



ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

Name of Company: YAOS Productions
Name of Production: Oklahoma!
Venue: Westlands Entertainment Venue, Yeovil
Date: Wednesday 20th March 2024
Adjudicator: Nicholas Goodall

A CLASSIC SHOW WITH A WONDERFUL ENSEMBLE CAST THAT FIZZED WITH ENERGY

Director & Choreographer: Sheila Driver

Musical Director: Jessamy Bowditch

Always a popular favourite, this evergreen musical based on Lynne Riggs' 1931 play *Green Grow the Lilacs* never fails to please and we were treated to an evening of humour, pathos, menace and romance by turn, underpinned throughout by exuberant dance numbers and some lovely cameos from the cast in supporting roles in your latest production. The troubling elements of the narrative were subtly dealt with and although you played the sub-plot with a light touch, which ensured that the audience were engaged in both the humour and the timeless melodic invention of Richard Rodgers' score, the drama was equally gripping, smouldering with the sexual tensions between the main protagonists.

The production was a real treat, both visually and dramatically. The sunny melodies and gleeful optimism of some of the songs were given with the freshness they deserve and were perfectly off-set by the humorous interactions between Ado Annie and her two beaus, Ali Hakim and Will Parker

who threatened to steal the show. At its heart, *Oklahoma!* is a story about the central question of whether charming cowboy Curly McLain or menacing farmhand Jud Fry will take the demure Laurey Williams to the box social and, ultimately, win her affection and hand in marriage. The darker themes of violence and injustice that are simmering just beneath the surface were played out in your production with just the right mixture of menace and jeopardy without losing the charm, passion and humour that accompany the rest of the action and we were given some scintillating performances from all of the principals with strong support from the company, particularly the dancers - it was a true ensemble tour-de-force.

The trouble with performing a well-established classic like *Oklahoma!*, a show that everyone knows, is that although you are assured of a good audience, you have a lot to live up to, not least the highly successful recent re-imagining of the show by Daniel Fish. Often cited as the musical which broke the musical comedy mould when it premiered in 1943, *Oklahoma!* is seen as a radical departure from its predecessors by seamlessly integrating the spoken dialogue of the book with the musical numbers. With that in mind, I offer my hearty congratulations to Sheila Driver for both her direction and choreography, which was excellent and to Jessamy Bowditch for steering us with such assurance through the tuneful score. This was a first-rate piece of theatre where the pace never slackened, so congratulations should go to everyone involved.

Below are some comments and notes for each department involved, and for each of the principals.

Staging

After your unplanned move to the Westland Entertainment Centre as a venue for productions following many years at the Octagon, your adaptation of the space was extremely well thought-out and I think it worked brilliantly for this show. I realise you have limited room in the wings and restricted back-stage facilities here but the set was cleverly designed to maximise the generous width the stage at the Entertainment Centre provides and by building out to increase the stage depth and by adding some beautifully constructed flats on either side of the performance area, you really optimised the performance space needed for the choreography.

The set was nicely produced and gave us a strong sense of time and location, with barn buildings suggested either side of the stage, painted clap-board timbers extending across the whole width in front of the stage and a beautifully constructed windmill placed at ground level stage left - a lovely touch that must have taken some time to construct. The rear of the stage had three sections of paling fences to suggest the farm's boundary with some slightly

odd undulating hummocks (hills?) behind. Not a wheat field in sight or regulation hay bales here, but some lovely creative lighting washes flooded the blank wall and stage together with watery sun (or moon) projections to suggest the open landscape. Fortunately there are few set changes needed during the show anyway, and the impressive structures created a nicely stylised backdrop for the action. Hats off to the team who created the set. It must have taken a lot of work but it worked beautifully and really enhanced the production.

