Theater review: Clackamas Rep lets the sun shine on 'Oklahoma!'

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By Marty Hughley, The Oregonian

In offering the landmark Rodgers and Hammerstein musical "Oklahoma!," Clackamas Repertory Theatre has made an excellent choice. With the country stumbling under the burden of high unemployment and economic instability, a little good cheer is in order, and this upbeat 1943 musical definitely allows audiences to escape, if only briefly, into an innocent past that may never have been but that we cherish all the same. Moreover, the CRT production lives up to the play—this "Oklahoma!" makes for a vibrant fun-filled evening of theater.

The musical's book certainly offers audiences a positive take on things American. As the title song's lyrics joyously affirm: "We know we belong to the land/And the land we belong to is grand!... You're doin' fine, Oklahoma!/Oklahoma O.K."

Sure, one might think the musical's vision is Pollyannaish, even a bit narrow-minded. For instance, given the fact that the musical is set in the Indian Territory, one might ask, where are the Native Americans? And one might also wonder why it is that the hardest working fella in the play is also the villain. But the fact is that this ground-breaking musical celebrates good old American rural virtues while rejoicing in the endless possibilities of progress and national growth.

The cowboys, farmers, and their ladies who populate the Oklahoma of this play are generally a wholesome, healthy, well-meaning bunch. A few of the core comic characters like the adventurous Ado Annie may seem to push the limits of proper behavior, but that's "proper" as we assume they understood it in 1900. Rodgers and Hammerstein meant for us to smile at the honesty of Ado Annie's free-flowing spirits. Only the hard-working hired hand "poor" Jud really crosses the line. With his selfish, angry, lecherous ways, he is a
dark cloud drifting across the skies of the “beautiful morning/beautiful day” represented in the play. Even so, he inadvertently eliminates himself from the play’s world in the last scene, guaranteeing that the musical’s festive tone survives the threat he poses.

This mood of innocent merrymaking and social amiability dominates all aspects of the production. **Director David Smith-English**’s large cast, including seasoned professionals as well as younger performers, handles the acting, singing, and dancing superbly. For the most part voices are strong, and choreographer Wes Hanson’s dance numbers, especially ensemble numbers like “The Farmer and the Cowboy” at the start of Act II, are performed with sprightly enthusiasm.

The lanky Stephen Eckelmann is very likeable as the cowboy hero Curly, and rich-voiced Dru Rutledge is equally strong as his love interest Laurey. Brianna Rouse gives us a playfully spunky performance as Ado Annie, and while James Sharinghousen humorously portrays the robust artlessness of her cowboy suitor, Corey Brunish does well as Ada Annie’s would-be seducer, the Persian peddler, who’s reluctantly assimilated into the happy Oklahoma community at play’s end.

Michael Mitchell gives us an appropriately disturbing Jud Fry. His dour, grim Jud moves and speaks with a restrained deliberateness, and, when he lets his carefully monitored guard down, reveals himself as a powerful and dangerous bully. Even when we see him at ease in his smokehouse abode, Jud remains a skulking, menacing presence.

Just as Jud is the quickly dissipating storm which heightens our awareness of the play’s prevailing sunniness, so the dreary brown smokehouse scenery appearing late in Act I for the scene set in in Jud’s living quarters nicely contrasts with the rest of Christopher D. Whitten’s light and airy scenery. The white set pieces trimmed in yellow or sky blue representing Laurey’s farmhouse and the ranch, which is the setting of the Act II “box social,” provide a wonderful background for Alva Bradford’s costumes. Bradford works with a color palette of muted hues — intriguingly walking the fine line between a broadly colorful cartoon world and the dusty earth colors of real life on the frontier. This may be an idealized Oklahoma, but for the play to work there needs to be some sense of connection to the actual place.

Finally, accolades go to orchestra conductor Rick Modlin and vocal director Lonnie Cline, who skillfully capture Richard Rodgers’ memorable music and -- most importantly -- effectively balance orchestra and singers so that the Oscar Hammerstein’s lyrics are always clear.

It’s great to experience this old classic again. And then in the fall, we’ll have the chance to take in another version of “Oklahoma!” when Portland Center Stage produces it. In the meantime, go and enjoy the CRT production, and I dare you to try to make it home without whistling or humming some of the Rodgers and Hammerstein tunes.

-- Rich Wattenberg