

## Plainsong: "Oklahoma!," at North Scott High School through June 27

Written by Jill Walsh  
Monday, 21 June 2010 06:00

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In 1943, Rodgers & Hammerstein wrote *Oklahoma!*, and consequently created a new genre of theatre that combined elements of drama with vocals and a musical score. Nearly 70 years later, for the first time, I saw the musical performed on stage, in a production by Countryside Community Theatre. I expected antiquity, but instead found the songs inspiring, the relationships (relatively) fresh, and the dialogue surprisingly funny. While Countryside's interpretation of the production incorporates performers of widely varying ages and experience levels - a few of the younger performers were hard to hear at the Thursday-night preview - the show is an example of community theatre at its finest.

*Oklahoma!*'s plotline is fairly simple: The young cowherd, Curly (James Daniel Pepper), courts the beautiful blond Laurey (Heather Herkelman) and is only briefly deterred from winning her affections by minor conflicts, including her own hesitation. Foil characters Ado Annie (Christine Goodall), Will Parker (Daniel Kuttler), and traveling salesman Ali Hakim (Eric Reyes) provide the sexually charged humor as they banter about marriage; Jud Fry (Matt Mercer), who silently pines after Laurey, is the ultimate misunderstood antagonist.

Scattered amongst the peppy dialogue are recognizable and uplifting songs: "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top," "People Will Say We're in Love," "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'," and of course, "Oklahoma!" I also enjoyed Ado Annie's "I Cain't Say No" and Laurey's "Many a New Day," although I had to strain to hear a few of the songs - particularly "Kansas City" and "All Er Nuthin'" - because, in terms of volume, the performers weren't able to compete with the orchestra.



I was, however, pleasantly surprised by the inclusion of a complex "villain" character, Jud, in

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this feel-good show; his "Lonely Room" lament was just as heart-wrenching and memorable as that of "Javert's Death" in *Les Misérables*. Mercer was very convincing as this soft-spoken farmhand whose passive devotion to Laurey reaches a level of menacing obsession at its climax, and he advantageously used his impressive height to dominate scenes; there were times when I felt downright scared of his character, and I was sitting about 12 rows back from the stage.

Herkelman created a poised and radiant Laurey, whose infectious positivity and sun-kissed appearance made her the clear choice for the town sweetheart. Vocally and physically confident, she made it hard for me to pay attention to the other performers when she was on-stage. Pepper also had a truly captivating voice; I particularly enjoyed his humorous interpretation of "Jud is Daid."

The show's technical elements also deserve accolades, including the vibrant costumes by Peggy Freeman and the set by Tom Goodall. The painted backdrop evoked Grant Wood's wind-swept rural landscapes, and the movable set pieces were just as detailed, down to the "French pictures" that were hung slightly (and appropriately) askew on Jud's walls.

Freeman's gowns for Laurey, meanwhile, were absolutely stunning. If I were about five inches shorter (okay, and 20 pounds lighter), I'd ask to buy them for myself to wear after the run of the show.



My only true lament with the production, directed by Wayne Hess, was the choice to use clown masks during the "Dream Ballet." Not only did the masks hide the necessary facial expressions of the performers, they also made things a bit confusing for the audience; since "stand-in" actors were employed to portray Curly and Jud, it was initially unclear who the masked characters were supposed to represent, or why the actual participants in the foreshadowed drama weren't the ones allowed to act it out.

Countryside Community Theatre's *Oklahoma!* is another excellent musical offering in local summer theatre. Sure, it's been performed on national stages for nearly 70 years, but that's a

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testament to Rodgers & Hammerstein's abilities to write situations and characters that are still relatable to American audiences. And the songs sure aren't easy to forget, either.

*For tickets and information, call (563)285-6228 or visit [CCTOnStage](#).*