

# OKLAHOMA!

YAOS PRODUCTIONS

Westlands Entertainment Complex - Yeovil

Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2024

*Somerset Fellowship of Drama – David Beach Competition*

## **Choice of Show**

This was a good choice of show that definitely suited the company with a good number of principal roles of varying requirements and some small step-out cameos for the ensemble as well. This was a potentially daunting task to put on a show that features so many well-known songs that have been loved by many since 1943. No doubt audience expectations would be high. Having never seen the stage production or film myself but knowing the songs well from my childhood I was eager to see how they could be brought to life through the medium of dance and drama and to experience a touch of nostalgia (it would have been useful to have had a copy of the libretto in advance of the show to help with this).

## **Auditorium Pre-set and Welcome**

I collected my ticket and made my way to my seat. The auditorium was well filled and we were entertained to a selection of country music while we waited. I did feel that the audience were a little muted in their anticipation but I wonder whether this may be more to do with the venue than their lack of excitement. The auditorium does not lend itself well to a 'cosy' theatre feel and when a theatre visit is about the whole experience such as welcome, interval experience, comfort of the seats (which I will say at the outset were incredibly uncomfortable) it can have an effect on the general 'feel' of the show.

That said, we were greeted by an open stage that immediately told its own story and took us back to all those old westerns we have seen with the ranch/homestead, the rocking chair, open land, hills in the background and, by clever use of offstage 'buildings' on each side of the stage in the auditorium, the large barns and windmill. The lighting effectively created a beautiful sunset? (or as we learned later, sunrise) and created a feeling of peace and calm with its shadows across the ground and the barns. We could certainly imagine the plains of Oklahoma stretching out beyond the hills.

The lights went down in the auditorium and the overture began. I waited eagerly for those "delightfully hummable songs" but, sadly, they were really not forthcoming. I did feel that the overture was a little long and became conscious of needing something to happen. Having watched an empty stage for some time on arrival (albeit set beautifully) I was ready for some movement – maybe ranch hands quietly going about their morning chores to add just a little interest while the audience were listening to the overture.

It did take me a little while to realise where the singing was coming from but Curly singing in the audience was a nice touch and drew us in to the introduction to his story.

## **Set Design**

You had built your set and, as I have already mentioned above, it created a beautiful tableau which allowed our imaginations to see the dry earth of the Prairies in America's Midwest. The built aspects of the set worked extremely well. They could be used, without movement, to represent various settings without taking up too much space on the stage area.

I did feel however that the show suffered a little for lack of set changes. There is certainly something to be said for 'less is more' and an almost blank canvas will often allow the actors on stage to shine. Too much cumbersome scenery and elaborate set changes can sometimes become a distraction and you were certainly able to make full use of the stage area using all available space. However, in this

case I did feel that it left the show a little one-dimensional and there were times when a change of scenery would have given just that little extra lift of energy that was missing in places.

The use of the back 'wall' for projections was extremely effective and, was a creative way to introduce the audience to different scenes – picnic, wedding etc. – particularly when this was not an overly complicated set.

Clever use of the boxes on stage gave us a different perspective in various scenes and this did of course mean that there were no constant set/props changes to detract from the action on stage. The rocking chair was moved on and off the stage unobtrusively and the boxes being moved by the cast rather than stage crew worked well.

I loved the use of the auditorium area for the barn buildings and windmill. I suspect partly dictated by space issues but the additional exits through the barn doors did give us some of the extra dimension that I think was needed and worked extremely well within the storyline.

There was however one aspect of the set that did cause a problem (more noticeable in Act 2). From my seat in the auditorium I was able to see the cast exiting stage right, the stairs and handrail offstage, the black curtain at the bottom and the door opening with a crack of light when they left the backstage area. We are all taught to stay in character until completely clear of the stage and audience and to see cast members picking their way down the steps did tend to spoil this illusion and was a little distracting. I suspect that this may have been a result of space issues backstage – I am very aware that the backstage areas of Westlands are challenging but it was a real shame that some form of camouflage couldn't be found.

