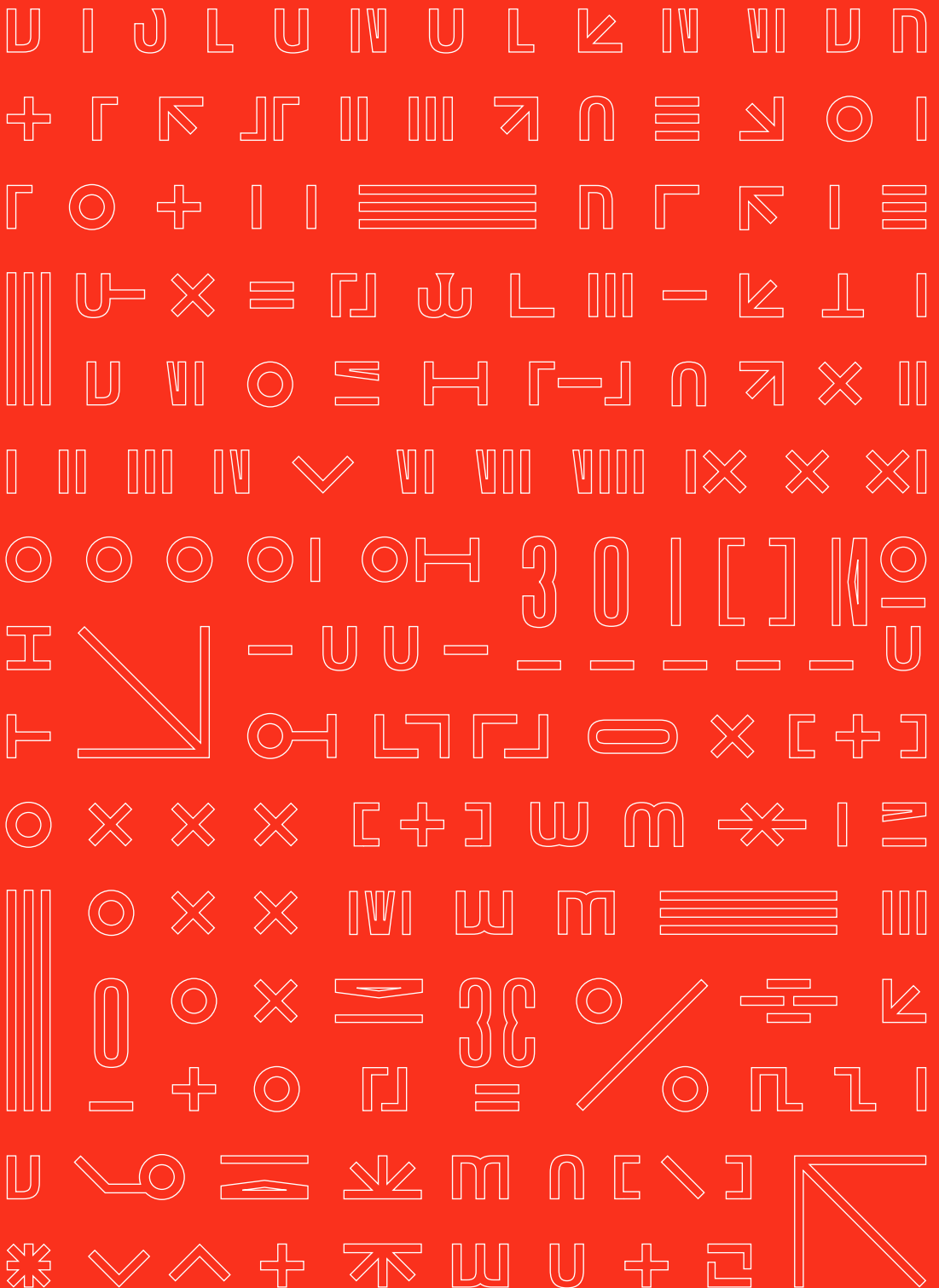
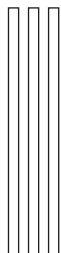
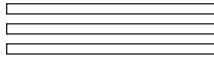


