"We belong to the land": iteration as (dis)integration in Daniel Fish's 2019 revival of *Oklahoma!*

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Abstract: In *Directors and the New Musical Drama. British and American Musical Theatre in the 1980s and 1990s* (2008), Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen notes that "[t]he very term 'musical revival' reveals a significant difference between how we treat the musical theatre canon and other performing arts: classic operas and plays receive new 'productions' but musicals are 'revived.'" (111) Because of their supposed conformist discourse and aesthetic, musical plays, especially those belonging to the canon of the Golden Age (1943-1966), are conceived as dated theatrical works that would need to be "resuscitated" in order to survive. Because of that perception, revivals of musical works have often been much concerned with identity politics and visibility politics, as the 2019 revival of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* demonstrates. In this dark production directed by Daniel Fish at Circle in the Square Theatre, Ado Annie is interpreted by an actress in a wheelchair (Ali Stroker, who became the first wheelchair user to ever win a Tony Award for her performance), whereas the dream ballet choreographed by Agnes de Mille in 1943 is replaced by "a dance about outsiders" (Kourlas 2019a) interpreted by a Black dancer, Gabrielle Hamilton. The choice of *Oklahoma!* also signifies a more general questioning of the genre. A formal and aesthetic landmark in the history of American musical theatre, *Oklahoma!* implemented the principles of "integration" as the dominant formal conventions of the genre, all the while solidifying the overarching motif of the "marriage trope", analyzed by Raymond Knapp in *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (2005) as a symbol of national unity. This paper looks at Fish's revival's reinvestment of the musical's founding principle of *integration*: while reintegrating Oklahoma! into contemporary issues dealing with visibility, the revival also disintegrates many of the musical's founding myths and unifying principles.

Résumé : Dans *Directors and the New Musical Drama. British and American Musical Theatre in the 1980s and 1990s* (2008), Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen note : "[t]he very term 'musical revival' reveals a significant difference between how we treat the musical theatre canon and other performing arts: classic operas and plays receive new 'productions' but musicals are 'revived.'". (111) En raison de leur discours et de leur esthétique supposés conformistes, les pièces appartenant au genre du *musical*, en particulier celles qui appartiennent au canon de l'âge d'or (1943-1966), sont conçues comme des œuvres théâtrales dépassées qui devraient être "ressuscitées" pour survivre. En raison de cette perception, les nouvelles itérations de ces *musicals* sont souvent scrutées au prisme des politiques d'identité et de visibilité, comme le montre la nouvelle production d'*Oklahoma!* de Rodgers et Hammerstein mise en scène par Daniel Fish en 2019 au Circle in the Square Theatre à Broadway. Dans ce *revival*, Ado Annie est interprétée par une actrice en fauteuil roulant (Ali Stroker, qui est devenue la première personne en fauteuil à remporter un Tony Award pour sa performance), tandis que le *dream ballet* chorégraphié par Agnes de Mille en 1943 est remplacé par un solo mettant en scène un corps habituellement relégué aux marges de la société ("a dance about outsiders", Kourlas 2019a), celui d'une danseuse noire, Gabrielle Hamilton. Le choix d'*Oklahoma!* signale également une remise en question plus générale du genre. *Oklahoma!* constitue un jalon formel et esthétique primordial dans l'histoire de la comédie musicale américaine : cette pièce a acté la mise en œuvre des principes d'"intégration" en tant que conventions formelles dominantes du genre, tout en insistant sur le motif du mariage analysé par Raymond Knapp dans *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (2005) comme symbole d'unité nationale. Cet article se penche sur la façon dont le *revival* de Daniel Fish, qui ouvre à Broadway dans un climat culturel centré sur la visibilisation des corps et expériences marginalisées, joue avec la notion même d'intégration si centrale pour comprendre l'héritage d'*Oklahoma!*: Fish réintègre le *musical* dans des questionnements contemporains, tout en "désintégrant" bon nombre

des mythes fondateurs, notamment autour de la question de l'union, que le *musical* avait contribué à entériner.

Keywords: contemporary American musical theatre; race and the musical; gender and the musical; revivals

Mots-clés : comédie musicale américaine contemporaine ; comédie musicale et race ; comédie musicale et genre ; *revivals*

Reiterating *Oklahoma!*, Redefining Integration

"How is it that the coolest new show on Broadway in 2019 is a 1943 musical usually regarded as a very square slice of American pie?" This is how *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley opens his review of Daniel Fish's 2019 production of the beloved Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *Oklahoma!*. First produced in 1943, adapted to the screen by Fred Zinnemann in 1955, and the product of countless productions,[1] *Oklahoma!* occupies a particular place in the pantheon of musical theater. The musical was immensely successful upon its opening,[2] and so was the original cast album,[3] which sold over 1 million copies and contributed to spreading the musical's popularity beyond Broadway theaters (Carter 228-229). Moreover, *Oklahoma!* redefined the contours of the American musical through "its refusal to conform to Broadway stereotypes" of the era (Carter xiv). Gone were the high-kick lines of scantily-clad chorus girls and the vaudeville-inspired composite acts that made up "musical comedies" at the time. Instead, composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II adapted Lynn Riggs's 1937 play, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, and turned it into what was heralded as a new, typically American theatrical genre (Carter xv).