The smokehouse scene between Curly, Ali Hakim and Jud was suggested through lighting changes and this was an elegant solution and avoided the need for a set especially for one scene. We saw the addition of a large table and benches for the wedding in Act 2 and hampers and props were enough to put us firmly at the box social. The barn stage left had a pair of doors which were used for entrances and exits at floor level. The stage itself was left relatively bare, with a simple but effective cabin for Aunt Eller, complete with veranda, which provided another entrance and exit point for the cast. The rocking chair, washing line, churn, heater and pail provided additional set dressing stage right but the main stage was left relatively free, with some boxes of different sizes which doubled as Curly's imaginary Surrey, the smokehouse and seating for a range of other scenes. This left you enough space to enable the cast to move around and make the most of the extended dance routines so carefully plotted throughout the show. You also made use of entrances and exits through the auditorium at floor level which was a nice touch.

Props and costumes helped to give us a sense of the period and the outfits were beautifully co-ordinated to enhance colour palettes in certain scenes and provide coherence across the production. Your cowboys and ranchers were appropriately attired in denim, checked shirts, leather boots, straw hats and stetsons and the women were given a range of colourful pastel-shaded dresses which were right for the Edwardian period in rural America. The costumes really enhanced the dance sequences and visual impact of the ensemble, not least in the cancan routine. Laurey in particular had a number of costume changes which was nice to see.

Props were also convincing and appropriate. You need to have guns, knife, colourful hampers and baskets for the girls at the box social and the all-important 'Little Wonder' as well as a variety of items for Ali Hakim to peddle and these were handled with realism and confidence by the actors. Little touches were well thought-out, such as Carnes's pair of rabbits when he enters with a shotgun and scares Ali into getting hitched to Ado Annie. His gun has been used to hunt for supper, not to intimidate and we get that straight away by the use of the prop.

Of special note was your Surrey which made a triumphant appearance in the finale for Curly and Laurey's wedding exit, although there was an inevitable hiatus before the Bows as it was moved off the stage.

Lighting was well designed and really well operated with a sensitivity in the cues that I appreciated. The use of particular colour palettes to denote certain emotional states or highlight moments of drama could have been a cliché but was delicately handled. We had a vivid red at the moment of Curly's death during the Dream Ballet and the same for Jud's demise in Act 2 but these moments punctuated the overall serenity of the lighting and far from being predictable, took us with stark immediacy to another place. The scene in the smokehouse was suitably gloomy with a subtle pair of blue LED spots to provide accented highlights on Curly and Jud and to section off this space on the stage and there was a lovely blue wash in the scene change before *Many a New Day*. The orange in particular tied in nicely with the reds and browns of the set (and the programme and publicity material), pulling the whole show together within a strong colour palette

In particular I liked your use of a watery 'sun' and 'moon' projection on the back of the stage to denote early morning, evening or night. In combination with the strong orange/red or blue washes, there was at times a literal, bright, golden haze enveloping the stage which gave the show an atmospheric glow and contrasted nicely with the full, bright lighting for the more joyful daylight scenes such as when Ado Annie's sings *I Cain't Say No* and Laurey and Curly's duet together in *People Will Say we're in Love*. You weren't afraid to leave the lights up for long cues but there were some nice touches like the understated dimming of the light for the reprise of *Surrey With a Fringe on Top* and the change to a bright light with the words "he loved everything in the world" in *Poor Jud Fry is Dead. Lonely Room* was similarly accompanied by moody lighting cues to match the lyrics: the song began in a dark blue light which changed to a bright white and then red at the climax of the song. Blackouts were rare in the show because there weren't any complex scene changes to cover but it was highly effective at the end of this scene. The Dream Ballet was the only time when you used moving 'petals' which were projected on the back wall at the beginning the sequence, announcing clearly that this was a dream and not reality.

Sound was generally well balanced and the clarity of the dialogue and vocals was good overall. There were a few moments where sound cues were missed on the Wednesday performance that I attended, especially with Laurey. Maybe you were having a technical issue with Laurey's mic here as it seemed to be mainly be her who was affected? Soloists were particularly well supported and the balance between the orchestra and the singers was well judged.

