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# Collaborative Writing for Commercial Musical Theatre

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COLLABORATIVE WRITING FOR COMMERCIAL  
MUSICAL THEATRE

By

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Bachelor of Fine Arts — Illustration  
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
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College of Fine Arts  
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## Thesis Approval

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## Abstract

Collaborative writing has produced some of the world's most important work for the stage, especially in the field of multidisciplinary theatre, which includes musical theatre, operetta, spectacle theatre, circus, ballet, and any other form of theatre employing multiple modes of performance (i.e. music, dance, acting, mime, etc.). Without collaborative writing teams, we would retain little of the multidisciplinary theatrical repertoire that has been produced in the past 120 years.

I argue that although the solo creative genius holds a position of great esteem in Western culture, creative collaboration has long been a more reliable, if less romantic, approach to the complex art of writing for the stage. In this thesis, I will look at successful collaborative writing for commercial musical theatre, in order to uncover effective collaborative methodologies and techniques. I will demonstrate that there are many effective approaches to collaborative writing for the stage, but these approaches have important commonalities. Most important among these commonalities, successful commercial collaboration is consistently marked by an overriding commitment to a unity of concept that guides the work of all the collaborators involved.

I will base my findings on two contrasting case studies: Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*, and Disney Theatrical's stage version of *The Lion King*, directed by Julie Taymor. Both productions were among the most commercially successful Broadway musicals of their times, and both were produced through collaborative processes, but they differed in very significant ways. The two shows were created with a different scope and scale from one another,

and they each employed extremely different internal hierarchies. The differences in their development make them excellent case studies for a comparison of collaborative methodology.

This study provides a framework for effective collaborative writing for commercial theatre. It helps to distinguish the most effective processes for collaborative, commercial theatrical writing, providing useful insights for practical application. Furthermore, it suggests concrete and specific processes that can be used by collaborators who are writing for the commercial stage. In musical theatre, a field in which collaboration is not only desirable, but often necessitated by circumstances, insights into creative collaborative processes are valuable, and worth the attention of a study such as this one.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	v
Table of Contents	vi
Chapter 1: Creative Collaboration, Writing, and the Stage	1
Chapter 2: <i>Oklahoma!</i> : Inventing the Classic American Musical	17
Chapter 3: <i>The Lion King</i> : Innovation Transforms the Broadway Tradition	35
Chapter 4: Risk, Reward, and the Path to Collaborative Innovation	55
Bibliography	64
Curriculum Vitae	74



# Chapter 1: Creative Collaboration, Writing, and the Stage

## 1. Introduction and History

American author Jessamyn West once said “Writing is a solitary occupation. Family, friends, and society are the natural enemies of the writer. He must be alone, uninterrupted, and slightly savage if he is to sustain and complete an undertaking” (“Jessamyn West Quotes”). This is a widely held belief about writers, whatever their form, style, or intended audience. Writers hold a special place in the social hierarchy. Our culture tends to stereotype them as solitary practitioners. We view their great works as evidence of individual creativity and isolated intellect. There is a mythos surrounding the idea of the writer, and it is built on an idea of a creative genius who must be sheltered from interaction with humanity, lest the fragile gift of literary expression be somehow tainted.

The true nature of writing, especially for the stage, does not always align with this culturally pervasive image of the hermit writer. Collaborative writing has produced some of the world’s most important work for the stage, especially in the field of multidisciplinary theatre, which includes musical theatre, operetta, spectacle theatre, circus, ballet, and any other form of theatre employing multiple modes of performance (i.e. music, dance, acting, mime, etc.). Without collaborative writing teams, we would retain little of the multidisciplinary theatrical repertoire that has been produced in the past 120 years.

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for commercial musical theatre, in order to uncover effective collaborative methodologies and techniques. I will demonstrate that there are many effective approaches to collaborative writing for the stage, but these approaches have important commonalities. Most important among these commonalities, successful commercial collaboration is consistently marked by an overriding commitment to a unity of concept that guides the work of all the collaborators involved.

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The benefits of creative collaboration are myriad. Compared to solo writing, collaborative writing can provide a greater diversity of perspectives, a broadened range of strengths, a reduced range of weaknesses, and a wider distribution of workload, which when applied intelligently, can considerably increase the speed of the writing process, as well as the quality of work produced. According to a Harvard University study conducted by Floyd Henry Allport in 1920<sup>1</sup>, merely working in close proximity to others produces a considerable improvement in the quantity and quality of creative output (Allport 162).

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<sup>1</sup> There has been remarkably little scholarship on this topic since Allport.

The use of collaborative writing processes in the commercial theatre is a well-established practice dating back at least to Shakespeare's time in the late 16th century, if not earlier<sup>2</sup>. Recent scholarship has illuminated some aspects of Shakespeare's writing process, revealing, somewhat controversially, that a few of the canonical plays, including *Macbeth*, *Pericles* and *Two Noble Kinsmen*, as well as a large number of "apocryphal" plays, were probably produced through collaborations with other playwrights (Merriam). More recently, collaborative writing has had profound influence on the development of commercial theatre in America and the United Kingdom, especially in terms of musical theatre. Many of the most influential writers of 19th century operetta and 20th and 21st century musical theatre are known to the public primarily as teams: Gilbert and Sullivan, Lerner and Loewe, Rodgers and Hammerstein, George and Ira Gershwin, Kander and Ebb, Schönberg and Boublil, and Flaherty and Ahrens, among others.

Moreover, for musical theatre writers, collaboration is often a requirement, rather than a choice. Although there have been successful solo musical theatre writers, including Stephen Sondheim, Jason Robert Brown, and Lin-Manuel Miranda, they are the exception and not the rule. Most composers are not librettists, and vice versa. As a result, for the majority of musical theatre writers, collaboration is a fundamental job skill which must be developed as thoroughly as possible in order to improve the quality and quantity of work produced.

Unfortunately, collaboration can be deeply frustrating and painfully slow when the process stalls. There is nothing like a disagreement between co-authors to bring progress on a major project to a screeching halt. Yet many successful writing teams maintained their working

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<sup>2</sup> There are a number of excellent studies on the subject of Shakespeare's collaborations, including Stanley Wells' *Shakespeare and Co.: Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher and the Other Players in His Story* (2006) and Brian Vickers' *Shakespeare, Co-Author: A Historical Study of Five Collaborative Plays* (2004).

relationships in spite of personal conflict and disagreement. Gilbert and Sullivan, for example, famously bickered throughout their career together, and although this may have contributed to the eventual dissolution of their working relationship, it did not prevent them from successfully producing hit after hit (Wren 163). It is, in many ways, astonishing that individuals who often did not get along personally could nonetheless come together to create art in tandem.

Knowing that collaboration can be simultaneously critically important to a project's success and a source of terrible stress and conflict, I intend for this study to help clarify some of the most successful processes and approaches to collaborative writing. For those who are attempting to create new works of musical theatre, it is clearly worthwhile to attempt to identify the methods and techniques used by successful writing teams in the past. A history of success, while not a guarantee of future success, is certainly encouraging.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will be restricting the scope of my study to address collaborative writing for commercial musical theatre. By *collaborative writing*, I mean the creation of original performance material for the stage conducted by two or more artists and/or writers working together in the composition of a stage musical. By *musical theatre*, I mean stage productions that incorporate music and dialogue and may also incorporate dance and visual storytelling.

The field of collaborative writing for the stage is in fact very broad, and includes such a wide range of styles and approaches that there does not exist an objective set of criteria that can adequately compare works across disparate styles, which also often work towards widely divergent goals. For this reason, this study will be limited to *commercial* theatre, by which I mean theatre written and produced with the primary intent of producing a profit. Although there

may be additional, non-commercial goals present in the plays analyzed, such as social or political agendas, these must be considered as secondary to the fundamentally profit-oriented primary goals of the musicals and their creators, in the context of this study. In accordance with this principle, the ultimate “success” of any performance piece will be judged on the basis of its profitability and financial success.

Nowhere is the advantage of creative collaboration more apparent than in the world of commercial performance. Commercial performance, which by definition is engaged with the express purpose of producing a profit, necessarily requires specific attention to the following areas: quality, clarity, and consistency of writing, broad audience appeal, and longevity of concept. All of these areas can be profoundly enhanced by the involvement of collaborative writing techniques throughout the creation process — from initial conception through to production and performance.

One of the challenges in this thesis is defining the authors for any given theatrical work. The creation of new work for the stage does not happen in a vacuum. Writers and composers receive suggestions from designers, directors, producers, dramaturges, actors, and others, and these suggestions sometimes affect their creative choices. These contributions, even when formative in the development of the play, do not always result in a writing credit.

It is tempting to look to the law to determine the rightful parameters of joint authorship. The legal definition for copyrightable material requires that it be “fixed in a tangible form of expression” and specifically exempts ideas and concepts (United States Copyright Office 3). Joan Channick, the Managing Director of Theatre Communications Group, has written a short

and very useful guide to copyright for the stage, in which she specifically addresses the legal definition of joint authorship:

The Copyright Act defines a “joint work” as “a work prepared by two or more authors with the intention that their contributions be merged into inseparable or interdependent parts of a unitary whole”. Case law has refined this definition to require (1) that all joint authors must make copyrightable contributions to the work and (2) that the joint authors have the mutual intention to be joint authors so that this kind of relationship is not imposed after the fact on unwilling partners. In *Childress v. Taylor*, a case in the early '90s, an actress who had suggested to a playwright friend the idea for a play based on the life of Moms Mabley and who did the biographical research for the play but did not actually write anything, was found not to be a joint author with the playwright. Although the actress had participated importantly in the creative process, contributing both ideas and facts, the court held that since neither ideas nor facts are copyrightable, her role did not constitute joint authorship. (Channick)

Ideas and facts may not be copyrightable, but it is impossible to consider the development of a stage musical without considering the ideas and facts that contributed to that development. The legal limitations on authorship notwithstanding, my case studies will clearly demonstrate the interconnectivity of the creative process. Non-textual, and in some cases non-copyrightable elements of the creative process clearly and consistently have a tangible effect on story, script, and end product. I argue that design, choreography, and contributions from performers themselves may fundamentally alter story progressions and the script itself. For

example, the title song of *Oklahoma!* would never have been written but for a suggestion from producer Theresa Helburn that the show needed “a song about the earth” (Wilk 65). Most significantly, ideas, though entirely un-copyrightable, are central to script development. Legal definitions, necessarily, must identify narrow and concrete criteria for joint authorship in order to create enforceable law. An analysis of the creative process, on the other hand, must address creative contributions to the writing process in a practical way.

In this thesis, a contributor will be considered a part of the collaborative writing team if his or her contributions affected the script, music, or any other aspect of the play as passed down to future productions. Even if the contributor provided no more than an idea, if that idea had a tangible effect on the total work as passed down to future productions I will consider the individual to be a part of the writing collaboration. My decision to discuss the contributions of individuals who are not credited as joint authors signifies only that those contributions were important to the writing process as it actually occurred, and are therefore relevant to the study at hand.

Let me be perfectly clear: this study is not intended to denigrate solo writing, or to imply that all writing for the stage ought to be produced through collaborative processes. On the contrary, this study recognizes that collaboration *can* be desirable for many writers and in many circumstances, and further acknowledges that many writers are not able to produce the type of work that they desire *without* the use of collaboration. Therefore, because collaboration can be desirable and is often necessary, it is in the interest of the art of dramatic writing for us to attempt to study successful collaborations and identify the techniques used in them, so that they can be reproduced and expanded upon.