### **Props**

Use of props was minimal and unobtrusive but much needed. Those that were used all looked good, whether they were used as part of the overall set dressing, such as the rocking chair which played an integral part in changing the scenes to and from the homestead, or in use by the actors themselves. Smaller items such as the washing line, stove and picnic hampers all made their appearance unobtrusively but added important little touches to the static scenery. All the props worked well and added appropriately to the show. The boxes were used to good effect for sitting and standing, which added some welcome height to the scenic tableau. The table and benches after the wedding immediately lifted the scene adding a sense of fun and the Surrey at the end was a lovely touch which, of course, met the expectations of the audience when such an integral part of the story.

### **Stage Management**

The stage management function appeared to be handled skilfully in this production. Transitions from one scene to the next were smooth. The furniture and larger props that did have to be moved on and off the stage were moved with speed and care and, to the audience everything appeared to be exactly where it should be at the right time. There was no sound of backstage chatter or clatter in the auditorium and the only slight downside to the seamless transitions from on scene to another was the problem of being seen exiting stage right that has already been mentioned.

### **Lighting**

It is not clear whether you used professional technical support staff for lighting or sound (or both) but I absolutely loved the use of the lighting in this production. From the shadows across the homestead and barns as we embarked on our journey to the beautiful backdrops of sunsets, sunrises, moonlit nights, falling blossom and leaves and the smoke house with its eerie gloom. The lighting was used to incredibly good effect. The sunrise/sunset backdrops lifted the set but also added a peace and calm. The falling leaves and blossom on the back drop in the picnic and wedding scenes transformed the set creating a feeling of happiness and joy. The smoke house scene in particular was so impressive. The use of lighting here was powerful and not only served to draw us in to a completely different environment for the first time – much needed relief from the homestead - but also supported the darkness of Jud's character. In the libretto, we are given a full description of the room and its contents. Little of that was seen or needed here. The use of blackout across the stage with just a small corner darkly lit focused the audience's attention immediately on this room and the stage didn't need to be 'set' for us to imagine its contents.

## **Sound**

Again, it is not clear whether you used professional technical support staff but the sound was excellent and we were able to clearly hear spoken and singing words to lead us through the story. The balance was generally good and it was refreshing to be able to hear the music clearly but also to hear with ease the vocals alongside it. With a 'song-driven' storyline it really is imperative that the audience can hear the song vocals and this was extremely successful. There were a couple of small mike issues with crackly mikes and, unfortunately, on more than one occasion Laurey's mike was not on for the first line or so of her dialogue when she came on stage, but these were very minor issues that seemed to be rectified very quickly.

## **Musical Direction**

Unfortunately it was not clear from the details sheet completed for me backstage just before the show who were the employed professionals. However, musical direction was excellent and I was impressed with the whole musical aspect of the show which came together and gave the audience those well-known songs, beautifully delivered. Every soloist, whether principal or step-out ensemble, was confident and well-rehearsed and you have clearly worked incredibly hard to ensure we were entertained by some beautiful solo singing and lovely ensemble numbers.

I very much enjoyed listening to the musicians although it did feel strange not being able to see them. I believe the cast may have been having to use monitors with the musicians hidden away and this can be incredibly challenging but the whole cast – principals, step-out and full ensemble – rose to the challenge and were absolutely on it in terms of timing and musicality and we were entertained with great music and great singing.

## **Choreography and Dancing**

This show was excellently choreographed and was an aspect of the production that was really enjoyable. Overall the choreography was varied and interesting and well executed. The cast made full use of the stage which, even with the full ensemble, never felt overcrowded. The dance routines were beautifully choreographed and clearly well rehearsed (although one dancer who was not completely sure of all their moves was a little distracting in a couple of the routines).

The female ensemble sang and danced beautifully and were clearly very well rehearsed. I did note however that several of their routines felt very similar in their balletic style. The dream scene was choreographed beautifully and it was refreshing to see a completely different style of dance. The male ensemble were just as proficient and well-rehearsed and performed with the confidence and gusto you would expect from a group of ranch hands and farmers.

