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Oklahoma! (Review)

Jersey Productions' version of the classic musical has straightforward momentum

By Rick Pender

Successfully reviving a classic musical can be tough. Such shows can come with a ton of expectations. *Oklahoma!* faces the added challenge of music and a story that are broadly familiar — by modern standards, the 1943 show can feel corny and nostalgic.

Jersey Productions' 2009 summer season has kicked off with a production that avoids clichés and plays to the strengths of the Rodgers and Hammerstein show that actually established a new way to tell stories, using songs and dancing to advance the plot.

Director Jason Bruffy (artistic director at Know Theatre of Cincinnati) has given this spirited *Oklahoma!*

a straightforward momentum, and Liz Vosmeier has reproduced Agnes de Mille's iconic choreography that was an essential attraction of the original hit. Bruffy has enhanced the show by casting African-American actor Ken Early as ill-tempered farmhand Jud, making the role more complex and interesting if not downright sympathetic. Singing "Lonely Room," big-voiced Early makes Jud someone you can understand and still fear.

The love story between Laurey (Courtney Brown), a standoffish tomboy, and stubbornly romantic Curly (Case Dillard) plays out predictably. The chemistry between them is minimal, but both are excellent singers, so their familiar tunes are rendered wonderfully.

Several minor characters have more verve: Leeds Hill, a CCM student with breathtaking dance moves, is Will Parker, and another strong dancer, Lisa LeCuyer, is his flirtatious Ado Annie. Their scenes have an emotional texture that captivates. LeCuyer's comic interaction with Nathan Neorr as Ali Hakim, a scheming peddler with a poor sense of timing, is especially entertaining.

Conductor Kelly Martin uses 16 able musicians to great effect. The balance of sound and voice is well managed, and the singers — especially the Broadway-experienced Dillard — are wonderfully supported.

Oklahoma! can become unwieldy with overdone sets, but not here. Using a few pieces of split-rail fence and a roll-around porch unit, plus a backdrop washed with color to reflect the Oklahoma sky and the emotions that change from scene to scene, is all that's needed.

OKLAHOMA!, presented by Jersey Productions, continues through July 25 at the Aronoff Center's Jarson Kaplan Theatre. Buy tickets, check out performance times and find nearby bars and restaurants [here](#).

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