## 2. Organization of Thesis

This thesis is organized into four chapters. This chapter, Chapter one, introduces the topic of collaborative writing for musical theatre, and identifies the two case studies to be analyzed. It provides a brief introduction to the history of collaborative writing for the stage, and an overview of the existing theoretical literature on the topic of collaboration. It also provides definitions for important terms and defines the parameters of the analysis.

Chapter two focuses on *Oklahoma!* (1943), the first collaboration between Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. The musical was adapted from *Green Grow the Lilacs*, a stage play by Lynn Riggs. While Rogers and Hammerstein were the main authors, there were significant contributions by choreographer Agnes de Mille and producer Theresa Helburn. In crafting the script, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II were basically creative equals, and their secondary collaborators served their vision. Helburn suggested changes to script and score that were retained in the final version of *Oklahoma!* and although Agnes de Mille's choreography was specific to the first Broadway production, her ideas and contributions affected the development of the book and music. Because both women's contributions were critical to the creation of *Oklahoma!* they will be considered here as minor collaborators, even though they did not directly contribute to book, lyrics or music. On the other hand, although the director and designers were critical to the success of the Broadway show, their work was not passed on in future productions, and there is no evidence that the development of the writing itself was significantly affected by their contributions. For that reason, they will be left out of my analysis.



The creation of *Oklahoma!* is emblematic of what might be described as a “traditional” approach to musical theatre writing. Each individual’s role in the creation process was clearly defined. Richard Rodgers was the composer. Oscar Hammerstein II was the book writer and lyricist. Other contributing creators were secondary. The musical was based on a stage play, and it was defined by text and music. Although the visual design was important to the success of the production, it was not central to the writing of the play. As an example of one of the most commonly undertaken forms of collaborative writing for the stage, *Oklahoma!* provides a valuable case study for analysis.

In Chapter three, I look at *The Lion King* (1997), a stage musical helmed by director Julie Taymor. *The Lion King* was based on an animated Disney film, and the material was not inherently suited to the stage. Making the story work in a theatrical context involved the leadership of an avant-garde visionary director, and the concerted, coordinated effort of a very large team of writers and designers. Unlike *Oklahoma!*, *The Lion King*’s hierarchy was topped by a director, not a writer. Julie Taymor’s vision was the guiding force in the creation of the Broadway show, and the writers served her vision. Equally important, in *The Lion King*, the story was expressed as much through visual design as it was through music or dialogue. Puppetry, masks, set design, costume design and choreography were critical elements in the narrative. For this reason, when considering this particular musical, the contributions of the designers and choreographer must be viewed on an equal level with the contributions of writers, lyricists and composers.

The creation of *The Lion King* was fairly singular, but the methods used are broadly representative of an approach to theatrical creation employed by Cirque du Soleil, Dragone and

many Las Vegas spectacle productions. The expansion of stage entertainment in recent years to include a growing number of spectacle, circus and variety productions has required a corresponding expansion in our understanding of the creative process. These types of shows employ visual storytelling techniques and story-critical choreography. When they include a script, the script is rarely a true representation of the performance. As in film, the directors, rather than the writers, tend to be the primary arbiters of meaning. In this respect, although *The Lion King* was a Broadway musical, its creation process was more reflective of non-traditional “spectacle” stage shows, and thus provides an excellent contrast to *Oklahoma!*

In Chapter four I provide a comparison of the collaborative processes behind the formation of *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King*. These two extremely dissimilar creative hierarchies resulted in highly differentiated creation processes, yet there were parallels in the way that they developed. Both shows went through three distinct periods in the development process. First, there was an ideation phase when the musical was broadly conceptualized and the progression of events and songs was laid out. Second, there was a creation period, the details of which varied between the two shows, but which involved the bulk of the writing and development. Third and lastly, there was a workshop and revision period, when ideas were tested, prototyped, analyzed, and revised if necessary.

Perhaps most importantly, both processes were marked by absolute commitment to unity of vision. Every design, every creative decision, and every movement on the stage was judged not on its own merits, but on how well it served the whole. This exacting standard made it possible for the production that reached audiences to present as a cohesive whole, in which the contributions of each individual creator would merge together seamlessly into a moving

theatrical experience. A collaboratively developed performance piece can only be truly successful if all of the elements of production are pulling in the same direction.

### **3. Literature Review**

The scholarship on collaborative writing for the stage, specifically, is quite limited. What does exist tends to center on the practices of anarchist theatre collectives, such as El Teatro Campesino in California and Goat Island in Chicago (Kerrigan 102). There is, however, a larger body of work addressing collaborative writing in more general terms, which can provide us with theoretical models that are relevant to the current study.

One of the leading ideas in current social theory is that even apparently solo writing actually emerges out of collaborative processes. Mikhail Bakhtin's 1986 *Theory of Language and Collaboration*, also known as the *Theory of the Communication Chain*, asserts that both individually and jointly authored texts result from processes in which collaboration is necessarily present. The basis for this assertion is the idea that "all communication is an *active process* involving collaborative partnerships" (Thralls 65). In their landmark essay "Writing as Collaboration," James Reither and Douglas Vipond directly ask the following question: "In what ways are writers collaborating with others when they write?" (Reither 856). The assertion that all writing is collaborative emerges out of a view of writing as a social process, influenced by the writer's intellectual interactions with other individuals, theorists and writers. Under this view, a text need not be explicitly jointly authored to be considered a product of collaborative work (Thralls 63-68). It is also noteworthy, however, that there has been a scholarly backlash against the classification of all writing as collaborative, based on the idea that in so doing, we render

useless the theoretical construct of collaboration, and make the term itself meaningless (Duffy 417).

Also of interest is Kenneth Bruffee's 1973 Theory of Collaborative Learning which draws on the 19th century experimental work of Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky's examination of dialogical thinking processes in both children and adults led him to the theory that "human thought is actually public or social conversation internalized" (Rogers 122). Kenneth Bruffee took this idea further, arguing that "knowledge itself is an inherently social artifact and learning an inherently social phenomenon" (Bruffee "Collaborative Writing", 745). Under this view, neither writing nor even thought itself can be considered truly individual, as, by definition, our thoughts are dependent upon knowledge gained through interaction with other humans, beings, and objects. Of course, this approach also further erodes the meaningful distinction between collaborative and solo writing, and, indeed, between individual and social identity.

While these theoretical constructs provide a pedagogically valuable way of viewing the social nature of writing, learning, and even thinking, they are not immensely useful to the writer seeking a practical guide to collaboration. For that, there is little scholarship available. There exist volumes devoted to the works of specific collaborative teams, such as Gilbert and Sullivan, Rogers and Hammerstein and Lerner and Lowe, and a handful of studies dedicated to the anarchist-collectivist models used by avant-garde theatre troupes such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe in California and the Liz Lerman Dance Experience in Takoma Park, Maryland (Kerrigan 97-102).

What these studies can illuminate are some of the ways in which collaborative companies structure themselves, in terms of hierarchy, pay, and power structures, and in terms of actual

creative collaboration. Of particular importance is that most of the collectivist companies have attempted to flatten their hierarchical structures to a greater or lesser degree. Nonetheless, there is variation between those who continue to employ an artistic director with a final say and those where true consensus is required in order to make any company decision (Kerrigan 101-102).

Of course, in analyzing the collaborative processes used by avant-garde collectivist companies, we must remain cognizant of the purpose of the theatrical work itself. The goals of these companies were primarily non-commercial. They were even, in some cases, forcefully anti-capitalist. Therefore, the methods presented in such studies are of extremely limited use to the commercial writer seeking practical advice on collaborative processes. If the goal of a theatrical work is primarily experimental, the collaborative methods employed can be centered on process itself, whereas if its purposes are primarily commercial, the goals are attracting an audience, satisfying that audience, and bringing in a financial profit.

Fortunately for the purposes of this study, there is an abundance of biographical and historical information about the work of some of the most successful collaborative teams in stage writing. Although to my knowledge, there has been little scholarly attention paid to the methods of collaboration used by these teams, the information exists in letters, interviews and anecdotes, as well as in biographies and historical accounts of the creation processes of specific works for the theatre. This study will help to fill this gap, compiling and analyzing some of the processes and practices of successful commercial collaborations. By focusing on the specific methodologies and practices that have led to commercially successful productions, it is my intention that this thesis be of practical use to those writing collaboratively for the commercial stage.

#### 4. Research Design

I have chosen to focus my analyses on two contrasting case studies: *Oklahoma!*, written by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II with contributions by Agnes de Mille and Theresa Helburn, and *The Lion King*, directed by Julie Taymor, and created by an expansive, international team of writers and designers. Because these two musicals represent such different approaches to collaboration, they provide a wide range of techniques for the collaborative creator to analyze and employ.

These two musicals, separated by more than 50 years, represent two very different types of musical theatre: the “traditional” Broadway musical and the more avant-garde “spectacle” show. They also represent two very different types of collaboration. *Oklahoma!* was a relatively straightforward partnership between composer and librettist, while *The Lion King* involved a complex network of creators working in tandem. While a thesis of this scope cannot hope to provide an exhaustive analysis of the collaborative methods used in the creation of commercial musical theatre, *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* represent such deeply contrasting approaches to writing for the stage that they provide significant diversity in terms of collaborative and creative processes.

The data for this study has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. It includes books, journal articles, articles in trade publications, documentary films, published interviews and lectures. Where possible, I have given preferential treatment to autobiographical materials. While it is true that there is unavoidable bias inherent to autobiography as a form, the potential advantages of working with a first-person source are overwhelming. In order to

counter-balance the autobiographical bias, I have also made sure to include a diverse range of outside commentators and analysts among my sources.

The data presented about *Oklahoma!* in Chapter two rests heavily on the autobiographies of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, and on *Oklahoma!: The Making of an American Musical*, an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of *Oklahoma*'s development process by Tim Carter. Carter provides a close analysis of archival materials, including notes and personal papers by the two primary authors. Chapter two also takes into account interviews with de Mille and Helburn and analysis by a range of scholars. The data presented about *The Lion King* in Chapter three depends largely on lectures and interviews with director Julie Taymor. Also of tremendous value was *The Lion King: Pride Rock on Broadway*, a book by Taymor and Alexis Greene which details the development of the Broadway production of *The Lion King*. Additional sources included an article written by Ken Cerniglia and Aubrey Lynch II, both members of *The Lion King* production team, and several scholarly articles, including a highly critical analysis by Maurya Wickstrom.

My primary method of data analysis will be process analysis. Usually used in business, this form of analysis identifies inputs, outputs and operational processes in terms of their usefulness and effectiveness to the goals of the system. It can be used to improve understanding of how the writing process translates onto the stage, and to identify areas of inefficiency. In this case, it will be used to identify successful strategies, methods, and techniques used in collaborative theatrical writing, and to judge them on the basis of results, or outputs. The use of a mode of analysis designed for use in business is appropriate to this thesis, due especially to the study's focus on commercial theatre and its profit-oriented goals.

## **5. Significance of the Study**

The benefit of this study is that it provides a framework for effective collaborative writing for commercial theatre. It helps to distinguish the most effective processes for collaborative, commercial theatrical writing, providing useful insights for practical application. Furthermore, it suggests concrete and specific processes that can be used by collaborators who are writing for the commercial stage. In musical theatre, a field in which collaboration is not only desirable, but often necessitated by circumstances, insights into creative collaborative processes are valuable, and worth the attention of a study such as this one.



