

The subtlest spirit of a nation is expressed through its music – and the music acts reciprocally upon the nation’s very soul. – Walt Whitman, “A Thought of Ours About Music in the United States” (1847)¹

When Rodgers and Hammerstein opened the curtains to *Oklahoma!* at the St. James Theatre on March 31, 1943, they ushered in what many consider to be the “golden age” of musical theatre. Based on the play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, by Lynn Riggs, *Oklahoma!* elicited glowing reviews and achieved widespread popularity. It received the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1944 and remained at the St. James Theatre for another 2,212 performances, making it the longest-running musical up until that time.² Reflecting on *Oklahoma!*’s legacy, Lewis Nichols of *The New York Times* wrote that the show “restored...public faith in the theatre” and that “there [had] been nothing like it.”³ In the wake of this triumph, Rodgers and Hammerstein became the most acclaimed and popular theatrical writers of their time, inspiring generations of established and aspiring composers and lyricists to raise the creative bar. Prior to *Oklahoma!*, American musical theater had used song and dance for entertainment value alone, but Rodgers and Hammerstein set a new standard by integrating musical numbers into the plot, using them as expressions of character and situation. Indeed, every element of the show wove together seamlessly to create a cohesive final product. In the words of Richard Rodgers, “The costumes looked the way the orchestra sounded.”⁴ For the first time, audiences witnessed a unified work of musical theater.⁵

In all of its complexities, *Oklahoma!* represented more than a theatrical feat or a rural monolithic community – it reflected the mounting racial tensions and nationalistic efforts of the 1900s from the perspectives of its Jewish writers. Growing up in New York City at this time, Rodgers and Hammerstein experienced social and cultural chaos in its

most heightened and concentrated form. Though New York had always been known for its progressive multicultural population, diversity reached unprecedented heights in the early twentieth century as great numbers of immigrants from all over the world passed through Ellis Island. Between 1900 and 1924, over 1.75 million Eastern European Jews entered the city and quickly made great contributions to New York life, especially in finance and the arts.⁶ In particular, many Jews were drawn to the theater. In fact, other than Cole Porter, many of the most influential artists during the years surrounding World War II, including Irving Berlin, Kurt Weill, George Gershwin, and Rodgers and Hammerstein, were Jewish. Their experiences as marginalized citizens seeped into their works and either reflected on or captured the emotions of intense political and social unrest. Responding to a city and a nation struggling to reconcile its multiculturalism with traditional "American values," *Oklahoma!* brought to the stage an idealized portrait of a diverse democratic society, while establishing musical theatre as a legitimate dramatic form.

In *Oklahoma!*, Rodgers (1902-1979) and Hammerstein (1895-1960) responded to the immense social, political and economic turmoil that confronted the United States in the twentieth century. Rodgers and Hammerstein grew up in New York City and met while attending Columbia University. Working together, Rodgers composed the music and Hammerstein wrote the lyrics. Together the pair focused most of their theatrical works on issues of conformity and tolerance as seen in shows such as *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and *The Sound of Music*. Though neither Rodgers nor Hammerstein was religiously Jewish, both were culturally Jewish and identified with the "outsider," especially because they lived in New York City, where issues of race, religion and ethnicity abounded. For immigrants, New York promised the possibility of upward mobility and social acceptance. However,

During the spring of 1954, the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency in the United States held hearings to determine the impact of crime comic books on children. The subcommittee included chairman Robert C. Hendrickson (New Jersey), William Langer (North Dakota), Estes Kefauver (Tennessee), Thomas C. Hennings, Jr. (Missouri), and chief counsel Herbert J. Hanoach. During the hearings, the subcommittee called upon child specialists and psychologists, including Dr. Frederic Wertham, author of *Seduction of the Innocent*. Members of the comic book industry also testified, such as William Gaines, publisher of EC Comics and *Mad Magazine*. At the beginning of the hearings, Hendrickson emphasized that the investigation was about the problem of horror and crime comic books in particular, not for instance comic strips in newspapers. He frankly declared, "Authorities agree that the majority of comic books are as harmless as soda pop." He also pointed out that these hearings were not an issue of freedom of the press, asserting, "We are not a subcommittee of blue nosed censors." Furthermore, Hendrickson insisted that the subcommittee had no preconceived notions about the topic, and that the hearings were a way to find out the impact (if any) of crime comics on the youth.³

The American public was not nearly as unprejudiced and dispassionate as Hendrickson claimed to be. In the 1950s, an anti-comic book crusade swept the country. State legislators passed laws banning the sales of certain crime comics, Catholic pamphlets condemned them as sin, women united and formed clubs to prevent children from reading harmful comics, parents prohibited comics in the home, psychiatrists called for censorship, groups even went as far as to publicly burn comic books. The cause of this fervor? Comics allegedly produced a critical American social problem: juvenile delinquency.

