

This 'Oklahoma' has a high-gloss polish



Reviewed by Robert Beumont

THE strange thing is that it seems only yesterday that as a bright young actor I queued in the gathering dawn by the blackened walls of Drury Lane Theatre to get a ticket for the gallery.

The year was 1947, it was winter, and the show which provoked such incredible enthusiasm was *Oklahoma!* That first night was one of the most exciting I can remember.

Of course we had heard of it as a most unusual musical and the theatrical "travellers" had, therefore, reported some impression who had been to New York describing the huge open stage as the "natural" free stage since a change of direction was possible at any moment.

But the critical impact of the show was not in the theatre. It was in the public mind. All those who had seen it were unanimous in their praise. There is a large class of people who are not usually concerned with the theatre but who are interested in the social and political aspects of the life of a nation.

Very sweet

At the time Anne James had just returned from America and had been in the theatre for a few days. She was a very sweet girl and had a very good voice. She was a very good actress and had a very good sense of timing.

But the start-up of being unemployed was not the worst. It was the fact that she was not allowed to see the show. She was not allowed to see the show because she was not allowed to see the show.

At the moment I was in the theatre and I was very happy. I was very happy because I was in the theatre and I was very happy.

of chorus

of chorus



The show DIDN'T go on!
By NATION reporter

It was a very good show and I was very happy. I was very happy because I was in the theatre and I was very happy.

of chorus

of chorus

ILLNESS HITS OKLAHOMA!

LAST night's performance of *Oklahoma!* at the Royal Opera House, London, was a very good one. The show was very good and I was very happy.

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of chorus

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MUSICAL VISUALLY VIVID

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of chorus

of chorus



The show goes on — in little more than 24 hours since Anne James returned here with Bill Godwin, stepped into the leading role of Laurey in the National City Players' production of *Oklahoma!* after Anne James had been taken on the casting list, having broken her arm in the first scene during the show on the first night by a fall while carrying a tray with the arms in plaster and a cast.

But I take Reg's word for it — and the word of a great many other people I have bumped into this week. When reading this Anne James went

of chorus

of chorus

of chorus

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The year was 1947, it was winter, and the show which provoked such incredible enthusiasm was *Oklahoma!* That first night was one of the most exciting I can remember.

Of course, we had heard it was a most unusual musical; and the theatrical fraternity had first-hand reports from colleagues who had been to New York describing the bare open stage as the curtain rose—not even a chorus of gartered Western floozies!—and the strange, striding dances of Agnes de Mille's conception.

But the initial impact of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* seems always to have been that rise of the curtain, with Aunt Eller a-settin' there, all alone on an open stage against a prairie background, and then the unaccompanied voice offstage singing "There's a bright golden haze on the meadow..." coming nearer—and then, on to the stage, with a swelling of music from the orchestra pit, comes the hero singing one of the hit numbers.

What sort of an opening was this for a musical? Where was the opening chorus and the line of girls boop-boop-a-dooping? When the show opened out-of-town in America, critics predicted a flop.

"No gags, no girls — no chance" they said. But the originality, the incredible vitality, and the tuneful score of Richard Rodgers proved the prophets wrong — by, so far, twenty-one years!

Hardly surprising

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the show's arrival in Nairobi — although two decades late — caused considerable speculation and anticipation. The National Theatre was full to overflowing, the audience was "dressed to the nines," and the atmosphere was electric.

It says a great deal for the Nairobi City Players that so exaggerated an expectancy was not let down.

Robert Young's production of *Oklahoma!* is very good indeed, and far surpasses such record-breakers as *South Pacific* and *Annie*. It is a compact production, with a disciplined shaping, finished off with...

...of the most notable features of it is the dancing—more correctly, I should say "modern ballet." For this *Anna Craddock* takes a goodly slice of the production's credit.

Her work is imaginative, and, at times, remarkably ingenious. The light between Curly and Jud in the Dream Sequence ballet was particularly good, and excellently carried out by Mel McCaw and Jeremy Hudes.