## Chapter 2: *Oklahoma!*: Inventing the Classic American Musical

In the history of musical theatre writing, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II are giants. The eight musicals that they wrote together<sup>3</sup> are considered classics of the form, and they experienced tremendous commercial success both in the 1940s and 50s, when they were writing, and in the years since. Their first collaborative effort, the groundbreaking musical *Oklahoma!*, set in place the methods of collaboration that they would employ for the rest of their careers. This chapter will explore the collaborative methods used by Rodgers and Hammerstein during the development of *Oklahoma!*, from their initial meetings to their final revisions before the Broadway opening. It will demonstrate that the success of *Oklahoma!* was built on consistent and conscientious collaborative processes, and identify those processes so they can be adapted by other writers and composers.

While there is a strong received narrative regarding the creative processes that built *Oklahoma!*, there is significant physical evidence that brings into question the veracity of that narrative. The received narrative includes an assertion that Rodgers and Hammerstein nearly always wrote lyrics before music, as well as several stories about the specific development of *Oklahoma!* (Rodgers 220-221). The archival records, on the other hand, seem to contradict this narrative in several ways. In particular, the records do not support the assertion that Rodgers and Hammerstein consistently composed lyrics before music (Carter 94). While a full accounting of the archival records is beyond the scope of this thesis, this chapter will address the controversy

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<sup>3</sup> Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote the following musicals: *Oklahoma!* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), *Allegro* (1947), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), *Me and Juliet* (1953), *Pipe Dream* (1955), *Flower Drum Song* (1958), and *The Sound of Music* (1959). They also wrote the movie musicals *State Fair* (1945) and *Cinderella* (1957) (rnh.com).

as it applies to the collaborative process. In order to keep a clear focus, this chapter will be limited to a discussion of collaboration and will not address other aspects of the creative process, such as inspiration, writing craft, direction or design, nor will it include musical or textual analysis of *Oklahoma!*.

The idea for *Oklahoma!* actually came from an outside source: Theresa Helburn, one of the co-directors of the Theatre Guild. During a 1940 revival of Lynn Riggs' *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1930) at the Westport Country Playhouse in Connecticut, Helburn conceived the idea of adapting the play into a musical (Hyland 138-139). It is indisputable, in fact, that *Oklahoma!*'s first collaborators were actually Helburn and Riggs. Theresa Helburn's vision and resolve were fundamentally responsible for the creation of *Oklahoma!*. It was her support that brought Riggs' play to the stage in 1931 and again in 1940, and her idea to bring the project to Richard Rodgers in 1942. Her involvement in the project did not end there. Helburn acted as a producer, promoted the show to investors, and even made important dramatic and musical suggestions that were implemented in the musical and fundamentally affected the audience experience (Wilk 19-20).

When Theresa Helburn brought her idea for a musical adaptation of *Green Grow the Lilacs* to Richard Rodgers, he was on the verge of parting ways with his long-time collaborator Lorenz Hart. Hart's alcoholism and other personal problems were preventing the team from creating new work. Although they had enjoyed a phenomenally successful career together, Rodgers was ready to find a new collaborator. In fact, due to his concern over Hart's alcoholism, Rodgers had already approached Oscar Hammerstein II to discuss a future partnership, should Hart be unable to continue working. This proved to be fortuitous. Hart was uninterested in writing a western musical and felt that *Green Grow the Lilacs* would be poor source material.

Lorenz Hart refused the project and headed to Mexico, leaving Rodgers to pursue other opportunities (Hyland 134-136).

Fortunately for Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II was already enamored with Riggs' play. He had, in fact, been conceiving of a musical adaptation of *Green Grow the Lilacs* for years, and was thrilled with the opportunity to work with Rodgers on the new musical. The two men's extraordinary commitment to the project was further illustrated by the fact that they agreed to write the musical without asking for a cash advance, knowing that the Theatre Guild was in dire financial straits (Wilk 38).

Once the project had been agreed to, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II arranged their first meeting, at Rodgers' Connecticut home. According to Rodgers' autobiography, they "sat under a huge oak tree and tossed ideas around. What kind of songs were we going to write? Where would they go? Who would sing them? What special texture and mood should the show have?" (Rodgers 217). In the following weeks, the men would meet for lunch in New York City twice a week, then go to their respective homes in the country to think. At this stage, they were not attempting to write songs or dialogue. They were simply brainstorming about the needs of the show, the nature of the characters and the thousands of decisions that writers make before pens are ever put to paper.

During these early meetings, there was no attempt to outline the show or make serious decisions about the production (Carter 81). For the first few weeks that they wrote together, Rodgers and Hammerstein attempted simply to familiarize themselves with each other, with the play they were about to adapt, and with the way that each of them preferred to work (Rodgers

217-218). It was a great relief to both of them that they found each other to be extremely compatible, and had few disagreements about the play or the writing process.

Once Rodgers and Hammerstein were both satisfied that they had come to a deep mutual understanding about the nature of the musical they were writing together, they moved into the next stage of their writing process: the blueprint stage<sup>4</sup>. At this point, they walked through the entire plot and laid out the structure of their musical together. Starting with the beginning and ending, they built a thorough outline, breaking down story and song components, and determining the content which needed to be communicated through each song. Both partners preferred to use music throughout as much of the show as possible, keeping the book lean, and the music front and center (Hammerstein 15-17).

It was also during this stage that the writers identified and addressed interior problems, both structural and contextual. Unfortunately, while both partners mention this aspect of the writing process, there seems to be minimal information illustrating what they might have meant by “interior problems.” Hammerstein does mention that he and Rodgers found the final scenes in *Green Grow the Lilacs* to have a “disturbingly Freudian flavor” (Carter 81). In the final scenes of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the community participates in a shivaree<sup>5</sup> outside of Laurey and Curly’s home. In the original play, the language in this scene got violent and quite graphically sexual<sup>6</sup> (Riggs 127). Rodgers and Hammerstein eventually worked out a “toned-down” version of the

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<sup>4</sup> By the “blueprint stage”, I mean the part of the writing process when the primary collaborators laid out the narrative progression of the show, as well as the placement of songs.

<sup>5</sup> A shivaree is a tradition in which the community bangs pots and pans, making a loud commotion to disrupt a newlywed couple’s wedding night (Oxford English Dictionary).

<sup>6</sup> This sexualized and violent language is probably what Hammerstein was referring to as “disturbingly Freudian.”

shivaree, in which the mood of the crowd was less sinister and the language far less sexualized. They believed this modified version of the shivaree would be more palatable to the audience, while maintaining the familiarity of the original. (Carter 81-82). It is unfortunate that neither party left a clear indication of what they meant by “interior problems” in the script, but we can certainly speculate that a major component of this process involved addressing the challenges of adaptation, as shown by the preceding example.

Adaptation is a form of passive collaboration. The original writer or writers do not have a voice in the room, and are unable to actively influence the ongoing creative process, but if they have done their jobs well, their words speak for them. In the case of *Oklahoma!*, Lynn Riggs, through the text of *Green Grow the Lilacs* exerted a silent but ongoing influence on the writing of the musical libretto. Hammerstein found inspiration in Riggs’ language, sometimes lifting large sections of dialogue with almost no change. Perhaps more surprisingly, one of the most iconic songs in the musical, “Oh What a Beautiful Mornin’” was inspired by and adapted from the stage directions in Riggs’ play<sup>7</sup> (Green 106).

It is important to understand, however, that Rodgers and Hammerstein did not treat *Green Grow the Lilacs* as a sacred relic. They were, from the beginning, willing to make significant changes in order to translate the play into a musical form. They added the character of Will Parker, and built a love triangle between him, Ado Annie, and Ali Hakim, in an effort to add a comic parallel to the serious love triangle at the center of the story (Hyland 143). They also made

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<sup>7</sup> The stage directions in question read as follows: “It is a radiant summer morning several years ago, the kind of morning which, enveloping the shapes of earth - men, cattle in a meadow, blades of the young corn, streams - makes them seem to exist now for the first time, their images giving off a visible golden emanation that is partly true and partly a trick of imagination focussing to keep alive a loveliness that may pass away” (Riggs 3).

Ado Annie a more physically attractive character, probably to meet the expectations of their Broadway audiences (Rodgers 218). By far the largest alterations to the original play were made to the ending. In *Green Grow the Lilacs*, Curly is convicted of killing Jud Fry and is allowed to spend only one night with his new bride before being hauled off to jail. Rodgers and Hammerstein felt that this ending was too dark and messy, and they “cleaned it up” by having Curly be found innocent of the murder, leading to a happy ending (Rodgers 218). Throughout the adaptation process, Rodgers and Hammerstein were respectful of their source material, but refused to be beholden to it. They used it where it worked for their purpose, and they changed it where it did not.

After learning each other’s work styles and preferences, deeply analyzing their source material, and making major adaptation decisions, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II were ready to start writing the songs that would define *Oklahoma!*. Before a single lyric was written or note composed, the two men engaged in extensive song planning. They determined the content, style and purpose of each song in the play, then tossed around ideas about lyrics, rhythms, melodic motifs and musical structures. Though Rodgers was not a lyricist and Hammerstein not a composer, they each had an intuitive understanding of the needs of the work at hand. They found that their ideas easily built upon one other when they engaged in this planning process together, and their work proceeded quickly and smoothly. Furthermore, they found that this collaborative planning process gave them immediate feedback from one another that led them towards good ideas and away from bad ones (Hammerstein 15-17).

After months of planning sessions, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II were finally ready to begin writing the play itself. Thanks to an extremely thorough planning process,

Rodgers, as the composer, had no real interaction with the book once the actual writing process began. Hammerstein took care of the dialogue, and Rodgers was relieved to be able to trust that the book would be completed on time and according to the decisions the partners had made together. Hammerstein required no babysitting. This was a welcome departure from the uncertainty and unreliability of his previous partnership with Lorenz Hart (Hyland 144).

After all the painstaking preparation, it was finally time for Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II to get down to creating the lifeblood of musical theatre: the songs. When it comes to songwriting, one of the most popular inquiries made of writers is: In what order do you write? Which comes first, lyrics or music? This question is particularly important when discussing the collaborative process, especially when the collaborators' respective roles are clearly defined as lyricist and composer. Unfortunately, when it comes to the songs that form the backbone of *Oklahoma!* (and in fact, when it comes to the entire Rodgers and Hammerstein songbook) there is serious scholarly disagreement about Rodgers and Hammerstein's methodology. There are two relevant theories: the "Popular Theory", repeated in nearly every account of *Oklahoma's* creation, including Richard Rodgers', and the "Carter Theory", presented by Tim Carter in *Oklahoma!: The Making of an American Musical*.

The first theory, which I will refer to as the "Popular Theory", is a major component of the received narrative and is backed up by Richard Rodgers' autobiography. This theory states that in almost every case Oscar Hammerstein II wrote the words first, then gave over the completed and already polished lyrics to Rodgers, who was usually so inspired by Hammerstein's masterful work that the music practically wrote itself. According to the Popular

Theory, there were one or two songs in every Rodgers and Hammerstein musical which reversed this order<sup>8</sup>, but the methodology, by and large, was quite consistent (Rodgers 220-221).