In 1943, *Oklahoma!* was therefore heralded as a groundbreaking play. But, to quote Brantley's words again, its subsequent pantheonization seems to have turned it into "a very square slice of American pie" – a sweet, undisturbing family entertainment focusing on the courtship between the young Laurey and her cowboy love interest Curly, only disturbed by the menacing presence of Jud Fry, the brood-

ing farmhand. The courtship between the two lovers (mostly hinging on Laurey's accepting that Curly take her to the box social) and their subsequent union (that integrates them into the community through the ritual of marriage) foregrounds the integration of Oklahoma into the American nation through the acquiring of statehood (Knapp 120), celebrated by the ensemble at the beginning of Act II: "We know we belong to the land / And the land we belong to is great!" (Rodgers and Hammerstein 119) In the tense political context of the Trump presidency, reviving a musical that celebrates the "great" American land and the glorious days of the founding of the nation might appear as a manifestation of conservative, even "revisionist" nostalgia – erasing the violence at the roots of the nation-making process.[4]

However, Fish's production, which transferred from St Ann's Warehouse to Broadway in March 2019, is anything but rooted in nostalgia. In the aforementioned *New York Times* article, Brantley interprets Fish's production "as a mirror for our age of doubt and anxiety." In *The New Yorker*, Cynthia Zarin titled her interview with Fish about the production "An 'Oklahoma!' For Today." Both critiques highlight the modernization and reassertion of *Oklahoma!*'s contemporary relevance that Fish's production offers, far removed from a sepia-toned nostalgic outlook. A plethora of other critiques heavily insist on the production's "darkness"[5], echoing Agamben's equation of darkness with contemporaneity:

> le contemporain est celui qui fixe le regard sur son temps pour en percevoir non les lumières, mais l'obscurité. Tous les temps sont obscurs pour ceux qui en éprouvent la contemporanéité. Le contemporain est donc celui qui sait voir cette obscurité, qui est en mesure d'écrire en trempant la plume dans les ténèbres du présent.[6] (26)

The darkening of *Oklahoma!*'s bright landscapes and romantic story therefore seems to signal a desire to anchor the play in contemporary issues, dealing with the collective anxieties structuring contemporary America. Beyond the production's overall modernization of the original sound, setting and costumes, this desire is especially manifest through Fish's choice of a nontraditional cast.[7] Not only is Laurey

a Black woman, but Fish also cast Ali Stoker, who became the first wheelchair-user to ever be nominated and win a Tony Award, as Laurey's comically promiscuous foil, Ado Annie. Fish's *Oklahoma!* echoes a more general effort to revive Golden Age musicals while putting visibility and nontraditional casting at the forefront – for instance, the 2022 gender-bending revival of *1776* by Roundabout Theatre Company, with women, nonbinary and trans actors cast as the forefathers, or the 2022 West End production of *My Fair Lady* with Amara Okereke as the first Black Eliza Doolittle. Precisely, the (re)integration of performers that were excluded from the original conception of *Oklahoma!* seems to perform a similar process of integration as the one narratively performed by the play – i.e. the integration of the territory of Oklahoma within the US nation *and* the integration of the married couple, Laurey and Curly, into the community at the end. In *Oklahoma!*, therefore, integration is a multi-layered notion that has both thematic, performative and formal resonances.

Indeed, the motif of integration and "assimilation" (Most) that structures the musical is also the product of its wartime context – the debated involvement of the US in WW2,[8] the final years of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's second mandate and the heated implementation of his New Deal measures. Bruce Kirle comments: "In *Oklahoma!*, the writers provided reconciliation and resolution by retaining a vision of rural America that appealed to conservatives and populists, while inserting a New Deal message that even grassroots America could be a model of assimilation and tolerance" (251-252). Following Kirle's comment, the symbolic integration (both of the land and of the couple) participates in the construction of America's "inclusionist ideology" (Knapp 120). Integration in *Oklahoma!* is therefore a strong thematic current that aims at reconciling a fractured America and depicting a utopian community that would supersede differences, conflicts, and violence.

Yet it is as a formal notion that the term "integration" has most regularly been associated with the play. Indeed, *Oklahoma!* has often been called the first "integrated musical", a formal appraisal of the

musical that was publicized as early as the original production by the creative team (O'Leary) and that still generates commentaries from formal specialists as well as historians of musical theater. Closer to a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* (literally, "total artwork"), the term "integrated musical" alludes to the way in which song, dance, music and dialogue form a whole that serves to advance the plot, giving the audience deeper insights into the characters' emotional states and psyche. Agnes de Mille's groundbreaking choreography for the dream ballet "Laurey Makes Up Her Mind" also asserted the role of dance as a storytelling tool – and de Mille is often credited for having ushered in the era of "director-choreographers" such as Jerome Robbins or Bob Fosse who reigned over Broadway in the 1960s. For all these reasons, *Oklahoma!* is widely acknowledged today as the first full-fledged modern musical:

