

ENCORE MICHIGAN

Cain't Say No" to Tibbits' Oklahoma

REVIEW July 09, 2016 Marin Heinritz

COLDWATER, Mich.—***Oklahoma!***, Rogers and Hammerstein's 1943 original collaboration, is credited with being one of the first "book musicals" in which dramatic structure is integrated into song and dance to create an emotionally evocative piece of theatre. In other words, plot matters.

For anyone who's somehow missed this oft-produced show particularly popular with high schools the English-speaking world over, *Oklahoma*'s central plot takes place in the turn-of-the century Oklahoma Territory and focuses on a love triangle involving Curly, a cowboy, Laurey, a farmer's daughter, and Judd, a sinister farm hand that parallels a subplot romance with Ado Annie who "cain't say no" to any man's flirtations and subsequently can't make up her mind between bone-headed cowboy Will and Persian peddler Ali.

Yes, it's more than moderately sexist in its depiction of women as commodities, and racist in the way it vilifies the sole person of color as an outsider. It's also beautifully constructed, lush, full of memorable songs and gorgeous dancing including the celebrated "dream ballet" originally choreographed by Agnes de Mille.

Its depth, darkness, and dancing rooted in classical ballet are what make it an outstanding classic. Though the current production at Tibbits opts not to delve too deeply into the darkness that belies the story, it is a terrific show made especially so by truly gifted dancers.

The ensemble of cowboys led by the dynamic Drew Porrett as Will Parker give knockout performances from "Kansas City" all the way through to the end. Their leaps, high kicks, tapping in cowboy boots and crisp fouette turns (without losing their hats!) are delightful to watch. Much of their choreography is mirrored by the equally excellent corps of women whose lines and impressive extensions are harder to see beneath their pretty long skirts and layers and layers of petticoats (elegantly designed by Marc W. Vital II).

The much-anticipated dream sequence ballet finale at the end of Act I is beautifully executed by the dancers, especially Tim Eidman and Maureen Duke, though her costume is ill-fitting and frumpy, which, again, distracts from the beauty of her technique. And though Aaron Lichamer's lights are particularly lovely in simulating early morning in "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" and highlighting the romance of Curly and Laurey's reprise of "People Will Say We're In Love" with a blue cyclorama and warm spotlight, the ballet sequence is too singularly bright and needs more variation to enhance its darker themes.

All of the central characters do a fine job with their respective roles, though some needed some easing in opening night. Director Kevin Halpin cast Catherine Skojec as Laurey and Jacklyn Collins as Ado Annie, though he may have better considered reversing those choices as Skojec's speaking voice is screechy and her face in a semi-permanent scowl

though both soften as the play goes on; and Collins's performance needs to be punchier sooner to pull off the big character she's portraying, though she, too, comes into her own by the second act with a rousing "All Er Nothin'" no doubt in part because she has the remarkable Porrett to play off.

Taylor Eliason is a warm and sympathetic Curly even when he's attempting to convince Jud to commit suicide. Mitch Voss's Jud provides real depth and emotion with his rich voice and solid physicality, though his accent is inconsistent.

Gloria Logan is charming as Aunt Eller and Artistic Director Charles Burr is a delightfully crotchety Andrew Carnes.

Joey Gugliemelli is larger-than-life as Ali Hakim to the point that he becomes overplayed if not a caricature. He works hard for the laughs he earns. Sometimes too hard.

But altogether this cast is strong and Music Director Cheryl VanDuzen's efforts pay off in big ensemble numbers that are downright splendid. The sound is enormous and rich in this nearly acoustically perfect house—and to take in a big classic musical in which the performers are not mic'd and accompanied by a live orchestra is an absolute treat.

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