

Tate's classic Oklahoma! certainly packs a punch

**Geoffrey Mogridge reviews
Ilkley Amateur Operatic Society's
production of
OKLAHOMA!
at the King's Hall**

Today's audiences expect realism and Jonathan Tate's production of this Rodgers & Hammerstein classic undoubtedly packs a punch. This is after all the Wild West in the days of the early pioneers - a tough masculine world far removed from the picture book settings evoked by Richard Rodgers' gorgeous and tuneful score.

But we can largely forget about sexual politics and - some strikingly realistic fight scenes aside - bask in the warm glow generated by this sunlit production. It is sumptuously costumed and the stage is extended into the auditorium to give a greater sense of immediacy as well extra space for Avril Ashworth's dazzling choreography of the big song and dance numbers such as Kansas City, The Farmer and the Cowman and the rip-roaring Oklahoma! chorus. These rousing numbers fill the stage and lift the roof, thanks to the dynamic musical direction of Judith Idle.

Their impact is as crucial to the success of this or any other production of Oklahoma! as the strength of its principal performers. Ilkley have assembled an impressive cast who look good, move well and have great voices. Ben Walton is an ardent and appealing Curly whose pleasing tenor is well matched by Nicola Sloan's sweet-voiced Laurey. Dressed in dungarees for the first act this Laurey is tough cookie and not only when repelling the advances of that sad outsider, Jud Fry. A muscular portrayal and powerful vocal performance from Robin Reid. His duet with Curly "Poor Judge is Dead" is one of the show's highlights.

Danny Condren shines as a nimble tap dancing Will Parker and Dannie Greaves gives a delightful performance as his scatty partner Ado Annie. There is some nicely judged comedy from Mike Smith as Ali Hakim and Michele Turner as the hysterically laughing Gertie Cummings. Casting her own no-nonsense maternalism as the story unfolds is Aunt Eller, a commanding performance from Mollie Williams.

Interesting cameos include Tim Ratcliffe as Andrew Carnes, Malcolm Atkinson as Ike Skidmore and Andrew Walbank as Cord Elam. Alex Ashworth dances the role of Laurey in the subtly-lit, evocative Dream Ballet. The IAOS Chorus is in splendid voice, orchestral backing is robust and the balance between band and stage is generally very good.

Andrew Walbank's scenic design and Pam Clarke's lovely costumes set the seal on another fine IAOS production.