



Evan Zimmerman

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THEATER

# A different kind of 'Oklahoma!' rides into town

Director radically reinvents classic musical with guns and violence

**W**hen Rodgers and Hammerstein's first musical arrived on Broadway, audiences had never seen anything quite like it. Ditto director Daniel Fish's radical reinvention of *Oklahoma!*, which seven decades later has become almost as much of a sensation as the original.

Riding into town for most of June, the revival brings with it Fish's vivid, visceral, violent take on the groundbreaking show, if not the chili served to New York audiences out of Crock-Pots from the stage.

"I wasn't trying to do something different. I was just trying to respond to it as I would respond to anything," Fish insists in a phone interview. "I'm not setting out to be different. I saw a story about America and about the nature of community, about how a group of people defines itself and the lengths they're willing to go to, including murder."

Building on the musical storytelling innovations of 1927's *Show Boat* (with lyrics by Hammerstein), *Oklahoma!* was an instant hit on Broadway in 1943. For the first time, a musical play integrated themes, plot and songs into a serious, dramatic narrative.

The touring production, presented by Broadway Dallas at Winspear Opera House and by Performing Arts Fort Worth at Bass Hall, has been evolving since 2007 when Fish was asked to mount the show at Bard College. A couple of moves later, it landed on Broadway, where it won the best revival Tony.

"There's a lot of talk around — you know, whatever — how controversial the show is, the makeup of the cast, the diversity of the cast, the fact that there are trans people in the cast," he says. "The production seeks to really be open to everybody who was in it, and we try to extend the same openness and invitation to our audience every night."

The plot of *Oklahoma!* seems simple. In a 1906 territory about to win statehood, Curly, a cowboy, and farm girl Laurey are in love but won't admit

it. She's also pursued by a crude farmhand, Jud, creating a rivalry. At a box social, the two men bid for Laurey's affections. Eventually, it ends in deadly violence, which Fish has turned from an accident into homicide.

"I realized there was a story there about a community needing to create an outsider and that is going to sacrifice justice in order to do so," he says. "That's in the script. We didn't change that. We just sort of pointed that up a little bit. And maybe other people haven't done that."

Hinting at what's to come, the back of the stage is lined with rifles.

"I didn't think I could do the production of *Oklahoma!* right now in America and not have guns in the picture," Fish says. "I think that'd be kind of blind. It's a huge part of our culture. It's a very divisive part of our culture that needed to be in the visual vocabulary of the show."

In the New York productions, some audience members sat at a long table on the edge of the stage. At intermission, everyone was served chili and cornbread, which isn't possible on tour.

In a couple of key scenes, the theater goes dark, the characters' images video-projected onto the back wall.

Fish argues that he's being true to the original. If you watch the 1955 film version of *Oklahoma!*, the darkness is there. So what has the director added?

"I think there are elements of the film that are really great," he says. "I think what we're doing is very different. We're living in a different time. I think whenever you make a piece, it's always in conversation with the world that you're living in or performing it in at that moment. So that's really how I come at it, hopefully trying to really create something that is in the most basic and also the deepest sense, truly contemporary."

*Manuel Mendoza is a freelance writer and a former staff critic at The Dallas Morning News.*



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Details

- Tuesday-June 12 at Winspear Opera House, 2403 Flora St. \$40-\$140. [broadwaydallas.org](http://broadwaydallas.org).
- June 21-26 at Bass Performance Hall, 525 Commerce St., Fort Worth. \$44-\$99. [basshall.com](http://basshall.com).

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