

[Back to Ray Luo's Reviews](#)

Oklahoma!



You wouldn't want to be caught sneaking a peak at an old classic 1943 musical about the lives of some cowboys and farmers in Oklahoma back when Oklahoma was still a territory, would you? Then don't tell anybody about the great songs sung by Curly to his intended, Laurey, including the episodic "The Surrey with the Fringe on the Top." Don't mention the comedic shuffles of the peddler Ali Hakim, who gets in over his head courting the already engaged Ado Annie. Make sure no one knows about Agnes DeMille's brilliantly choreographed dream ballet sequence, and shut up all the rumors about the great performances led by Sam Zeller's psychotic yet sympathetic workman Jud Fry. Otherwise, people will say you're spending too much time in Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma!" thanks to the Civic Light Opera of South Bay Cities and director Stephanie A. Coltrin.

The first musical produced by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, "Oklahoma!" takes place in the territorial town of Claremore, where dashing Curly McLain (Damon Kirsche) is pursuing beautiful Laurey Williams (Sarah Bermudez). Thinking that Curly is being fresh with her in claiming to possess a new buggy, Laurey accepts the offer of farmhand Jud Fry (Sam Zeller) to take her to the dance. Curly settles for the hilarious Aunt Eller, Laurey's ward, and confronts Jud over the competition for Laurey. In the auction that takes place at the dance, Curly and Jud fight over the highest bid for a lunch made by Laurey, and the winner eventually marries her.

First performed during World War II, "Oklahoma!" was written to give the American people a way to escape the difficult times. Besides singing cowboys, one way to escape is to provide a few laughs. Ali Hakim (Nathan Holland) is a comical "Persian" peddler who keeps getting into trouble with girls he seduced who want him to marry them. In one case, Ali becomes the dad's favorite to wed Ado Annie Carnes (Annie V. Ramsey), who is already engaged to Will Parker (Karl Warden), if and when he comes up with \$50. In one hilarious episode, Ali has to outbid Will in order for him to retain the \$50 that he needs to wed Ado Annie. Later, Ali gives Ado Annie the "Persian goodbye" in front of Will; and of course, one good kiss deserves another. Holland's performance is simple, but enormously entertaining. Everything from his plaid suit to his raspy voice resonates humor. Ali's craftiness and Will's stupidity make for an ironic and contrasting sidelight to the main story.




Ado Annie's song "I Cain't Say No" illustrates one of the ways in which the songs in "Oklahoma!" are integrated into the story instead of being solo show pieces. In "I Cain't Say No," we learn why Ado Annie has taken up with the peddler, because she hilariously can't stop doing whatever is asked of her. Similarly, in the famous second song "The Surrey with the Fringe on the Top," Curly narrates the basic plot of the first act by claiming to possess the titular buggy, which leads to a reprimand from Laurey. Even character development occurs within a song, such as when Curly imagines what it would be like at Jud's funeral if he killed himself in the dark-toned song "Pore Jud." In the Wagnerian tradition, "Oklahoma!" is one of the first musicals to use recurrent songs and musical motifs with the goal of advancing a dramatic plot.

Another song that drives the story is the duet sung by Laurey and Curly when they are alone for the first time in the musical. "I know a way to prove what they say is quite untrue," sings Laurey in the piece "People Will Say We're in Love." Apparently, the way to solve this problem includes "don't please my folks too much,"

"don't laugh at my jokes too much," "don't praise my charms too much," and "don't look so vain with me." These paradoxical statements tell the story of how Curly and Laurey flirt with each other: by claiming not to love each other when they really do. Damon Kirsche is especially engaging when it is his turn to sing "People Will Say We're in Love" as Curly. He delivers the lines quickly as opposed to the movie production of "Oklahoma!," making the song sound more melodic. He also gives a charming performance during the flirtations with Laurey and in the climactic bids to get her lunch away from Jud. In that scene, Kirsche shows much bravado as he pawns first his saddle, then his horse, and finally his gun, his only instrument of defense.

Stephanie Coltrin's direction of the original Agnes DeMille ballet dream sequence is perhaps more dramatic than melodic. The transitions from sleep to dream are seamless, but the fighting between the actors who is not Curly playing the role of Curly and the actual actor playing Jud is not especially convincing. Throughout, the music and singing are rendered beautifully. The faster pace set by the time limit makes "Oklahoma!" easy to enjoy, and easy on the ears. Now, you wouldn't mind being caught sneaking a peak at the first Rodgers and Hammerstein classic.

"Oklahoma!" is produced by the Civic Light Opera of South Bay Cities (www.civiclighthouse.com), and runs at the Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center until October 4.

 <p>Oklahoma! Gordon MacRae, Glo... Best Price \$13.33 or Buy New \$19.99 Buy from amazon.com Privacy Information</p>	 <p>Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma! ... Hugh Jackman, Jose... Best Price \$13.85 or Buy New \$19.99 Buy from amazon.com Privacy Information</p>	 <p>Carousel Gordon MacRae, Shi... Best Price \$9.97 or Buy New \$20.49 Buy from amazon.com Privacy Information</p>
--	--	--