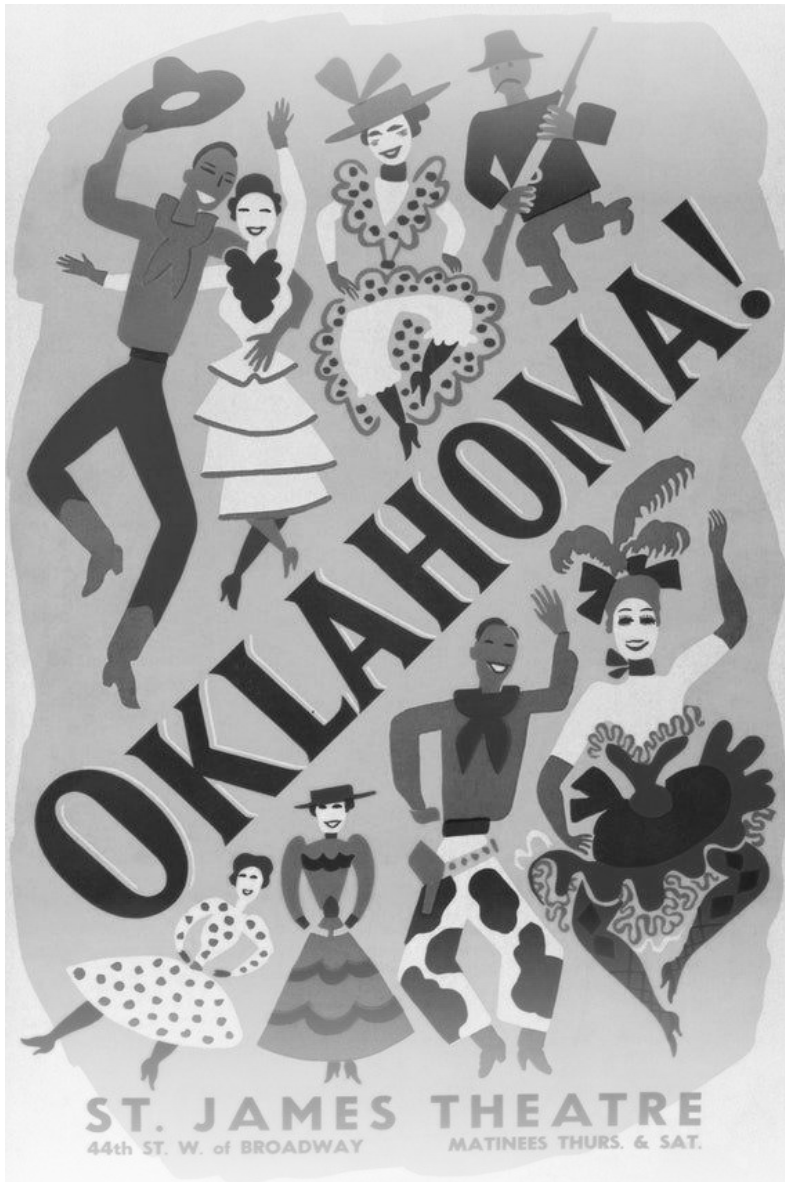


# The Birth of Broadway



## 6. Ballet on Broadway

March 25, 2025

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MOST MUSICALS CONTAIN CHOREOGRAPHED PRODUCTION NUMBERS featuring spectacular dancing along with the singing. But Rodgers and Hammerstein's first great hits, *Oklahoma!* (1943) and *Carousel* (1945), went one further by including "dream ballets" which actually advance the narrative in balletic terms. In between came *Fancy Free*, the standalone ballet by Jerome Robbins and Leonard Bernstein, and the musical that grew out of it, *On the Town* (both 1944). The close conjunction of these four works is our cue to look more deeply at the function of dance on the Broadway stage.

The *Carousel* ballet, originally over 40 minutes long, addresses a problem unusual for a musical in that it covers a gap of 16 years and the death of the leading character. Is it enough to address the considerable moral issues raised in the earlier part of the play? *rb.*

### A. Welcome to the Revolution!

The dances choreographed by **Agnes de Mille** in *Oklahoma!* occur in different contexts and serve different purposes. We look at two of the major production numbers from this point of view before turning to the ballet that ends Act I, which is truly original.

**Rodgers & Hammerstein:** *Oklahoma!*, dance break to "Everything's up to date in Kansas City" (film 1949; Gene Nelson as Will Parker)

**Rodgers & Hammerstein:** *Oklahoma!*, dance break to "The farmer and the cowman" (film 1949; Charlotte Greenwood as Aunt Eller)

**Rodgers & Hammerstein:** *Oklahoma!*, dream ballet, first half (film 1949; Bambi Linn and James Mitchell, with Rod Steiger as Judd)

## B. All That Jazz

But *Oklahoma!* was not entirely the first. *On Your Toes* (1936) by **Richard Rodgers** and **Lorenz Hart** was about the mounting of a ballet, *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* which, with choreography by **George Balanchine**, brings the musical to an end. *Fancy Free*, the standalone ballet written by **Leonard Bernstein** for **Jerome Robbins** in 1944, was expanded the same year into a regular musical, *On the Town*.

**Rodgers & Balanchine:** *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, opening (1939 film with Vera Zorina)

**Bernstein & Robbins:** *Fancy Free*, opening (NYC Ballet 1986, with Joseph Duell, Jean-Pierre Frohlich, and Kipling Houston)

**Bernstein & Robbins:** *Fancy Free*, commentary on Second Sailor's solo by dancer Tyler Angle

**Bernstein et al:** *On the Town*, opening (1949 film, d. Stanley Donen; Bern Hoffmann as a Shipyard Worker; Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra, and Jules Munshin as Sailors)

**Bernstein et al:** *On the Town*, Miss Turnstiles (1949 film, as above; Vera-Ellen as Ivy Smith; choreographed by Gene Kelly)

**Bernstein & Robbins:** *On the Town*, Miss Turnstiles (2014 revival; Megan Fairchild in rehearsal)

## C. Audience Sympathy?

*Carousel* was based on the 1909 play *Liliom* by Hungarian author **Ferenc Molnár**. It deals with difficult questions of moral turpitude and redemption, and spans a 16-year period, including scenes in the world after death. Could **Oscar Hammerstein II** devise a scenario for **Richard Rodgers** that would coax Broadway audiences into being moved by such an unusual story, and how might ballet help them do so?

**Molnár:** *Liliom*, love scene (1930 film, d. Frank Borzage, with Charles Farrell and Rose Hobart)

**Rodgers & Hammerstein:** *Carousel*, bench scene (Kelli O'Hara and Nathan Gunn), with analysis by Leonard Maslon

**Rodgers & Hammerstein:** *Carousel*, ballet (1956 film, based on Agnes de Mille, with Susan Luckey and Jacques d'Amboise)

**Rodgers & Hammerstein:** *Carousel*, penultimate scene (NYPO 2013, with Tiler Peck, Kelli O'Hara, and Nathan Gunn)

George **Balanchine** (1904–83, *American choreographer*), Leonard **Bernstein** (1918–1990, *American composer*), Agnes **de Mille** (1905–93, *American choreographer*), Oscar **Hammerstein II** (1895–1960, *American writer*), Ferenc **Molnár** (1878–1952, *Hungarian writer*), Jerome **Robbins** (1918–98, *American choreographer*), Richard **Rodgers** (1902–79, *American composer*)

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