

The Lost & Found Lynn Riggs

The loner behind one
of Broadway's most enduring hits
found his voice and home at OU.

BY CONNIE CRONLEY

Can a lost painting be discovered if no one knew it was lost?

The answer is yes, if the discoverer is an adventurous young OU alumnus and the painting is an unknown self-portrait of playwright Lynn Riggs, one of the university's most famous students.

Riggs himself disappears from the public eye so often he is called "Broadway's Forgotten Man." He is rediscovered when the public remembers he is the playwright of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the basis for Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* That famous, candy-colored musical has also been rediscovered and revived with new spins.

From the TV musical comedy series *Schmigadoon!* to Daniel Fish's edgy interpretation on tour nationally, *Oklahoma!* is clicking with new audiences. A Denver production featured an all-Black cast. A gender-bending Oregon version had the lovers (Curly and Laurey, Will Parker and Ado "Andy") as same-sex couples and Aunt Eller as a transgender woman.

Riggs himself was anxiously discrete about his orientation and private life, fearing condemnation from "the folks back home," wrote his biographer Phyllis Cole Braunlich. Almost seven decades after his death, societal values have taken a 180-turn and he is lauded as "a gay, Cherokee playwright." The Dennis R. Neill Equality Center in Tulsa has named its theater for him with, lest we miss the point, an exterior mural of a rainbow-colored portrait.

The story of Lynn Riggs, the private man and the celebrated playwright, goes round and round like a pup chasing its tail, but much of it begins at—and returns to—the University of Oklahoma. ►



Better known as the author of 21 plays, several short stories and books of poetry, Riggs was also an accomplished painter, as evidenced by this self-portrait in the Riggs Collection at the Claremore Museum of History.

DISCOVERIES

This story starts with Andy Couch, a 2012 OU art history graduate. After adding a degree in museum management from the University of Tulsa, he became the first director and curator of the Museum of History (MoH) and Lynn Riggs Memorial in Claremore, Okla. The museum is as picturesque as a scene from a William Inge play, complete with white gazebo where the city band gives outdoor concerts.

Couch is a young man with curly red hair and an affable manner. Don't call him Andrew. "Andy, please," he says, "My parents were big fans of *The Andy Griffith Show*."

His pleasant personality and persistent nature served him when he plunged into research of Claremore's other celebrity native son. Couch developed friendships with the Riggs family; acquired valuable items for the museum; and persuaded the Cherokee Nation to fund his research trip to Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, where he became the first researcher to open the restricted file in the Lynn Riggs Collection—sealed for more than 30 years.

What he found there was revealing, but what he found back in Claremore in the museum's storage sheds was astonishing: rare film footages and the unknown self-portrait, now on exhibit at the Claremore Museum of History.

RIGGS AT OU

Rollie Lynn Riggs was born in 1899 near Claremore. His father was a hard-boiled rancher and banker who thought Lynn wasn't rugged enough. His part-Cherokee mother died when he was one and his stepmother was a cold and angry woman who locked him in the doghouse as punishment. It was a bleak childhood for the slight, fair boy in spectacles. At age 18, Riggs left Claremore on a cattle train for Chicago and hopscothed across the country from New York to Los Angeles in a dog's breakfast of jobs.



His father saw no value in higher education for his scholarly son, so Riggs scraped together enough money to pay his tuition to OU in 1920. He was described as "one of the most destitute of students" and joined Pi Kappa Alpha, washing dishes to pay for his room and board. On campus, he bloomed like a lonely sunflower that had finally found the sun. It was the happiest time of his life. He wrote poetry, short stories and plays; he worked in the English department as a teaching assistant; he never missed a football game or dance; he played guitar and sang at parties.

The star-studded list of his professors includes the English department's Walter Stanley Campbell, who published under the name Stanley Vestal, and Benjamin Botkin, who became one of America's best-known folklorists. Poet Vachel Lindsay was a visiting lecturer. History instructor Edward Everett Dale was an ex-rancher, cowboy, author and a founder of OU's Western History Collections. Josh Lee, professor of public speaking, became a U. S. senator.

Riggs' classmates included Osage writer John Joseph Matthews and Almer Stilwell "Mike" Monroney, another future U. S. senator. Most important to Riggs was music teacher Joseph H. Benton and his mother, who embraced Riggs like a son. She invited him to live at their home and Benton invited him to join a touring singing group. Benton became famous in Europe as grand opera star Giuseppe Bentonelli and then a leading tenor of the Metropolitan Opera in New York. In 1940 he returned to OU as professor of voice and retired in 1969 as chair of the department.

ABOVE - OU alumnus and former director of the Claremore Museum of History Andy Couch was the driving force behind the research and curation of the Lynn Riggs Collection, now on display at the Claremore Museum of History.



Although this quaint farmhouse scene looks like it could be the setting for Aunt Eller's farm in the musical *Oklahoma!*, the painting from the Riggs Collection actually depicts the author's home in Shelter Island, N.Y., where he moved after gaining a measure of success with the play *Green Grow the Lilacs*.

In Riggs' senior year, he had something of an emotional and physical breakdown, dropped out of school and relocated to Santa Fe, where he flourished among the gay artists' community there. In 1928, he won a Guggenheim fellowship and spent a year in France writing *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which was produced in New York in 1930. Riggs went on to become one of the most distinguished writers of his time, with 21 full-length plays, 24 film and TV scripts, and books of poetry. He was often mentioned in the same breath as Eugene O'Neill and Clifford Odets. In the 1930s and '40s he was in Hollywood writing movie scripts and becoming close friends with Bette Davis and Joan Crawford.