³ *Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books), Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate.*

Anxiety about juvenile delinquency increased, as World War II had ended and America entered the Cold War against Soviet Russia. The Cold War generated fear in the American public and gave rise to McCarthyism. The notion of containment emerged during the Cold War as a foreign policy, but also translated into the domestic social realm. Historian Elaine Tyler May for instance examined the effects of Cold War culture on the nuclear family.⁴ The threat of Communism jeopardized American democracy. Moreover it produced an alarmist attitude that extended out of the political sphere. Also, as the media was reaching larger audiences and influencing American life, the number of comic books published in the 1950s rose tremendously. During this decade, many psychologists and sociologists like Frederic Wertham claimed a direct relationship between the rise of juvenile delinquency and comic magazines. This theory spread through America, as Americans desired control over at least the problems plaguing their own society. Comic books were a straightforward solution. This rather simplistic answer resounded with Americans, who hoped that censorship and banning of damaging comics would help eliminate juvenile delinquency. The force of the comic book scare showed how the anxiety concerning the Cold War pervaded American culture at home. Americans' fear of Communism translated into an attack on the changes in their own society and took one form in the campaign against the harmful, horrific, hateful comic book.

The comic book scare of the 1950s was a moral panic; the American public feared a problem that may or may not have been actually damaging to society. Sociologists Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda declared that political and social culture have built up threats that later have influenced the public. They classified moral panics into three types: grassroots, elite-

⁴ Elaine Tyler May, 153-181.

On August 18th, 1590, John White returned to Roanoke to search for the hundred colonists he had left there three years before. As White and his sailors approached the site, they discovered the settlement deserted and found a tree with the letters "CRO" carved upon it, which led White to believe that the colonists had travelled to Croatoan Island fifty miles to the South. As White's crew headed towards the island, a vicious storm battered their ships and ruined their provisions, so the exhausted explorers returned to England. No one ever found the Roanoke colonists and their fate remains a mystery.¹

The lost colonists of Roanoke have fascinated historians for centuries and inspired much writing on the subject. Historian David Beers Quinn studied second-hand reports of Jamestown settlers and maintains that the majority of the colonists headed north and merged with the Chesapeake Indians.² Scientist Robert Dolan's research of tree ring density suggests that the colonists may have died near Roanoke from severe drought, while historian Haywood Pearce's examination of an engraved stone indicates that the colonists may have been living very close to Jamestown.³ The theories continue. However, this narrow line of focus is unfulfilling and unproductive, as it has heavily emphasized an unimportant aspect of Roanoke. The historical value of Roanoke comes not from debating what happened to the colonists, but from the significance of Roanoke in the scheme of English colonization.

very relevant
engagement
with the
historiography

Not only was the settlement of Roanoke abandoned by sixteenth century British leaders, but also its significance has been neglected in U.S history today. Though the settlement was short lived, it was a crucial link in the development of a strong English presence in America. The concrete and difficult reality of Roanoke, the first experiment in sustaining Englishmen in America, broke utopian expectations of heavenly soil,

abundant gold mines, and ever-cheerful Indians. The failure forced planners and promoters to approach colonization with more realistic goals and to implement more consistent and effective organizational structures. The experience of Roanoke influenced England's ideas of colonization and shifted the settlement ideal from a military base to an agricultural self-sustaining colony. The short-lived existence of Roanoke itself agitated Spanish authorities and further heightened tensions between the two nations, while the settlers' use of violence on the native tribes soured the inter-race relations and portended the violence and abuse that would follow in later years. In this way, the experience and failure of Roanoke gave rise to organizational and ideological shifts that would allow more successful colonies to come to fruition. At the same time, the experiment foreshadowed and created problems that later colonists would have to face.

nice/f framed
and then
put forward with
strengths!!

Even before the seventeenth century, England was interested in colonizing America for a variety of reasons. English writer Richard Hakluyt best articulated these rationales in his report called *A Discourse Concerning Western Planting* (1584), which was intended to convince English authority to take a more active role in America. Hakluyt argued that colonization would ameliorate England's vast overpopulation by shipping her poor citizens away, grow England's economy by expanding her markets and providing her with foreign goods, and increase the Queen's domain and spread the word of Christ. However, the reason that Hakluyt repeatedly emphasized was that colonization would enable England to compete with Spain. In the sixteenth century, Spain had created a formidable empire by colonizing large stretches of North and South America and extracting their riches. Spain's newfound power and wealth alarmed other European countries. To counteract this sudden imbalance, England wished not only to create her