As far as individual performances were concerned, although the general standard was high, there was a certain imbalance. Striding, roaring, firing-off pistols and generally completely dominating the whole proceedings was Dorothy Patience as Aunt Eller.

When she bore down on whirling cowboys with the

determination of a Marjorie Main riding a dragon into battle, what could the poor tough guys do but submit?

Superb as this performance was, it inclined to overshadow the story being worked out between Curly, his girl Laury, and the nasty Jud Fry.

Alex Ross brings to the part of Curly a very fine singing voice which he knows exactly how to use. But for the hero, his acting performance — although pleasant and uncomplicated — was sometimes a little apologetic.

Very sweet

As Laurey, Anne James looked very sweet and, in the second half (when her American accent had slackened off a little) was good.

But she started off by being incomprehensible when she spoke, and indistinguishable when she sang; and unfortunately these drawbacks were not improved by a tendency to move woodenly like a puppet still manipulated by the producer's hand.

In the sub-plot, Will Parker and Ado Annie provide a humorous romance which offsets the tragic shadows looming over the Curly-Laurey love affair. Jack Higham made a notable impression as Will; he has a strong personality and his performance was neat and polished. Pamela Bull made a great deal of Annie, but seemed vocally insecure.

As a result, the "point" lines of her numbers (which Rodgers invariably sets in a higher register in order to give them emphasis) seemed to go back down her throat instead of coming out with a coon-shouting bang. A pity, because it took the edge off an otherwise well-thought-out performance.

Gloom and foreboding were well expressed by Bill Godden as Jud; and the lighter side was amusingly conveyed (if a bit overplayed) by Frank Horley as the pedlar, Ali Hakim.

of chorus

The work of the chorus — both singers and dancers — was excellent. And, returning to the technical side again, Mary Epsom who had to design and see to the making of clothes for the huge cast did a first-rate job.

The settings by Meryl Evans were effective, clean-looking and evocative; and on the orchestral side, Reg Manus wielded a nifty baton, of which the players occasionally took some notice.

Oklahoma! has been another landmark in Nairobi's theatrical life. And with its abundance of high spirits has brought gaiety and tunefulness to the National Theatre at a time of national rejoicing.

● ANNE JAMES

The show DIDN'T go on!

By NATION Reporter

DAD luck hit the City Players again last night when Anne James, leading lady of the National Theatre musical production "Oklahoma" was unable to appear. Doctors had diagnosed bronchitis and pneumonia.

A capacity audience arriving at the theatre found "Show cancelled" notices in the foyer.

But the show will go on tonight. Said City Players chairman Len Pierrepont: "If Anne is not recovered and unable to appear by Tuesday night's performance, Petal Erskine will take over."

Disappointed ticket holders can re-book.

ILLNESS HITS OKLAHOMA

LAST night's performance of *Oklahoma!* at the Kenya National Theatre had to be cancelled at the last minute after the leading lady, Anne James, had been forbidden by her doctor to appear on the stage. She is suffering from bronchitis.

Two other leading members of the cast were also on the sick-list. Bill Godden, who plays Jud Fry, broke his arm on the first night — Saturday — during the fight scene in the last few minutes of the show, and Pamela Bull, who plays Ado Annie, was still recovering from the flu that almost forced her to drop out on the first night.

Both of them turned up for the performance last night, however, and took part in an impromptu rehearsal. Mr. Bryan Epsom, of the Nairobi City Players, said it was not known if Miss James would be able to appear tonight but that in any case there would be a show.

Rehearsals were being held with an understudy for her original understudy had to drop out of last week — and to the fight scene for Mr. whose arm is in plaster until late on Sunday he had made a appearance, singing from the show.

Mr. Epsom said 350 people had booked for last night's performance which was at 5. queue had already tickets when the show was cancelled. He offered seats at any performance at which available. Booking was exceptionally said.

In April last year performances of *Anna Gunn*, also presented by the Nairobi City Players, had cancelled after the illness of Yvonne Faithful. On that occasion Bull took over the two days' intense