He and OU friend Benton crossed professional paths in 1936 in New York as Benton was making his debut at the Metropolitan Opera with Massenet's *Manon* and Riggs' play *Russet Mantle* was debuting. Benton remembered a lunch with Riggs and George Gershwin, discussing collaboration on a folk-opera similar to *Porgy and Bess*. Gershwin died the next year before their project could be realized. About the same time, Riggs was conferring with composer Aaron Copland about turning one of Riggs' plays into an opera. That project,

too, was unrealized, but it influenced Copland's 1942 ballet *Rodeo*, choreographed by Agnes de Mille.

In 1948, Riggs was one of five OU alumni honored for their achievements. Riggs could not attend, but wrote modestly, "Actually, I have done little in life except try to discover who I am and what my relation to the world I know consists of."

Riggs worked steadily and hard but was often stressed about money. He anguished about his life as a closeted gay man and could not shake the sad memories of childhood and a father who considered writing an unfit job for a man. The title of the Braunlich biography is *Haunted by Home*, and that term fits him like a custom-made boot.

Riggs did not come back for his father's funeral. His last trip to Claremore was for his own funeral after he died of stomach cancer in 1954 at age 56. Benton sang at his friend's funeral and wrote, "Rarely have I ever had such difficulty controlling my voice and emotions."

For the first time in state history, the governor of Oklahoma sent a state flag to be draped over a coffin. All of his life Rollie Lynn Riggs felt fatherless, but he was, at last, the state's favorite son. ▶



Courtesy of Claremore Museum of History

An American social realist and muralist, Marion Greenwood was yet another contemporary artist and friend of Lynn Riggs' who captured the playwright in oils.



Courtesy of Claremore Museum of History

Riggs relaxes at home with his self-portrait in the background.

THE PLAYS

Riggs is best known as a Southwestern folk playwright. In person, he was sophisticated and articulate, but his plays—not his poetry or short stories—featured folk songs and authentic regional speech. His fastidious duplication of early Oklahoma dialect is likened to John Millington Synge's mastery of Irish dialect. Riggs says that Oklahomans' speech is "lazy, drawling, not Southern, not 'hick,' " but rich and rhythmic with picturesque imagery. Just read aloud a couple of pages from *Green Grow the Lilacs* to see how pitch perfectly he captured the Oklahoma language.

Something went south with some of Oscar Hammerstein II's lyrics to "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'." When Gordon MacRae sings, "Everythin's goin' my way" in the movie, Oklahomans cringe and think: "Well, hell, that ain't right." Riggs wrote phonetic spelling for words like doin' and kissin'. He did not write everythin'. It's a linguistic thing. Oklahomans say somethin' or nothin', but they don't say anythin' or everythin'.

Although *Green Grow the Lilacs* is darker than the musical, Hammerstein says that Riggs' play was "the very soul of *Oklahoma!*" He particularly liked the play's "lustful melodrama" and the early settlers' boisterous spirit, but also the aching loneliness and violent passions of the frontier.

Ashton Byrum, director of OU's Weitzenhoffer School of Musical Theatre, is well versed in Riggs' play and the Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical; he's also an enthusiastic fan of the Tony-winning Broadway revival by Daniel Fish, which is touring nationally. The original *Oklahoma!* from the Golden Age of musical theatre is a "lovely, pastoral vision" of the American myth, he says. The Fish revival is earthy, "people trying to scrape together a living on the prairie." Laurey wears jeans, not a white dress. Critics say this revival is darker, sexier, lonelier and more violent. "It's more complex," Byrum says. "And it's incredible."

MORE DISCOVERIES

Couch, who read troves of intimate love letters in the Riggs Collection at Yale, is bemused about the public adulation of Riggs as a gay man. "You want to respect his wishes and to keep his relations private, but you also want to celebrate him, because he is such an icon for the LGBTQ community, not only in Oklahoma, but for Native American culture and the Cherokee Nation."

Couch and his wife, Katie, have left Oklahoma for Casper, Wyo., where he is executive director of the Nicolaysen Art Museum. His dream of managing an art museum was



Courtesy of Claremore Museum of History

“There are no elephants or corn in Oklahoma. It’s wheat!”

Lynn loved music and was known to play guitar and sing with friends and family. Some of the moments were recorded in his New York apartment and “the farm” on Shelter Island in 1949.



Courtesy of Claremore Museum of History

Steve Robinson, board chair of the Claremore Museum of History, poses with some of the items in the Lynn Riggs Collection. Robinson is leading museum efforts to expand exhibition space for the collection.


nurtured by his OU professors and mentors: B. Byron Price, Victor Koshkin-Youritzen, William Jackson Rushing III, Mary Jo Watson, Allison Palmer and Sherri Irvin.

His enthusiasm for Riggs has not dimmed since leaving Oklahoma. “Not enough people realize how brilliant he was. Our state government should honor him more. His story needs to be told a lot louder,” Couch says. “It should be told across the state and not just in a little place like Claremore, Oklahoma.”

Steve Robinson, chairman of the board of Claremore’s MoH, agrees. “It is shocking to me that there isn’t a single portrait or photograph of him in the state capitol.” For its part, MoH is enlarging the exhibition area dedicated to Riggs’ paintings, photographs and research materials.

This is a story about multiple discoveries.

Almost a hundred years apart at the University, Rollie Lynn Riggs and Andy Couch discovered their talents and took those talents out into the world.

About three years ago, Ashton Byrum drove from Chicago for his new job in the university’s musical theatre program. With the lyrics from *Oklahoma!* playing in his head, he looked out the car window and made his own discovery, turned to his wife and son and said, “There are no elephants or corn in Oklahoma. It’s wheat!” At least that’s the way the professor tells the story. 

Connie Cronley is the author of several biographies of famous Oklahomans, including A Life on Fire: Oklahoma’s Kate Barnard. She lives in Tulsa, Okla.