I particularly enjoyed the full ensemble/cast routines. These were clearly very well rehearsed, were fun to watch and full of energy with a great use of the stage and gave the production a much needed boost of energy which I did feel on occasions was a little lacking. The opening number in Act 2 in particular created a great energy which remained throughout the Act. The colour changes on the back projection were pretty and added an extra lift to the dance routines. The fight scenes were also impressive – well choreographed and rehearsed and enjoyable to watch.

## **Costumes**

Costumes were excellent and it was certainly not possible to tell which were society made and which were hired. The costumes generally felt 'of the period' although I did feel the dungarees Laurey was wearing were a little modern in style, as were at least one pair of men's jeans (although still dungarees and jeans there have obviously been subtle changes in fashion over the years that gave these a modern feel). I also noticed that there was one costume in the female ensemble which did seem to be very different to the rest, in material, style and colour and this did stand out and detract a little from the other dancers during the ensemble routines. Generally however the costumes were charming and everything felt appropriate.

## **Hair and Make-up**

There is no mention of make-up and hair in your programme, however the cast all looked well made up and natural with, generally, hair done suitably and this all enhanced the overall look of the show. My only slight disappointment was with Laurey's hair in the early scenes which, again, did look a little too modern. I think the aim was probably for ringlets but the result was more of the larger modern curl that we see today. In later scenes however she had changed her hairstyle slightly which seemed to be much more in keeping with the period.

## **Individual Performances**

### **Curly - Nick Harris**

Nick is an impressive actor, singer and dancer and he did not disappoint. He played the part of Curly with confidence and ease and led us in a measured and thoughtful way through Curly's story. He delivered all his solos and duets beautifully. We saw a likeable, gentle character and his relationship with Laurey was sweet and believable. He was convincing in his portrayal of someone in love but who may never find the courage to stand up for what he wanted, as well as a naivety in his apparent lack of realisation of Laurey's true feelings. He was able to create a degree of frustration in his audience for his apparent lack of 'oomph' in pursuing Laurie. However, in the smoke house scene we did see a slightly different side to Curly and the possibility of a tougher core when needed. His 'encouragement' of Jed to take his own life was disturbing and we were left wondering just how far Curly might be prepared to go in this persuasion. His final fight scene with Jud was well choreographed and rehearsed and we finally saw the man who was prepared to fight his corner.

### **Laurey - Amy McIntosh**

Amy played her role beautifully as Laurey. She performed with confidence and portrayed a young woman conflicted by love, self doubts, fear, youthful confidence – we saw it all. We worried for her as she pushed Curly away, we feared for her as she edged towards Jud, admired her wise words in her friendship with Ado Annie and shared her happiness when she finally got her man. Amy sang beautifully, whether solo or duet, ballad or more up tempo. She was secure in every aspect of the performance of this role, was clearly well rehearsed and, although a principal character allowed others to shine – her relationship in particular with Ado Annie was lovely to watch.

### **Jud Fry - Luke Whitchurch**

I loved Luke's portrayal of a dark and troubled character and the smoke house scene in particular gave us a superb insight into Jud's character. When Jud made his first appearance we simply saw a somewhat surly uncommunicative character – he said almost nothing but his movement and body language gave the audience an immediate glimpse of the type of man he was. However, in the smoke house scene it became apparent that he was not simply a surly man torn and troubled because of an unrequited love (and possibly a figure of pity). He showed us an insight into the dark demons he was fighting and with it a realisation that this was not driven by a desire to banish them, but rather by a frustration that he was not able to embrace them to get what he wanted. This was a dark man with deep secrets and desires and, of course, a beautiful singing voice.

### **Ado Annie - Leah Driver**

This was an impressive portrayal of this 'silly' girl. Leah was able to show us a complex young woman who was so silly that she was comical but someone who was also risking her future happiness due to her inability to recognise and choose her path. Leah is a great natural comedienne able to deliver her lines with impeccable timing and make us laugh without it ever feeling forced or 'over the top'. I loved this performance which was confident, well rehearsed and polished and added so much fun to the production. Leah held our attention whenever she was on the stage and was an absolute pleasure to watch. I very much look forward to seeing her in future comic roles.

