

# Class 6: Ballet on Broadway

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## A. Welcome to the Revolution!

1. Class title 1 (*Oklahoma!*)
2. Section title A (*Oklahoma!* marquee and poster)

This class spans the short gap between the *Oklahoma!* (1943), the first musical collaboration of **Richard Rodgers** (1902–79) and **Oscar Hammerstein II** (1895–1960), and *Carousel* (1945), the second. Note that I have called it “Ballet on Broadway,” not “Dance.” We have already seen a number of dance numbers, and I know we’ll see many more, but Ballet is different. Let’s take 15 minutes to explore that.

3. Scenes from the movie that I am showing

*Oklahoma!* is remarkably simple in plot. It involves two triangles: the love between the heroine **Laurey** and the Cowboy **Curly**, which is threatened by the jealous hired hand **Jud Frye**, and the vacillation of **Ado Annie** (“I’m jest a girl that cain’t say no”) between **Will Parker** and the *soi-disant* Persian peddler **Ali Hakim**. Here are the three scenes from the 1955 movie that I shall be showing. The first comes about 20 minutes into the show. Will Parker (**Gene Nelson**) has returned from a trip to Kansas City, where he says that “Evrything’s up-to-date,” including the dancing; the older woman is **Aunt Eller (Charlotte Greenwood)**, everybody’s friend. The second clip is the opening number of Act Two, the community square dance at a so-called “box social” held to raise money. The choreography is by **Agnes de Mille** (1905–93). I will show the dance portions of each number only; afterwards, let’s discuss them. [Although I also have stage versions, I am using the remarkably faithful 1949 movie for de Mille’s choreography.]

4. *Oklahoma!* movie: Kansas City dance
5. *Oklahoma!* movie: Box social dance
6. Scenes from the movie (repeat)

The subtitle of this course is “From Fantasy to Realism.” How, in these terms, do those two dances compare? What is the style of each? How natural is the context? What does each contribute to the story? Taking the barn dance first, it is completely natural in context: dancing is what people did in parties, and in that place and period it would probably have been square dancing. Yes, the moves at the end go outside the square-dance repertoire, but the inspiration is entirely traditional. As for the narrative, well maybe: the box social scene is where important things happen—but they don’t happen in the dance. The dancing at the train station is also American vernacular, but of a much more recent vintage. It has no essential part in the plot, except to establish the happy-go-lucky quality of this secondary character. Both dances are inserted for entertainment—and why not?—but the barn dance has at least some narrative justification.

7. Laurey’s two partners

The third dance sequence is different, though. First of all, it is longer: 15 minutes rather than 2 or 3. Secondly, it is more artificial than either of the other two; instead of American vernacular (though there are some touches here and there), it uses a foreign language, ballet. Yet it is absolutely part of the show's narrative; it is written in the score as "Laurey makes up her mind." The pretext is relatively slim—Ali Hakim sells her smelling salts which are probably laudanum, and this whole episode is thus an opium dream. It has three sections: her imagination of her wedding to Curly, her vision of a sordid life that she would live with Jud, and a fight to the death between Jud and Curly. I have only time to play the Curly section, stopping where the sequence with Jud begins.

8. *Oklahoma!* movie: Dream Ballet, opening

9. Laurey's two partners (repeat)

Did this work for you? So unusual was this idea that it brought the curtain down and the audience to their feet at the end of Act One—completely replacing a more conventional production number like we saw in *Anything Goes*. Critics often call it the standout number in the show. And yet my wife, thinking back to the reissue of the movie we saw about 40 years ago, remembers only "that interminable dance sequence in the middle." To be fair, a ballet sequence on the stage would probably have a quite different effect from ballet on film. Looking at it again now, I find that while the section with Curly is very clear and inventive, in a sort of *Appalachian Spring* way (though *Oklahoma!* was earlier), the idea of putting Jud into a brothel is simply too obvious; married life with Jud might well be squalid, but not in this particular way. I don't see the point of "Laurey makes up her mind" if the stakes are going to be so obviously loaded.

## B. All That Jazz

10. Section title B

11. Rodgers, Balanchine, Bernstein, Robbins

While *Oklahoma!* was the first musical to include a lengthy ballet sequence to advance the narrative, it was not the first appearance of ballet on the Broadway stage. To give it some context, I want to look at a couple of jazz ballets and the stage musicals related to them. The first, which you have already glimpsed, is the ballet *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, choreographed by the Father of American Ballet **George Balanchine** (1904–83) to an earlier score by **Richard Rodgers**. This originally formed the finale of the musical *On Your Toes* by Rodgers and his usual collaborator before Hammerstein, **Lorenz Hart** (1895–1943). The story of the musical is all about a choreographer trying to get his new jazz ballet produced by the Russian Ballet in New York. He eventually succeeds, and the 20-minute ballet, *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, is the final number in the show. In context, it is highly melodramatic, even comic in patches, with two gangsters waiting in the wings to shoot the leading dancer, but Balanchine later revised it to be given as a standalone piece with his own company, the New York City Ballet. That is what you have just seen. I don't have a clip of the original musical, but I do have the start of the sequence in the 1939 movie, featuring the Russian ballerina **Vera Zorina** in the role of a night-club stripper.

