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# Forum

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## ***Oklahoma!* and Jews in the United States**

To the Editor:

After reading Andrea Most's article on *Oklahoma!* ("We Know We Belong to the Land": The Theatricality of Assimilation in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*," 113 [1998]: 77–89), the comments on it in the Forum (113 [1998]: 452–54), which raise convincing doubts about details of her reading, and Most's reply (113 [1998]: 454–55), I am most struck by the criticism that is not made, involving what I see as a basic methodological problem. Most has assumed that because Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rodgers were Jewish, they felt themselves outsiders in American society and thus constructed their perhaps most famous musical comedy as an assimilationist semiallegory. Her interpretation depends entirely on the ethnic identity of these collaborators and on her assumption that as Jews Rodgers and Hammerstein must have felt as she says they did. Even Most's identifications of Jud Fry as implicitly black and Ali as implicitly Jewish depend on the authors' purported desire for assimilation into "white" America. (It is a significant detail that Mervyn Vye, the first Jud, looked whiter than the cowboys, all of whom had the tans of outside workers, or so I remember from the performance I saw in 1945. "Bullet-colored" likely meant nothing more than dirty.)

Surely Most's whole argument is circular: we know that certain meanings are present because the authors are Jewish, and their being Jewish explains why those meanings are present. And the paper is also based on a dubious preconception about American Jews. Do they—even if we limit consideration to middle-class American Jews—inevitably feel they are outsiders and desire assimilation? This is not merely a questionable generalization; it is an ethnic stereotype.

And as an assumption about Rodgers and Hammerstein in particular it verges on the absurd. Both men were successful in musical comedy for decades before *Oklahoma!*—Hammerstein with various composers (most notably Jerome Kern) and Rodgers with Lorenz Hart. They may not have become millionaires until they joined forces in the 1940s, but their fame, wealth, and status in the fairly closed society of the New York theater were already long established by the time *Oklahoma!* opened on Broadway.

I must admit that as a secular Jew (born 1936) who grew up in New York conscious of my ethnic background yet never feeling an outsider, I am surprised that I did not have this response when I first read Most's article. It took others' more

specific doubts to evoke my awareness of the methodological flaws at the heart of the paper. Perhaps I have become less sensitive than I should be to stereotypes of Jews, so commonly accepted do they seem to be today in Canadian and American culture.

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### Reply:

Michael Steig's claim that my analysis rests on an "ethnic stereotype" about Jews represents a serious misreading of the essay and an equally serious misunderstanding of American Jewish history.

First, I must object to Steig's claim that my interpretation "depends entirely on the ethnic identity" of Rodgers and Hammerstein. While I do feel that their ethnic identity played a role in the creation of their works, I draw the evidence to support the argument largely from the texts themselves and from aspects of the original productions. I did not need to stretch far, for example, to identify Ali Hakim as implicitly Jewish—countless observers of the original production noted that Joseph Buloff, a well-known performer on the Yiddish stage, played the part with a pronounced "Jewish inflection." Likewise, I deduced Jud Fry's racialized identity from specific clues I found in the text, many not so subtle, as when he is instructed to sing "like a Negro at a revivalist meeting" (42). While I would welcome discussion on my analysis of the text, Steig offers no counterreadings and indeed never refers to the text itself.

Second, I take issue with Steig's accusation that I indulge in an "ethnic stereotype" in implying that Rodgers and Hammerstein may have felt some anxiety about their status as Americans in the 1930s and early 1940s. A stereotype depends on generalizations. I focus in the paper on a particular, well-defined set of Jewish artists, operating under particular historical conditions. Nowhere do I speak (as Steig does) transhistorically of "American Jews" or "middle-class American Jews" who "inevitably" feel alienated. I used archival materials (including some not cited in the essay) in developing my claims about these specific figures. In an extended correspondence with his uncle Arthur, for example, Hammerstein discusses the failure of his uncle's nightclub in Palm Beach, which fell through because the owner "doesn't want any tenants who are Jews" (Arthur Hammerstein, letter to Oscar Hammerstein II, 23 June 1936, Hammerstein Collection, Lib. of Congress, Washington). Other exchanges in the same collection make it clear that Hammerstein

was well aware of the discrimination facing Jews on a variety of fronts.

This biographical evidence notwithstanding, there is also substantial historical proof that American Jews, in general, did feel a great deal of anxiety about their status in America during the interwar period and that this anxiety was well founded. As I discuss in the paper, nativist sentiments gained strength throughout the period, discrimination against Jews was a major concern, and the rise of Nazism was perceived as a significant threat. American Jews responded to these circumstances in many ways, through institutional and political action, literary and artistic production, and personal choices about identity. Numerous works on American Jewish history amply document this claim. I refer Steig to Henry Feingold's *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920–1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992) and Leonard Dinnerstein's *Uneasy at Home: Antisemitism and the American Jewish Experience* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987) for an introduction to the topic. Achieving "fame, wealth, and status" on Broadway in no way shielded Jews from this type of anxiety. In fact, those in the upper socioeconomic classes, who were more likely to seek entry into elite circles, often felt the sting of exclusion most directly. Steig might consider the parallel case in Hollywood: certainly the studio heads, despite their great wealth and power in the world of movies, still felt anxiety about how they were perceived. Why did they change names and wives in attempts to de-ethnicize their identities if they had no worries about the effect of their Jewishness in the broader American sphere? Finally, while I appreciate the force of Steig's personal experience, it in no way serves as evidence to disprove my claims, particularly since, as he points out, he was born thirty-four years after the younger of my two subjects.

I would like to conclude with a comment about Steig's observation that "Mervyn Vye [. . .] looked whiter than the cowboys" and hence, he implies, could not possibly be mistaken for black. First, a minor correction: Jud was originally played by Howard da Silva, not Vye. Regardless, as numerous observers of American history have shown, race is not necessarily written on the skin. As I state in the essay, Jews feared being labeled black not because they looked black but because "blackness" was a transportable category. Irish Americans were called black until they eventually achieved "whiteness" (see Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* [New York: Routledge, 1995]). Needless to say, the skin color of Irish people did not change. An entire American genre, the mulatto melodrama, is based on the premise that the heroine is presumed white until she is discovered to be black. If her skin color were an indicator, the plot would have