

Review: 'Oklahoma!' has trouble with test of time

Bridgette Redman, For the Lansing State Journal

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If you are an educational institution, such as Michigan State University, it makes sense to put on a show such as Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma!"

It is a show with historical value when it comes to musical theater, there is challenging music and complex choreography. There are a lot of learning opportunities within the show.

None of which changes that it is a problematic relic of a show to be putting on in this day and age.

Led by Director Brad Willcuts, the MSU Theater production of "Oklahoma!" is quite well done and readily shows why this musical was popular for so many years and why it changed the form of musical theater.

Chaseton Cain as Curly, Isa Rodriguez as Laurey, and Ryan Adolph as Jud in the MSU Theater Department's production of "Oklahoma!" (Photo: Eloy Gomez)

The audience is first greeted by an incredibly detailed and beautifully painted scrim made by Kirk Domer and his crew. It represents a theme straight out of a Sears Roebuck catalog that Domer, the scenic designer and props master, carries throughout the entire set.

The scrim rises as the 16-piece orchestra, led by Dave Wendelberger, plays an old-fashioned overture, immediately sharing the complex orchestrations and deeply layered music that will be played throughout the next few hours.

"Oklahoma!" takes place immediately before the territory became a state and focuses on the courtship of Laurey and Curly. A subplot involves Ado Annie who must choose between her devoted suitor Will and the itinerant peddler, Ali Hakim.

This is where things start to get uncomfortable as it is one of those storylines that wants you to believe that when a woman says no, she really means yes and when she says yes, she either really means no or she's a naughty nincompoop who shouldn't be taken seriously. It's how the two heroines behave and it causes nothing but trouble for everyone.

Add to that the way the hero Curly bullies Jud, the man who is his competitor for Laurey's attention and love, encouraging him to commit suicide the way cyber-bullies do today, and it's hard to just sit back and enjoy this show.

If you're ready to engage with these themes and call them out for what they are, the MSU production is an excellent example of "Oklahoma!" performed well and with complete commitment.

The first real treat is that all the singers perform without microphones, something possible with the wonderful acoustics of the recently remodeled Fairchild Theatre. It spotlights the beautiful voices of everyone in the cast and makes the harmonizing a thing of breathtaking beauty.

Chase Cain is the all-American cowboy, an aw shucks sort of young man with a beautiful voice and a commanding stage presence. He makes Laurey seem downright ornery for spurning his advances as Cain is so very likable and charismatic—until, that is, he goes to visit Jud and treats him in a reprehensible way out of jealousy.

Isa Rodriguez brings a serious demeanor to the part of Laurey, letting the audience engage with her as a serious, thoughtful, independent woman—which is sometimes at odds with the choices the script has her make. Rodriguez is an intense listener and she gives some of the best clues to her character when she is not speaking, whether it is celebrating with Ado Annie or stealing secret smiles as Curly sings.

Ryan Adolph brings a layered performance to Jud—he's not simply the reprehensible villain, even if no one is going to ever be his friend. As the loner, Adolph lets us see that he's longing for something better, longing to belong in some way. We see in him today's mass shooters—violent loners who have been bullied and misunderstood and who choose the worse possible responses to what life has dealt them. His performance of "Lonely Room" is feelingly performed and colors his future actions. That said, Adolph doesn't shy away from making him violent and angry, a man who is an outsider because he fails to act with any compassion or decency.

Anna Birmingham is a pure delight as Ado Annie. She brings energetic, fun and happy demeanor to the girl who can't say no. Yes, Rodgers and Hammerstein made her the comic relief for being willing to say yes and to enjoy the company of young men, but Birmingham doesn't shy away from that and creates an Ado Annie who is likeable and who we want to see more of.

Choreographer Alisa Hauser does a beautiful job with all of the numbers, in particular Agnes De Mille's famous dream ballet that closes out the first act. For that number, 14 dancers from MSU's Orchesis were brought in for the 15-minute scene.

MSU's "Oklahoma!" is well-done and worth seeing if you are willing to engage and challenge the themes and behaviors portrayed and not simply accept them for how they were originally written and presented. It remains a historically important part of musical theater, but not one that stands up well to the test of time.

IF YOU GO

- The Department of Theatre at Michigan State University presents Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma!" Feb.15-24
- Michigan State University's Fairchild Theater.
- Days and show times vary
- Tickets: Wharton Center Box Office, 1-800-WHARTON