> While the demonstration of the Principles of Integration may be the exception rather than the norm before the 1940s, the principles appeared regularly and increasingly in shows from the 1910s through the late 1930s before the integrated ideal became the law from post-*Oklahoma!* aspirant musicals of the 1940s. (Knapp et al. 103)

Carter also notes that "accounts of the Broadway musical often divide into pre- and post-*Oklahoma!* phases" (xi). However, many scholars and critics have long remarked that *Oklahoma!* was not the first musical to present the characteristics of an integrated musical: for instance, *Show Boat* (1927) is regularly used as an earlier example of integration (Block; Knapp et al. 136; Savran 215; O'Leary 142). Some scholars even question the validity of integration as a relevant notion to determine a musical play's formal superiority. For Scott McMillin for instance, the specific pleasure of musical theater is drawn from "the crackle of difference" (2) between the musical number and the dialogues – debunking, as a result, the vision of integration as a formal standard to be followed for musicals to be successful and provide spectators with pleasure. James O'Leary, through his study of the original production's publicity, also nuances the status of *Oklahoma!* as the formal example by which subsequent plays had to abide: "Integration was never simply a formal principle to begin with. It was a performative

act of cultural positioning" (180). For O'Leary, heralding integration as the only way to make musicals (through the mythical positioning of *Oklahoma!* as a formal model) risks "[reaffirming] highbrow mores while obscuring other traditions and values" (181) and therefore, preventing other stories and performances from being told and seen.

In the chapter dedicated to "integration" in *The Oxford Handbook to the American Musical*, Geoffrey Block points out that "[d]espite […] forays into racial politics, however, 'integration' on Broadway was, at least until the 1960s, an aesthetic aspiration largely unconcerned with racial politics" (Knapp et al. 97). Interestingly, he links the formal reinventions of the musical that occurred in the 1960s with a new understanding of integration as linked with politics of identity and questions of inclusivity. Circling back to Fish's *Oklahoma!*, I argue that his contemporary, dark and nontraditionally-cast revival also concurs with a formal disintegration of *Oklahoma!*'s integrative aesthetic. Paradoxically, the elements that reintegrate *Oklahoma!* into 21st-century America become the tools that undo the play's myths of formal *and* thematic integration. Analyzing the 2010 multiracial revival of *Oklahoma!* performed at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., Donatella Galella points out the contradictory pulls multiracial productions of *Oklahoma!* necessarily navigate. Using Jill Dolan's concept of "utopian performatives"[9], she argues that these nontraditional casting practices both signal change while perpetuating the illusion of a post-racial world: "[…] the multiracial production of this particular musical staged a utopian performative and keyed into the age of a black president residing in the White House, which is only a few miles from the theater; it signals a step forward in representation, but also a continuation in structure" (233). I argue that Fish's production, though being faced with similar risks, uses these "utopian performatives" as contemporary performances of disintegration.

This article will first focus on the way Fish's production reboots the folk essence of *Oklahoma!* in order to expose the cracks beneath the polished surface of the pastoral world upon which the world of the play is built. Another element of disintegration comes from the dou-

ble-edged nature of performance in this production: they are both the markers of the play's desire to include and integrate "othered" bodies but also the instruments of a formal disintegration. Performance becomes the trigger that prompts formal changes – changes that accompany and shape the genre's grappling with contemporary issues surrounding race and gender.

Rebooting the folk musical: disintegrating the pastoral of *Oklahoma!*

In his seminal study *The American Film Musical,* Rick Altman identified the folk musical as one of the dominant subcategories of the film musical and includes *Oklahoma!* as one of the textbook examples of the subgenre. Altman first exposes the idea that "the folk musical projects the audience into a mythicized version of the cultural past" (272). This "mythicized […] cultural past" evokes a somewhat fossilized vision of American cultural traditions, usually encapsulated in the term "Americana." Yet, Altman also adds: "This mythical vision of the folk musical is in many ways more complex, because it must grapple more seriously with a lived reality" (272). This "lived reality" points to the folk musical's anchoring into the mundane and daily activities of the nuclear family that Altman identifies as one of the standard elements of the folk musical (273-277). The phrase "lived reality" also signals that this "cultural past" is not necessarily always frozen in myth, but follows the cultural transformations that Americans witness and actively engage with. The folk musical therefore hinges on spectators' reconstruction of this cultural past as well as their own, new cultural references that are now part of contemporary American culture. Fish's production does not shy away from embracing *Oklahoma!*'s status as a decidedly American musical, while inserting more contemporary elements of Americana. His recreation precisely navigates the "more complex" dimension of the folk musical as the elements of American culture are used to better deconstruct the polished exterior of the pastoral world of *Oklahoma!* and directly confronting the audience to the fractures at the foundation of the United States.

