

*There's a bright, golden haze on the meadow,  
There's a bright, golden haze on the meadow.*

A deceptively simple opening to a Broadway show. A cowboy singing a cappella offstage, and then strolling onto the stage while a middle-aged woman churns butter in front of her house. No big chorus. No big production number. No dancing girls. Simple. Deceptively simple.

But *Oklahoma!* caused a revolution in Broadway musicals. In *Oklahoma!*, songs and dances were not interruptions. They were an integral part of the story. They helped you know the characters better. In most previous musicals, you could rearrange the songs and dances in the show. You could do them all in reverse order, and it wouldn't make much difference. But not in *Oklahoma!*. Change the order of the songs, and you would change the meaning of the play.

*Oklahoma!* was the first collaboration between Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein. They had both worked with other partners for years on Broadway, and they had varying degrees of success with other plays. But when they had the opportunity to work together, they tried to work in a different way. Before for both of them, the tunes were written first, and the words came second. But with *Oklahoma!* the words would be of central importance, and they would be written first. The music would be written afterwards.

Yes, at one level, *Oklahoma!* was deceptively simple. What's the story about? It's about which one of two guys will get to take a gal to a picnic. That's it, at least at a superficial level. And yet, there was so much more.

What was *Oklahoma!* really about? Home. Family. Love. These things are also deceptively simple. And yet at the time they seemed vitally important.

The year was 1943. America was smack dab in the middle of the Second World War. New York was a port from which soldiers were being sent to Europe. And the producers of *Oklahoma!* gave out free passes to servicemen for every performance. The choreographer said that she didn't remember a performance during those years when there weren't 3 rows of uniformed men in the back of the theater.

Family? Love? Home? For these soldiers, these were things worth fighting for, worth dying for.

*We know we belong to the land,  
And the land we belong to is grand!*

But that land of those lyrics transcended the Oklahoma Territory from 40 years before. The audiences in 1943, and 1944, and 1945 knew what they were really singing about. The chorus may have been singing O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A. But the real meaning was clear. They were really singing about U-S-A.

And they were singing, "We know we belong." Plural. Us.  
*Territory folks should stick together,*  
*Territory folks should all be pals.*

In our fractured and divided world, that message of unity still needs to be heard. In 2018 America, we could use some of that 1943 sense of unity.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are many who would actually see the values of *Oklahoma!* as a bit corny. Family. Love. Home. Unity. And yet, remarkably, *Oklahoma!* has been performed somewhere in the world every night since 1943. Tonight, on at least one stage somewhere on our planet, a cowboy will walk out singing,

*Oh, what a beautiful mornin'*  
*Oh, what a beautiful day.*  
*I got a beautiful feelin',*  
*Ev'rythin's goin' my way.*

And everything in *Oklahoma!* is not sweetness and light. There is a pretty dark antagonist: Jud Fry, who is revealed to be a rapist, and an arsonist, and a murderer. And near the end of the play, Jud falls on his knife during a fight with Curley on his wedding night with Laurey.

And after that death, Laurey's Aunt Eller tells her this:

"Lots of things happens to folks. Sickness, er bein' pore and hungry even—bein' old and afeared to die. That's the way it is—cradle to grave. And you can stand it... You gotta be hearty, you got to be. You cain't deserve the sweet and tender things in life lessn' you're tough."

During WWII, the audiences of *Oklahoma!* knew about darkness in the world. And yet they affirmed the values of home, and family, and love, and unity.

Rodgers and Hammerstein would write many other great plays together: *Carousel*, *The King and I*, *The Sound of Music*, which I'll talk about in a few weeks.

But they wrote another WWII play. This wasn't a play that was performed during WWII. It was performed 4 years later, in 1949. But it was set during WWII. It was their great play, *South Pacific*.

At one level, the themes of *Oklahoma!* were trotted out again in *South Pacific*. Home. Family. Love. Unity.

But the setting was very different. The protagonists were a disparate group, tossed together by the fortunes of war on an island in the South Pacific. And like the characters in *Oklahoma!*, these were real people, genuine people, not 2-dimensional caricatures. They had real personalities, real dreams and aspirations, and real flaws.

In fact, there was no villain, no real antagonist in *South Pacific*. Yes, the Japanese military was an offstage presence throughout the play. But the real conflict in the play takes

place within two of the characters: Ensign Nellie Forbush, a Navy nurse, and Lieutenant Joe Cable, a Marine.

Both Nellie and Joe fall in love with two different people.

Joe falls in love with Liat, a Tonkinese girl. The Tonkinese were Vietnamese laborers from the gulf of Tonkin region brought in by the French to work on their island plantations.

