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## **The 5th's RODGERS & HAMMERSTEIN'S OKLAHOMA! Delves Into Deeper Issues of Race**

*Panel Discussions and Town Hall Meeting Set to Continue Dialogue*

(Wednesday, February 15, 2012 – SEATTLE, WA) **The 5th Avenue Theatre** will host panel discussions and a Town Hall meeting to engage audiences about the portrayal of race in its current production of *Rodgers & Hammerstein's Oklahoma!* Called “provocative” by the *Seattle Times*, this new production features an African American actor as the antagonist, sparking vigorous discussion among audiences about racism both in 1907 (when the musical is set), and in society and the arts today.

The choice to cast African American actor **Kyle Scatliffe** as the farm hand Jud Fry has been earning strong reactions. While Scatliffe has been applauded for his nuanced portrayal of the character, there are some audiences who are concerned that having the only African American performer among the principals play the villain reinforces negative stereotypes about African American men. “It’s impossible to avoid racial implications,” said *The Seattle P.I.* While The 5th is the first major arts organization to make this particular casting choice, the concept of diversity in the cast of *Oklahoma!* is not new. Portland Center Stage explored this concept a year ago with an all-black cast and Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. cast the show with African American actresses portraying Laurey and Aunt Eller.

“There were things I wanted to explore based on the research I had done,” said Choreographer and Spectrum Dance Theater Artistic Director **Donald Byrd** of his approach to the collaboration. “The musical takes place at a time when the Oklahoma Territory was being considered for statehood. In 1907, Oklahoma had more all-black communities than the rest of the country being put together.” In fact, from 1865 to 1920, African Americans created more than 50 identifiable towns and settlements in Oklahoma, some of which still exist today. There was even a movement to make Oklahoma an all-black state. The new 5th Avenue production has been inspired by and captures some of this history.

“While we never intended to evoke such strong responses, I am in many ways heartened that this production has people talking about these important issues,” said The 5th Avenue Theatre’s Executive Producer and Artistic Director **David Armstrong**. “The idea that musicals could, and should, tackle big themes and significant subjects largely began with *Oklahoma!* and I am not unhappy to see that legacy continue.” He added, “We did believe

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that this casting would amplify the inherent drama in the story. I've seen dozens of productions of *Oklahoma!*, but never before have I felt such empathy for Jud, and never before have I felt so sad when he dies."

"I never would have imaged that in 2012 a production of this almost 70-year-old musical could cause such a stir. I am a firm believer that great theater inspires dialogue, and I look forward to engaging our audiences on this difficult subject and hearing their reactions to this unorthodox casting choice."

**Panel discussions** will take place between the matinee performance and evening performance on **February 18 and 25 at 5:00 PM** and **February 19 and 26 at 4:30 PM**, and will feature Spectrum Dance Theater Artistic Director and *Oklahoma!* Choreographer Donald Byrd and The 5th Avenue's David Armstrong. A **Town Hall Meeting** featuring the executive team at The 5th Avenue Theatre and members of the creative team for *Oklahoma!* will take place on **Monday, March 5, at 7:00 PM**.

**FOR CALENDAR EDITORS:**

**WHAT:** The 5th Avenue Theatre has set plans to host panel discussions and a Town Hall meeting to engage audiences about the portrayal of race in the current presentation of *Rodgers & Hammerstein's Oklahoma!* Called "provocative" by the *Seattle Times*, this new production features an African American actor as the antagonist, sparking vigorous discussion among audiences about racism both in 1907 (when the musical is set), and in society and the arts today.

**WHEN:** 5:00 PM, February 18 – Panel Discussion  
4:30 PM, February 19 – Panel Discussion  
5:00 PM, February 25 – Panel Discussion  
4:30 PM, February 26 – Panel Discussion  
7:00 PM, March 5 – Town Hall Meeting

**WHERE:** The 5th Avenue Theatre (1308 5th Avenue, Seattle)

**INFO:** For more information, please visit <http://www.5thavenue.org/education/adult-programs#show-talk>

**MORE ABOUT THE 5TH AVENUE'S OKLAHOMA!**

*Rodgers & Hammerstein's Oklahoma!* plays through March 4, 2012 at The 5th Avenue Theatre (1308 5th Avenue, Seattle). For tickets (starting at \$29) or information, please please visit [www.5thavenue.org](http://www.5thavenue.org) or call the Box Office at (206) 625-1900. Tickets may also be purchased at (888) 5TH-4TIX.

Special thanks to The 5th's 2011-12 season co-sponsors Safeco Insurance, US Bank, and the *Seattle Times*. Additional thanks to *Oklahoma!* production sponsors KCTS and The National Endowment for the Arts.

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