Fish's decision to stage *Oklahoma!* is linked to the director's feeling that "his [previous, more experimental] work and the audience were parting ways" (Schuessler). The musical's status as a popular form of entertainment hints at a desire to connect the theatrical material and the audience. Through his reinterpretation of the musical's vernacular aesthetic as a participatory experience, Fish's revival proposes a new reading of integration, one that is also aimed at the audience. The integrative power at the core of Fish's *Oklahoma!* is especially highlighted through the setting of the theater housing the production. First-row spectators, benefitting from the intimate setting of the theater-in-the-round at Circle in the Square Theatre, sit at the tables along with the other farmers, and the chili pots laid on the rustic wooden tables are to be consumed at intermission.[10] As a result, spectators are included in folk traditions that are part of the American vernacular, like the churning of butter, the shucking of the corn or typical events of rural life, like the box social in Act II. The production's costume design enabled the audience to identify more easily with the characters: getting rid of the period outfits that were privileged in the original production, in the 1955 film and even in more recent revivals (like Trevor Nunn's 1999 production), Fish's production offers a contemporary take on typical cowboy-style attires – Levi's jeans and denim skirts, leather cowboy boots and chaps, checkered shirts and crop tops. Whereas Rodgers and Hammerstein's original orchestration and score still bore the trace of European operettas, the revival's music is anchored in the typically Southern and Midwestern sounds of bluegrass and country music: the rattling twang of the banjo and the mandolin replaces the lushness of strings. Curly's singing style heavily relies on distinctive country singing techniques, like the yodels, growls and nasal falsetto which are very far from the brightness and cleanness of the classical interpretations of the songs. This quintessentially American music is therefore more gritty and less "pretty", but also more familiar.

The familiarity of these typical American sounds accompanies a depiction of the territories that is very much akin to a pastoral. Both the opening number, "Oh What A Beautiful Morning," and the eponymous opening number of Act II, when the ensemble gathers

onstage to celebrate Oklahoma's newly acquired statehood, depict a land of plenty, a vast space for all agricultural dreams to come true. While Curly opens the play by singing "There's a bright golden haze on the meadow" (Rodgers and Hammerstein 11), the ensemble opens Act II by singing of "Flowers on the prairie where the June bugs zoom, / Plen'y of air and plen'y of room, / Plen'y of room to swing a rope!" (119). The welcoming vastness of these bountiful plains comes to be associated with soaring feelings of hope and endless possibilities. But far from a sentimental outlook on the rural life of frontier communities, Fish's production uses a specific color palette to deconstruct the pastoral world of the Midwestern prairies. As mentioned in the introduction, reviewers unanimously insisted on the dark tone of the production. This darkness is indeed at the center of the play's marketing strategy: the posters for the Broadway production display a very minimalistic black-and-white design. The top half of the poster is painted white, whereas the bottom half is painted black. The title, in black capital letters, is simply poised on the brink of this color divide. Interestingly, this divide and the positioning of the black section at the bottom of the poster hint at the subterranean menace contained within every pastoral. Indeed, if the pastoral traditionally posits "a world innocent of politics" (Gray and Robinson 58), it is one that remains "continually endangered by a surrounding world of political and economic corruption" (58). Fish's production unearths the threat and darkness that accompany every pastoral, not by contrasting it with an urban environment, but by transforming the pastoral itself into a darkened environment. The luminous blue skies and golden cornfields that have characterized a lot of the revivals of *Oklahoma!* are here replaced by a flat drawing of the prairie painted on a plywood paneling at the back of the stage, in grayish tones. This palette and the flatness of the landscape are reminiscent of Dorothea Lange's iconic photographs, commissioned by the Farm Security Administration to document the migration of Oklahoma workers during the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. The desolate gray house adorning the paneling therefore subverts the image of the "land of plenty," turning this land into a sterile, fruitless and potentially hostile environment. Danger has al-

ready surfaced within the community – the wall of guns ("racks upon racks upon racks of shotguns" [Reed and Blank 129]) that adorns one side of the stage, more specifically, is a frontal reference to the muted violence seeping in the community. To a certain extent, Fish's production goes back to the roots of the myth of the frontier as it was developed by Frederic Jackson Turner at the end of the 19th century, unearthing its inherently violent dimension. Turner conceptualized the constitution of the "American type" as inherently linked to a form of violence: "It was his [the pioneer's] task to fight with nature for the chance to exist. […] The rifle and the ax are the symbols of the backwoods pioneer. They meant a training in aggressive courage, in domination, in directness of action, in destructiveness" (269-270). In Fish's production, the wall lined with racks of shotguns is a constant reminder of the underlying violence structuring the pioneer community, as well as contemporary America.

Interestingly enough, the enactment of this violence triggers the disintegration of one of the structuring motifs of Golden Age musicals, a dramatic device Raymond Knapp calls "the marriage trope." For Knapp, "the success or failure of [the characters'] relationship(s) might serve as a marker for the resolution or continuation of conflicts between larger antagonistic forces" (10). Just after the company's celebratory number, "Oklahoma", and as they celebrate the wedding of Laurey and Curly, Jud enters, menacing to disrupt their wedding by forcefully kissing Laurey. Considered the "villain" of the play, Jud is also the "Other" in the community – the menace repressed by the pastoral. In the original production, Jud then attempts to kill Curly before falling on his own knife. But in Fish's version, as soon as Jud starts to move towards Curly, the latter "shoots him with shocking swiftness from several feet away, blood splattering all over the bride and groom's white clothes" (Larson). The gorey, vivid touches of red on white materialize the violence of prairie justice, revealing the blood at the root of the foundation of the state of Oklahoma. It is also a reinterpretation of Curly's responsibility: in most productions, Curly accidentally kills Jud after they physically struggle (Jud falling onto his knife or Curly defending himself and killing Jud accidentally). Fish's

