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Gothic *Oklahoma!*: The Dream Ballet

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GOthic OKLAHOMA! THE DREAM BALLET

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Laurey Williams, the heroine of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*, is a girl without a problem. Courted by the charming and talented Curly, Laurey plays at disliking and dismissing him, but this only proves to her Aunt Eller what the audience already knows: "She likes you," Eller says to Curly, "quite a lot."¹ And even though Laurey has shown moments of tenderness and sensitivity to Jud Fry, that "bullet-colored, growly man" (17) who works Eller and Laurey's farm, we all know that she loathes him, and merely pretends an attraction to him in order to ignite Curly's jealousy. Yet for all its Broadway predictability, *Oklahoma!* is convinced that Laurey is somehow ambivalent about her white knight and gothic villain. In the middle of the play is the famous dream she enters in order to "show [her] heart what it really wants,"² to the accompaniment of her girlfriends' chant, "make up your mind, . . . make up your own story, Laurey" (49). The dream, cast in the form of a ballet choreographed by Agnes de Mille, plays out the fantasy of marriage to Curly and the fear of Jud's violence should she reject him. In this sense the dream ballet introduces a decidedly gothic affect to an otherwise wholesome and upbeat musical comedy, yet it doesn't clearly convey the sense of ambivalence or confusion that the play argues Laurey feels. Given the clarity of her affections from the play's beginning, we can only wonder why Laurey needs dream-work at all. Make up your mind, yes, Laurey, but make it up about what? What work does *Oklahoma!*'s gothic dream do, and what difference does it make that this dream takes the form of a dance? Cast in other terms: what affective registers does the dream ballet address, and why embed the genre of the gothic dream ballet within the jovial and sunlit world of the musical comedy?

The 1942 Rodgers and Hammerstein play, and the movie version that followed it in 1955, are famous for changing the function of song and dance in the larger world of the Broadway musical. Drawing on a genre remarkable for its unapologetic wish-fulfillments, its privilege of the spectacle of pleasure at the expense of realism and death, and its apotheosizing of the local into the dreamy vales of the Utopian,³ *Oklahoma!*-as-musical rewrites Lynn Riggs's play, *Green Grow the Lilacs* of Depression-torn 1931. In fashioning a more upbeat, mass-appealing vision for the '40s and '50s, Oscar Hammerstein replaced Riggs's traditional cowboy lyrics with jaunty songs that were then choreographed by Agnes de Mille. These songs and dances contributed much more directly to the plot and characterization than production

numbers had in previous musicals, where they functioned as mere *divertissements* or *tours de force* to highlight the talent of the performers.

In particular, de Mille choreographs Laurey's marriage fantasy as conventional romantic ballet, inflected with motifs of American folk dance. As with classical nineteenth-century ballets where lovers dance in dreams with their beloveds (think the second act of *Giselle* or the Ballet of the Shades in *La Bayadère*), de Mille sets Laurey and Curly's dance to a conventional vocabulary of the ballet *pas de deux*; and like her Romantic predecessors, she liberally peppers the choreography with local dance styles (here primarily American-based jazz) to situate her dancing lovers as "authentic" country folk. But the glossy romance is short-lived. At the heart of the dream sequence is a scene where Laurey, in her attempt to escape the menacing Jud, finds herself in a stripped-down, surrealist dance hall, where three licentious women in silk and bustiers do what the play script calls "an amusing, satirically bawdy dance" (50), a cancan, to be precise (Figure 1). This dance certainly isn't amusing to Laurey: it dramatizes her fears that she may be—or may be perceived to be—attracted to two men at once, and conveys to us that the very idea of sexuality is terrifying to her. A victim of the compulsory sexual coupling that motivates the entire play, Laurey is forced to join the dance hall women's cancan. The dream ends with Curly's attempt to shoot Jud, but the villain is impervious to the bullets and eventually kills Curly so that he may have Laurey. If the dream ballet is to show Laurey—and to show us—what she really wants, then what she "really wants" seems to be a morass of sexual fears compounded by the allurements of sexual license and sexual power. In this sense, the dream uncovers an affective tapestry we can only call "gothic," woven through as it is with repressed desires that bleed to the surface, uncovering subterranean movements that should have remained buried.⁴ The gothic *métier* of this dance, I want to suggest, condenses a number of meanings that the Broadway version of the drama cannot deal with overtly.



