



Oklahoma! – Stage One Youth Theatre

Date – 21st February 2026

Director – Paul Clements

Musical Director – Harry Wells

Choreographer – Helen Wallis

Venue – King’s Theatre, Southsea

Type of production – Musical

Oklahoma! was the first musical collaboration between Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. It is based on Lynn Riggs' 1931 play, “Green Grow the Lilacs” and it made its Broadway debut in the dark days of 1943. It was an immediate success with several songs becoming hits in their own right. Many tours, revivals and awards followed, and it is heart-warming to see one of my all-time favourite shows being gently updated and introduced to the younger generation - and what an excellent job they made of performing it!

Sets were simple: Aunt Eller’s house, the smokehouse or the frame of a barn, but the stage was decorated with numerous high-quality props, mainly moved by the cast. Ali Hakin’s cart in particular was a wonderful creation, with so many drawers and compartments. Stage managers Justin Butcher and Duncan Tyler and their crew managed seamless changes behind a clever wall of lighting and smoke – an ingenious device. Ian Pratt’s lighting design was stunning and constantly changing to match the mood. Costumes, hair and makeup (Rachel Grech and Katie Clements) fitted the bill perfectly and I was amazed to learn that most of the costumes had been made by Rachel. What a task!

Stage One has raised the bar significantly in recent years, and I have to give a lot of the credit for this to Director Paul Clements. He has chosen yet another strong cast for this show - each one can sing, dance and act to the highest standards.

Arthur Westmorland was perfect as Curly, the handsome, skilled cowboy in pursuit of Laurey, and determined to do anything to get her. His scene with Jud Fry shows a dark side to the character and Arthur made it believable. Lizzie Codling gave us a very strong, stubborn and independent Laurey, unable to decide between Curly or Jud. Heidi Butcher made a good Aunt Eller, friendly, good-humoured, but stern - only a little lacking in age to give her the gravitas she needed – always a snag with youth productions. Sam Shirley was perfectly charming and goofy as the spendthrift Will Parker, desperate to marry Ado Annie – a delightfully dotty interpretation by Evie Payne Simmons. Fraser Ndahiro gave us a real jack-the-lad Ali Hakim, the Persian Peddler, a snake oil salesman who could sell anything to the most suspicious customer. Perhaps the most impressive character was the Jud Fry created by Joshua Witt – perfectly dark and brooding, a social outcast with a questionable past. You could feel how he longed to be accepted and that his hankering after Laurey could be dangerous.

The supporting cast were equally strong and provided a lot of very natural background

interest while the main scenes were playing out. Singing by chorus and soloists was top-notch with lovely harmonies, and Helen Wallis's choreography was interpreted beautifully, leading to some spectacular images, especially during the ballet. The seventeen-piece band under the baton of MD Harry Wells sounded magnificent – such a refreshing change from recorded tracks. Harry Hare's sound design and quality head mics meant we heard almost every word, though one or two of the cast might slow their speech a little to good effect.

The full-colour programme was of excellent quality, giving lots of information about the show, cast and creatives. I particularly like the messages to cast members, something of a tradition with this group. It was also good to note that you had understudies for the main roles – good experience for the supporting cast and a big show like this is a financial risk without them.

To sum it all up in just one word. Outstanding. Superb. Brilliant. Incredible. OK, that's five, but I got carried away and I can't count. It's easy to forget how many fantastic songs there are packed into this classic show. There isn't a bad one amongst them. And this evening was as good a production of the show as I've ever seen - adult, youth, professional or amateur. It was perfect and I'd happily see it again. Stage One and Paul Clements I hope you're all proud of yourselves: cast, crew, tech team, orchestra and everyone else - because you've got every right to be! Please keep raising the standards of theatre in Portsmouth.

Mark Donalds
NODA SE District 10 Representative

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