, www.musicals101.com, 1997) choreography earned him a Tony award for that show, along with four more in the 1950's, starting with *Guys and Dolls*. "His choreography had an athletic quality that let men look masculine and women look strong yet still feminine – a refreshing formula" (- John Kenrick, www.musicals101.com, 1997); this is much of a prelude or a bridge between the innovation of dance as a story in *Oklahoma* and DeMille's dances, and the athleticism and energy of Jerome Robbins's creations in the later *West Side Story* of 1957. *Guys and Dolls* was important in that it began to shape the way that dance would become important and necessary to tell stories the way the writers and composers wanted them to be told. As John Kenrick states, Kidd's choreography allowed the characters to show who they really were through dance and motion, instead of purely by song and dialogue.

Later musicals would also use dance as a way of conveying moods and atmospheres, or telling the story. In *West Side Story*, a 1957 musical by composer Leonard Bernstein, lyricist Stephen Sondheim, director/choreographer Jerome Robbins and librettist Arthur Laurents, Robbins created dances in the hyper-athletic and masculine style that Agnes DeMille pioneered in *Oklahoma* and *Rodeo*, a 1942 ballet by Aaron Copland. This musical was groundbreaking in its use of dance not only as a device to tell the story, but as necessary and valid as the songs, music and dialogue of the show. Without dance, *West Side Story* would have been radically different.

Musicals101.com says that "Since every Robbins dance step was motivated by character, his work was a natural fit for the musical theatre of his time" (- John Kenrick, www.musicals101.com, 1997), highlighting the importance of Robbins's contribution in dance and dramatization thereof, on the Broadway musical stage. Together, Robbins and Agnes DeMille revolutionized the role of dance in the storytelling of a Broadway musical. "What Agnes de Mille initiated, Robbins fulfilled." (- John Kenrick, www.musicals101.com, 1997)

West Side Story was Bernstein's most successful Broadway score. Since Bernstein was the only main conductor of the New York Philharmonic to ever compose for Broadway, he had the experience and influences to create some of the Great White Way's most ambitious and musically complex scores. Three of Bernstein's biggest hits, *Wonderful Town*, *On The Town*, and *West Side Story* itself, were all set in New York City. This is probably due to his blend of classical, jazz and popular music styles which so appealed to its citizens.

Songs like "Maria" (figure 4) and "Somewhere" were sweeping and almost operatic in style, to compliment and emphasise the emotional importance of the lyrics according to the plot and characters. "America" (figure 5) and "Dance at the Gym" (figure 3) both showed off Bernstein's Latin and jazz influences respectively. With Jerome Robbins as director and choreographer, "something as prosaic as a gang walking down a street became an excuse for dance that strengthened the plot and developed individual characters." (- John Kenrick, www.musicals101.com, 1997)

Figure 3 – “Dance At The Gym – 4c. Cha-Cha”

4c. Cha – Cha

Instrumental

207 *Andante con grazia* ♩ = 100

El. Gtr., Fngr. Cyms.

Piano

Cl., Bsn., Vcs., Cb. (pizz.)

211

3 Fls., Bongos, Tamb.,
Pno., Vlins. (pizz.)

210

light and dry

“Cha-Cha” is one of the several movements in “Dance At The Gym”, which is the dance episode which, without dialogue, introduces the romance between Tony and Maria. This is shown by the subtitle which reads “Instrumental”. The music is rhythmic and rather fast-paced, and the tempo qualifier “con grazia” means “with grace”, possibly to show the dance-like quality of the music. Bar 211 introduces further percussive instruments, which add to the rhythm of the piece, with pizzicato violins accenting the beat.

Figure 4 – “Maria”

5. Maria

Tony

Cue: DIESEL: We'll see him at Doc's.

TONY: Maria ...

Slowly and freely

TONY *p* 3

The most beau - ti - ful sound I ev - er heard:

Piano

Hn. I

Bsn. *pp*

3 *cresc.* *

ri - a, Ma - ri - a, Ma - ri - a, Ma - ri - a ...

Tony

Hn. II

cresc.

“Maria” is a ballad-type song, sung by Tony in the events following the “Dance At The Gym” episode. Here, Tony is expressing his love for Maria. The music here is a contrast to the fast, rhythmic feel of the “Dance At The Gym”, which reflects the difference between the conflict that was apparent at that time, and the serene and loving atmosphere of this scene. The piece moves “slowly and freely”, emphasising this; “freely” possibly highlighting the free feeling that Tony now has. There is no great use of percussion, but the heavy usage of triplets adds a subtle dance-like quality to the music.

Figure 5 – “America”

46 **Tempo di Huapango (fast)**

that in! _____
Hns., Sp. Gtr., Vlins.

Traps, Pno. *f marc.* -Pno. *dim.*

Bsn., Timp., Vcs., Cb.

50

p.
I like to be in A - mer - i - ca! O. K. by me in A - mer -
GIRLS (except Rosalia)

p.
I like to be in A - mer - i - ca! O. K. by me in A - mer -

Fls. *p.*

Bsn., Strs.

“America” is a fast, rhythmic song in very emphasised triple time, which is accompanied by dance. The song shows Bernstein’s Latin influences, and is relevant in this sense, as the lyrics tell of the differences between Puerto Rico and America from the eyes of the Puerto Rican immigrants. The percussive piano and staccato playing in the orchestra add to the rhythm of the piece, and the tempo reads as “Tempo di Huapango”. Huapango is a Mexican style of music and dance which would have been popular with the characters singing the song.

These multiple variations from the Broadway mould which appealed to audiences even whilst entering new territory dramatically and musically meant that “West Side Story” became one of the most successful and frequently produced musicals of all time.

Dance and music as storytelling devices grew most prominently with *Oklahoma!* and *West Side Story*. For the first time, dance was being used to portray feelings, emotions and ideas, and music was chosen and written purely to tell the story, not to sell tickets.

[1909 Words]

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