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DESIGNING THE DREAM BALLET: FROM OKLAHOMA!’S THIRD AUTEUR TO FISH’S REVIVAL AND BEYOND

Maressa Park

ABSTRACT

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s epoch-defining, twice-Pulitzer Prize-winning Oklahoma! is well-known for its integrated non-musical elements, which seamlessly create multimedia cohesion. The most iconic element of this integrated musical is Agnes de Mille’s “Dream Ballet”, a show-stopping choreography and “microcosm” of the show’s plot and the paragon of its namesake genre. The Dream Ballet has undergone a striking evolution in the 2019 Oklahoma! revival at the Circle in the Square Theatre, noted for its subversion of the genre’s expectations. Although choreographer John Heginbotham and director Daniel Fish changed several aspects—including choreography, staging choices, audience immersion, and musical alterations—their refashioning of the Dream Ballet ushered in a new perspective and effect that is vital to the revival’s meaning and success at large. This paper examines the ways in which the two Dream Ballets design themselves around and challenge their respective political environments. Whereas de Mille removes and confine’s Oklahoma!’s unmistakable original horror material, Heginbotham’s Dream Ballet capitalises on the immersion of the audience in a staging of communal sacrifice that plays upon its juxtaposition of community and belonging with community and culpability. Finally, this paper will examine the possibility of using virtual reality to emulate the specific affordances of the 2019 staging.

#Broadway musical; #Oklahoma! revival; #Agnes de Mille; #Dream Ballet choreography;
#Daniel Fish

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The Broadway dancing is understandable to all who see it. It is, so to speak, in the vernacular. It is ours. It speaks for us. It speaks to us. All of us.
—Agnes de Mille

INTRODUCTION: IMPRINT AND EVOLUTION OF THE DREAM BALLET

Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943) is an artistic innovation that continues to maintain a "singular position" in the fast-expanding canon of American musical theatre—defying initial predictions for its commercial reception (Young 2019). *Oklahoma!* created the image of the musical itself, pitching America's "makeshift" art from "entertainment to enlightenment" (Mordden 2002). As *Oklahoma!* approaches its eightieth anniversary, its status as the first "real phenomenon in modern Broadway history" is beyond dispute in the United States; it dominated the box office with an unprecedented 2,212 performances until its 1948 close on Broadway—surpassing the previous record four times over (Lunden 2000). In contrast with the duo's *Carousel* (1945, an adaptation of Ferenc Molnár's European hit play), *Liliom* (1909), and *The Sound of Music* (1959, based on a successful film and itself the source of the 1965 worldwide blockbuster), the dominance of *Oklahoma!* remains rather limited to the country in which it is set, with the exception of London's West End. Despite the specific nature of a patriotic "tonic" made to compliment the uncertainties of the Second World War, the success of *Oklahoma!* prompted new integrations of creative elements and the revisitation of its Broadway predecessors altered in its likeness—"[e]verything that mattered was turning into *Oklahoma!*" (Mordden 2002).

Oklahoma!'s Dream Ballet elevated the established role of dance as a storytelling medium by making movement serve as silent mode of communication for plot and character development ("Honoring Agnes" 2006). Though choreographer Agnes de Mille did not invent the Dream Ballet's genre and drew inspiration from Broadway predecessors, she added complex, abstract layers through silent emotion, gestures, and expression that "spoke to the human condition" (Gardner 2016). Prior to the advent of the integrated musical, non-musical elements were generally disparate and choreography was often distracting,

amusing, or unessential fodder (Gardner 2016). De Mille—who also studied Freudian analysis—used ballet to “mobilise the subconscious” as a plot-furthering device (Gardner 2016).