Having an off-stage band has its advantages and one of them is being able to fully balance the instrumentation in a way that is difficult when the instrumentalists are in the same space as the performers. There were moments when I thought perhaps you could have pushed the orchestra sound a little more, especially in the climatic moments of high drama or in the larger ensemble numbers, and I certainly could have done with a little more bass at times, but overall the sound was deftly handled and I could hear the details of the scoring very clearly. It's hard not to have an off-stage band feel like you're using a backing track and you captured the timbral differences between the instruments, for example between the brass and string keyboard sounds, very effectively. There were a few mis-steps, however: a snare drum roll in the Dream Ballet sounded strangely like a crackling radio and the opening scene was accompanied by something which I think was the sound of cicadas but it was not clear in the mix. I could also have done with more treble on Will's voice, which was harder than the other singers to hear clearly over the band, but these are really trifling quibbles as overall the sound was crisp and sharp. Reverb on the voices in particular was just about right - Curly's entrance when he was singing unaccompanied was beautifully rich and it was a nice touch to have some Country music playing in the background as the audience took their seats.

Choreography throughout was beautifully designed, particularly the ensemble numbers in Act 2 and the scenes with Laurey and the girls in Act 1. There was always variety in the dance routines; polkas, tap, waltzes, high-stepping American country dance movements, lifts and the cancan all featured at different points in the production. Dance, which is integral to many of the songs, helps to propel the musical along and underpin the emotional heart of the story-telling. No where is this clearer than in the extended Dream Ballet sequence which ends Act 1. Laurey's feelings were beautifully portrayed, and it was a hugely atmospheric moment which set the tone for the drama of Act 2. This could have been a moment when the energy levels slacked, coming as it does at the end of along first half, but I was riveted by some polished and highly accomplished dancing, with no substitute Dream Laurey or Dream Curly coming on to replace the principals here. With no singing or dialogue for fifteen minutes, the Dream Ballet shifts from light to dark and everything has to be bigger, more exaggerated, conveying emotions only through gesture, facial expressions and movement and it was nice to see this expressed with such a high level of technical accomplishment.

You clearly had a talented team of dancers who could take on the variety of dances required in *Oklahoma!* and I loved the choreography and movement in every number. Everyone looked totally comfortable with their movements and even in the solo and duo performances, the design of the movements across the stage was creative and effective, for example the pair of dancers who

came on and danced behind Will and Ado Annie during *All Er Nuthin*. The ensemble supported the leading actors very well, and the large dance numbers were particularly impressive, with the whole cast participating in the Act 2 finale. I don't know if you took any direct inspiration from Agnes de Mille, but your work definitely stood up to her pioneering achievement in integrated dance. Your inventive and varied Dream Ballet was far more visually interesting than the slightly fey version in the 1955 film!

It's no mean feat to take on the role of both Director and Choreographer in a show of this type and I congratulate you Sheila for the work you have done in making this such a successful component in the production.

Band

It was lovely to have a decent sized band for this show and the demands of the score were extremely well met by some very tight ensemble playing and technically assured instrumental solos. The string sounds were captured well from the keyboards and having a violinist to provide additional authenticity and to balance the wind players was a nice touch although there was a notable moment when the intonation slipped in the overture.

Being off-stage brings many challenges as well as some advantages but it worked really well from an audience perspective. There were moments when I would have liked a little more bass in the mix and I notice that you didn't use a bass player in the ensemble so presumably this was played from the keyboard. This is just a personal preference and I know that by having the band off-stage you were going to lose some of the punch you get from having instrumentalists in the same space as the performers. Drums and percussion were suitably pushed back in the mix and apart from the cited moment in the Dream Ballet, sounded good. Right from the overture the tempos were crisp and very clearly set; the cast never came unstuck using a relay system with the orchestra in another space which is a testament to Jessamy Bowditch's very clear musical direction.

Overall the orchestra sounded so slick it was sometimes hard to imagine you weren't using a pre-recorded backing track (I'm sure some might have thought you were). This certainly rated as one of the tightest bands I have heard recently in an amateur production so many congratulations to Jessamy and all the players involved. It gave such an additional lift to the performance.