### **Ali Enticott – Aunt Eller**

This was a role played beautifully by Ali. There was comparatively little dialogue but her facial expressions and body language said it all. From the first moment we saw her she beautifully portrayed a great strength of character and 'grit'. She was certainly feisty but was able to show that, beneath the surface, not only was she the glue that held everyone together but also was the 'carer' in this little community. She was likeable and funny and a great foil to the other more frivolous, serious, sensitive characters around her.

### **Will Parker – Will Poulton**

This was a lovely polished performance portraying a likeable but naïve young man who just wanted his girl. We celebrated his 'wins' and bemoaned his 'losses', willing him to get it right and get the girl. He managed the 'will he won't he?' scenario with confidence and humour and he kept us entertained and in suspense with his efforts. He interacted well with the rest of the cast and was convincing in his apparent complete lack of understanding of the character of his bride to be. He has a lovely singing voice and it was a pleasure to watch him perform.

### **Ali Hakim – Nick Toop**

This was a confident and well rehearsed performance from Nick. His portrayal came across as a mixture of the earnest salesman and comic slightly misunderstood young man (mostly misunderstood by Ado Annie). There were times when I was not too sure which I was watching – although I do realise they should have both been part of a whole. I think Nick played the earnest, slightly misunderstood salesman well and, that in itself, was humorous but this often seemed to get a little 'muddled' when he tried to bring out the comic side of the role and this did sometimes come across as a little forced. However, Nick provided a great foil to Ado Annie and there were some lovely and very funny moments between the two.

### **Andrew Carnes – Steve Williams**

This was another confident and enjoyable performance by Steve who portrayed exactly what we have come to expect from 'Paw'. He was polished and funny and provided a great foil for both Will and Ali Hakim.

### **Gertie Cummins – Jasmine Boniface**

This was a confident portrayal of Gertie. Whilst I do appreciate the 'laugh' was the whole point of the character I did feel that it was a little too much. (I haven't seen the film so have nothing to compare). The first time it was certainly funny but it then became simply very irritating (this may of course have been the point). I did feel that if it had been toned back just a little it had the potential to have had the audience laughing each time.

### **Direction**

This was a well directed and choreographed production. Everything flowed well and transitions from one scene to the next were seamless. Sets didn't change significantly and stage crew were almost not required which all added to the overall flow of the action.

Having a reasonably clear stage and back wall projection helped create full scenes without too much cumbersome scenery getting in the way and this did create some lovely scenes with the full company using all the available space. The set never looked over-crowded – a reflection of excellent direction and choreography.

The show was clearly well rehearsed and the confidence from all the actors, whether principals or ensemble, gave the audience a secure performance to enjoy. The relationships between the characters were believable as well as being fun and interesting.

All that said, I have to admit I did struggle a little with this production and am finding it difficult to pinpoint a specific reason. The set, scenery, sound, lighting were excellent, as was the direction and choreography. The whole cast was well-rehearsed, confident and polished and the show was performed to the highest standard. I couldn't fault the acting, singing or dance routines.

I think perhaps the show was the victim of its venue. There is certainly no question re the talent of this amazing cast and crew. As already mentioned, I did feel that one single set throughout the whole production did create a slightly one-dimensional feel and in places, particularly in the first Act, the show did seem to lack some energy. I do think some set changes may well have served to 'lift' the energy levels a little but I am very aware that Westlands is not the easiest venue in which to perform with its backstage space being extremely limited. I suspect the lack of set changes may have been a result of these limitations which is why, unfortunately, on this occasion I do feel the production may have fallen victim to the venue.

### **Summary**

I did very much enjoy this show. It was obvious that the cast and crew were committed to providing their audience with a great experience and a fun night of entertainment and they certainly succeeded. The acting, singing and dancing was all of the very highest standard, the music was wonderfully delivered and the set was beautiful. Whilst I may have felt that the first Act was a little slow in places energy levels in Act 2 certainly lifted from the very first energetic opening number right through to the wonderful performance of Oklahoma by the full company to round off the show and we were again treated to that wonderful YAOS 'sparkle'.

I would like to thank you for allowing me to be a part of a such a lovely evening.

Cathie Warner (Adjudicator)

Somerset Fellowship of Drama's David Beach Competition