The Popular Theory is presented as settled fact in most biographical material but at least one scholar, Tim Carter, has come to an entirely different conclusion about the collaborative methodology of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. His theory, which I will refer to as the Carter Theory, states that Rodgers and Hammerstein were actually altogether inconsistent about their methodology and order of writing. The evidence for the Carter Theory, laid out in minute detail in *Oklahoma!: The Making of an American Musical*, is compelling, but dense and difficult to access, especially since most of the original documents are hidden away in limited access archives. Carter analyzed thousands of documents, including the writers' notebooks, early musical sketches and minor newspaper interviews, and came out with a far more nuanced portrait of the way the songs of *Oklahoma!* emerged: one in which the writing order was fluid and adaptable. Some songs were written lyrics first, some music first, and some were passed back and forth between lyricist and composer throughout the writing process (Carter 94). Although the Popular Theory appears in a larger portion of the literature, the available evidence seems to better support the Carter Theory<sup>9</sup>.

There were two clear benefits to this fluid approach to writing order. The first was that it left room for inspiration. If Rodgers had an idea for a melody, or if Hammerstein had the start of a lyric, it could serve as a launch point for the song at hand. The second benefit was that the fluid approach allowed the partners to adapt their methods to the needs of each specific song they

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<sup>8</sup> In *Oklahoma!*, "People Will Say We're In Love" is the only song for which every account claims that the music was written before the lyrics.

<sup>9</sup> It is not within the scope of this thesis to verify the Carter Theory.



were writing. In 1943, Oscar Hammerstein II revealed in two different newspaper interviews<sup>10</sup> that in general, he preferred for the music to be written first in the case of sentimental songs, and for the lyrics to be written first in the case of comic songs. In her *New Yorker* profile of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, Margaret Case Harriman noted that “according to Hammerstein and Rodgers, a love song always comes out better if the music is written first and the words fitted to it later. The boys don’t know exactly why this is true, but they think it may have something to do with music being the language of love” (qtd. in Carter 95).

In order to build a clear picture of the work flows and processes employed in the creation of *Oklahoma!*, I will now look at three of its well-known songs: “Oh What a Beautiful Mornin’”, “People Will Say We’re In Love”, and “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top”. Each of these three songs was written using a different work flow and writing order from the others. While all three songs were successful components of the same cohesive whole, they each served a distinctly different purpose within the context of the play: “Oh What a Beautiful Mornin’” opened the musical and set the tone for the rest of the production; “People Will Say We’re In Love” served as the principle lovers’ main romantic ballad; and “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” was an up-tempo mood-lifter.

The process of writing the opening song in *Oklahoma!*, “Oh What a Beautiful Mornin’”, is often cited in support of the Popular Theory. The opening was, from the start, the source of some stress and uncertainty on the part of the writing team. Common wisdom at the time dictated that the opening number of a musical should be a rollicking, up-tempo affair featuring a bevy of scantily-clad dancing girls. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II tried for days to invent a

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<sup>10</sup> The interviews appeared in the *Boston Morning Globe* on 14 March 1943 and in the *New York Post* on 29 March 1943 (Carter 95).

way to bring dancing girls into the scene, but in the end, the attempts felt contrived and hollow. They were trying to create a new kind of musical, driven by story and character, and the common wisdom was not necessarily applicable. After giving the full weight of consideration to the conventional approach, Rodgers and Hammerstein decided to throw convention aside and trust the story (Hammerstein 7-9).

In their initial meetings during the song planning stage for “Oh What a Beautiful Mornin’”, Rodgers and Hammerstein made a number of extremely important decisions as a team. Rodgers enumerates some of the choices that were made: “not to have a chorus on-stage (phony); utilize three-quarter time in short sixteen-bar verses and repeated refrain (indigenous); have Aunt Eller on-stage churning butter to emphasize rhythm (self-evident); let Curly enter singing but unaccompanied (intimate); better not seat audience during song (impressive)” (qtd. in Secret 246-247). Many of these decisions were revolutionary choices, especially the decisions to open the show with an old woman churning butter on an almost empty stage, and to open with a solo song rather than a rousing group number.

In the end, Hammerstein adapted the lyrics directly from the opening stage directions in *Green Grow the Lilacs*. Accounts differ as to whether the lyrics for “Oh What a Beautiful Mornin’” were written in as little as one hour or over as much as two or more weeks (Secret 248). There is, however, wide agreement about the speed with which the music was written. When Oscar Hammerstein II gave Richard Rodgers the lyrics to *Oklahoma!*'s opening number, Rodgers produced the melody almost instantaneously. Rodgers described it as though the music was an inevitable response to the lyrics:

I was a little sick with joy because it was so lovely and so right. When you're given words like that you get something to say musically. You'd really have to be made of cement not to spark to that... When the lyrics are right, it's easier to write a tune than to bend over and tie your shoe laces. Notes come more spontaneously than words... (Wilk 41)

Richard Rodgers sat down at the piano with Hammerstein's lyrics and translated that instinct into the very first Rodgers and Hammerstein song, and much to the chagrin of his new writing partner, it took about "as long to compose it as to play it" (Hyland 140-141). The writing of "Oh What a Beautiful Mornin'" was a textbook example of the Popular Theory, in which the lyrics were composed first and the music followed swiftly thereafter.

"People Will Say We're In Love" was an example of a song written in the reverse order. Richard Rodgers composed the music first and brought it to Hammerstein as a melody for a love song. It was also an example of the rare song for which Richard Rodgers struggled to produce a satisfactory melody. In an interview with Gertrude Samuels, Rodgers claimed that it actually took him days to settle on music for the first eight bars of the chorus (Carter 120). Once he had completed the now-iconic melody, Rodgers passed the music on to Hammerstein for lyrics.

Writing the lyrics for "People Will Say We're In Love" presented a whole new set of challenges for Oscar Hammerstein II. The original placement of the song was in the second act, where Hammerstein's libretto held a place-marker stating that at this point in the musical, Curly and Laurey would sing "what will be the best song in the show - when it is written" (Hyland 144-145). By the time Oscar Hammerstein II received the completed melody from Richard Rodgers, the song had been moved to the first act, where it presented a unique

dramatic problem. The new placement of the song set it at a time when Curly and Laurey were fighting. It would not have been effective to stop the emotional momentum in order to break into a love song. Eventually, Hammerstein hit upon a solution: writing the song as a list of negatives. The melody he had been given was clearly a love song, but the dramatic moment required a tongue-in-cheek solution. As any musical theatre aficionado knows well, Hammerstein's answer was to compose the lyrics as a list of don'ts:

Don't throw bouquets at me.

Don't please my folks too much.

Don't laugh at my jokes too much.

People will say we're in love. (Hammerstein)

In the case of "People Will Say We're In Love," the music preceded the lyrics, and both elements emerged out of a creative struggle. In spite of this struggle, or perhaps because of it, the product which emerged had an effortless quality which would come to characterize much of Rodgers and Hammerstein's work.

The writing process for "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top" was unusual for Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. This song, which was actually Hammerstein's favorite song in *Oklahoma!*, was passed back and forth between the two writers throughout its creation. "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top" was the only song in *Oklahoma!* that was not completely new. The melody for the beginning of the song was a musical fragment that Richard Rodgers had written previously but which had not yet found its place in a musical (Secret 249). According to Oscar Hammerstein II, this was an unusual way for Rodgers to work. In the introduction to his book, *Lyrics*, he describes Rodgers' work method:

Almost all composers have a reservoir of melodies which come to them at different times and which they write down in what they call a sketchbook. When they start work on a new musical play, they play over these previously written melodies for their collaborator, and it is decided which ones can be used in this particular score. They then write additional melodies as required. Dick Rodgers, however, does not work in this way. He writes music only for a specific purpose (Hammerstein 13-14).

Interestingly, “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” seems to have been the rare exception to Rodgers’ usual process. For some unknown reason, Richard Rodgers wrote a melody-fragment sometime before starting on *Okahoma!*, and decided to hold it in reserve. Rodgers found the fragment’s moment in the second song in the musical.

Richard Rodgers presented the song fragment to Oscar Hammerstein II, who proceeded to work with it over the course of a few days. Hammerstein returned the piece to Rodgers with lyrics for the melody-fragment and for the middle section, which did not yet have music (Secret 249). Rodgers explains how the lyrics then inspired the rest of the music for “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top”: “Oscar’s lyric suggested both a clip-clop rhythm and a melody in which the straight, flat country road could be musically conveyed through a repetition of the straight, flat sound of the D note, followed by a sharp upward flick as fowl scurry to avoid being hit by the moving wheels” (qtd. in Wilk 42). When Rodgers completed the melody, he returned it to Hammerstein, who had very little trouble completing the lyrics for the song.

Above all, the philosophy which characterized Rodgers and Hammerstein’s songwriting was a devotion to unity of idea. For the two men, every song, every word, every note, should

serve the story, a truly revolutionary idea in 1942. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II shared a belief that effective musical theatre writing demanded that every song “capture the essential character or mood of the singer or the scene” (Nolan 9-10). Hammerstein summed it up succinctly: “There are few things in life of which I am certain, but I am sure of this one thing, that the song is the servant of the play, that it is wrong to write first what you think is an attractive song and then try to wedge it into a story” (Hammerstein 19).

Rodgers and Hammerstein were utterly committed to *Oklahoma!*. They never allowed their broad vision to be compromised by ego or attachment to a particular song or lyric or melody. This was especially clear when it came to be time for revisions. Hammerstein lurked in the theatre, spying on preview audiences to locate low points and problem areas<sup>11</sup> (Wilk 92). One of the songs cut from the musical was a ballad called “Boys and Girls Like You and Me.” It is widely agreed by commentators, and by the writers and producers themselves, that the song was beautiful, but didn’t actually propel the characters forward. In the style of Broadway show that was popular at the time, in which the story was merely a vehicle for entertaining song-and-dance numbers, it would have been a lovely addition to the show. *Oklahoma!*, however, was a “book musical”, in which the story and characters were the musical’s driving force, and there was no place in it for extraneous musical numbers. The writers let the song go when they realized it didn’t serve the play (Wilk 39). Hammerstein also made severe cuts to the dialogue between each version of the play. Each draft was more streamlined and focused than the last (Carter 85).

The revisions to *Oklahoma!* included both significant cuts and major additions. “People Will Say We’re in Love”, “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top”, and “Kansas City” were all late

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<sup>11</sup> Hammerstein hid his presence from audiences in order to get a genuine sense of their reactions, rather than the polite response he could expect if they were aware of his presence.

additions to the musical. The title song itself was a very late addition. Theresa Helburn, the producer who had initially brought the idea for *Oklahoma!* to Rodgers, approached Oscar Hammerstein II and said to him, “I wish you and Dick would write a song about the earth” (Wilk 65). A few days later Hammerstein found himself writing about the state of Oklahoma and its land. “Oklahoma” would become one of the most iconic songs in the musical, and would give it its title. It was never described in an outline. It was not adapted from *Green Grow the Lilacs*. “Oklahoma” was an inspired idea, and one of Helburn’s most valuable contributions to the play. It was also proof of the importance of the revision process.