At large, *Oklahoma!* is set in the early-1900s Oklahoma Territory and focuses on the interrelated complexity of community, transition of a new state’s establishment, and conflict of young Laurey Williams’ romantic entanglements with rivals Curly McLain and Jud Fry. The production’s impact draws from its innovative integration of libretto with song, dance, and storytelling—redefining its genre and the future of musical theatre. As the powerful nexus and microcosm of the production, the Dream Ballet conveys the core of Laurey’s turmoil with agency against force, escapism against reality, and desire against fear—probing class, consent, and convention through a mirror to the female psyche.

De Mille’s Dream Ballet runs a gamut of bodily-represented emotions, beginning with fluttering, jubilant wing movements that Laurey performs when anticipating her wedding with Curly; moving to a romantic, spectacular high lift that conveys her elation when she chooses Curly; and ending with limp-necked agony—“a rape accomplished in mid-air” per de Mille—when Jud swings Laurey over his head and takes her away (Gardner 2016). The Ballet also explores the psychology of the characters through restraint, combat, caress, embrace, possession, seduction, goading, nonchalant throwing, strangling, and immobilisation. Without words, it manages to convey the spectrum of emotions, from hope to jubilation, glee to seduction, and mourning to horrified depression—stunningly without transition.

DREAMING UNDER DARK VEILS: LAUREY’S SUBCONSCIOUS

De Mille’s choreography delves into her view on Laurey’s subconscious—what she described as Laurey’s both terrorised and repelled fascination with Jud’s “mysterious and forbidden [absorption in] sex,” and her anxiety about her own sexual awakening (Gardner 2016). De Mille’s familiarity with Freud likely influenced this shocking change in tone from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s original light-heartedness, infusing it with what Dolan dubs “women’s theatre”—or a protest about the “the destructiveness of society and celebrating the rebirth of women’s consciousness” (Gardner 2016). De Mille fought to reproduce all of this in Fred Zinnemann’s 1955 film adaptation, aided by “full diagrams, measure for measure, the exact steps, and choreographic score” (Gardner 2016). Echoing Jud’s violence with its sudden but radical scenic and costume changes, the filmed Ballet violently yanks the veil of “Quixotic” law and order—complete with the mimicry of manlike windmills in a field just before Laurey’s unveiling and Jud’s reveal—to

blow the whistle on the disaster of Laurey's hidden fears, revealing disarray exponential to that of Dorothy's cyclone. The community fails Laurey as she seeks protection from the stiff backs of a cast that suddenly seems unfamiliar—bystanders, enablers, and peripheral villains—or frozen puppets. Perhaps their inanimate state mirrors that of Laurey, who is stalked by a mirror at the Ballet's beginning.¹ While stalling, the worst decision occurs by default, and Laurey realises that her community will not guide her first adult decision—even by minima of meeting her pleading eyes. Bildungsromans are sorts of Purgatories, and Laurey's premonitions of her community's lack of care about her choice concretise as they take turns abusing her, foregrounded against a chandelier piping with flames straight from hell. Laurey's head lolls parallel to the ground when she witnesses her fate in her reflections: women tacked to Jud's wall like mares. Engulfed by blood-red dust, Laurey's movements finally synchronise with the townspeople in horror instead of tradition or jest, just as her lover's throat is depleted of air. No hand is moved as Jud seizes a filly by the bridle and rides away in triumph.

De Mille takes the role of textual disruptor without contributing to the original libretto itself. Her *Dream Ballet* depicts Laurey's descent into "active vanishing" or "radical invisibility" that render the subject silent (Phelan 1993)—a type of gastric feminist criticism that describes how artists "do not simply reflect the male gaze but refract it [...]—and thereby even *dismantle* it" (Solga 2016).² When de Mille animates the women tacked on Jud's walls, decorating them as jesters, she highlights the consequences of the exclusion of women from personhood in theatre, aesthetics, and nature (Case 1988).