Principals

Aunt Eller - Ali Entercott

Heading the cast, you were perfect as Aunt Eller, characterising every mood of this lovable, funny and yet sympathetic character. We saw Aunt Eller's strong character in the auction scene and throughout the production as a whole and you captured her mannerisms and throw-away humour with great skill. Aunt Eller is a 'mother to everyone', a woman who is trying to keep the peace between the cowhands and the ranchers. Her down-to-earth and underlying warmth aids Laurey in her stuttering romance with Curly but we also saw her spine of steel in your well-rounded characterisation. You have a gift for comic timing and a wide range of facial expressions, particularly evident in the scene with Will Parker and the boys looking at the 'Little Wonder'. This really helped to make Aunt Eller fresh and younger than her years.

You were confident in your moves across the stage in each scene and achieved another real skill – that of engaging with your fellow performers and the audience at the same time. But what was really memorable for me was the auction scene in Act 2 when you helped to maintain a really quick pace and drive the action towards the showdown between Curly and Jud. You carried off the accent convincingly and your moment to shine in *The Farmer and the Cowman* demonstrated your ability to interact with everyone in the company. This was a really strong, praiseworthy performance.

Curly - Nick Harris

You gave a wonderfully rounded characterisation in the role of Curly; a believable Cowboy whose singing was spot on in all situations. The character of Curly has to have a confident swagger - he is after all the most handsome man in the whole county and he knows it! You set the bar very high right from the start with your breezy a cappella opening to the show in *Oh, What A Beautiful Mornin'*. Entering through the auditorium and singing directly to the audience, Curly's insouciant appeal was out there right from the start. He can come across as arrogant and unforgiving and in recent re-imaginings of the show, even cold, but you managed to portray Curly with charm and wit and as the show progressed, we saw his genuine devotion to Laurey unfolding. Indeed, your rapport with Amy was one of the highlights of the show, by turns touching and feisty, tender and funny. I was convinced by the auction in Act 2 that there was a real chemistry between you and that made the denouement when Jud tries to take Laurey from Curly by violent means all the more real. You wore the regulation cowboy chaps and gun belt as though you were used to spending every day in the saddle and your accent and delivery of the dialect, both in the songs and the spoken word was spot on.

Your baritone voice was strong at the top of your range. *The Surrey With the Fringe on Top* was particularly noteworthy starting as it does on a top E, as

was your lovely duet with Laurey, *People Will Say We're in Love*, although be careful not to let the pitching slip slightly when the dynamic drops to a whisper. You have a very strong line in making appropriate gestures while you're singing and in *Poor Jud is Daid* we saw some vivid story-telling with you singing directly out to the audience.

This was a really polished performance which gave you a chance to demonstrate your singing, dancing and acting skills and I will long remember your entrance at the beginning of Act 1 which was a stand-out moment in the show.

Laurey - Amy McIntosh

Equally up to the vocal demands of the part, and having a strong command of the dialect, you gave an excellent account as Laurey, extracting the tender moments of her vulnerability when required, yet holding your own in songs like *Many A New Day*. I really liked your bubbly, feisty portrayal, achieved through an exuberant physicality and vocal lightness. This was a strong characterisation and you met the demands of the songs and the dance numbers with great distinction. I enjoyed the snappy way you sparred with Curly in the opening scenes and you managed the dance numbers with great assurance as well as a number of quick costume changes.

Laurey is confused about Curly and seems to be waiting for him to make the first move but your portrayal of Laurey wasn't too innocent to see that her acceptance of Jud's invitation to the box social will mean trouble. Your disengaged and quiet indifference to the calls of your suitor gave Laurey a little more depth than is sometimes the case; your first encounter with Curly was a good example of this and set the tone for how your character developed throughout the show. A slight mis-pitching of the first a cappella entry in *Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'* was quickly overcome and once you hit your stride your delivery of the key songs, *Many a New Day*, *People Will Say We're in Love* and *Out of My Dreams* was always clear and fresh and your voice felt bright throughout your range. *Many A New Day* was sung with determination and vigour, and the female ensemble carried off the tight harmonies to support you. You managed the top As with ease and I could see how much you were enjoying the role – it was infectious. This was a very accomplished and heart-warming performance.