Any analysis of the creation of *Oklahoma!* would be incomplete if it did not give due consideration to the Act I ballet. Agnes de Mille, *Oklahoma!*’s choreographer, played a definitive role in the creation of the musical, but the nature of that role has been hotly disputed. In her autobiography and public interviews, de Mille claimed that she was solely responsible for the idea of the dream ballet. According to her version of events, Hammerstein “had envisioned a circus with Laurey’s Aunt Eller riding around in a surrey with diamond wheels, Curly as ring-master, and Laurey on a flying trapeze; ‘they were literally going through hoops.’” (qtd. in Secret 252). According to de Mille, it was she who convinced Oscar Hammerstein II that the best way to end the act would be with a dream ballet, illustrating Laurey’s fantasies and fears (Hyland 145). She also claimed that she was the one who wanted to introduce some sexiness into the story through the dream ballet. De Mille later described the situation saying, “the first act, there was nothing in it, no threat, no suspense, no nothing” (qtd. in Wilk 72-74). De Mille believed the dream ballet would provide the perfect opportunity to introduce danger and sex to the first act.

Tim Carter's analysis, however, paints a different picture. According to Carter, long before a choreographer was hired, Oscar Hammerstein II had already committed to paper a detailed outline of the dream-ballet, which included many specific details that Agnes de Mille later claimed to have invented herself. My analysis of the outline in question reveals that Hammerstein had, in fact, broadly conceptualized the ballet, but his idea of a dream-ballet included circus elements, and evoked a dramatically different mood than the ballet Agnes de Mille would eventually create (Carter 127-128). Hammerstein himself never questioned de Mille's version of the story, nor did he personally take any credit for the invention of the dream ballet.

While Carter attributes this discrepancy to an active fraud perpetrated by Agnes de Mille, it seems far more likely that de Mille's description of Hammerstein's idea of a "circus ballet" was an honest attempt to describe her contributions, and to explain the dramatic change of tone which took place after she became an active collaborator on the musical. While she did take credit for a few ideas which appear to have predated her involvement, memory is imperfect, and I see no evidence that her inaccuracies were a result of intentional deception. Furthermore, there can be no doubt that Agnes de Mille, through her conception of the dream ballet, fundamentally helped to shape *Oklahoma!* as a musical.

The logical question that must be asked is: were Agnes de Mille's contributions to *Oklahoma!* significant enough that she should be considered a co-writer? Although the music and lyrics appear in every production of *Oklahoma!*, the original choreography is rarely reproduced. It is also worth considering Theresa Helburn's contributions to the final product.



While she did not write a lyric, compose a note, or even choreograph a step, *Oklahoma!* would never been written without Helburn's advocacy and coordination.

For the purposes of copyright law, authorship is limited to partners who have contributed either words or music to the final piece (Channick). Participation in ideation or story-phase development does not constitute authorship. However, copyright law is constantly being re-written, especially in response to the evolution of art and literature. Today's law may not be sufficient to answer the challenges posed by today's art. After all, it can hardly be denied that Agnes de Mille and Theresa Helburn both helped to shape *Oklahoma!* in essential ways.

In a way, *Oklahoma!* was a collaboration between five individuals: Lynn Riggs, Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, Agnes de Mille, and Theresa Helburn. The problem with attempting to spread the credit around is that it eventually becomes impossible to determine the boundaries of the writing team. Designers, actors, orchestrators, and directors all might have an influence on the development of a musical. Do we consider them to be co-writers as well? In the case of *Oklahoma!*, an honest analysis of the writing process includes the contributions of Riggs, Helburn and de Mille, but the musical, as it is performed today in professional and community theatres, is generally attributed simply to Rodgers and Hammerstein. Legally and practically, though many had a hand in its development, *Oklahoma!* was written by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, based on a play by Lynn Riggs.

Rodgers and Hammerstein had a collaborative relationship built on respect, hard work, and professional compatibility. However, they did not work in the same way. Hammerstein was slow and methodical, while Rodgers was fast and intuitive. The critical factor in their professional compatibility was not a similar work style. It was, rather, similar philosophies about

writing for the theatre. They both believed that their job as writers was to let the story speak. They believed that no conventional rule should be blindly followed if it interfered with the telling of a story.

In his autobiography, Richard Rodgers explained his personal philosophy about musical theatre:

I have long held a theory about musicals. When a show works perfectly, it's because all the individual parts complement each other and fit together. No single element overshadows any other. In a great musical, the orchestrations sound the way the costumes look. That's what made *Oklahoma!* work. All the components dovetailed. There was nothing extraneous or foreign, nothing that pushed itself into the spotlight yelling "Look at me!" It was a work by many that gave the impression of having been created by one (Rodgers 227).

In this statement, Rodgers gives a lot of credit to his other collaborators. Perhaps that is one of the other secrets of successful collaboration: generosity of spirit, and a genuine willingness to share credit.

### **Chapter 3: *The Lion King*: Innovation Transforms the Broadway Tradition**

On November 13, 1997, more than fifty years after Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein II opened *Oklahoma!*, Julie Taymor, Thomas Schumacher and Michael Eisner toasted the success of *The Lion King* on Broadway. The new musical, adapted from a blockbuster Disney animated children's film, was unlike anything that Broadway audiences had seen before. It featured stylized dance, South African chants, elaborate puppetry, and it changed the way the world saw Broadway. *The Lion King* broke box office records and attracted a whole new generation of theatre-goers to Broadway stages. This astonishing artistic feat was accomplished by a team of collaborators working under the leadership of the visionary director and designer Julie Taymor. Unlike *Oklahoma!*, *The Lion King* was not the product of a collaboration between relative equals. Julie Taymor led, and her team followed. Taymor herself wrote no more than a handful of lyrics, and did not contribute a word of dialogue or a note of music to the show, yet the stage production of *The Lion King* is without a doubt the product of her unique vision.

This chapter will trace the development of *The Lion King*, describing a director-led collaborative process, in which design, choreography and puppetry were equal in importance to music, lyrics, and dialogue. It is a process that fluctuated between individual ideation and collaborative development. There were times in the development process when Taymor worked by herself, but no single aspect of the production was created by one individual alone. The chapter will also address the unique challenges of collaborating with a corporate entity and an entertainment juggernaut like Disney.

In June of 1994, while Disney Theatrical was celebrating the success of *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway, and a mere month and a half after the election of Nelson Mandela to the South African presidency, Disney Animation released a groundbreaking animated film called *The Lion King*. The movie, set in a mythical air-brushed African savannah, featured songs and chants by Elton John, Tim Rice, Hans Zimmer and South African composer Lebo M. It wove African traditional music and visual imagery into a bright children's spectacle with a sparkling pop music soundtrack. *The Lion King* tapped into a historical moment marked by a rise in interest in Africa as South African politics rocked popular discourse and world music was trending nationwide (Jordon 11).

The film was a wild success, but when Michael Eisner, CEO of the Disney Corporation, approached Thomas Schumacher, president of Disney Theatrical Group, about creating a Broadway musical based on Disney's latest box office hit, Schumacher balked. In his words, it was "the worst idea I had ever heard ... there was nothing about the film that called out to be theatricalized. Frank Rich in *The New York Times* called *Beauty and the Beast* an animated Broadway musical. No one ever said anything similar about *The Lion King*" (qtd in Taymor and Greene 14). Schumacher and Eisner argued repeatedly about the suitability of *The Lion King* for theatrical adaptation:

This discussion repeated itself several times until Michael grew weary of smiling and told me in no uncertain terms that I was indeed working on an adaptation of *The Lion King*. I blurted back that it was impossible, and he shot back even faster it wasn't impossible, I just needed a brilliant idea!

A brilliant idea, that's it. All I needed to do was *find* someone with a brilliant idea. This sleight of hand is known as *development* in many many circles of Hollywood. (Schumacher qtd in Taymor and Greene 14)

Thomas Schumacher immediately knew to whom he would turn for his brilliant idea: the celebrated avant-garde director and designer, Julie Taymor.

After Julie Taymor received the phone call from Thomas Schumacher offering her the opportunity to direct the new adaptation, she and Schumacher tossed around a wide range of ideas. They considered using Madison Square Garden for an immersive theatre concept, staging the show in a tent in the style of a Cirque du Soleil touring show, or doing a spectacle production at Radio City Music Hall. All of these ideas were firmly rejected by Michael Eisner, who was deeply committed to the idea of a “legitimate Broadway musical” (Taymor and Greene 21). When valuable intellectual property is being adapted in a collaboration with an enormous corporate entity, the corporate entity has all the leverage. Taymor left that phone meeting with a formidable task: to adapt a beloved animated film populated by talking animals into a serious Broadway musical with wide demographic appeal. By the end of the meeting, it was also clear to all parties involved that a collaboration led by Julie Taymor would be firmly and definitively defined by Taymor's vision. Even with Disney, one of the world's most powerful entertainment juggernauts, as her producer and collaborative partner, Taymor made it clear that she would be running the show (Taymor and The Nantucket Project).

The challenges of adapting *The Lion King* were entirely different from the challenges Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II faced in adapting *Oklahoma!* Unlike *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the source material for *The Lion King* was an animated film — a blockbuster hit with

loyal, sometimes obsessive fans, and was backed by a major corporate entity whose money and reputation was riding on the production. The musical would have to both meet the expectations and demands of a loyal, devoted Disney audience, and bring in a new, sophisticated theatre audience that was instinctively distrustful of the “Disney-fication” of the Great White Way (Taymor and Winer).

These were not the only major challenges facing the musical. In a very practical way, as Julie Taymor explains, “many of *The Lion King*’s scenes are seemingly impossible to transfer to the stage: the wildebeest stampede, the panoramic landscapes, the chase scenes, the animal herds, the elephant graveyard, and its hundred hyenas. They are all inherently cinematic scenes” (Taymor and Greene 22). Taymor immediately recognized that part of the answer to a successful adaptation was scale. She saw the need to “transform the proportions on stage to achieve that play with scale and space” (Taymor and Greene 22). Even more important than theatrical spectacle, however, was the need to create a real human connection with the audience — no small task when faced with a cast of characters conspicuously lacking any humans.

Thomas Schumacher recounts:

When it came to translating the film to the stage, the challenge was to find an approach that would make people connect better with the characters and the story than they already had in the movie. Because theater is about connections, it’s about the audience connecting with what is happening on stage. If you can’t close that link in that chain, you don’t have a piece of theater (qtd in Taymor and Greene 24)

Julie Taymor spent months with the material, letting her ideas gestate, and waiting for a burst of inspiration to provide a concept for the new musical that would transform a beloved children's movie into something new and different, while retaining the essential seed that made it so wildly popular in the first place.

In a way, Julie Taymor's initial creative collaborator on *The Lion King* musical was the film that preceded it. But, it was not long before Taymor was working closely with a much larger community of collaborators, starting with the film's co-director, Roger Allers, and screenwriter, Irene Mecchi. Allers and Mecchi, guided by Taymor's vision, became the co-writers of the musical's book, and they worked intimately with Taymor to realize that vision. Taymor and the writers met "to discuss the script, scene by scene, to determine what could work on the stage, what needed to be fleshed out, and what had to go" (Taymor and Greene 22). The decisions these three made would form the backbone for all the other creative work to follow.

In this early development stage, Julie Taymor and the collaborative team's main goal was to conceptualize their stage adaptation of *The Lion King*, integrating story, song, dance and design into a theatrical whole. In addition to the book writers, Roger Allers and Irene Mecchi, the team at this stage consisted of an international contingent of composers and songwriters, including Elton John, Tim Rice, Lebo M and Mark Mancina<sup>12</sup> (Cerniglia 4).

