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I'm tempted to say that the high point of the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's *Oklahoma!* comes in the show's first minute, when Adam Clough's Curly enters singing "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" in a thrillingly rich, powerful baritone. Such a statement, however, might indicate that the rest of the actor's performance is somehow *less* of a thrill. Put simply - and with no disrespect meant to director Jay Berkow or the show's other participants - this *Oklahoma!* works *because* of Clough.

An engagingly naturalistic performer with sharp comic instincts, Clough completely sells Curly's big-hearted ebullience and charming egocentrism, and from his opening seconds of stage time, displays knockout confidence and charisma. He's so ceaselessly in character that your eye is consistently drawn to him, and the emotionalism of his readings frequently catches you off-guard; Clough's wounded grace as Curly auctions off his possessions makes this scene more forceful, and more touching, than I've ever seen it before. (And that's having seen *many* previous *Oklahoma!*s.)

It's what Clough does vocally, though, that provides *Oklahoma!*'s soul. His rendition of those timeless Rodgers & Hammerstein numbers is thoroughly spectacular, but what's almost more inspiring is Clough's vocal *control*;

the actor's clever deliveries (in song
and
speech) not only provide emotional context, but go a long way toward elucidating the show's
plot
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Cristina Sass, who plays Curly's beloved, Laurey, gives a marvelously down-to-earth, wholly believable take on this traditional ingénue, a tough cookie with a happily sardonic sense of humor. (The actress' first appearance here is a delightful shock, as Berkow opens the show with the routinely prim and pretty Laurey determinedly chopping wood. In *overalls*.) Yet Sass' spirited interpretation could easily lead to storyline confusion: Why would this smart, self-possessed young woman so readily fall for Curly's macho blarney?

Because of that *voice*, that's why. The leads' loving relationship is made clear in the playfulness of their repartee, but its *depth* is revealed in the soothing hush of Clough's vocals; when, slowly and softly, he cradles Sass in his arms while singing "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top," you understand that this excitable cowboy offers Laurey the only solace she'd ever want or need. (Clough's baritone implies, "You're
safe
with me.")

Yet Clough's vocal command is so assured that he's also able to come off as deeply insinuating, and even a little scary. During Curly's first confrontation with Jud (Doug Neville), the actor's intimidating low notes on "Pore Jud is Dead" - a *de facto* argument for the character's suicide - make the lyrics sound like a directive from God himself, and
whenever

these antagonists face off, Neville's subdued malevolence finds its perfect counterpart in Clough's fathoms-deep timbre. You can understand Jud hating Curly for the measured sureness of his tones
alone
. (Cannily, Clough also uses his baritone for comedic effect - whenever Curly is surprised or overwhelmed, his pitch pops about two octaves higher than usual.) The voice is, of course, one of the chief instruments for an actor. Clough's instrument hits so many notes that the results are nearly symphonic.

Clough, however, is hardly the entire show, as this *Oklahoma!* features a host of wonderful performances. In addition to Sass (whose singing is as breathtakingly lovely as her portrayal is astute) and Neville (with his underplayed intensity and impassioned vocals), Autumn O'Ryan is an endearing Aunt Eller - satisfyingly comedic without sacrificing truthfulness - and Don Hepner is a grouchy riot as the shotgun-toting Andrew Carnes.

Meanwhile, Kimberly Furness' Ado Annie reveals this tirelessly inventive actress' talent for playing dumber than dirt; Furness, with her dazzlingly genial grin, convinces you that there's nothing in Annie's mind but whatever thought is currently tumbling out of her mouth (if that).

If only Furness weren't having to *work* so hard. Most of her scenes, though, are played opposite Shane Partlow's Will Parker and Tom Walljasper's Ali Hakim, and neither actor appears to be in the same show as Furness ... or the *rest* of the cast, for that matter. Partlow sings splendidly and, on opening night, his lasso tricks received deserved applause. (Not for nothing has he appeared in 22 productions of
The Will Rogers Follies

.) But he has an unfortunate habit of delivering his laugh lines face-front to the audience, breaking the rhythm of his scenes, and Walljasper too often feels equally synthetic, his "Persian" hustler a compendium of comic tics with no real payoff. (He's also stuck with a terrible number - usually cut from productions for
really
good reason - that would only make sense if Walljasper dropped Hakin's
faux
accent and performed it straight, which he doesn't.)
Oklahoma!
's other ensemble members appear grounded in the show's reality, but Partlow and Walljasper don't seem connected to the others
or
to the show's reality; I felt they would've given the exact same performances regardless of whether anyone else was on stage
with
them.

Despite the excellent costuming by Greg Hiatt, this *Oklahoma!* isn't quite as grand as you might hope it'll be; the musical tracks are effective without being enthralling - songs tend to climax with a whimper instead of a bang - and the choreography, though well-performed, isn't particularly demanding.

Plus, Berkow's re-imagined dream ballet, eschewing Agnes de Mille-style choreography, is a major disappointment; barring some slow motion and the output of a smoke machine, this sequence doesn't feel different from any *other* scene in the show, and its meaning gets lost. It feels as though someone merely spiked the hoedown punch.

But there's enough grandeur in the portrayals of Sass, Neville, and especially Clough to make up for its absence elsewhere, and for fellow audience members who feel they know this musical verbatim, the chance to see these familiar characters brought to life with such imagination and wit creates its own *kind* of grandeur. Circa '21's *Oklahoma!* may, on occasion, feel smaller than you remember it being, but the impact of these performances is nothing short of enormous.

For tickets, call (309) 786-7733 extension 2.