Jud Fry - Luke Whitchurch

There are different ways you can play the part, but your Jud didn't come over as vulnerable or misunderstood: he was mesmerisingly sinister and threatening. You were wonderfully menacing as Jud, the villain of the piece, leering magnificently, singing with full-throated passion and looking mean, lumbering and a physical threat. We saw this menace and Jud's underlying

sense of injustice in the smokehouse scene in Act 1 when Curly goads Jud towards ending his life and speculates on how his death would be received. Your Jud was a dark mirror image of the romantic lead and we were left in no doubt that he posed a real threat to Laurey in the Dream Ballet sequence and in his desperation in bidding for her at the auction. This simmering resentment was clear to see and the performance was all the more chilling for it.

Your interaction with Curly in the smokehouse scene was equally chilling. I was convinced from the start that Jud was capable of violence and your reactions during *Poor Jud Fry is Dead* and your rendition of the tricky *Lonely Room* were excellent - a spine-chilling and intimate moment when the story comes out of the light and focuses instead on Jud's isolation and misery. It is easy to lose the clarity of the lines while displaying such uncompromising resentment but both your accent and vocal delivery never wavered.

Despite his abusive behaviour, there needs to be some sympathy for Jud who is clearly seen as a workhorse without feelings. I certainly felt some pity for him in your characterisation. Your ability to safely simulate the threat of violence without making any actions look too staged was equally impressive. You were no pantomime villain. This was a really strong performance.

Ado Annie - Leah Driver

This role requires a strong actor and someone with real stage presence and you managed both the comedy and the vocals in the songs really convincingly. Your accent was faultless and really added to the characterisation; you made the most of Ado Annie's strong and colourful use of dialect and delivered the one-liners to perfection. Timing is everything in a comic role like this and you had the audience in stitches in your banter with Ali Hakim and Will. You played up Ado Annie's naive and gullible innocence and your physical comedy, especially your wide range of facial expressions, was a joy to watch. The performance was vivacious, playful and open-hearted, just as the character should be, and you lit up the stage with your rendition of *I Cain't Say No* where crystal clear diction was delivered without any loss in your impeccable southern accent.

You were clearly very comfortable playing a strong character part and owned the stage when you came on. I loved your performance overall.

Will Parker - Will Poulter

This was a role in which you had an opportunity to demonstrate your talent for comedy and it was clear from the outset that you were having a great time playing Will. Your entrance in Act 1 with *Kansas City* was full of life and the dance routine including some tap steps and a lift at the end was nicely executed. Your scene with Ali Hakim where he hoodwinked you into taking back the fifty dollars was beautifully played, as was the under-rated Act 2 duet with Ado Annie, *All Er Nuthin*. You had an impeccable accent and I was very

impressed with your diction in the dialogue although for some reason I felt your voice was slightly too much in the mid-range in the mix during the songs and could have done with more treble - a technical issue outside of your control.

Will is the dim-witted, innocent, easily suckered foil to Ali Hakim's knowing and cynical wheeler-dealer and your earnestness perfectly complemented both his scheming and Ado Annie's vacillations. As the third member of the sub-plot love triangle you were perfectly cast and really made the most of your moments to take centre stage.