FIGURE 1: A lascivious cancan. *Oklahoma!*, dir. Fred Zinnemann (Twentieth Century Fox, 1955).

To consider the macabre affect of *Oklahoma!*'s dream ballet, we need to consider more carefully its primary gothic figure, Jud Fry, or Jeeter, as he is called in Riggs's *Green Grow the Lilacs*. Like the ubiquitous Phantom of the Opera that Jerrold Hogle has traced through its various cultural manifestations,⁵ Jud/Jeeter is a shape-shifter who performs different work in different versions of the drama. In the general contours of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, he is a surly and possessive villain who threatens Laurey with personal violence and her home with arson should she refuse his advances. His last name, *Fry*, associates him with the fire he will use to try to kill Laurey and Curly late in the play. The fact that he lives in an old smokehouse, and that the stage set of his dream saloon is lit by torches, make him an easy type, a gothic Satan emerging from the fires of Hell to molest and corrupt our ingenuous virgin. But what makes the stage musical's villain so interesting is the way in which the dream ballet uses him to condense so many elements of masculine and territorial violence that Riggs, in his original play, locates outside of Jeeter. In *Green Grow the Lilacs*, Laurey tells Eller that she loves her home in Indian Territory, except for one time of the year, "Sunday in fall, when it's windy, and the sun shines, and the leaves piles up thick agin the house. I'm 'fraid of my life to go from here [her bedroom] to the kitchen—like sump'n was gonna ketch me!"⁶ That amorphous and haunting "sump'n" gradually takes the form of Jeeter Fry: "he makes me shiver ever' time he gits close to me," she tells Eller "With a frightened look around, as if he were in the room." "I hook my door at night and fasten the winders agin it. Agin it—and the sound of feet a-walkin' up and down out there under that tree, and around the corner of the house, and down by the barn—and in the front room there!"⁷ The conflation of "it" with "him" helps Laurey to make sense of her neuroses; by condensing her more spectral and amorphous anxieties and projecting them onto Jeeter, Laurey is able to give them a local habitation and a name.

That conflation, however, is not a little overdetermined. While it's true that Jeeter is dangerous, and will try to kill her and Curly near the end of the play, Laurey's sense that he haunts her house merely reifies a fear she felt long before she ever met Jeeter. In a remarkable passage that was deleted from the stage musical, Laurey tells Eller of her arrival in Oklahoma:

Onct I passed by a farmhouse and it was night. Paw and maw and me was in a covered wagon on our way to here. And this farmhouse was burnin' up. It was burnin' bright, too. Black night, it was like I said. Flames licked and licked at the red-hot chimbley and finally it fell, too, and that was the last of that house. And that was turrible! I cried and cried.⁸

The house, we are given to believe, was set on fire by some unidentified man to whom the farmer's wife had refused to show some kindness, and so burning became the Oklahoman logic of justice. We will see this logic again when Jeeter attempts to burn Laurey and Curly atop the haystack during the shivaree, but given that Laurey experienced this trauma as a child, and given that it has haunted her relationship to her house ever since, we have to see Jeeter as a *symptom* of a certain kind of Oklahoman justice, not its inventor or primary model. By the same logic, Jeeter must be read as a *symptom* of Laurey's anxieties rather

than their cause. In the film version of *Oklahoma!*, this hysterical symptomology is played out in the relationship of the terrorized house to a more general logics of space. De Mille's dream ballet has Laurey attempting to escape from a house, supposedly the whorehouse with which Jud is associated, but significantly, this is the house to which Laurey herself has run following the collapse of her wedding ceremony; Jud simply followed her there. Like any uncannily abject space, the house "beseeches" Laurey at the same time that it threatens to "pulverize" her,⁹ an ambivalence we saw in the passage on Indian Territory I quoted above. In light of Riggs's original concerns in *Lilacs*, the dream house is also the more generalized sense of "home" in Indian Territory, a home that is never where the heart is because it is continually shadowed by the supposed threat of violence and attack (from white men, from Cherokee, from one's own unconscious). Riggs's scene clearly inscribes "home" as an always already terrorized and terrorizing space, the site of a widespread fear of violence against its inhabitants. The musical attempts to localize and contain this violence within its gothic villain, Jud, but Jud is more metonym than metaphor: he signals a more primal, a more *heimlich* or homely threat for which he is not the original signifier.

