

The zest and exuberance of *Oklahoma!*

By J B Leftwich

In the Broadway revival of *Oklahoma!*, once again the robust song, “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’,” fills the theater with joyful exuberance of living in a great, big, wonderful world.

The lyrics of Oscar Hammerstein II and the music of Richard Rodgers are a happy and successful marriage of words and melody. I have always wondered, which came first: the music or the lyrics? In this case, whichever was first created was masterful and the second creation that blended it into a masterpiece of popular music was equally top of the line.

*Oh, what a beautiful mornin’
Oh, what a beautiful day,
I got a wonderful feelin’
Everything’s goin’ my way.*

This refrain captures the joy of living in a wonderful world, especially the wonderful world of *Oklahoma*.

There are other phrases just as expressive. “The corn is as high as an elephant’s eye” may be the most famous line of the song. It prompts you to imagine Oklahomans measuring the growth of corn with the height marks of an elephant. Maybe, ankle high to an elephant or knee high to an elephant or belly high to an elephant.

In the song, the corn is almost grown. As high as an elephant’s eye. But symbolically, there’s more growth expressed in the last line of the stanza: It looks like its climbin’ clear up to the sky.

Then, later in the song, the cattle are like statues, taking little note of human movement, but as the vocalist rides by, “a little brown mav’rick is winkin’ her eye.” Still later:

*The breeze is so busy it don’t miss a tree,
And a ol’ weepin’ willer is laughin’ at me!*

Ah, it’s such a wonderful day that even a willow tree, which usually weeps, is laughing.

Oklahoma! was written for the stage and that’s where it belongs. The stage, not a motion picture screen, is where the play’s energy spills over into the audience. The joy and exuberance energize the viewers.

There are other wonderful songs in *Oklahoma!*, including the title song which is equally brimming with energy, “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top,” and “People Will Say

We're in Love.”

The music of Rodgers and Hammerstein contrasts dramatically with the drivel which passes as music today. Today's music lacks the majesty and the poetry and the rhythm of songs in such productions as *Oklahoma*, *My Fair Lady* and *Camelot*. It may be that today's music synchronizes with the mundane and materialistic world in which we live.

“Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'” could be converted into a beautiful hymn. Many of its lines would translate almost verbatim. Christian hymnals are peppered with vigorous and joyful songs. Examples are “Rise Up, O Men of God,” “Christ the Lord Has Risen Today,” and “Joy to the World.”

The refrain of “Beautiful Mornin'” could become the chorus of a hymn simply by changing the last line. Instead of “Everything's going my way” it could be altered to read, “Things must be going God's way.”

As I write these words, I am looking out my window at a cloudless day with crisp light which followed a rainstorm during the night. The peonies, the iris and the snowball bushes are in full bloom. The lawn is lush. In the garden, the lettuce and the onions are ready for picking. It's a day of epiphany. For a moment as we block out memories of 9/11, tornado damage in Rutherford County and elsewhere, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Middle East and a dozen or so warring African nations, it's a wonderful morning.

O, what a beautiful day!

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Oklahoma! is a slice of Americana. It opened on Broadway in 1943 and has been in constant production somewhere ever since. One report I read said there are at least 600 new productions of the play in a normal year.

Columnist George Will labeled *Oklahoma!* “an anthem of optimism that not even world war could dent.”

“It is serendipitous that this revival, which played for four years in London, arrives (on Broadway) with the nation again at war,” Will wrote.

More than any other element, the quality and zest of its music perpetuate *Oklahoma!* And Americans recognize that *Oklahoma!* is, well, a slice of Americana.

If you would like to read the lyrics of the great songs in *Oklahoma!* click on <http://www.prigsbee.com/Musicals/lyrics.htm>. This website will lead you to the lyrics of many great Broadway hits. My e-mail address is leftwichjb@charter.net.

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