



CRITIC'S PICK

Review: A Smashing ‘Oklahoma!’ Is Reborn in the Land of Id

Oklahoma! | NYT Critic's Pick | Broadway, Musical | 2 hrs. and 45 min | Closing Date: Sept. 1, 2019
Circle in the Square, 235 W 50th St. | 212-239-6200

By **Ben Brantley**

April 7, 2019

How is it that the coolest new show on Broadway in 2019 is a 1943 musical usually regarded as a very square slice of American pie? The answer arrives before the first song is over in Daniel Fish’s wide-awake, jolting and altogether wonderful production of “Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Oklahoma!,” which opened on Sunday night at the Circle in the Square Theater.

“Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’” is the title and the opening line of this familiar number, a paean to a land of promisingly blue skies and open spaces. But Curly, the cowboy who sings it, isn’t cushioned by the expected lush orchestrations. Nor is the actor playing him your usual solid slab of beefcake with a strapping tenor.

As embodied by the excellent Damon Daunno, this lad of the prairies is wiry and wired, so full of unchanneled sexual energy you expect him to implode. There’s the hint of a wobble in his cocky strut and voice.

Doing his best to project a confidence he doesn’t entirely feel, to the

accompaniment of a down-home guitar, he seems so palpably young. As is often true of big boys with unsettled hormones, he also reads as just a little dangerous.

He's a lot like the feisty, ever-evolving nation he's so proud to belong to. That would be the United States of America, then and now.

Making his Broadway debut as a director, Mr. Fish has reconceived a work often seen as a byword for can-do optimism as a mirror for our age of doubt and anxiety. This is "Oklahoma!" for an era in which longstanding American legacies are being examined with newly skeptical eyes.

Such a metamorphosis has been realized with scarcely a changed word of Oscar Hammerstein II's original book and lyrics. This isn't an act of plunder, but of reclamation. And a cozy old friend starts to seem like a figure of disturbing — and exciting — depth and complexity.

Mr. Fish's version isn't the first "Oklahoma!" to elicit the shadows from within the play's sunshine. Trevor Nunn and Susan Stroman's interpretation for London's National Theater of nearly two decades ago, while more traditionally staged, also scaled up the disquieting erotic elements.

But this latest incarnation goes much further in digging to a core of fraught ambivalence. To do so, it strips "Oklahoma!" down to its skivvies, discarding the picturesque costumes and swirling orchestrations, and revealing a very human body that belongs to our conflicted present as much as it did to 1943 or to 1906, the year in which the show (based on Lynn Riggs's "Green Grow the Lilacs") takes place.

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Laura Jellinek's set suggests a small-town community center that might double as a polling station, decorated with festive banners, colored lights — and a full arsenal of guns on the walls. It's made clear that we the audience are part of this

community. The house lights stay on for much of the show, in a homogenizing brightness, that is occasionally and abruptly changed for pitch darkness. (Scott Zielinski is the first-rate lighting designer.)

There's chili cooking on the refectory tables onstage, for the audience's consumption at intermission. A seven-member hootenanny-style band sits in plain view. The well-known melodies they play have been reimagined — by the brilliant orchestrator and arranger Daniel Kluger — with the vernacular throb and straightforwardness of country and western ballads.

The cast members — wearing a lot of good old, form-fitting denim (Terese Wadden did the costumes) — are just plain folks. Singing with conversational ease, they occasionally flirt and joke with the audience seated on either side of the stage. We are all, it would appear, in this together.



Foreground from left: Ali Stroker, Will Brill and James Davis in “Oklahoma!,” which aims to make the audience feel like it’s part of the same community as the performers.

Though the cast has been whittled down to 11 speaking parts (and one dancer), the key characters are very much present. They include our scrapping leading lovers, Curly McLain and Laurey Williams (Rebecca Naomi Jones); their comic counterparts, Will Parker (James Davis) and Ado Annie (Ali Stroker); that bastion of homespun wisdom and stoicism, Aunt Eller (Mary Testa) and the womanizing peddler Ali Hakim (Will Brill).