production chooses to consciously present Curly as another source of violence threatening the peace of the community. The critic's mention of a "shocking swiftness" hints at the impactful and blunt confrontation to violence experienced by audience members: the shock value of this final scene directly points to Fish's Brechtian wish to confront the audience to the disintegration of the many myths contained within *Oklahoma!*. The production plays on the sense of familiarity provided by the integration of the audience and the sudden feeling of alienation audience members might feel when brutally confronted to the hidden violence and darkness of the pastoral. In the production, light acts as a tool of exposition that brutally and even crudely reveals the dark side of the pastoral. Indeed, as critic Soraya MacDonald recalls: "The first thing one notices upon entering Circle in the Square is the aggressive brightness of the room's lighting (more than a few members of the audience wore sunglasses through the performance)" (in Reed and Blank 129). Scott Zielinski's lighting design is built on this black and white alternation, "[going] from blindingly bright (…) to dead dark" (Brantley and Green). Such use of light is highly reminiscent of Harold "Hal" Prince's original staging of *Cabaret* in 1966, in which he used a lighting rod to temporarily blind the audience (Garebian 42) – linking the characters' indifference towards the rise of Nazism in 1930s Germany with 1960s American spectators' passivity towards the racist underpinnings of the US society in the context of the fight for civil rights led by Black Americans (Garebian 102).

Similarly to Prince, Fish's integration of the audience into the show therefore serves a Brechtian goal of alienation: confronting the audience to their own horizon of expectations, and suddenly creating a disturbing effect that acts as a jarring note that tarnishes their vision of the utopian ideal of *Oklahoma!*. In that respect, Fish's production is not so much about presenting a new utopia, but more about unearthing the inherent threat and corruption contained in every pastoral – in that case, the violence of prairie justice and frontier communities, a violence that also echoes the formation of the American nation in those Western territories. The ending of Fish's production, which I earlier analyzed as a disintegration of the marriage trope, could also

be interpreted as the impossible repair of the fracture between Black and white Americans. It is also the failure of a mixed-race marriage, a failure that recalls the anti-miscegenation laws that many US states implemented as late as 1967. The indelible red trace of violence imprinted on these wedding outfits disintegrates this performative union of contraries, which is symbolically shown here as inherently tainted. Therefore, despite a nontraditional casting initially construed as an inclusive promise, the production addresses the potentially illusory and unrealizable nature of such promise.

Double-sided performances

Forgoing the utopia contained within the pastoral of *Oklahoma!*, the production nonetheless seems to offer a different kind of utopia, one that is embodied and performed by the nontraditional cast. As Warren Hoffman writes: "*Oklahoma!* rewrites history by expunging the painful aspects of frontier history while celebrating the rewards of white American pioneer spirit, features that have helped solidify *Oklahoma!*'s place in the pantheon of beloved American musicals" (66). It is precisely *Oklahoma!*'s white-centered narrative that once permitted its elevation to the status of model musical – but it is that same narrative that widens the discrepancy with 21st-century plays, and seemingly relegates the musical to obsolescence. Far from capitalizing on the immutability conferred by such canonization, the casting practices of Fish's iteration of *Oklahoma!* therefore seem to have a double impact: they re-solidify "*Oklahoma!*'s place in the pantheon of beloved American musicals" by presenting a vision of a diverse America more adapted to 21st-century concerns with identity, but they also comparatively remind the audience of the traditionally white narrative that supports motifs of reconciliation and unity.

Daniel Fish is not the first director to revise and correct *Oklahoma!*'s all-white community with a racially diverse casting. William A. Everett mentions three other productions (in 2010, 2012 and 2018) that include Black American actors in leading roles and/or gender-bending casting practices (most notably, the 2018 version at the

Oregon Shakespeare Festival). Interestingly enough, new productions of *Oklahoma!* should be more concerned with the absence of Native Americans. And yet, none of the different revivals listed by Everett nor Fish's production cast Native American actors or actors with Native American ancestry or heritage. Other bodies bear the weight of these productions' corrective intent – in Fish's *Oklahoma!*, those of women, Black and/or disabled. In other iterations of the play, as mentioned in the introduction, casting choices always hinged on symbolic representations. As Galella reminds us, choosing to cast Jud as a black man is a decision that has symbolic implications, something that Everett also explains when looking at the 2012 production at Seattle's 5th Avenue Theater.[11] In a post-racial world, a Black actor could portray a villain as much as a brown or white actor. But in the wake of Black Lives Matter, US spectators will be extremely sensitive to the stereotypical association of Black men with otherized characters, outcasts who deserve to be outcasts because they are associated with filth (suggested by the repelling "smokehouse" where Jud lives: "It is a dark, dirty building where the meat was once kept" [Rodgers and Hammerstein 59]), too sexual (Jud has pictures of naked girls on his wall, as Curly remarks: "That there pink picture—now that's a naked woman, ain't it?" [Rodgers and Hammerstein 60]) and violent (when asked by Curly what he does with his gun, Jud curtly replies: "Shoot things" [Rodgers and Hammerstein 60]). Fish chose the strikingly pale and blonde-haired actor Patrick Vaill in a clear rebuttal of such stereotypes, also signaling "an apparent unmarked-ness to whiteness that can be safely laughed at or villainized", as Galella remarks (221). Therefore, as the introduction underlined, it is the play's most prominent female characters, Laurey and her comical foil, Ado Annie, that bear the weight of reintegrating the ostracized bodies. This highlights the role of female bodies as central points of intersection between gender, race and disability: because the female body has been so celebrated throughout the history of musical theater,[12] they become semaphores that lead the audience to go beyond the characters and look at *who* performs them. This phenomenon is not limited to Fish's production, of course. The intense focus that musical numbers put on