12. Rodgers & Balanchine: *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, opening

13. Rodgers, Balanchine, Bernstein, Robbins (repeat)

Would you call that more or less realistic than *Oklahoma!*? It is contemporary and urban, deliberately diving into the underworld, but it has that particular gangster-chic that Broadway loves. There is also a downmarket urban setting in *Fancy Free*, the 1944 ballet that was the first collaboration of **Leonard Bernstein** (1918–1990) and **Jerome Robbins** (1918–98)—interesting to see them both looking so young in these photos! We are in an ordinary bar somewhere in New York. Made in 1944, the middle of World War II, the story concerns three sailors on 24-hour liberty, trying to see as many of the sights of New York as they can, while hoping to pick up some girls in the process. This is the opening of the ballet, which introduces the three sailors. Later, two women will come in, and the men will do a kind of dance-off to compete for their attention. This is a later performance, from 1986; sorry it is so blurry. The three dancers are **Joseph Duell**, **Jean-Pierre Frohlich**, and **Kipling Houston**. Given that ballet is an intrinsically unrealistic medium, what elements do you see here that are real?

14. Bernstein and Robbins: *Fancy Free*, opening

Is there any way you can call that realistic? For me, it is the way that Robbins interleaves the ballet steps with bits of natural movement, sudden flashes of milieu or character. Let's learn more from one of the dancers from a more recent performance, **Tyler Angle**, fortunately filmed in better video.

15. Tyler Angle narrates a scene from *Fancy Free*

16. — still from the above

17. *On the Town*, stage and movie posters

*Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* was originally part of a stage musical, and later gained independence from it. *Fancy Free* was the exact opposite. Originally conceived as a standalone ballet, its success convinced a Broadway producer that the basic idea—three US Navy sailors on leave—could also be the basis of a musical. Robbins and Bernstein agreed, their friends **Adolf Green** and **Betty Comden** wrote the book and lyrics, and the new show was written in the amazing time of eight months (April to December of 1944). Bernstein used some of the same music in the new show, but none of it literally; the *Fancy Free* ballet does not occur in the show, but there are four other dance sequences that, between them, tell much of the story. Unfortunately, there are no videos of the original production, though I'll show you something in a minute from the 2014 revival. MGM made a movie in 1949 with **Frank Sinatra** and **Gene Kelly**, but the producers thought that Bernstein's music was too complex, and replaced all but four of the numbers with new songs by their house composer **Roger Edens**. Bernstein and Robbins boycotted the film in consequence, and Gene Kelly took over the choreography. All the same, it opens with two Bernstein numbers from the original show: the dockworker's song, "I Feel Like I'm Not Out of Bed Yet," and the iconic "New York, New York." [The film commits the usual absurdity of filming in locations all across the city, with no concern whatever about the time to get from one to the other!]

18. *On the Town* (movie 1949), opening

19. *On the Town* (movie 1949), Miss Turnstiles

Talking about getting from one place to another, the three guys of course take the subway. And in the process, they see a poster for “Miss Turnstiles,” a young commuter selected each month as the face of the subway system. The boys fall in love with the present incumbent, **Miss Ivy Smith**, and eventually get to meet her, but the fantasy promo becomes the first of the several ballet sequences, the equivalent of *Oklahoma’s* dream ballet. This *was* in the original stage show, and the music is genuine Bernstein. I’ll show the beginning of it as danced by **Vera-Allen** in the movie, then cut to approximately the same place in the 2014 Broadway stage revival. This is actually a rehearsal clip, but I like it because **Megan Fairchild**, who plays Ivy, has such natural presence and character. Note that this is neither Bernstein nor Robbins; the choreographer is **Joshua Begasse**.

20. *On the Town* (movie 1949), Vera-Allen as Miss Turnstiles

21. *On the Town* (revival 2014), Megan Fairchild as Miss Turnstiles

22. Class title 2 (Can dance be real?)

## C. Audience Sympathy?

23. Section title C (*Carousel* posters)

Richard Rodgers, in later life, called *Carousel* (1945) the favorite of his Hammerstein shows. Watching it again recently, however, I found it quite difficult to sit through, in part because of its quite unusual structure and time frame, but mainly because it seemed I was watching the characters making bad choices followed by still worse ones, and wondering whether the authors were raising more moral issues than they could ultimately resolve. Yes, I included it in the class because, like *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel* includes a lengthy Agnes de Mille ballet that is important in the plot. I will indeed get to that, but I do also want to address the issue of how to maintain audience sympathy with a character who is not always likeable.