Story is the soul of theatre, but the 75-minute animated film of *The Lion King* did not provide enough story to hold up a two and half hour musical. Julie Taymor, Roger Allers and Irene Mecchi felt that the longer stage format afforded them an opportunity to build out a more

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<sup>12</sup> Elton John and Tim Rice are both British composers, Lebo M is a South African musician, and Mark Mancina is an American composer. (Cerniglia 4)

complete Hero's Journey<sup>13</sup>, in which Simba would pass trials and tests to earn his triumphant homecoming to Pride Rock. According to Taymor, Simba needed time "to truly take the journey, both inner and outer, that would lead him full circle to his place as king" (Taymor and Greene 22). Prior to meeting with the writers, Taymor had spent about a month brainstorming what she called "Simba's lost years" (Taymor and Greene 22). Now she would need to entrust her ideas to the writers.

Once together, Julie Taymor and the writing team planned out the story progression for *The Lion King* musical in tremendous detail, adding scenes and fleshing out characters. Taymor brought Allers and Mecchi an idea for a new scene that showed Simba as "a young man daring his own mortality [because] he has never gotten over his father's death or the subconscious guilt that he was responsible for" (Taymor and Greene 24). The powerful scene, which revealed a dangerously reckless side of Simba, would eventually be called "Simba's Nightmare", and it was critical in building Simba into a more complex character, suitable for the stage (Taymor and Greene 24).

Another serious concern for Taymor and the writers was "the lack of strong adult female presence" (Taymor and Greene 24). They agreed to expand Nala's role, emphasizing her strength, defiance and rebelliousness, and giving her a complete story arc to parallel Simba's. They also decided to make Rafiki, the baboon shaman, into a female character "bringing us all together as both a character and sort of force of nature. This strong, essential female presence elevates the entire theme of the circle of life" (Taymor and Greene 24-25). It is difficult to ascertain whether these particular character decisions were purely rooted in Taymor's early

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<sup>13</sup> Referring to the work of Joseph Campbell, especially *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.



vision, or if they emerged organically from the collaboration itself, but their actualization required collaborative effort.

As *The Lion King*'s story arc began to take shape, Julie Taymor began to lay out the progression of songs and dance numbers within the story (Taymor and Greene 22). Although the animated film was widely celebrated for its music, there were actually only five songs on the soundtrack: "Circle of Life," "I Just Can't Wait to Be King," "Be Prepared," "Hakuna Matata," and "Can You Feel the Love Tonight." The typical Broadway musical contains over a dozen songs. This left Taymor with a deficit of at least eight musical numbers. In order to reduce this deficit, Taymor turned to "Rhythm of the Pridelands," an album inspired by the score of *The Lion King* animated movie, with songs by Hans Zimmer, Mark Mancina and Lebo M. She was deeply inspired by the music: "The melodies are soulful and evocative, as is the way in which the music is arranged and performed. The film's score contains vocals that Lebo M helped create with a South African chorus singing in Zulu. For 'Rhythm of the Pridelands,' the composers created songs from some of the score music and also wrote new songs, mostly in Zulu and all with a strong African choral center" (Taymor and Greene 25-26). Julie Taymor was inspired by the album, soon selecting pieces that could be adapted for the Broadway production. Taymor quickly found that "several melodies on the 'Rhythm of the Pridelands' album seemed appropriate for specific characters, based not upon the song's content but upon its mood" (Taymor and Greene 25-26).

A handful of songs from "Rhythm of the Pridelands" helped to flesh out the new musical, but they were not enough to complete it. For that, Julie Taymor had to turn to her musical collaborators and ask them to create new songs. From Elton John and Tim Rice, she asked for a

“charm” song for Zazu<sup>14</sup>, a darkly comic trio for the hyenas, and a scene-song about the madness of King Scar<sup>15</sup>. The final musical elements, chants by Lebo M, would not be added until further into the development process (Taymor and Greene 27).

One of the ways in which the creation of *The Lion King* was a radical departure from “traditional” musical theatre writing methods (such as those described in Chapter 2), was that its visual aesthetic and design elements began development very early in the conceptualization process. Julie Taymor’s vision was, in fact, quite visual, and it was necessary to lay out the broad strokes of theatrical design and visual narrative in order to complete the writing process. The initial design concept for the show included scenic elements, masks and puppets, each of which played a critical role in forming the aesthetic foundation for the theatrical adaptation of *The Lion King*. Having these elements in place early in the writing process critically affected the development of the script and music. For example, rather than the visuals being designed to harmonize with music, *The Lion King*’s music was often composed to harmonize with the visual aesthetic. This was especially true of the chants that were added late in the creation process (Taymor and Greene 156).

Initially, Taymor made three critical decisions about the scenic design for *The Lion King* on her own. First, she decided that the central image in the play was a circle and it would be manifest in the set piece known as Pride Rock (Taymor and Greene 28-29). (Although she drafted initial drawings of Pride Rock at this time, the piece would be radically reimagined later in the process, after she brought in a set designer.) Second, she decided that the stage technology

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<sup>14</sup> A hornbill who acts as Mufasa’s advisor.

<sup>15</sup> The antagonist, a lion who has usurped Simba’s rightful throne.

would be revealed to the audience. There would be no attempt to conceal the mechanics of movement. It was Taymor's belief that by revealing that which is usually concealed, the magic of the stage could be made more, not less, impactful (Taymor "Spiderman, The Lion King, and Life on the Creative Edge."). Third, she conceived the idea of constructing large conveyor belts to create the illusion of movement during journeys, chases and stampedes (Taymor and Greene 28-29).

This initial stage of visual development was undertaken by Taymor alone, but she was careful to leave room for future collaboration. She recalls, "I censored conceptualizing any other set elements, because I wanted whoever would eventually be hired as the scenic designer to be free to propose his or her own creations" (Taymor and Greene 28-29).

During this early conceptualization phase, Julie Taymor began to think about how she would represent the cast of animals on the stage. She experimented with a range of puppetry techniques to create the illusion of animal movement. In this process, she was guided by her decision to reveal stage technology, finding that the most effective designs were those where the animal and the performer were both visible and present on the stage. This duality of human and animal became the central concept of *The Lion King* musical, what she would call the Double Event (Taymor "Spiderman, The Lion King, and Life on the Creative Edge."). Taymor describes the concept and why it worked:

One of the most powerful elements of the film is the rich humanity of the animal characters. Their voices, speech patterns, and emotionally wrought facial expressions are the crux of the humor and the pathos achieved. In considering this ironic duality of the human and the animal it became critical in the design

concept not to hide the actor behind a whole mask or inside an animal body suit. I wanted the human being to be an essential part of the stylization. [...] On a practical level, performers sing better without masks covering their faces. Aesthetically and emotionally, an audience gains the facial expressions that can add to an appreciation of what is really a human drama in animal guise. (Taymor and Greene 30)

In practical terms, this meant that the characters in *The Lion King* would wear their animal masks like headdresses, with their human faces fully visible beneath the stylized masks. Additionally, the dancers, who represented various African animals, would be visible inside and around the puppets that they controlled. Every aspect of design would be influenced by this idea of human-animal duality.<sup>16</sup>

At this point, Julie Taymor made her first hire for *The Lion King* musical: puppetry master Michael Curry, who would collaborate with Taymor to create *The Lion King*'s puppets and masks. Taymor and Curry already had an established history, working together on the film *Fool's Fire* (1992) and Taymor's opera productions of *Oedipus Rex* (1992) and *The Magic Flute* (1993). There are tremendous benefits to working with the same collaborators over and over again, including familiarity, the development of effective and efficient work flow patterns, and personal rapport. In this case, prior experience helped Taymor and Curry to establish discrete roles in their collaboration together. Taymor explains: "Primarily I would be responsible for the

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<sup>16</sup> Julie Taymor's use of puppetry and the idea of human-animal duality in *The Lion King* musical were strongly affected by her years of study in Japan, Bali, Sri Lanka, and other parts of Asia. These Asian influences, while fascinating, are not relevant to the question of collaboration. For that reason, I have chosen to leave them out of the current discussion, although they are quite worthy of scholarly attention.

sculpture and aesthetic design of the characters while Michael would be the architect of the technical design. Obviously the division would be loose; he would have tremendous input into the actual look of the show as I would be very involved in how the characters were going to move” (Taymor and Greene 40-41).

Michael Curry and Julie Taymor proceeded to discuss technical solutions to the presentation of principal characters. They experimented with a few different versions of masks, including shield masks that “the actors could hold in front of them or wear on their arms and backs” before settling on the headdress solution (Taymor and Greene 41). They spent months together wrestling with the designs for a comical duo of Timon and Pumbaa<sup>17</sup>. The characters’ unusual sizes and shapes and their comedic interactions necessitated a specialized approach to the puppetry. For Pumbaa, the team eventually settled on a huge puppet, in which the actor would be visible as a part of the warthog’s hair, and through the somewhat open, skeletal sides of the puppet (Taymor and Greene 64). Timon was a much more difficult puppet to design.

Taymor and Curry tried three dramatically different approaches to the puppetry for Timon before they were satisfied. First, they tried a Japanese form of puppetry called Hachioji Kuruma Nyngio, in which a seated performer manipulates the puppet using both hands and feet to control the puppets’ limbs and head. This style was rejected because the seated position of the puppeteer severely limited the agile Timon’s movements. The next attempt was a humanette puppet, in which a puppet body was suspended beneath the actor’s face. Unfortunately, the practical effect was to make it appear as though Timon was “floating three feet off the ground” (Taymor and Greene 67). The final attempt, which was ultimately chosen, was a one-man adaptation of a

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<sup>17</sup> Timon is a meerkat, and Pumbaa is a warthog.

traditional Japanese three-man Bunraku style of puppetry, in which the actor is fully visible behind a four-foot puppet (Hong 53-54). Working together, Curry and Taymor were able to identify what was and was not effective about each progressive puppet style, eventually landing on successful designs which met the narrative challenges of the show while fitting seamlessly into Taymor's unique visual aesthetic.

With the concept clear and the narrative arc in place, Julie Taymor and Michael Eisner met in Orlando, Florida in January of 1996 to discuss Taymor's ideas for the theatrical adaptation of *The Lion King*. Taymor says of this critical meeting, "He understood that a production I directed and designed would neither duplicate the film nor aim for realism, but would have its own distinctive look and personality. The production would have enormous scale and aspire toward elegance but at the same time would not hesitate to reveal the elements that make theater unique" (Taymor and Greene 45).

At this moment in the creative process, Julie Taymor's collaboration with Disney itself was at the forefront. While many theatre professionals were extremely displeased with Disney's entry into the theatrical market, Taymor herself took a much more practical view towards her corporate collaboration. Working with Disney, she had access to resources and financial support for her ideas, far beyond anything that had previously been available to her. Furthermore, Taymor describes her relationship with the Disney Corporation as one built on trust and respect:

Whenever people use the word Disney - I know that [...] the organization, for me, is individuals. I work with Tom Schumacher, Peter Schneider, and had occasional meetings with Michael Eisner. That's Disney to me. Disney is the same as Jeffrey Horowitz, my beloved producer at Theatre for a New Audience.