the physical and vocal prowess of the performers embodying the characters is also at the source of the pleasure and applause of spectators of every musical. As McMillin remarks: "We do not think of real people while we watch the performance. We think of performance people, people who can sing and dance, numbers people" (59). Spectators rarely only applaud the characters' emotional journey in itself – they applaud the performance that musically and/or choreographically signifies this evolution, and therefore the performer. But because nontraditional casting adds layers of significance to the performance, it also shapes and reconfigures the expectations we have of a musical theater performance.

This is especially visible in the number "I Cain't Say No", performed by Ali Stroker as Ado Annie, in which she explains that she "cain't say no" to men and is overwhelmed by her sexual desire: "Soon as I sit on their laps / Somethin' inside of me snaps / I cain't say no!" (Rodgers and Hammerstein 32-33). If this number initially aims at poking fun at the self-consciously promiscuous behavior of Ado Annie, Ali Stroker's powerful and dynamic interpretation enacts the sincere and exhilarating pleasure she derives from this yielding to her desires, as she explains to Laurey: "Other girls are coy and hard to catch / But other girls ain't havin' any fun!" (Rodgers and Hammerstein 33). The evocation of a body that suddenly takes control over reason evokes a powerful physicality that subverts the immobility associated with disability. This is signified through her circulation on stage: she moves flirtatiously from one character to the other, easily turning her wheelchair around while holding a microphone. Her expressions (from winks to exhilarated grins) convey the pleasure and excitement she takes in singing as akin to the sexual pleasure the text alludes to. Vocally, the performance is especially virtuosic insofar as the number is to be sung in a mixed belt, requiring the fullness and warm resonance of chest voice while moving across the singer's passaggio on several occasions. The display of vocal mastery culminates in the final word, "No," which Stroker stretches across more than one octave in one breath, ending with a joyful and climactic cheer. The powerful dimension of the performance is the occasion for the audience to admire

the performer's ability, all the more so since belting while sitting in a wheelchair is an especially complex technical feat as it is a style of singing that engages the entire body and demands a strong core support. Her sitting position subverts the traditional image of the Broadway diva who usually stands tall, arms outstretched and feet firmly planted on the ground. As Stroker explains, beyond the different techniques she resorts to to comply with the physical demands of belting, singing somehow allows for movement:

> I wear a brace that supports my core, and I do all my movement from my neck and my shoulders. I sing from my upper back — these muscles are what I engage to get power to sing. But singing for me is not technical, it's spiritual. It is a cry. It is a source of expression. It is where I don't have limits. I feel like I can fly when I sing. One of the crazy parts about being paralyzed is you have such a specific relationship to your body. You know the parts that you cannot use, you cannot feel. So the parts that you can, sometimes you feel like you have superpowers. (Paulson 2019b)

The mention of "flying" points to soaring movements of elevation: voice is no longer just a transmitter of emotion, but it becomes an agent and conduct of movement. The motif of elevation is here especially powerful as the audience might be more used to viewing the disabled body as static and irretrievably linked to the ground. The number's soaring force and energy – an energy that is all the more physical since Ado Annie defends a sexuality that hinges entirely on joyful willingness and pleasure – contradicts the visual signs of immobility usually associated with disability. Not only does this reshape spectators' preconceived notion of what "Broadway bodies" are, but it also transforms the way movement is traditionally viewed on the Broadway stage.

The revival's take on the character of Laurey also highlights these deconstructions. Vocally, Rebecca Naomi Jones' interpretation of Laurey is interesting as it does not really conform to the traditional soprano range associated with Golden Age ingénues. Analyzing the 2019 cast album recording of "People Will Say We're in Love" (a duet between Curly and Laurey), Jesse Green comments in *The New York Times*:

> […] for the current revival, Laurey's chorus has been transposed to the key of A Major, taking her into a smoky belt range that starts low and never gets above a C sharp.
>
> In the lowered version, Ms. Jones never goes all-out soprano.
>
> Without the high notes, and the singing tone that comes with them, all traces of operetta are gone. There's no more showing off for the audience, or even for Curly; it's as if Laurey has other things on her mind than making pretty sounds. She's playful, but worried.

