Written by Mike Schulz
Wednesday, 30 May 2007 02:33

- Buy Autodesk AutoCAD Plant 3D 2014 (64-bit) (en,de,fr,ja)
- Discount - Microsoft Windows 7 Professional with SP1 (32 bit & 64 bit)
- Discount - Lynda.com - After Effects Apprentice 15: Creating a Sports Opening Title
- Download Flash CS4 Professional Bible
- Discount - Adobe Dreamweaver CS6 Student And Teacher Edition MAC
- Discount - Lynda.com - Creating Infographics with Illustrator
- Buy Lynda.com - CSS Positioning Best Practices (en)
- Buy Cheap Rosetta Stone - Learn Filipino (Level 1, 2 Set)
- 49.95$ I.R.I.S. Readiris 12 Pro MAC cheap oem
- Download Nik Software Silver Efex Pro 2 MAC (64-bit)
- Buy OEM Smith Micro Anime Studio Pro 8 MAC
- Discount - Hazel 3

As the director of music theatre performance at Western Michigan University, Jay Berkow is well aware of the historical significance of *Oklahoma!,* which he is currently directing for the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse.

"It is kind of the grandfather, or the progenitor, of the contemporary musical-theatre piece," Berkow says, referencing the work's fame as one of the first "book musicals" in American theatre, wherein songs are fully integrated into the drama, and the lyrics and score are as essential to character understanding as dialogue.

Yet the Pulitzer Prize-winning musical is also considered historic for being the first collaboration between the legendary duo of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein. And for running a then-unprecedented 2,212 Broadway performances. And, not least of all, for marking the Broadway debut of famed choreographer Agnes de Mille; as Berkow states, "*Everyone* talks about the integration of the dance."

Already a noted artist with the American Ballet Theatre and the Ballet Russes de Monte Carlo, de Mille ended Act I with what is commonly referred to as the "dream ballet," a 15-minute piece that dramatizes the psyche of *Oklahoma!*'s lead character, Laurey, and a revolutionary theatrical technique. The ballet sequence - in which Laurey must face her conflicting feelings about her sweetheart, Curly, and the brutish farmhand, Jud - is so demanding that it is often excised from productions altogether, yet when Berkow staged
Oklahoma!
at Vermont's Little Summer Theatre in the early 1990s, he had no intention of cutting it.

Perhaps to his chagrin.

"The first time I directed the show," he says, grinning, "I had this crazy British producer up in Vermont. He was crazy like a
fox
. And I had this very dance-y
ballet. And he watched my ballet rehearsal, and after it," - and here Berkow continues in a parodistically posh British dialect - "he said, ‘It's a
lovely
ballet, Jay.
Lovely
ballet. And I
appreciate
all Agnes de Mille has
done
for
Oklahoma!
and musical theatre.

"‘But,'" Berkow adds, pausing dramatically, "‘*couldn't* you just tell a *story*?'"

For the past three decades, Berkow has devoted his career to telling stories on stage. *Oklahoma!* 's director appeared in Broadway productions of *A Chorus Line, Evita,* and *La Cage aux Folles* , has directed at regional theatres across the country, and has written four full-length musicals, two straight plays, and what he describes (in what I assume is a slight exaggeration) as "millions of children's shows. Literally *millions* ."

Locally, however, Berkow is probably best-known for his involvement with the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre, where he was a much-admired performer, director, and choreographer, and where he served as the summer-stock organization's artistic director from 1998 to 2006 - "nine seasons, 47 shows," he says.

As one might imagine, Berkow's theatrical career has enabled him to be well-acquainted with the Rodgers & Hammerstein *oeuvre* - their famous collaborations include *Carousel, The King & I, South Pacific,* and *The Sound of Music* - and the director does consider himself a fan, not just of the duo's scores, but of the stories these musicals tell.

"The librettos are really quite good," says Berkow, "and the characters all have believable *reasons* for doing everything they need to do. And sometimes, you see these kind of ‘museum productions' of R&H musicals, and they [directors] don't take the time to really flesh out the characters and the relationships. ... They just kind of find a way to paste it together, musical number to musical number."

Considering most audiences' acquaintance with Rodgers & Hammerstein's credits, it might be understandable that directors sometimes take such shortcuts. But as Berkow himself proved when directing the Showboat's *Sound of Music* in 2005 - a deeply re-imagined production that put an unexpectedly fresh spin on the material - familiar works can become wonderfully *un* familiar when approached with empathy, and a grounding in reality.

"You just take a little *time* with Maria," Berkow says of *The Sound of Music*'s singing-novice character, "and you realize, ‘Oh, she's a real *person*.' She's kind of like this teenager raised by wolves on the mountain - she has no clue, and she's *winging* it. And all of a sudden that character becomes very *real*.

"Same with with Laurey and Curly in *Oklahoma!,*" he continues. "They're these very headstrong people who hardly ever see each other. He's a cowboy, he's out on the range, and she sees him once every two, three months, just for a weekend. And then he's back out on the range. So they have a very short time to kind of get their relationship to the next level."