The dream ballet, then, serves as a repository for Laurey Williams's neurotic and hyperbolic fears of home, with all its permeability and institutionalized violence. But that's not all. The ballet also encodes a larger, more social fear that circulates around the rituals of heterosexual union. I'm thinking particularly of the shivaree, a parodic and celebratory aggression against the bride and groom on their wedding night. In the musical versions of the narrative, the shivaree plays a minor role in the final scene: it is simply a "good old custom. Never hurt anybody" (77). True, it's during the shivaree that Jud Fry dies, but that's his own fault: he has tried to murder Laurey and Curly and ends up falling on his own frogsticker with fatal consequences. The shivaree is the occasion for his death, but certainly not its cause. Instead, prior to Jud's arrival the stage directions for the Broadway play tell us that this is "a good-natured hazing" (79), and the film has Gordon MacRae and Shirley Jones grin at each other during the shenanigans just to assure us that they too enjoy the game. In Riggs's version of the shivaree, though, things "git purty rough," as Curly warns Laurey;¹⁰ and the stage direction tells us that "hardly a bridal couple within twenty miles around, for years and years, has escaped [the] bawdy ministrations" of the shivareers. For five pages of the play we are given a view of that "good old custom": the mob rips off Curly's shirt and menaces Laurey; "*The MEN break out into derisive and lascivious guffaws . . . in an orgy of delight*"; there are promises to Laurey to "Scrunch you to death, pur' near!", "Bite them shoulders—," "Eat 'er alive!"¹¹ And Jeeter's death by his own knife is hardly read as an unfortunate accident or even simple self-defense on Curly's part; rather, Curly is hauled off to prison to await trial for murder, a legal action that Aunt Eller explains is the necessary product of the community's belief in its *right* to shivaree. Curly must come to trial, she asserts, in order to enshrine the Okalahoman male's right to ritualized violence against a bride and groom—and against the whole heterosexual institution itself—without that ritual getting out of hand. Quite a difference from the parlor game played by Rodgers and Hammerstein's cast. Of course, Riggs's version of the shivaree is closer to the mark.

Historically, the shivaree has concealed within good-natured game-playing a clear violence against marriages deemed to be inappropriate or socially dangerous; it has acted theatrically as a method of control in marital kinship structures, structures that have particular high purchase in a play like this one, where the socially suspect cowboy (Curly, he of no fixed address) wants to marry the land-owning and stationary farmer, thus changing the social landscape of the next state in the American union. All of this social unrest is removed from the Broadway revision, or at least watered down into the pallid musical number, "The Farmer and the Cowboy Should Be Friends." And in order to purge the fear that the farmer (Jud) and the cowboy (Curly) *won't* be friends, the musical reduces shivaree violence to the petty jealousies of a pathetic hired hand whom it then kills off to make way for a new, settled, farmer Curly. The large-scale affect of unrest is removed but not repressed: it finds its expression in the gothic explosion of the dream ballet.

While the dream ballet is the gothic remainder of psychological and social violences sanitized from Lynn Riggs's version of *Oklahoma*, it provides more than a simple ratio of "aggressions over here become aggressions over there." It adds new ones of its own. In *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the shivaree is conducted by a group of blood-thirsty men playing at the sacrificial murder and consumption of the virgin bride; the womenfolk, in both this play and *Oklahoma!*, are excluded from the ritual. De Mille's dream ballet rewrites this exclusion. In the *mise en scène* of the saloon's dance hall to which the dream Laurey runs, Jud Fry is the central masculine presence but not necessarily the central threat. That role belongs to the dancing girls themselves. As Jud retires to a chair on stage left to watch the goings-on, the women terrorize Laurey with a parodic cancan, one they will eventually force her to join. As the dance begins, the stage bursts into flame: fire from the chandelier and floor lamps metaphorize the fire that terrorizes Laurey's sense of home in *Lilacs*, a fear exacerbated by what will happen if she "fires" Jeeter off the property: she will, quite literally, "fry." Once again the dream ballet isolates within Laurey's fantasy the traumas of the larger Territorial landscape while replicating them as paralyzing and explosive forces. But it also locates those terrors within women's relations with one another, relations that are signaled more clearly through the nature of de Mille's choreography.

