

The First Important Modern American Musical

That seems like an oxymoron since the United States originated the concept of the musical. It seems like we were in competition with our cousins across the big pond in the 1970s & '80s with the Second British Invasion and the shows of Andrew Lloyd Webber and others like *Les Misérables*.

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II began their collaboration in 1943 with the musical *Oklahoma!* While it may seem dull and passe by today's demand for bigger, flashier, even bordering on the cinematic, this show set the standard for which all musicals are judged. This summer, [Fountain City Festival](#) will be presenting this benchmark classic. *Oklahoma!* was innovative for several reasons. Most importantly, it established the "book musical." For the first time, the plot, music, lyrics, and choreography became integrated. No longer would there be a story divided by songs and dances that did nothing to advance the plot.

It did not begin with a big chorus number as had been the practice in operettas. Curly enters singing one of the many songs of the American Song Book: "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'."

Something else that was totally unheard of... the title song was not even heard until the end of show.

The invention of the "Dream Ballet" was first used to foreshadow coming events and delve inside the psyche of a main character.

While the simple plot of every day life in turn of the century Oklahoma Territory seems corny 70+ years later, *Oklahoma!* will forever hold a spot in the formation of the modern musical. Better shows may have come along since and seem to overshadow

it, but without it the concept of the musical would be far different.