DREAMSCAPING AS RETHINKING: FISH'S AND HEGINBOTHAM'S OKLAHOMA! (2019)

Originating at Bard College in 2007 and arriving on the Broadway stage in March 2019, Daniel Fish's *Oklahoma!* reinterpreted the tone of the show with radically different choreography by John Heginbotham, including music, timing, chronological appearances, and staging choices. Importantly, these changes all manifested in the *Dream Ballet* (Fox 2019).

Audiences anticipating a *Dream Ballet* finale to Act I might be surprised to discover that it begins Act II, then moves so hurriedly to the next song that its own applause is robbed. No temporal separation exists between Laurey's nightmares and her waking world. Does this suggest that the entirety of Act II exists in that same special hell? The 2019 sequence—which swings from light to dark, cacophony to peace—is a disorienting pendulum. Once fog filters onstage, an unfamiliar figure clad in a glittery shirt—plain but for its script "Dream

¹ *She floats in the same malicious immobilisation of the decision paralysis that Lapine and Sondheim's Cinderella echoes on a palace terrace in 1987's Into the Woods.*

² *This is similar to Philomele's role in Timberlake Wertenbaker's The Love of the Nightingale: in it, Philomele overcomes her vocal muteness, representing societal silencing, to pursue justice through a performance that victoriously communicates her abuse to an emotionally-affected audience. (Dolan 1991, 8; Wertenbaker 1990). Like de Mille's treatment of Laurey, Yoko Ono intended to commit to the idea of societal exposé: what would occur if women were to "[not] fight" ("Cut Piece" 1964). Ono's alternative reaction encapsulates the idea of disappearance through autonomy: in line with Peggy Phelan's proposed solution to the "trap" of visibility for women in cultural production, Ono enacts "active vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility" (Phelan 1993, 19; Solga 2016, 24–25).*

Baby Dream”—appears mid-stage, and dances passionately in solitude. The sudden introduction, fusion, and responsibility of a novel player in the intimate cast, dancer Gabrielle Hamilton, creates shocking consciousness. Aside from the Dream Ballet, the remainder of the otherwise hip-joined scenes lack any singular spotlight or physical space designated more important than the whole.

Much about the 2019 Dream Ballet is boldly contemporary, from the style of dance—which is heady and unrestrained, removed from standard ballet—to the use of a screen projector casting close-up portraits (Kourlas 2019). The 2019 revival's Dream Ballet is performed not so much for the audience as it is *with* them; Hamilton draws uncomfortably close to audience members, staring at them directly—“[they] see [her] skin, [they] hear [her] breath, the exhaustion” (Kourlas 2019). *Oklahoma!* creates a stage for communal sacrifice. Neon lighting occasionally casts Hamilton and surrounding fog in colour, while the electric guitar riffs vibrate, culminating in a sense of ominous unease. Hamilton circles insistently, loping and spinning in spirals that are occasionally broken by urgent jerks as if glitches in routine—before being pulled backward, holding her chest as if a string has been pulling straight through her spine. Heginbotham's choreography displays Laurey's relationship with her restlessness and responsibility, conveyed through her “puppeteering” of dancer Hamilton's movements. Boot-knocking distracts while Hamilton begins to kick toward the audience; her bounds across the floor become combinations of backward turns and kicks and wide hops backward, broken by segments of eerily calm walking almost akin in contrast to the moments preceding and following Jud's seizure of Laurey's veil in de Mille's Ballet. The same tension between external possession and self-possession is explored here. The lack of puppeteer in Heginbotham's sequence leads us to wonder: for whom does the audience wait? Who will step in and claim responsibility for this chaos?