De Mille's choice of the cancan here is not accidental: as a marked counterpoint to the balletic and folk-dance motifs that constitute all the other dancing in *Oklahoma!*, the cancan resurrects a tradition of female sexual power and license that Laurey Williams spends much of the play pretending she doesn't want. Deriving from the Old French *caquehan*, meaning "gossip" or "scandal,"¹² the cancan is, according to Wendy Buonaventura, the "rudest dance of all time," one which women dancers traditionally performed for pleasure rather than for money.¹³ In the dream ballet, the cancan seems to terrorize Laurey with the very idea of female sexual pleasure, as if to be aroused were by definition to be out of control (despite the fact that the arousal expresses itself through a very controlled and technically demanding choreography). This girl who ostensibly can't say "yes" to either of the men in her life is forced to cancan to a burlesque perversion of "I'm Just A Girl Who Cain't Say No,"



FIGURE 2: Jud forces Laurey to waltz. *Oklahoma!*, dir. Fred Zinnemann (Twentieth Century Fox, 1955).

the comic solo sung elsewhere by Ado Annie who wants all the men who want her. In the logic of the dream, the cancan then leads Laurey to an awkward waltz with Jud, which he soon abandons for a more raucous polka with one of the cancan girls (Figure 2). Here again the form of the dance signifies: when the waltz burst onto the English and American scene in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, it was denounced as dangerous to religion and morals, as it clasped the bodies of men and women tightly together and spun them around until the dancers lost their sense of place and self-control. The polka, similarly, has been connected to the cancan since at least the 1830s, both using the same galloping step, “the same exuberant 2/4 beat,” the same “intimate bodily contacts [and] sexual fantasies involving [the dancers’] partners.”¹⁴ The form of the dance, its historical resonances, takes us well beyond the dream ballet as a mere expression of Laurey’s *fears* regarding Jud and his violent advances; it encodes Laurey’s actual *desire* for that more bestial sexual expression, or at least for some of the powers it might offer.

Those feared desires, those reluctant powers, become clearer as the ballet continues. As the dream Laurey’s cancan melds into a polka with Jud, the music melds from “Cain’t Say No” to “Poor Jud is Dead,” the strangely psychological ballad Curly sang to Jud earlier on. In that song Curly tantalizes Jud with the seductive attraction of imagining his own death: the lyrics invite Jud to envision his own funeral and the masses of people who would mourn and venerate him. This deadly seduction immediately precedes Laurey’s dream, and the juxtaposition suggests a link between the two pieces. Remember, the purpose of Laurey’s dream is to show her her own mind and to tell her what she really wants. That she should end up dancing with a figure who can imagine his own death, a figure who, like the undead Dracula, will be able to withstand the bullets the dream Curly shoots at him, takes us well beyond the facile plot of sexual triangle where good girl is caught between good boy and bad boy. To dance with Jud is to dance with Death itself. Witness how, at the conclusion of

the dream ballet, the saloon women are hoisted into the air by their men and carried about as if dead—what clearly happens to good girls who cavort with the likes of Jud Fry—but they are not dead at all (Figure 3).¹⁵ Their exquisitely held poses in this “death grip” mark the degree to which they continue to dance, continue to give energy to their positions in the choreography. (We can contrast this to the dead Curly, whose “corpse” is simply dragged off the stage.) In other words, the dream ballet becomes a kind of *danse macabre* in which Jud and the women all take on the role of dancing un-dead. Death, uncannily animated through choreography as it is through imagining oneself dead, becomes a parody of the powerlessness Laurey fears from a sexual union with Jud (or with Curly, for that matter). The ballet’s Life-in-Death delivers to the women a distinctly *un-feminine* female power that rewrites the scripts of sexual pleasure: it’s not that these women can’t say no, it’s that they won’t. They at least play at being dead to Oklahoman codes of sexual and gender propriety. This, I think, is Laurey’s central problem to be worked out in the dream, for she too is in that curious state of becoming (like the *cancaneuses*, like the Territory about to be the next American state): she is no longer a virginal innocent yet she is still unable—or unwilling—to claim the attractive powers of sexual knowledge, given that those powers are always framed within, and accorded by, death. For as so often happens in the gothic, death is both a metaphor for liberation and a threatened corporeal reality.