As much as this vocal range deconstructs the standard vocal register associated with the role of the ingénue and the character of the ingénue itself, Jones's vocal performance also subverts the traditional numbers performed and associated with Black female performers and characters in musical theater, i.e. showstopping numbers known as "the big black lady song" (Dinero 30) that usually feature resonant and powerful belting, much like the character of Effie in *Dreamgirls* (1980). Jones's understated performance ("There's no more showing off for the audience") goes against the stereotypical excess usually associated with Black female performance in musical theater. The deconstruction of such a stereotype as well as Jones's authentic, simpler vocal performance, deprived of any virtuosic demonstrations, once again disrupt audience expectations as to what a Black female performer sounds like in a musical number.

This disintegration of recurring tropes associated with female Black performances in musical theater is furthered through the dream ballet sequence in which Laurey "makes up her mind" between Jud and Curly. Choreographed by John Heginbotham, this version of the dream ballet presents the originality of doubling Laurey's character: Rebecca Naomi Jones is not the one performing the dance number; another Black dancer (Gabrielle Hamilton), who does not appear in the ensemble, stars in this solo. The number emphasizes aesthetic circulations between the commercial art of musical theater and more experimental forms of modern dance, referencing for instance Alvin Ailey's athletic style and work on lower-body extensions.[13] The choreography is a jubilant and explosive display of athleticism, a symbol of Laurey's sexual awakening. The doubling of Laurey's role is especially

interesting as it hinges on the double-sided nature of these performances – as both inclusive and marking an aesthetic dislocation in the smooth passage from dialogue to musical or dance numbers. In a *New York Times* article, Justin Heginbotham gives a very telling anecdote:

> At one point during its creation, Mr. Heginbotham questioned a choice Ms. Hamilton had made and asked Mr. Fish, "Is that how that character would behave?"
>
> Mr. Heginbotham winced at the memory. "He looked at me incredulously, and he said my name — which I knew was really serious: 'John, what's the difference?' But what he meant was, what do you mean, *character*? It's Gabbie. We're watching Gabrielle dance. (Kourlas 2019a)

The dancer is not just a mere incarnation of the character of Laurey. The close-ups of her face projected on the back wall, the sound of her breath (which is audible to the audience) create an intimate and authentic encounter with the performer, which seems to disrupt the project of the integrated musical. The performer emerges out of the character as Heginbotham's anecdote reveals, and momentarily draws the spectators out of the enveloping world of the show. In the dream ballet, the music to which the choreography is set also explores this sense of discontinuity: the first part of the choreography is set to a reprise of "Oh What A Beautiful Mornin'" rife with electric guitars, culminating in a jarring and discordant cacophony of sounds, while the second part turns back to strings, more typical of the instrumentation of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals. Even the dancer's costume creates a rupture with the rest of the production: her sequined black and white tee-shirt is more reminiscent of 21st-century ready wear than the cowboy attires evoked earlier. These elements purposefully detach the dream ballet from the rest of the play, creating a tear in the tight-knit fabric of the integrated musical. Of course, the number still moves the action forward, as it choreographically suggests that Laurey chooses Curly. And yet, because the audience is actively meeting the performer more than just the character, it is also temporarily removed from the narrative of the musical.

The central visibility of this Black body *demands* that we look at it as a distinct body, and therefore unsettles the cohesive principles of

the musical. In that respect, the number echoes Scott McMillin's interpretation of musical numbers as interruptions that generate layered understandings of the performance:

> The numbers in the Rodgers and Hammerstein version do not advance the characters or further the book so much as they change the characters and the book into new versions of themselves that play against our normal sense of identity and story. The numbers interrupt our normal sense of character and plot with song and dance, and what we are left with is not the "one" but the "multiple." (21)

For McMillin, the musical numbers dislocate a sense of continuity more than they perpetuate it. But more than this, what the audience is confronted to is "the 'multiple'." The term is significant insofar as it not only points to the multiple versions of the characters (who operate on different modes depending on whether they sing and dance or whether they don't), but also to their doubling as both characters *and* performers, and to the diversity of the bodies present on stage. Symbolically, the fragmentation of the "one" into the "multiple" also signifies the deconstruction of the exclusively white-centered (and ableist) narrative of *Oklahoma!* – a deconstruction that can only be efficiently brought forward by *formal* disintegrations as well.

Conclusion

The nontraditional casting of bodies usually excluded from Golden Age musicals in a canonized play such as *Oklahoma!* therefore seems irretrievably linked to a formal disintegration of the model of the "integrated musical", or at least to the necessity to look for formal reinventions accompanying more diverse and inclusive castings. The fact that Fish's production first had a run off-Broadway (a trajectory usually undertaken by newly created shows or by revivals of shows that are not considered as popular as *Oklahoma!*) shows that the avant-garde aesthetics of non-commercial theater are perhaps one way of circumventing the continuation of power structures associated with nontraditional casting on Broadway that Galella underlines. Indeed, in an article from *The New York Times*, Jennifer Schuessler writes: "Mr.