24. — as above, with dates

Unfortunately, I have trouble finding good clips. There is nothing usable from the **1945 premiere**. The **1956 movie** is visually handsome, but makes some major departures from the original. There was a splendid revival in 1992 at the National Theatre in London, but the only clips of that are impossibly blurry. In a couple of instances, I will be using the 2013 production from **Lincoln Center**, but it was performed in front of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, and thus is necessarily simplified. My choices in this hour have been partly influenced by the materials available

25. Film posters for *Liliom*

But let’s start at the beginning. *Carousel* was based on a play, *Liliom* (1909), by the Hungarian playwright **Ferenc Molnár** (1878–1952). The Theatre Guild, which produced both *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*, presented it on Broadway in English translation in 1921, and at least two movies were made from it in the Thirties. I play you a scene from one of them, directed by **Frank Borzage**. *Liliom* (**Charles Farrell**) is a

carnival barker and something of a womanizer. He has become attracted to **Julie (Rose Hobart)** and asked her out to a café. Both have lost their jobs as a result. I want you to look at it and tell me (a) why you think it might have appealed to Rodgers and Hammerstein as a possibility for a musical, and (b) what the problems might be?

26. Film: *Liliom* (1930), love scene

27. Shirley Jones and Gordon MacRae in *Carousel* (1956)

What did you think? I love this clip, because the ambience is so gloriously musical. On YouTube, it is referred to as the “love scene,” and yet the actual exchange is so banal, so tight-lipped, that you wonder what is going on at all. This quality was very much picked up by Hammerstein in the third scene of the musical. Where a more traditional librettist might have made the young couple meet, find things in common, and come together in a soaring melody, Hammerstein builds the scene—the so-called **bench scene**—out of awkward silences, embarrassed chatter, and finally a big tune in which the heroine emphasizes that she is *not* in love. I came across a wonderful video analyzing the scene, and although I don’t normally outsource my teaching, I thought I’d play it complete. It uses the scene from the NYPO concert, with **Kelli O’Hara** and **Nathan Gunn**, plus a commentary by **Leonard Maslon** that I’ll also put on the website. Note that this only applies to a *stage* production; the photo shows the movie, which cuts all the unconventional aspects almost completely out.

28. Analysis of the *Carousel* bench scene

29. What happens next?

At this point, we are about 35 minutes into the show; what happens next? There are some songs involving secondary characters, and at least one big production number, “June is bustin’ out all over,” but here is what takes place between Billy and Julie. ***Billie and Julie marry. He refuses to go back to his old job and cannot find a new one. Frustrated, he gets into arguments, and at least once hits Julie. She tells him that she is pregnant, and he resolves to do everything for the child. To make money, he joins a friend in a hold-up scheme to rob Julie’s former boss. The hold-up goes wrong, Billy is cornered by the police and kills himself to avoid capture. Billy goes up to some kind of Purgatory. 16 years later, he is given a chance to look down on his daughter, Louise, and go back to earth for one day to help her...*** If this were an opera, most of this would take place in music, but this is basically a play, so other people get the music and their story is worked out in dialogue. The big exception is Billy’s big song when he learns that Julie is pregnant, his **Soliloquy** which rings down the curtain on Act I. Halfway through Act II, Billy is dead, accidentally by falling on his own knife in the movie, but by suicide in both the stage musical and the original Molnár play. So he has left his wife to fend for herself with a new baby; he is hardly in a state of grace.

30. Ballet scene from the *Carousel* film

But he gets one chance to redeem himself, and that’s where the ballet comes in. Ostensibly, it shows his daughter **Louise**, now 15, apparently happy, but shunned by the other children because of her father. She too falls for a carnival barker, but he rejects her as being too young. It is another fantasy, but it

serves the practical purpose of filling an 16-year gap, enticing Billy to come back to Earth, and in a way summarizing the whole story so far. The original was over 40 minutes long; this movie version is only 11.

31. *Carousel* (movie 1956 movie), Act II ballet

32. — still from the above

So how does Billy redeem himself? His job up there had been polishing the stars, so he takes one with him on his way down, and—making himself visible only to her—offers it as a gift to Louise. But she refuses it and he gets mad. The dialogue that follows comes straight out of the **Molnár**. In the play, it is not enough; it ends with Liliom’s fate still undecided. But a wartime musical requires a happy ending; is the addition of a reprise of “If I loved you” enough?

33. *Carousel* (NYPO, 2013), final scene

34. Tiler Peck, Kelli O’Hara, and Nathan Gunn in *Carousel* (NYPO, 2013)

So is it? To be fair, Billy gets to go to Louise’s graduation. He sits besides her and whispers advice to hold up her head and be her own woman, no matter what others may say. Then he moves over to Julie, and whispers that he always loved her—something that, even in their first duet, he was previously unable to put into words. Is *that* enough?

35. Class title 3 (final shot of the movie)