

A lively time out West in Oklamoma!

Although Elsie Rendell chose “Oklahoma” as her farewell production for the East Surrey Operatic Society, illness unfortunately prevented her from completing the show. However, the discovery of Rex Baines, a well-known producer who himself played the lead in the first amateur showing of “Oklahoma” at the Scala Theatre, led to a take-over in production by which the East Surrey’s show did not suffer. With Christopher Slater as Musical Director and Shirley Knight as Choreographer and Ballet Mistress, a high standard of achievement was reached in both fields which went a long way towards creating the atmosphere of vigour and excitement necessary to this pioneering story set at the beginning of the century. The orchestra gave excellent support.

The main story concerns the eternal triangle; in this instance, the cowboy Curly; his contrary girl friend, Laurey (who owns a farm and lives with her elderly Aunt Eller); and the morose, ill-adjusted hired hand, Jud, whose obsession for Laurey leads him to dark deeds.

There were several new faces among the cast, notably David Slater as Curly. He brought a likeable personality to the role and moved in convincing cowboy style. Musically his tone was better in the higher range of his songs, but he sang throughout with intelligence, feeling, and good rhythm. Barbara Lee brought out effectively the pert contrariness of Laurey’s character. She moved with assurance, and sang the romantic numbers with sincerity. Her dialogue timing was particularly good.

The powerful stage presence of Fred Harrison was shown to advantage in the nasty role of Jud. He conveyed well the man’s dangerous brooding, but also evoked unwittingly pity by his singing of “Lonely Room”, Pat Felstead was a lively, kindly Aunt Ella; a little young and spry perhaps, and lacking the wryness which the dialogue suggests, but a competent performance.

Humour was of a high order. Gillian Jarvis as Ado Annie, the girl who “Cain’t say No.” played the part with a deep, Southern accent which, though inappropriately match with that of her father, was nevertheless very amusing. It was definitely “out of sight out of mind” with Annie, and the return of her boyfriend, Will Parker, from a visit to Kansas City upset her romance with the pedlar, Ali Hakim. A delightful performance.

Repeating his original role in the 1958 presentation of this show, Malcolm Howe played Ali Hakim, the Persian pedlar trying to avoid matrimony. Starting quietly, he built the role well to its highlight a shotgun wedding to Gertie Cummings. A smoothly handled, perfectly timed performance. Leonard Headde was a competent Will Parker and Phil Felstead had a real romp as Andrew Carnes, Ado Annie’s father. A hilarious capering performance, very much in the style of Moore Marriott. Smaller roles well taken were Ike Skidmore (John Fallon); Cord Elam (John Rapley) and Diana Silverton who played Gertie the girl with the irritating laugh

Although the opening scene of the play was rather flat and the chorus grouping unoriginal, staging really came alive with "Out of My Dreams", sung by Laurey and the girls, and followed by the Ballet (in which Diana Kevan danced the part of Laurey with grace and dramatic impact). Grouping and lighting was most effective throughout the remainder of the show culminating in the "Oklahoma" chorus. The final scene with Jud's attack on Curly, his own untimely death, and the subsequent trial, .was a little rushed, but this is a small criticism in what was on the whole a most enjoyable entertainment.

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