

## MSU theater program presents ‘Oklahoma!’

Ken Glickman, For the Lansing State Journal

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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)

I will go out on a limb and say that Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma!" is the most historically important Broadway musical ever written. Wow, what mouthful – but it's true.

And what a perfect musical for the Michigan State University Theater Department to produce this year, the same year that the current game-changer, "Hamilton," comes to Wharton.

Brad Willcuts, director of the show, says, "When we were choosing the shows for this season, I noticed that the last four musicals had been 'Hair,' 'Grease,' 'Urinetown' and 'American Idiot' - all shows with a rock-type sound. We decided that on the educational level, it was time to do a classic show, so we chose 'Oklahoma!'"

"Oklahoma!" which opened in 1943, was the first show written by Rodgers and Hammerstein, the team that would transform musical theater until the mid '60s. It was a blockbuster hit, although it was only on Broadway for five years. Today many shows have been running for 10, 15, 25 years and more.

Before "Oklahoma!" Broadway shows usually opened with a line of high kicking chorus girls with a flashy production number. By contrast, "Oklahoma!" begins on a bare stage with an elderly woman churning butter in the corner. Backstage the main character, Curley, begins singing "Oh What a Beautiful Morning," slowly walking to center stage. It was a revelation.

"Broadway shows were always driven by spectacle," says Willcuts. "This was the first narrative driven piece – the first one to put the story first."

The story had depth, was layered and even had a dark quality, unheard of in musicals of the day. Songs like "Surrey With the Fringe on Top," "Poor Jud is Dead," "I Can't Say No," and "People will Say We're in Love" became a part of American culture. It was the first musical to record an original cast album and win a Pulitzer Prize.

In his book, "Something Wonderful" documenting the Rodgers and Hammerstein collaboration, Todd Purdum says, "Oklahoma!" was much more than a Broadway hit, it was a huge cultural phenomenon."

In a PBS special many years ago, choreographer Agnes DeMille remembers that the show ran during World War II and the last two rows of seats were always held open for any serviceman who was in NY and was being

shipped off to Europe. The show's idealistic portrayal of America and American values often moved the young soldiers to tears.

But does it still speak to modern audiences? "Absolutely!" crows Willcuts. "There are so many things about the story that are relevant today. The peddler Ali Hakim is an outsider but is assimilated in the society, the farmers and the cowmen have to settle their differences, and the darkness of Jud, the violent farm hand, is an important character also."

MSU is treating the show with the respect it deserves. "We have a 16-piece orchestra and are using the Fairchild Theater. We want to honor the legacy," says Willcuts. They have also hired the student run dance company, Orchesis.

Willcuts also mentions that lyricist Hammerstein was a political activist and those sensibilities are very present in the show. "I first did 'Oklahoma!' 17 years ago in summer stock. It's still a present piece of theater. Deep and pure.

"Now, in an academic setting we have the time to dig deeper. That's what's so fun about doing shows here. We deal with modern day immigration and who gets into to the new state of Oklahoma. Current topics of national interest."

Willcuts says, "I'm a sucker for this show. I believe in the power of Rodgers and Hammerstein. The shows can be pure entertainment but also have a very serious perspective. One of my favorite lines is when Aunt Eller says, 'You have to experience the hard to appreciate the light.'

"Also, the connection between Jud and Laurey is interesting. Although he is mean and violent, there is something deeper between them – a hidden desire. Laurey sort of likes Jud." That conflict in Laurey's mind is played out in the famous ballet sequence in the second act.

Compared to the previous shows, "Oklahoma!" demands different skills from the singers. "They must have a legit tone with vibrato and blend with other singers and the chorus. It's not like a rock show. There are some musical comedy nerds in our cast who know the show, but most of the younger people don't know it."

Today, Broadway shows bring in billions of dollars each year. Many feel that it was "Oklahoma!," with its beautifully matched music to lyrics and realistic stories, that created the modern musical as we know it.

## **IF YOU GO**

- The Department of Theatre at Michigan State University presents Rodger 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