[...] They're individuals. If you work with these individual producers and they support you that's a good relationship. It's not a corporation I'm working with.  
(Taymor and Winer)

Likewise, Thomas Schumacher at Disney Theatrical Group was stimulated and inspired by the challenge and innovation Julie Taymor brought to the table:

Theater is not a business. Theater is a passion. The making of theater is about art. It is about people and people's ideas. The business of theater is what happens after creation. The irony here is that the most competent, most successful entertainment company working in the world today has set out to make its most daring, most challenging piece thus far and it is doing it by committing to artists, not by committing to a business proposition. (Cerniglia 7)

The stage adaptation of *The Lion King* had the go-ahead from Disney's corporate leadership, and now the creative process would be moving into a new and exciting phase in the creation process. The design team would expand; actors, dancers and singers would be cast and hired; staging and choreography would begin; and prototypes would be built and tested. And in the midst of all this productive, creative chaos, the script and music of *The Lion King* still would need to be completed.

In early 1996, the creative team was expanded and the performers were cast. The design team now included choreographer Garth Fagan, scenic designer Richard Hudson, costume designer Mary Peterson, wig and makeup designer Michael Ward, lighting designer Don Holder, sound designer Tony Meola, and musical director Joe Church, in addition to orchestrators, design associates and assistants. This was, in many ways, the most richly collaborative time in the

development process of *The Lion King* musical. With larger teams in place and theoretical ideas being prototyped, the development process moving forward involved an integrated process, where story, music, choreography and design could all influence and respond to one another.

At this stage, choreography came to the forefront of the creative development process. Prior to the beginning of rehearsals, Julie Taymor and Garth Fagan, the choreographer, had discussed the dance needs of the entire show. There were important questions they needed to address together: When would dance be the focus of a scene? When would it help create a background? How much movement and choreography would the principles be involved in? Faced with cinematic scenes, flocks of birds, herds of gazelles and the like, Taymor approached Fagan and presented to him the puppets that she and Michael Curry had designed (Taymor and Greene 148-149).

Now it would be Fagan's job to integrate those puppets into choreography evocative of animal movement and consistent with the mood of *The Lion King*. Fagan responded positively to the challenge, and brought his own creative opinions to the table. Fagan, whose artistic background was dominated by European and American modern dance, but included Afro-Caribbean influences, wanted "to put pure concert dance on stage and not some commercial variation thereof. [...] He wanted the movement to be born of his dance vocabulary and to be metaphoric in his storytelling in ways that only dance can do" (Cerniglia 4-5).

Garth Fagan's choreographic vision for *The Lion King* drew from a wide range of dance styles, but differed widely from typical Broadway fare:

I want the dance to look like an integral part of this community, of this *Lion King* land. Of course *Lion King* land includes strong elements from Africa, so



that means body-rhythmic and weighted movement, the kind of movement used by cultures that are close to the earth and to nature. I want dance in which fantastic, unusual patterns and shapes evolve, shapes of dancers' bodies, shapes of union of dancers. Some shapes are related to the African base of the piece, and some are just magical. (Taymor and Greene 148)

This carefully-crafted movement style was built of broad and deep collaboration with the director, composers and puppet designers. One of the most critical elements of the collaboration involved the integration of chants and choreography. Lebo M's grassland chants were connected to the choreography, and required a painstaking back-and-forth process that Garth Fagan was not at all used to. There were many times in the creation process when the choreography was shaped by puppetry, the music was shaped by the choreography, and then the choreography was changed in response to the music. This was a huge departure from the far more common practice of a choreographer working with an already complete score (Taymor and Greene 155-156).

According to Taymor:

Usually Garth choreographs to a finished piece of music and needs the counts to be absolutely specific, so this was a bit trying at first. Ultimately, though, the back-and-forth process of music inspiring dance, and then the dance moves inspiring new twists in the music, turned out to be the best and only method in what was a truly collaborative process. (Taymor and Greene 156)

This process eventually expanded to include one of the lead orchestrators, Bob Elhai, as well as composer Mark Mancina, and was illustrative of the astonishing level of collaboration required in order to realize Taymor's elaborate and fantastic vision. This was not a musical with discrete

categories that could be handled as separate pieces: book, music, dance, and design. This was a unified whole, in which even the tiniest decisions had ripple effects across multiple departments.

Also at this time, the various designers began to sketch and prototype set pieces, props, costumes, puppets, and masks. The designers of *The Lion King* laid out their space in an extremely unusual way. They found a loft space that was large enough for a small costume shop, a drafting studio, and a puppet and mask construction area. Whereas most designers work in isolation and exchange their ideas in scheduled meetings, the designers working on *The Lion King* would be able to bounce ideas off of one another all the time. There was an immediacy to this way of working that helped contribute to the visually cohesive aesthetic of the production. Taymor explains the advantage of the loft setup:

Our approach made sense. It is impossible to separate one design element from another. Patterns on costumes were duplicated in the patterns of the scenery. Colors were constantly compared. Everybody had questions about scale, dimension and the flow of traffic onstage. The loft space gave us easy access to one another and facilitated the collaborative effort. (Taymor and Greene 50)

In many ways it seems self-evident, but one of the secrets to successful collaboration can simply be proximity. It is easier to create a unified whole if you are working in the same place.

It was out of this integrated environment that set designer Richard Hudson and Julie Taymor developed the major scenic elements which would provide the visual center of the entire production. The most important element in the stage design was Pride Rock, and Taymor had already begun to sketch ideas for it during the early ideation phase of *The Lion King's* development. Taymor's early design involved a circular, symmetrical structure that she described

as looking like a tiered wedding cake. Hudson hated it. He found it too symmetrical and felt that it lacked a sense of danger or edge. Hudson responded to this initial design with one of his own. Richard Hudson's Pride Rock consisted of a revolving staircase with an asymmetrical shape, spiraling 20 feet into the air. The asymmetry gave it a more organic feel, and the turntable allowed the set piece to be shown from many angles. It was a fantastic example of a successful collaborative process. Although Taymor's original idea was not sufficient, it was enough to spark Hudson's idea, which would become the visual centerpiece of the Broadway show (Taymor and Greene 80).

In any big budget Broadway musical, the producers and backers have a say in major production choices. When the producers and backers in question represent Disney Theatrical Group and the intellectual property being developed is a Disney Animation property, the importance of satisfying those producers cannot be overstated. *The Lion King* was a tremendous risk for Disney Theatrical, and the work presented by Julie Taymor and the rest of her creative team was subject to Disney's approval or rejection. In order to determine if the show was progressing satisfactorily, Michael Eisner and Thomas Schumacher set up an August 1996 workshop. The workshop consisted of a sit-down, un-staged reading of the script and music, the staging of a few critical scenes, and a presentation of the visual development to this point: sketches, prototypes and models of sets, costumes, masks, and puppets. All took place in a rehearsal studio rather than a theatre. Taymor later decided that a rehearsal studio did not provide a close enough approximation of the audience experience to be useful for demonstrations (Taymor and Greene 49).

After the initial workshop, Disney Theatrical was satisfied that *The Lion King* should be Broadway-bound, but they were not yet convinced that Taymor's dramatic ideas about the Double Event<sup>18</sup> would work on the stage. Schumacher and Eisner questioned the use of masks and puppetry for principle characters and wondered if the show would be better served by restricting the more extreme visual elements to the chorus (Taymor and Greene 119). Taymor felt that the creative vision had been compromised by the non-theatrical setting in which the first workshop had been presented. In order to address these concerns, Taymor and her collaborators decided they needed a second workshop. This one, to be held at the New Amsterdam Theater on February 10, 1997, "would present finished costumes, puppets, masks, and full makeup and would take place on a fully lit stage, with people watching from an appropriate distance" (Taymor and Greene 122).

In the February 1997 workshop and prototype demonstration, Julie Taymor decided to present the principle characters in three different versions. The first, Taymor's preferred approach, involved the headdress-masks described earlier; the second was a half-mask version; and the third was based on a makeup-only design. In the end, Taymor's original idea translated beautifully to the stage:

What happened at the end of that is they all did work and Michael Eisner [...] said at the time, 'They all work, but the one you first created, your first concept,' the one that I called later the Double Event, 'it's the most risky, but if it works the payoff is bigger.' And that whole concept of taking a big risk and if the risk

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<sup>18</sup> This is how Julie Taymor describes the human-animal duality created by the use of masks and puppets that partially obscure and partially reveal a character's human features.

works the payoff is bigger, is something I wish more people would live by, because that's what I live by. (Taymor and Winer)

Thomas Schumacher would later describe that workshop as “one of the most important artistic breakthroughs in the process of bringing Julie’s vision to life and the characters to the stage. Julie’s concept [...] could only be realized by going into a theater space and trying it” (Taymor and Greene 122). It is important to note that the success of this workshop was fundamentally an endorsement of the collaborative processes that went into creating it. Furthermore, the entire workshop process, and obtaining the approval of the producers was part of Taymor’s responsibility as a partner in a corporate collaboration.

The February workshop also revealed a scene and costume change in Act One that took far too much time to transition, between the end of the “hyena bacchanal” and the beginning of the wildebeest stampede. The situation necessitated the creation of a new scene between Mufasa and Zazu, which ended up being “a rather comical and moving scene that adds to the development of these characters” (Taymor and Greene 168). As is often the case, the challenges presented by the reality of staging opened up new dramatic possibilities and enriched the entire show.

In the end, *The Lion King* was a wild success for Disney Theatrical Group. Julie Taymor’s innovative vision, brought to life by a varied, international team of collaborative artists and writers, inspired audiences all over the world. The success of *The Lion King* depended on the efforts of all of the collaborators, working in unison towards a common goal and a common vision. It was a success built on risk and trust. Disney entrusted one of its most valuable commercial properties to a director with an avant-garde vision and a reputation for risk-taking,

and Julie Taymor and her team returned to Disney a property worth even more as a stage production than it was in movie theaters. To date, the animated film of *The Lion King* has brought in just under one billion dollars in box office sales (“The Lion King (1994) - Financial Information.”). The stage version passed the six billion dollar mark in 2014. Disney made the right decision.

## Chapter 4: Risk, Reward, and the Path to Collaborative Innovation

Long before a musical reaches a Broadway stage, even before a single song has been written, it begins its life as an idea. That idea, whether conventional or revolutionary, simple or complex, is like an uncut diamond: it may hold promise, but you cannot put it on a stage and call it a musical any more than you can put a rough, unpolished diamond on a ring and call it fine jewelry. The idea must journey through a development process and emerge as a unified whole to become worthy of the stage. Stories must be outlined, songs must be written, and ideas must be tested and tried. Collaborative partners must learn to work with one another and come together around a unified vision. Even for a musical written by a single writer, there is collaboration throughout the development process, as the writer interacts with producers, directors, designers and others. For a musical that is written by a team, the development process is highly dependent on successful collaborative techniques, no matter the era or style in which it is written.

Times change. Tastes change. The nature of musical theatre itself changes. Between 1943, when *Oklahoma!* opened on Broadway at the St. James Theatre, and 1997, when *The Lion King* opened at the New Amsterdam Theatre, a great deal had changed about Broadway (Carter 168 and Associated Press). In 1943, Broadway audiences expected to see scantily dressed dancing girls and energetic song-and-dance numbers, but did not yet know that they wanted stories and characters with depth and substance. In 1997, audiences expected strong stories peopled with rich characters, but they did not yet know that they wanted puppetry, masks, and the mechanics of the stage. Both shows revolutionized the face of musical theatre, and as a

result, both were risky ventures for their creators and their producers to undertake. Change is inherently and definitionally risky.