Despite the inarguable tunefulness of *Oklahoma!*'s score, Berkow states that his fondness for the show truly stems from an understanding of the characters' hardships.

"For me," he says, "what really makes the piece work so beautifully is the original play on which it's based, Lynn Riggs' [1931] play *Green Grow the Lilacs*. It's a well-written, human straight play about life in Oklahoma territory in 1907. And if you've ever read the play, Oscar Hammerstein really lifted verbatim 75 percent of it.

"I want there to be a *reality*," Berkow says of his approach to the musical. "That doesn't mean that Ado Annie and Will and Ali Hakim and the comic characters aren't going to be somewhat extreme and funny, but the whole show needs to look like this is really *happening* to these people. I want the audience to get a sense of what it was like to *live* in Oklahoma in 1907.

"Like, why is the barn dance so important? The barn dance is important because the women and the men don't see each other very much ... . They don't see each other every day or even every *week*. They're all very spread out over acres and acres and miles and miles of untamed land. And they're all trying to tame their little *part* of it."

Berkow adds that the heart of *Oklahoma!* is "this love story between Laurey and Curly set against this very real, very *harsh* environment." Yet the audience won't glean that unless they accept these seemingly stereotypical characters as actual *people*.

"I mean, what's the *challenge* of Laurey and Curly?" Berkow asks. "They love each other before the show begins, so why does it take them two hours to get *together*?"

The key to understanding the romantic leads as a *couple*, Berkow suggests, is understanding them as individuals.

Laurey, says *Oklahoma!*'s director, is "a very grounded, solid farm woman ... the kind of girl who, if a guy says, ‘When I take ya out in the surrey ... !' and starts acting out, she's just gonna *laugh* at him. She's gonna go, ‘This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.'

"You know, it's very much like some guy saying, ‘I just got this new *Corvette* and we're gonna go for a *hot ride* tonight,' and Laurey saying, ‘Okay. Yeah. You rented a Corvette for our date. Terrific.'"

As for Curly, "the reality is he's this cocksure, conceited cowboy," says Berkow. "You know ... ‘Come up on my horse and tell me I'm hot and tell me I'm the stud ... !' And she's like, ‘Get *off* the horse and pick up a *shovel*.'

"Yeah, they love each other, they're sexually attracted to each other," he continues, "but how are they actually gonna *be* together? How do they work it out? There 's a lot of practicality involved, and so for me, that's what makes the story exciting."

The director insists, though, that the emotional reality he hopes to convey shouldn't frighten off those merely hoping for an entertaining night at the theatre. "It's still gonna be the *Oklahoma!* th at they love," says Berkow. "You know, those people that say, ‘Oh, *Oklahoma!* 's playing? I wanna go see it - I've seen it three times. I love it.' It's not like we're taking *Oklahoma!* and dissecting it so much that they're gonna be, like, ‘ *This* isn't *Oklahoma* ... !'"

But the chance to direct a more truthful production of this musical warhorse was, for Berkow, its chief selling point. "Luckily for me," he says, "I'm at a point in my career where if it's a show I don't really *feel* anything for, I don't do it. You know, I'm not a 25-year-old director, and I have a full-time job."

And what of *Oklahoma!*'s signature dream ballet, the one that - in Berkow's initial stab at the material - found itself in need of a story?

"It's this odd little moment in the show," says Berkow of Laurey's reverie. "It's not like she's trying to decide whether she wants Curly or Jud - she doesn't want *Jud*. She wants *Curly*. But does she want Curly the way he *is* , or does she want him to *change* ?

"And she's got to find a man," adds the director. "This is Oklahoma territory. It's not like, ‘Well, I think I'll go to college ... .' No. Her future is *set.* She owns this land, she owns this farm, she has to find a man to marry her and come work the land with her. And she has to find the *right* guy; whether she loves Curly or not, if he can't stop being this stud-muffin cowboy and come be a farmer with her, then he's *not* gonna be the right guy.

"So the story that's being told is kind of her *fear* of what's gonna happen with Curly - that Jud's gonna get in there and Curly's gonna be macho and it's gonna end up in tragedy."

Berkow smiles, reiterating - *sans* British accent - the words of his former Vermont producer. "It's really about making sure that story gets told."

Circa '21 will produce Oklahoma! *May 30 through July 21. For tickets and more information, visit (http://www.circa21.com).*

(***Full Disclosure:*** *Circa '21's Jan Schmall and I co-created and scripted the* Oklahoma! *pre-show entertainment being performed by the theatre's wait staff, the Bootleggers, and the* Reader *'s director of marketing, Lars Rehnberg, produced the instrumental tracks for the pre-show's CD accompaniment. But don't consider this article a* de facto *endorsement of either the Bootleggers' show or* Oklahoma! *itself; Lars and I haven't attended any rehearsals, and won't see the results until opening night.)*