The audience's disorientation is mirrored in the boiling point of Hamilton's performance, where the cacophonous music reaches its shrill peak, the lights disappear, and Hamilton falls mid-spin. Heginbotham's Dream Ballet ultimately capitalises on the subconscious—true to de Mille's vision, but with even more abstract and interpretive freedom. The performance lacks much of the overt sexual energy displayed in the original—from the absence of focus on male love interests to Hamilton's loose, plain tee-shirt. However, Hamilton dances figuratively “naked,” which is made apparent by the lack of shoes or pants, plain costume, and shaved hair (Kourlas 2019). Similar to Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, Jennifer Kidwell's *Underground Railroad Game*, or Karen Finley's *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, this performance creates raw audience discomfort, attempting to reclaim activeness of women's bodies—particularly subversively through asexualised nudity or near-nudity (Finley 2013).

Hamilton describes her character as an “entity of rawness” and states that some of her performance is like “screaming into a pillow” within a total script where Laurey herself is seldom given the opportunity to voice her thoughts or emotions (“Tony Nominees: The Women of *Oklahoma!*: All Of It” 2019). Here, Laurey’s choice of suitor seems more self-protective than confident, romantic, or autonomous, serving commentary on female autonomy (McDonald 2019). Embracing her own liberal choices within the piece, Hamilton states, “I don’t think the Dream Ballet holds any value when I become comfortable in it” (Mordden 2002). Heginbotham’s Ballet is painfully aware that Laurey is in hell the entire time.

The psychological hold is set up by landscape-set effects—“dream-scaping”—that put the audience in an interpretive, psychological state of mind while emphasising intimacy and community. Much of it is present for the entire show’s run—like the crockpots obstructing the audience’s view—but for some audience members, their purpose may not make sense until the Dream Ballet itself. The set, technical space, timing, and staging are important contributors to the experience of “dreaming” and contribute to what Larson refers to as “immersive theatre” (Larson 2019). Immersive theatre grants the audience’s members active autonomy by allowing them to enter the spotlight of focus rather than periphery—even to the extent of allowing performances to occur outwardly (White 2012). The architecture of the Circle in the Square Theatre allows audience members to participate in a double-sided *experience machine*—an “enclosed and other-worldly” space in which scenography, choreography, dramaturgy, and more “[coalesce] to place audience members in a thematically cohesive environment that resources their sensuous, imaginative, and explorative capabilities as productive and involving aspects of a theatre aesthetic” (Alston 2016). According to Adam Alston, immersive work tends to be “[...] linked to the richness and evocativeness of affective experiences, which are produced in a reciprocal relationship between audiences and the world in which they are immersed, but that are also predicated on a commitment to immersion as a productive participant” (Alston 2016). Immersive theatre offers performer-audience transactive trust; by respecting its audience as performers, the performance carries the equal risk of complete rejection. The already alluded-to nakedness in The Dream Ballet and discussion of the body, naked from the waist down and barefoot, necessitates a relationship of reflective closeness with the audience. Reviews of Fish’s *Oklahoma!* state that a number of the audience members that are welcomed “at the table” choose to abandon their place midway through the performance, just prior to the Dream Ballet. This promotes self-selection in response to risk: the “community” that remains becomes all the more intimate in number and shared choice.³

³ Yoko Ono’s performance “Cut Piece” highlights the idea of performance as an “exchange” between performer and audience through transactive trust and risk of transgression. Ono’s piece reflects physical and emotional consumption, dehumanisation, and destruction—through the literal implication of cut pieces. In 1967, she described “Cut Piece” as follows: “it was very important to say you can cut wherever you want to. It is a form of giving that has a lot to do with Buddhism. [...] a form of total giving as opposed to reasonable giving” (as quoted by Concannon 2008, 88–89). Likewise, Hamilton performs “total giving” while Heginbotham invites the audience to “take what they want.”

The invitation of theatrical immersion can alter “instinctive reactions to what we see and hear” (Larson 2019). For *Oklahoma!*, these include the premonition of the collection of “Chekhov’s guns” and occlusive fog surrounding the audience, alongside intimate and interactive audience proximity that includes direct eye contact and breaking bread. During the intermission and just prior to the start of the Dream Ballet, the audience members are together fed chilli—a hearty meal, likely contributing to affective drowsiness at the start of Act II, alongside an onslaught of disconcerting smog. This combination of the senses would not have been possible in timing had Fish left the Dream Ballet in its original placement before the intermission.