And Nellie falls in love with one of the French plantation owners, Emile de Becque. Nellie is from Little Rock, Arkansas. She joined the Navy not only to help with the war effort. She says at one point,

"I wanted to see what the world was like—outside Little Rock, I mean. And I wanted to meet different kinds of people and find out if I like them better."

And in Emile, she finds that he is a different kind of person with a very different life, in a world very different from Little Rock.

In one of the most touching songs, Nellie and Emile are each singing to themselves. They're obviously attracted to each other. But each also doubts that the other would be attracted to them.

Nellie sings,  
*We are not alike;*  
*Probably I'd bore him.*  
*He's a cultured Frenchman—*  
*I'm a little hick.*

And Emile sings,  
*Younger men than I,*  
*Officers and doctors,*  
*Probably pursue her—*  
*She could have her pick.*

And yet they both fall passionately in love with each other.

But the romances between Joe and Liat, and Nellie and Emile hit speed bumps. And the problems are not from outside. They are from within the two Americans.

When Liat's family starts talking marriage, Joe ends their relationship. Joe can't imagine taking a Vietnamese bride home with him to 1940s Philadelphia high society.

And Nellie finds out that Emile has fathered two children who are half-Polynesian. Their Polynesian mother has since died. But this shocks Nellie's racial sensibilities.

Remember, this is a 1949 play. And it's set in 1943. And Rodgers and Hammerstein actually clean it up. In the original source material, James Michener's book, *Tales of the South Pacific*, Nellie pulls no punches. In describing the Polynesian children and their mother, Nellie uses a racial epithet that we euphemistically refer to today as the "N"-world. It's very strong language, reflecting a deep-seated prejudice.

And that's the struggle in *South Pacific*. Nellie and Joe each have to grapple with their own prejudices.

They are both intelligent people. They are in contact with their inner selves. But they also are in conflict with their inner selves.

And Joe is aware that his prejudice comes from cultural conditioning. In the spiritual centerpiece of the play, he sings,

*You've got to be taught to be afraid  
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,  
And people whose skin is a different shade—  
You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught before it's too late,  
Before you are six or seven or eight,  
To hate all the people your relatives hate—  
You've got to be carefully taught.*

Unfortunately, Joe's insight doesn't change his relationship with Liat. And while he and Emile are on a dangerous scouting mission to report on Japanese troop movements, Joe is killed. He dies without a chance to reconcile with Liat.

Nellie, however does have time to reconsider. Emile is missing in action. And yet she speaks these words to him out over the ocean:

"Come back so I can tell you something. I know what counts now. You. All those other things—the woman you had before—her color... What (nonsense)... All that matters is you and I being together."

Meanwhile, the troops who have been waiting on the beach are beginning to deploy. The tide of the war is changing. The base commander says,

"The whole picture of the South Pacific has changed. We're going the other way."

But there is deeper meaning than troop movements here. 'The whole picture has changed... We're going the other way.' Nellie's too has changed. And she is moving in a new direction.

And so, presuming that Emile is gone, Nellie begins to look after his children. But as Nellie and the two children are sitting down together at the dinner table, suddenly Emile reappears. The children rush to embrace their father. They drag him to the dinner table. Apparently, in that moment, there is a new family sitting down to dinner together. While the

children are eating, Nellie and Emile surreptitiously yet passionately grasp hands under the table. And the curtain falls. There is no grand finale. No elaborate and rousing final chorus. Just the two of them clasping hands as the curtain falls.

Just as *Oklahoma!* begins quietly, *South Pacific* ends quietly.

And *South Pacific* is affirming the same values from *Oklahoma!*  
Family. Love. Home. Unity.

But in *South Pacific*, they are affirmed in a new way in a new place for a new future.

As Christians we affirm those same values. Family. Love. Home. Unity. But we do so at two levels. We give thanks for our earthly homes, and relationships, and families.

But we also affirm the fact that in Jesus Christ, we are made part of a new family. We are promised a new home. We are offered relationship with him, and with all of God's children as our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the final book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, some of the descriptions are more exotic than any South Pacific island. And yet, Revelation describes a new home, a new Jerusalem, a city from God where heaven and earth are united, where God and human beings find unity with each other, where God dwells in the midst of his people.

But God's family also finds unity with each other. The family of God is described as being made up of human beings "from every tribe and language and people and nation."

Simple? Perhaps. And yet, glorious.

Good eventually triumphs. God eventually triumphs. God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

New family. New home. New unity. New and perfect love.

*Oh what a beautiful day.*