The ideas for both *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* originated with producers who would never receive any kind of writing credit: Theresa Helburn, Co-Director of the Theatre Guild, for *Oklahoma!*; and Michael Eisner, CEO of the Disney Corporation, for *The Lion King*. A lot was at stake for both producers. The Theatre Guild, in spite of a rich history that included introducing the country to the works of Eugene O’Neill, Maxwell Anderson and Bernard Shaw, was in dire financial straits in 1941, when Helburn first approached Rodgers. Helburn needed *Oklahoma!* to be a smash hit in order to save the Guild from going under (Green 101).

Disney, on the other hand, was (and is) an entertainment juggernaut — a multinational corporation with an outsized reputation that inspires both adoration and contempt. In 1997, Disney was financially strong, and the budget for *The Lion King* was correspondingly large<sup>19</sup>. Yet *The Lion King* was an enormous risk for the Disney Corporation. Aside from the fact that millions of dollars had been sunk into its development, Disney needed *The Lion King* to help the corporation be accepted in the world of theatre (Taymor and Winer). For Disney, *The Lion King* was a serious attempt to prove that it was artistically worthy of the stage. Many people in the theatre world were incensed that Disney had begun to produce Broadway musicals that might be described as ancillary products to their animated films. Although *Beauty and the Beast* had been a commercial success, it was viewed as a mediocre musical by much of the theatre community. With the announcement of a *Lion King* musical, there was an understandable fear that Broadway was going to be slowly transformed into Disneyland. With this musical, Eisner and Thomas

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<sup>19</sup> Disney does not release budgetary figures, but my analysis of the people, materials and methods of production used reveals that *The Lion King* must have been a multi-million dollar endeavor.



Schumacher, President of Disney Theatrical Group, hoped to prove that Disney belonged on Broadway (Wickstrom 285). For Disney, it was existentially important that *The Lion King* be an artistic success. Although the fate of the entire Disney Corporation was not at stake, the fate of Disney Theatrical Group was.

In certain ways, *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* were dissimilar projects, though each was revolutionary in its own way. *Oklahoma!* was adapted from a play, so it was already known that the story was well-suited to the stage. Nonetheless, the material was viewed as unfit for a musical by many people, including Richard Rodgers' former partner Lorenz Hart (Hyland 136-137). While the very idea of a Western musical was viewed with derision by many theatre insiders, the most revolutionary aspect of *Oklahoma!* was its emphasis on story. The idea of a "book musical"<sup>20</sup> was not entirely new in 1942, but it was unusual. In the introduction to *Lyrics*, Oscar Hammerstein II describes the general attitude towards musical theatre in the early 1940s as cynical:

Neither the public nor the critics expected more than a display of girls, jokes and tunes. Those who came off with the most credit in addition to the stars were several prominent producers [...] and composers [...]. The librettist was a kind of stable boy. If the race was won he was seldom mentioned. If the race was lost he was blamed for giving the horse the wrong feed. For many years I read theatrical criticism and comment which contained the statement "The book of a musical show doesn't matter," and yet in the case of most failures it was pointed out that the book was so bad that it could not be survived. (Hammerstein 41)

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<sup>20</sup> A musical's "book" is its dialogue and narrative structure. A "book musical" is one that is story-driven.

When Rodgers and Hammerstein decided that *Oklahoma!* would be driven by story and character, they were taking a huge risk, and altering the course of musical theatre history.

*The Lion King* was adapted from an animated movie musical populated by animals with human personalities. At first glance, the source material appeared absolutely unsuitable for the stage (Taymor and Greene 14). But, artists are often inspired by limitations, and seemingly impossible challenges can inspire ingenious solutions. The very things that made *The Lion King* movie so unlikely to succeed as a musical — a cast composed entirely of animals, the centrality of the movie’s cinematic visuals, and the sheer enormity of the story’s scale — were the things that inspired revolutionary theatre. Julie Taymor’s idea of the Double Event, or the visible duality of animal and human in every character, was a response to the challenges posed by adapting such unsuitable source material for the stage. The spectacular puppetry, unconventional choreography, and overall conceptual artistry of *The Lion King* musical were truly innovative solutions to some extremely unconventional problems.

One of the areas where *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* differed most significantly was in terms of the composition of their authorial teams. *Oklahoma!* had a straightforward writing team. Composer Richard Rodgers and librettist Oscar Hammerstein II were the only credited authors of the musical, but there were important structural contributions from producer Theresa Helburn and choreographer Agnes de Mille. Direction and design were later additions to the musical and were not integrated into the writing process in any significant way.

*The Lion King*, on the other hand, was such a profound departure from traditional musical theatre that its creation cannot properly be described as “writing.” Due to the prominence of visual storytelling in *The Lion King* musical, the primary designers must be considered a part of

the authorial team. In fact, the creation of the musical was helmed not by a writer, but by the highly-respected avant-garde director Julie Taymor. Her enormous writing team included: two primary book writers, Irene Mecchi and Roger Allers; five songwriters, Elton John, Tim Rice, Lebo M, Hans Zimmer, and Mark Mancina; choreographer Garth Fagan; set designer Richard Hudson; puppet co-designer Michael Curry; costume designer Mary Peterson; and of course Julie Taymor herself, who acted as both director and overall design lead (Taymor and Greene 25-26, 49 and Cerniglia 4).

With such an enormous collaborative team, Julie Taymor had a necessarily hierarchical relationship with the writers and designers with whom she worked. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, on the other hand, shared an equal partnership. Both arrangements led to commercially successful, groundbreaking new musical theatre and each approach was well-suited to the needs of the project in question. Often, hierarchical collaboration is viewed as a lesser form of collaborative effort, with equal partnership as the ideal towards which all collaborative models should strive. In reality, not every project has the same needs. While it is not unusual for a thriving two-person collaboration to be built on equality, a ten-person collaboration generally needs a leader to keep the whole team moving in the same direction. *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* demonstrate that a collaboration must be defined by the needs of the project at hand. There is no ideal collaborative model with universal applications.

Both *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* went through three distinct periods in their development, which I refer to as an “Ideation Period”, a “Creation Period” and a “Workshop and Revision Period.” The Ideation Period involved two parts. First, there was early conceptualization, when the primary creators allowed their vision of the musical to evolve. For

*Oklahoma!*, this took place during the initial meetings between Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. For *The Lion King*, the early conceptualization was undertaken by Julie Taymor alone, and involved ideas about story and visual aesthetic. In both cases, this part of the creative process required open exploration and a total lack of censorship.

The second half of the Ideation Period was what I call the “Blueprint Stage”, when the musical would be outlined, with song and dance numbers placed into the narrative. This part of the Ideation Period also involved decisions about adaptation. During the development of both *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* there were changes made to both story and characters. Rodgers and Hammerstein changed *Green Grow the Lilacs* by adding the character of Will Parker, changing the character of Ado Annie into a more attractive funny girl, and altering the play’s ending in subtle but significant ways<sup>21</sup>. Julie Taymor, along with the book writers, Irene Mecchi and Roger Allers, made major changes to the source material of *The Lion King* during this period as well. Among other changes, they added major story events to deepen the development of Simba, significantly expanded Nala’s role, and changed Rafiki’s character from male to female in order to strengthen the musical’s female representation<sup>22</sup>. By the end of the Ideation Period, both *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* had been fleshed out and were ready for the next stage of development.

The second period in the development of both *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* was the Creation Period. During this part of the writing process, the outline created during the Ideation Period was expanded into dialogue and songs. In the case of *The Lion King*, this period also

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<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 2 for details.

<sup>22</sup> See Chapter 3 for details.

included choreography, visual design, and the engineering of prototypes for the complex puppetry invented to translate herds of animals from the screen to the stage.

Chapters two and three trace the specific collaborative processes used during the Creation Period by the collaborative teams responsible for the development of *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King*. Given the widely disparate needs of the two projects and the differences in their collaborative structures, it is unsurprising that *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* underwent dramatically different Creation Periods, involving different collaborative methods. Nonetheless, both musicals emerged from this period with an early version of the script and score in place.

The final period in the development of both *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* was the Workshop and Revision Period. Between the two musicals, the workshops themselves differed in one significant respect: the previews for *Oklahoma!* were held in front of full audiences, while the previews for *The Lion King* were presented only to the show's producers. This can be attributed in part to Julie Taymor's insistence that test audiences are toxic to innovation (Taymor and the Nantucket Project). Rodgers and Hammerstein had no such misgivings about preview audiences. In fact, Oscar Hammerstein II had the habit of lurking in the audience during previews to try to gauge people's honest responses (Wilk 92).

In spite of these differences, the creative teams behind both *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* used their workshops to find the parts of the script that needed revisions. They then went about making cuts, changes, and additions as necessary and without sentiment. This highly important step is often absent from the process of an inexperienced writer, and that is to the detriment of the writer's work. Effective writing, whatever the medium, requires revision. This has a special importance in the theatre. When a musical exists only as a libretto and a score, it is

impossible to predict exactly how it will come to life on the stage — where it will drag, where it will feel rushed, and where it will lose the audience’s attention. Whether or not preview audiences are present throughout the Workshop and Revision Period, there must be a time when the musical is staged and a time for the creators to make changes in response to that staging. In the cases of *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King*, this process resulted in the reordering of scenes, and the addition of new musical and dramatic material.

In addition to following the same broad pattern of development (Ideation Period, Creation Period, Workshop and Revision Period), *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* shared a unifying philosophy. Both shows succeeded because they put unity of concept at the center of every major developmental decision, and because they chose to take significant artistic risks in pursuit of their visions. Those risks paid off. Both shows broke box office records, and had a lasting effect on musical theatre.

After *Oklahoma!*, the “book musical” became a standard form, dream ballets briefly experienced a surge in popularity, and audiences began to demand musicals with plots and characters that they cared about (Wilk 101). As William Hyland put it in his biography of Richard Rodgers, “*Oklahoma!* was a revolution in American musical theater. Rodgers and Hammerstein perfected a new synthesis of music, libretto, lyrics, dancing, and staging. It was no longer merely a musical but a musical play” (Hyland 138).

Fifty years later, *The Lion King* freed the imaginations of an entire generation of directors and writers, expanding the definition of musical theatre, and opening the door for continuing experiments in avant-garde commercial theatre — a concept which seemed to most people to be a contradiction in terms prior to *The Lion King*’s Broadway opening (Moore). In an article for

*Dance Research Journal* two of the original members of the Broadway production team, Ken Cerniglia and Aubrey Lynch II, described *The Lion King*'s success: "The phenomenon of *The Lion King* is attributable in part to everyone involved bringing something vital and personal to the creative table" (Cerniglia 4).

This is the core of all successful collaborative creation: everyone must bring something "vital and personal" (Cerniglia 4). Everyone must give of themselves, while simultaneously putting the good of the whole project ahead of personal ego and creative attachment. When this kind of theatrical collaboration is successful, the results can change the nature of our art and the way that our industry functions. It can help spur innovation, and bring out the best in individual creators.

No two collaborations will operate in exactly the same way, but we learn and grow by building on the successes of the past. Both *Oklahoma!* and *The Lion King* provide practical models to help guide the work of future collaborative writing teams. Their developmental commonalities demonstrate a strong framework for collaboration, with a history of success in commercial musical theatre. The differences in their hierarchies and methodologies demonstrate that there are many ways of approaching collaboration and that no one method or approach holds a monopoly on success.

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