Fish's arrival on Broadway […] might seem like a remarkable turn of events for an artist who has spent much of his career running in the opposite direction of American commercial theater." The revival's journey off-Broadway and its foray into more avant-garde or experimental aesthetics metaphorically represents the necessity for *Oklahoma!* to be reinvented further away from the capitalist frame of commercial theater that dictates its aesthetic and thematic components in order to be reiterated as a decidedly contemporary musical.

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1 "It still receives more than six hundred productions per year" (Carter xi).

2 "[…] after a triumphant opening, *Oklahoma!* stayed on Broadway for five years and (beginning in 1947) in London's West End for three" (Carter xii). Compared with the thirty-five-year run of *Phantom of the Opera* on Broadway (from 1988 until April 2023), *Oklahoma!*'s run might seem relatively short but in 1943, it signaled unprecedented success, and was a record only bested by *My Fair Lady* in 1954 (Hischak 202).

3 *Oklahoma!* was the first musical to record the cast with full orchestrations. This definitely set a precedent for subsequent original cast recordings of musicals (Hischak 202).

4 Oklahoma marked the final stop of the infamous Trail of Tears that forcefully relocated 60,000 Native American West of the Mississippi river between 1830 and 1850.

5 *New York Times* critics Ben Brantley and Jesse Green mention the "dark golden haze in this reclaimed *Oklahoma!*;" *New Yorker* critic Sarah Larson mentions "Daniel Fish's Dark Take on *Oklahoma!*," while *The Atlantic*'s Tom S. Purdum entitles his review of the play "'Oklahoma!' Gets a Dark, Brilliant Revival." *The Independent* did the same for its preview of the production's West End transfer: "Daniel Fish on his dark new *Oklahoma!*: 'We're trying to deal with violence, injustice and community" (Crompton).

6 "The contemporary is the one who stares at his time – not to catch sight of its lights, but its obscurity. All times are dark for those who feel their contemporaneity. The contemporary is he who can see this obscurity, and who is able to write by dipping his quill in the darkness of the present." (my translation)

7 In *No Safe Space: Re-Casting Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in American Theatre,* Angela C. Pao explains that the term "nontraditional casting" exists along several other terms (multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural, diverse, innovative or experimental) to designate "the rich array of casting practices […] that have burgeoned in the United States since the 1960s" (2). She explains

that, though "widely adopted among theater professionals and the mass media," "dissatisfaction with this designation surfaced along with questions as to whether it is always clear when race, ethnicity, or gender is central to the development of a particular character or play." However, the choice of the word *nontraditional* to designate the production's casting practices has been prioritized in this article because, as Pao underlines, "[i]t is inclusive in terms of both the people affected and the approaches developed. Perhaps even more importantly, it foregrounds the fact that what American audiences were accustomed to seeing on the stage before the era of multiracial casting was not a truthful correspondence to reality, as one might think from hearing many of the objections, but the application of historical conventions" (4-5).

[8] As Carter underlines, the promotional material and the reviews that attest for the reception of Oklahoma! reveal that "*Oklahoma!* was easily construed as a morale-boosting part of the war effort" (xv).

[9] In *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at Theatre*, Dolan coins the term "utopian performatives" to define "small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" (20). Donatella Galella envisions the 2010 Arena Stage multiracial production of *Oklahoma!* as a "utopian performative of inclusion" insofar as it "illustrated how exhortations for togetherness can map onto calls for racial diversity, equality, and eradication of identity lines that alienate individuals" (214).

[10] Daniel Fish initially envisioned his production under the label of "dinner theater" (Schuessler).

[11] Everett remarks that, however well-intentioned the creative team might have been, casting a Black man as Jud was read as a way of confining Black actors to tropes of violence, therefore reinforcing negative stereotypes: "the creators, who were striving for a multiracial production in the best sense of the idea, according to several reviewers instead ended up inscribing negative stereotypes of African American men as violent and abusive. When the white Curly suggests that Jud hang himself – something that happens in the original libretto – he now, in a literal sense, would be seen as perpetrating white-on-black violence in the form of lynching, as the *Seattle Times* reviewer Nicole Brodeur noted" (366). Galella notes that the Arena Stage creative team was sensitive to this issue, deciding that "Jud should not be played by a black or Native American actor so as to avoid stereotypes of drunk, sexually threatening, working-class male villains of color" (221). However, the team also "briefly considered casting a Native American actor as Jud because his outsider status and death would resonate with the violent treatment of indigenous peoples by the federal state. The team

ultimately claimed that it did not find a suitable singing actor and expressed concerns about offending audiences with such a portrayal. White actors were cast […], suggesting an apparent unmarked-ness to whiteness that can be safely laughed at or villainized" (221).

12 As Stacy Wolf remarks in *A Problem Like Maria*, "The very action of singing and dancing—the foundation of performance in musicals—requires an athleticism that demonstrates women's physical and vocal strength. The female principal in most musicals is visually and aurally dominant. She stands center stage, the story is built around her, and the songs are written for her as solo presentations" (22).

13 Demetia Hopkins-Greene, a former dancer at the Alvin Ailey Company, who undertook Gabrielle Hamilton's *Oklahoma!* solo in December 2019, explains that her work at the company greatly inspired and "prepared" her for this number (Kourlas 2019b).