Dolan describes theatre involving relationship-reliant exchange as “circular”—“intuitive, personal, [and] involving” (Dolan 1991). Through audience involvement—the bread-breaking chilli, occlusive fog, and challenge to personal space—performances relinquish traditional “non-participatory” separatism between performer and spectators (Dolan 1991; Kidwell). Simultaneously, the obstruction of vision and space, alongside the unconventional act of eating within the theatre, cause an audience level of self-awareness and vulnerability.

Adding to this self-awareness comes the lighting design, which shifts from aggressively-bright illumination to total darkness, so that the thrilling part of this exposure appears as something that always lurked waiting to be “excavated” (Green and Brantley 2018). Reviewers call the moments of illumination “all-exposing,” in conjunction with the “open prairie” of the surrounded stage and one which “allows those homesteaders we once thought were so wholesome no place to hide, even when it’s pitch dark” (Green and Brantley 2018). The affordances of lighting foreshadow the rife moments of intentional darkness to follow—particularly the scene in which Jud places Curly’s hand on the pistol and the obtrusive lighting dies.

Some of these horror elements are maintained and some are exaggerations of original elements. Beyond the overtly brow-beating murder of Curly, de Mille’s choreography always contained puppeteer-like movement, a limp Laurey dragged like a ragdoll by Judd, silent screaming, and immobilised bystanders: every time Laurey searches for help, her community is frozen. In Fish’s revival, horror manifests in blood-red lighting; moments of eerie blackouts; and the alteration of the score. The shrill screeches of string instruments followed by mid-rise halts and stark silence—choices that sound like mistakes—put the audience on edge. The Dream Ballet ends when the cast returns from offstage to mark the onset of the next number staring into space, foreshadowing their lack of vitality during Act II’s finale. They remain still until they are reanimated—like puppets, or perhaps the undead—by a jarring “Yee-haw!” that indicates the start of the highly contrastive “The Farmer and the Cowman.”

According to de Mille, the original Dream Ballet was diegetic—with recognisable characters, dynamics, feuds, and desires that are each connected to the libretto—and contrasted the innocence and grace evoked by ballet genre with assault, pornography, abuse, and murder. This is diluted in Heginbotham's choreography—while it identifies titularly as a “ballet,” it boldly contends with disparate genre boundaries and expectations. However, Hamilton's performance holds vehemently to de Mille's requirements of intimate character-building and internal exploration (Sandomir 2017).

UNIVERSALISING AND PERSONALISING ART: OKLAHOMA'S FUTURE

Theatrical history is rich in “radical” revisitations of tradition—including *Belle Reprise* to a *Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Love of the Nightingale* to the legend of Philomele, and *Desdemona: a Play about a Handkerchief* to Shakespeare's *Othello*. Their effect is aggravating because they deconstruct popular representations and conduits for change through reclamations of women's voices, visibility, and movement in the theatre tradition. As Sue-Ellen Case reflects, such revisitation designates a “new kind of cultural analysis, based on [...] cultural and socioeconomic evidence, to discover the nature of women's lives” in classic periods—particularly those which are the most lacking in their representation (Case 1988).

Heginbotham's Dream Ballet foreshadows violence and literal darkness but conceals until the ending the culprits of these premonitions—Jud is not the sole villain. This ambiguity casts importance onto the periphery surrounding the iconic scene—in “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’,” the voices of Curly and Aunt Eller intersect in an unnervingly maniacal shared laugh. At their duet's conclusion, the final unexpectedly disturbing and resonant note suggests that the characters' observance of beauty will be challenged. This finale harkens to the hissing halt in “Laurey's Entrance.” Such peripheral recasting of villainy is a subversion of expectations that omission, as well as presence, works to achieve in Heginbotham's Ballet.