Ali Hakim - Nick Toop

What a lovely part this is! The travelling peddler with a roving eye and the gift of the gab is something a good comedy actor can really get their teeth into and you didn't disappoint. You made the most of the comedy and I loved your rendition of *It's a Scandal! It's a Outrage!* with the male ensemble. You managed to the trick of speaking the verses rather than singing them with consummate ease and this only helped to enhance the characterisation. Comic timing was always pin sharp and the scenes with Ado Annie were particularly funny. Ali is an outsider but unlike Jud he is accepted by the community. Since we never know whether Ali is actually Persian or merely playing a part, he can be an everyman. The brown trousers, checked jacket and waistcoat gave you the feel of a huckster, (after all, Ali is really a con-man) and you hustled Will with the convincing panache of a cynical salesman. Your delivery of the fast paced dialogue was excellent and kept the scenes with Ali moving along at a cracking rate. Your accent never faltered and there were some sublime moments. This was a very strong performance.

Andrew Carnes - Steve Williams

The supporting role of Andrew Carnes as father to Ado Annie and opinionated rancher who facilitates Curly's exoneration for the death of Jud is a nice cameo part and you gave a no-nonsense performance which felt just right as the straight-talking farmer. Carnes is a shotgun-wielding, uncompromising character whose reluctance to embrace the cowhand's point of view is clear to see, especially in his aversion to Ado Annie marrying Will Parker. Your voice was suitably gruff and threatening when it needed to be and you delivered your vocals in *The Farmer and the Cowman* with gusto. A nicely judged performance.

Gertie Cummings - Jasmine Boniface

This was a lovely characterisation of the irritating but lovable Gertie. Although a small part, Gertie has to be believable and you had her annoying laugh off to a T, eliciting a laugh pretty much every time you made an appearance, especially at the end when you managed to hitch Ali Hakim. Having a strong

cast member in the smaller supporting roles is key to making the production move at pace and your contribution certainly helped.

Other parts

There are a number cameo roles and named parts in the ensemble and each of these was played with conviction and a strong sense of character. I particularly liked your Cord Elam, Mark.

Ensemble

Although there aren't many big ensemble numbers in *Oklahoma!*, especially in Act 1, the scenes which involved everyone were well put together and confidently performed. Choruses were sung with gusto and the big production songs in Act 2, *The Farmer and the Cowman* and particularly the long-awaited *Oklahoma*, were delivered with energy and commitment. The Men's chorus did an admirable job with the jaunty *Kansas City* and *It's A Scandal, It's A Outrage* and the female chorus in *Many a new Day* and *Out of My Dreams* provided some strong vocal support to Laurey with clear and well balanced three-part harmonies. You managed the tricky task of singing while dancing admirably and the chorus harmony singing was full-throated and well-pitched, special highlights being *Many a New Day* and *Oklahoma*. I must again mention the Ballet, which to me was incredibly strong for an amateur company. You certainly have some accomplished dancers in your group.

What strength in depth you have in this company! All the principals were excellent in their way, giving us convincing characterisations which were believable, funny and touching while avoiding the worst of the schmaltz which can creep in to productions of *Oklahoma!* Your choreography was outstanding - the sheer variety and excellent execution by your cast, especially the female dancers, gave the show energy and highlighted the success of the integrated approach to drama Rodgers and Hammerstein were attempting to create in this ground-breaking musical. The Dream Ballet in particular was a moment to savour.

You didn't cheat those who were coming to see an uplifting Western jolly but equally didn't shy away from the dark brutality at the heart of the plot and this must be in large part down to the vision the creative team and to Sheila Driver and Chris Holman-Holmes in particular. The problematic sham trial which exonerates Curly in time for the happy ending is a much-debated weakness in the plot of *Oklahoma!* but we were given a strong, dark, passionate and at times sympathetic performance in the shape of Luke Whitchurch's Jud Fry which counter-balanced the overall joie-de-vivre of the rest of the show. The singing was bright and strong from all the soloists and the ensemble. Songs and dances were beautifully realised by the musicians under strong musical leadership from Jessamy Bowditch and my overriding

memory of this show will be one of a company that was thoroughly enjoying the performance and which had clearly put in lots of hard work in rehearsal. This was a very well cast and well directed production and I enjoyed some top quality individual performances. Well done to all involved and thank you for your welcoming hospitality. I very much look forward to seeing more of your work in the future.

NG

30/03/24