Oh, I almost forgot poor old Jud Fry (Patrick Vaill), the slightly, well, weird handyman who's sweet, in a sour way, on Laurey. Everybody forgets Jud, or tries to. Not that this is possible, with Mr. Vaill lending a charismatic, hungry loneliness to the part that's guaranteed to haunt your nightmares.

These people — in some cases nontraditionally yet always perfectly cast — intersect much as they usually do in "Oklahoma!" They court and spark, fight and reunite. They also show off by picking up guitars and microphones and dancing like prairie bacchantes. (John Heginbotham did the spontaneous-feeling choreography.) They use household chores, like shucking corn, to memorably annotative effect.

Ms. Stroker's boy-crazy, country siren-voiced Ado Annie, who rides a wheelchair as if it were a prize bronco, and Mr. Davis's deliciously dumb Will emanate a blissful endorphin haze. Mr. Brill is a refreshingly unmannered Ali Hakim, and Ms. Testa is a splendid, wryly authoritative Aunt Eller.

But there's an abiding tension. This is especially evident in Ms. Jones's affectingly wary Laurey, who regards her very different suitors, Curly and Jud, with a confused combination of desire and terror.

That her fears are not misplaced becomes clear in an encounter in Jud's dank hovel of a home. Curly sings "Pore Jud," in which he teasingly imagines his

rival's funeral with an ominous breathiness

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The scene occurs in darkness, with a simulcast video in black and white of the two men face to face. (Joshua Thorson did the projection design.) And the lines between sex and violence, already blurred in this gun-toting universe, melt altogether.

I first saw Mr. Fish's "Oklahoma!" at Bard College in 2015, and again at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn last year. It was an exciting work from the get-go, but it just keeps getting better. The performances are looser and bigger; they're Broadway-size now, with all the infectious exuberance you expect from a great musical.

At the same time, though, this production reminds us that such raw energy can be harnessed to different ends, for ill as well as for good. In the earlier versions, I had problems with its truly shocking conclusion — the scene that takes the most liberties with the original. In its carefully retooled rendering, it's disturbing for all the right reasons.

The other significant change here involves the dream ballet, which in this version begins the second act and has been newly varied and paced. It is performed by one dancer (the exquisite Gabrielle Hamilton) with a shaved head and a glittering T-shirt that reads "Dream Baby Dream."

What she does is a far cry from the same sequence as immortalized by Agnes de Mille, the show's legendary original choreographer. But on its own, radically reconceptualized terms, it achieves the same effect.

As she gallops, slithers and crawls the length of the stage, casting wondering and seductive glances at the front row, Ms. Hamilton comes to seem like undiluted id incarnate, a force that has always been rippling beneath the surface here.

She's as stimulating and frightening — and as fresh — as last night's fever dream. So is this astonishing show.

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Oklahoma! NYT Critic's Pick

Circle in the Square

235 W 50th St.
Midtown West
212-239-6200

Category Broadway, Musical

Runtime 2 hrs. and 45 min

Credits Music by Richard Rodgers; Book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II; Based on the play "Green Grow the Lilacs" by Lynn Riggs; Original choreography by Agnes de Mille; New music arrangements by Daniel Kluger; Choreography by John Heginbotham; Directed by Daniel Fish

Cast Will Brill, Anthony Cason, Damon Daunno, James Davis, Gabrielle Hamilton, Rebecca Naomi Jones, Will Mann, Mallory Portnoy, Ali Stroker, Mitch Tebo and Mary Testa

Preview March 19, 2019

Opened April 7, 2019

Closing Sept. 1, 2019

Upcoming Shows

Tuesday	April 9	7:00 pm
Wednesday	April 10	2:00 pm
Wednesday	April 10	8:00 pm
Thursday	April 11	7:00 pm
Friday	April 12	8:00 pm

This information was last updated on April 8, 2019

A version of this article appears in print on April 8, 2019, on Page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: An American Classic for an Anxious Age

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