Perhaps the fog on the set is an indication of the obscuring of expectations—the same teasing, testing way that they had played with the audience's feelings of hunger and drowsiness to be shocked awake with the revulsion of the finale. According to Kourlas, this is an open “landscape ballet,” and there is nowhere to hide particularly during the Dream Ballet (Kourlas 2019). All that remains is the human body.

Ultimately, both Dream Ballets fashion their designs around their political environments. De Mille's and Heginbotham's Ballets echo in temporally disparate yet like American eras—one steeped in ideals of war, justice, and nostalgia; the other steeped in racial justice

and exclusion, gun violence, pandemic and wartime, requiring us to grapple with the workings of American justice (Green and Brantley 2019). However, Agnes de Mille centred the show’s first murder in the Ballet—confining the show’s horror to the dreamscape as the audience’s guilt and conscience blended into the background by the jubilant finale, with Jud’s death excused in their subconscious. Fish’s revival strips this psychological cover-up, making Jud the first murder *victim*, rather than the Dream Ballet’s resident murderer—and after the ensemble vocalises their dark, selfish excuses, culpability becomes uncomfortably present in every corner of the theatre. By opening de Mille’s vision and transferring the darkness to the acts surrounding Heginbotham’s mist, *Oklahoma!* plays with the idea of diegetic challenge found in Laurey’s Ballet of consciousness: the safety of tradition versus the pull of violence.

Fish’s 2019 revival continued its North American tour in 2022; its reception on stages with increased front-facing crowd capacity—but less intimacy—fares more critically (Lenker 2022). It is within the Circle in the Square Theatre’s environs that Heginbotham, Fish, and Hamilton achieved “circular” performance: much in the vein of At the Foot of the Mountain Theater, one of the oldest American cultural feminist theatre ensembles, which “struggle[s] to relinquish traditions such as linear plays, proscenium theatre, non-participatory ritual” in place of theatre that is communal: “[. . .] circular, intuitive, personal, involving” (Dolan 1991). What might community, progress, impossible decisions, and statehood and independence look like—feel like—after the onslaught of pandemic and war? The international adoption of *Oklahoma!* has always represented “survival of a civilization” (Mordden 2002). Yet the sole other nation that has housed numerous revivals is England, originally as a “greeting” or “handshake” two months after the Battle of Stalingrad’s (Mordden 2002). Could a communal need for peace following a plague bolster *Oklahoma!*’s to a worldwide recognition that matches its national success?

Agnes de Mille stressed the importance of community during national crises; reimagining democracy in uncertain times through communal revisitation. a streaming entity successfully brought Lin-Manuel Miranda’s 2015 *Hamilton* in its live glory, with its rotating platforms and live cracks of laughter and anguish, to standard smart devices. a standard-screen movie adaptation would fail to convey the circular theatre that lives within Fish’s *Oklahoma!* An immersive experience could capture the confrontation and blood of this open “landscape ballet.” Television giants have invested in an array of 360° panoramic films; the future of virtual reality in film is close. While Fish’s *Oklahoma!* makes use of the affordances of the Circle in the Square Theatre, the same strain of culpability he captures could be more terrifying should the audience, inversely, be located in the *centre* of the created community.

This would grant Heginbotham the opportunity to dreamscape a hell virtually inescapable from any direction, playing into the psychological tactics that de Mille introduced. Fish's *Oklahoma!* should not be cribbed in reaction to the stifling staging concessions made for its North American tour—it should resume the level of immersion wherein it was founded. *Oklahoma!* has always been described as a wartime “tonic” in source material—a historical fireball that has proven itself to think smart, in circles of prediction and forewarning (Lunden 2000). Alcohol always offends before it cleans a wound for binding. Almost a century later, *Oklahoma!*'s closer-knit-than-ever audience must decide whether to take it as analeptic balm, blind bracer, or precious propellant.

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