

Oklahoma!

Music by Richard Rodgers Book and Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein

TAOS Musical Theatre

Tuesday 21st May 2019

Reviewed by Delia Lee, District 10 Representative, South West Region

Thank you for your kind invitation to review your production of *Oklahoma!*

I noticed in the programme that the director's 'right-hand woman' was secretly hoping that Hugh Jackman turn up during the run, which would indeed have been lovely. However my Oklahoma pinup was always the late great Howard Keel, who starred as Curly when *Oklahoma!* became the first American post war musical to travel to London in 1947. The role was given to Gordon MacRae in the 1955 film adaptation, with an unknown Shirley Jones as Laurey and magnificent choreography by Agnes de Mille.

The set worked extremely well with the band fenced in 'cattle style' stage left and a wonderful American Windmill that turned throughout the show. There was corn lined up across the back to signify the fields, a washing line and hay bales to create different levels and seating when required. The show started with Aunt Eller's entrance, gently rocking in a rocking chair and making butter as the band played the overture. It was very atmospheric and worked well. The use of entrances through the audience were a nice touch and allowed **Russell Syrett** as Curly to sing the iconic '*Oh what a beautiful morning*' as he meandered towards the stage.

Lorraine Ferguson as Aunt Eller portrayed this strong woman with a good mid-American accent and a no nonsense attitude that suited the part.

Russell Syrett as Curly had a good voice and a strong but gentle stage presence. **Frankie Lewis** as Laurey was in fine voice. She played the spikier parts of Laurey's character well, but I would have liked to have seen her softer and happier side a bit more.

Ado Annie played by **Connie Knight** was superb. She delivered her songs with great comedy and a fine voice and really understood her part in the show; a very talented comedy actress that I look forward to seeing more of.

Ben Jenkins was a good contrast as **Will Parker**. His singing and dancing were confident but he also worked well with Connie to portray a very believable pairing.

Andrew Curtis provided much humour as Ali Hakim. He had a good pace in his scenes and provided some light relief to the darker moments with Jud Fry.

With so many memorable songs such as '*people will say we're in love*' and '*Oklahoma*', it is easy to forget the dark undertone to the story in the form of Jud Fry. **Gary Robson** did a good job bringing this sinister brooding character to life. His song '*Lonely room*', which was taken out for the 1955 film, is so disturbing and very difficult to get right, but Gary kept in character and delivered the song well.



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There are many other parts, too numerous to mention, but all lines and songs were delivered with confidence and good characterisation, so well done to you all.

Director **Anna Mazan** struck just the right balance between good and evil, allowing the cast to revel in the joyous moments and shock in the darker ones. It is a very long show but performing rights often do not allow for anything to be cut. In an ideal world a few less verses in some songs and a slightly pacier auction scene would have helped, but there was so much to like about this production. However, the highlight for me was Anna's choreography. As a choreographer myself, I know how daunting it is to produce a 15 minute ballet without the advantage of a fully trained dance company at your disposal. However, Anna produced a very credible story through music, using a mixture of principals, chorus and some lovely young dancers. The use of symbolic arm movements performed by the whole cast towards the end worked really well. The rest of the dance numbers were equally as successful and used the limited space well. There was an enjoyable tap number to '*Kansas City*', led by a very able Ben Jenkins and pure enthusiasm and joy in '*The Farmer and the Cowman*' and '*Oklahoma*'. The principals and chorus were well rehearsed and worked hard to realise Anna's vision. The young dancers used were also delightful and danced beautifully.

Having the band on stage looked great visually but makes it hard to balance the sound between the instruments and the singers on stage. Although there were a few moments where the band took over, on the whole Musical Director **Julian Clementson** produced a well-controlled sound. He had also done an admirable job with the chorus, who sang the harmonies in '*Oklahoma*' very well.

Unfortunately, there were quite a few sound issues on the first night, which was a shame but hopefully these were ironed out for subsequent performances. Lighting was interesting and varied, producing a good atmosphere, especially in the opening scene.

Costumes, hair and makeup were very good and likewise props were all in keeping. I liked the strings of lights for Act 2 and scene changes were adeptly handled by the stage crew dressed as cowhands.

It was a full house and the cheering at the end was well deserved. The audience clapped along enthusiastically for the final encores of '*Oklahoma*' and it was lovely to see that the cast had enjoyed the performance as much as the audience. Congratulations on a great show.

Delia Lee

NB The comments above solely form the view of the representative attending and only reflect the performance seen.

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