What I’m arguing here is that it is precisely that uncanny *pas de deux*, that strangely rich aporia created by the sexual attractions of death, that Agnes de Mille brings to *Oklahoma!* as an echo of Lynn Riggs’s concerns in *Lilacs*. Bright golden hazes on the meadow notwithstanding, *Oklahoma!* produced a macabre affect in Riggs. In 1928 he wrote,

—after sorrow, fear, hate, love—I can’t even begin to suggest something in Oklahoma I shall never be free of: that heavy unbroken, unyielding crusted day—morning bound to night—like a stretched tympanum overhead, under which one hungers dully, is lonely, weakly rebellious, and can think only clearly about the grave, and the slope to the grave.



FIGURE 3: A dance with Death. *Oklahoma!*, dir. Fred Zinnemann (Twentieth Century Fox, 1955).

It seems to me more and more that I am haunted and driven by pictures and pictures—ominous, gray, violent, unserene—and this in spite of the fact that I become more and more sane, more and more free of hysteria. So it begins to grow on me that only in that borderland of life, that disjointed, slightly unfocused arena can we touch the pains of truth.¹⁶

In *Oklahoma!*, it's only the perverse Jud Fry who thinks repeatedly about the grave; indeed, according to Curly, he lives in a grave, dwelling underground like a mole and never enjoying the light. But in *Green Grow the Lilacs* Laurey is as much haunted by the grave as Jeeter is. Hers is a grave of sexual knowledge, of sexual union, of the false promise of domestic bliss in "virginal" Indian Territory. If Laurey lives in a gothic borderland, so did Riggs, a part-Cherokee whose land was being swallowed up by white America, a closeted homosexual for whom the institution of marriage could only represent violent death. With the fading from view of *Green Grow the Lilacs* and the rise of fame of *Oklahoma!*, it's only in the genre of the dream ballet that we might find his gothic "borderland of life" and in it glimpse his affectively riven "pains of truth."

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NOTES

¹ Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, "Oklahoma!," in *6 Plays by Rodgers and Hammerstein* (New York: The Modern Library, 1942), 1–84. Subsequent references to this edition are included parenthetically within the text.

² *Oklahoma!* (DVD), directed by Fred Zinnemann (Twentieth Century Fox, 1955).

³ For what remains a crucial discussion of the Broadway musical and its discontents, see Richard Dyer's "Entertainment and Utopia" in *Only Entertainment* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁴ Here I am drawing on Schelling's famous definition of the Uncanny most familiar to us through Freud. Writes Freud, "'Unheimlich' [the Uncanny] is the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light" (Schelling). Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, Vol. XVII, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 224.

⁵ Jerrold E. Hogle, *The Undergrounds of The Phantom of the Opera: Sublimation and the Gothic in Leroux's Novel and Its Progeny* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

⁶ Lynn Riggs, "Green Grow the Lilacs," in *The Cherokee Night and Other Plays* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 27.

⁷ Riggs, "Green Grow the Lilacs," 30, emphasis original.

⁸ Riggs, "Green Grow the Lilacs," 26.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 5.

¹⁰ Riggs, "Green Grow the Lilacs," 75.

¹¹ Riggs, "Green Grow the Lilacs," 82, 83.

¹² Wendy Buonaventura, *Something in the Way She Moves: Dancing Women from Salome to Madonna* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 97.

¹³ Buonaventura, *Something in the Way She Moves*, 11.

¹⁴ Buonaventura, *Something in the Way She Moves*, 98.

¹⁵ De Mille knew what she was about in having these women thrust over the heads of the male dancers. In her biography she writes, "No pioneer man . . . would, in a courting or social dance, turn a woman upside down—a slut, possibly, but not one of his own women who were valuable and to be treated with courtesy and gentleness. Nor would the women squat on the ground and jump around like frogs. Yet I have seen these tricks used in American folk reconstructions. . . ." Agnes de Mille, *Dance to the Piper* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1952), 213–14.

¹⁶ Phyllis Cole Braunlich, *Haunted by Home: The Life and Letters of Lynn Riggs* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 76.

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