

## 'Oklahoma' was real value for money

Reviewed by Petal Allen

THERE is no question in my mind whatsoever that the Nairobi City Players' production of *Oklahoma* at the National Theatre rivals anything on offer in the entertainment world of Nairobi from now until Christmas. It offers real value for money and has something for everybody, young and old alike.

A simple love story told against the robust and rugged background of the wild west of America — with songs to remember forever — stunning dances — daring fights and tears, what more can you ask?

My trouble is that I have spent too many long hours adjudicating amateur and school productions and I find it difficult to watch any show without mentally giving it marks as one would for an examination piece. The purpose of an adjudication is for the education, enlightenment and encouragement of the players. However, I always found that any audience attending one of these adjudications always hung on every word one uttered and they seemed to enjoy learning about the inside workings of a theatrical production. So I will try it out on you readers!

Here goes! marks out of 10. With am/dram (amateur dramatics), one can usually give 5 marks right off for effort, enthusiasm and sheer courage. This production of *Oklahoma* is no exception. Evidence of this can be seen in the good chorus numbers, outstanding costumes and fine team-work within the orchestra and cast, not to mention the professional handling of the complicated lighting cues and set changes.

So that leaves 5 marks to be gained. These are handed out less generously and have more to do with talent, therefore, they are the more difficult to attain. I am only giving Fernand Monast 1 mark for his direction. The whole piece lacked attack and pace. For a start, the curtain opens and Curly (excellently sung and acted by Vic Francis) was allowed to amble onto the stage, mincingly open a weeny gate crooning on gently about it being a "beautiful morning". Now, the opening scenes of *Oklahoma* is a classic and the stage directions must be engraved on the hearts and memories of anyone who has ever seen the stage show or the film. It should go like this; the curtain swings open to reveal vast fields of waving corn (not dolly green millocks and a few



A scene from the famous musical *Oklahoma!* now running at the Kenya National Theatre. In the foreground (left to right) Vic Francis, Rosemary Robbins and Marlene Docherty and, of course, a real "Survey with a Fringe on Top" (courtesy of the Norfolk Hotel).

"*Oklahoma!*" has two more weeks to run up to 23rd December but there is a record advance booking and a number of performances are almost sold out particularly in the final week.

measly maize cobs). From a great distance, one hears the booming voice of Curly and as he comes bounding into view, he leaps a five bar fence with the greatest of ease and ends up embracing aunt Eller with a huge bear hug.

All this transports the audience instantly onto the prairies where men are men and women are women and a zest of living and loving is what makes the world go round. Having fallen down at the start in making the right impact, the cast find it difficult thereafter to capture the verve and vigour which is the quintessence of Rodgers and Hammerstein's first and finest musical.

My next argument is with

the set design. This is not *Oklahoma!* Even my scrappy knowledge of geography has imprinted on my mind a country of vast, rolling prairies. This could have been achieved with clever use of the cyclorama. The pen full of rabbits was a nice touch, though their busy mating activities together with the endlessly racing clouds across the back-drops proved rather distracting from the often languid and pedestrian action on stage. Only half a mark for the set design then.

For individual performances, I would like to award a total of 2 marks. Although the acting was sincere and convincing on the whole, accents were inconsistent. (laugh

should be *laf*, and got to be should be *goddabe*), concentration was poor and few really attacked their roles. (watch Vicky Udall for how you should present yourself on stage). The two diademical performances were given by Marlene Docherty as Aunt Eller and Mike Noel as Jud Fry. Both managed to capture, inspite of the lethargic direction, the vivacity and virility that I have been harping on about.

Thus the production gains a total of 8½ out of 10. Full marks could have been achieved if Fernand Monast had brought the whole thing into a neat 2½ hour package with much more feeling for rhythm and pace, guts and gusto.



MIKE NOEL plays the unpopular hand, Jud Fry, in the Nairobi City Players' "*Oklahoma!*" at the National Theatre.

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# It's a handsome Oklahoma!

By ALLEN ARMSTRONG

IT's 35 years since Rodgers and Hammerstein's tuneful and colourful *Oklahoma!* first delighted and excited Broadway audiences. Since then, of course, it's been done by countless amateur groups around the world — and often "done" is the word.

Nairobi City Players, however, are way ahead of most amateurs when it comes to putting on the big show, and their new presentation of *Oklahoma!* at the Kenya National Theatre is well up to the high standards we've come to expect from them.

Canadian-born professional director Fernand Monast has produced a mighty handsome show, enhanced by splendid sets, lighting and costumes that give the stage a warm and sunny

glow.

I'm sure that Mr. Monast and musical director Nat Kofsky will quickly sort out the few problems and failings that were evident on opening night.

The first act, I thought was a little under-paced and nervously hesitant in parts (first-night jitters?), and the two directors need to work out a better balance between the principal singers, some of whom have quite light voices, and the soaring sound of the music.

One of my own favourite numbers is *Kansas City*, but here I'm afraid Arthur Docherty's singing probably could not be heard beyond the first half-dozen rows.

Mr. Kofsky might especially try to tone down or muffle the percussion, which too often irritatingly intrudes where it's not wanted — particularly in the romantic duet *People Will Say We're in Love*.

The cast is extremely well chosen, with Marlene Docherty outstanding as Aunt Eller. Marlene is one of Kenya's most versatile actresses, and she lifts many a scene with her sheer "professionalism".

Vic Francis, with his hair specially curled for the part, is an engaging cowboy, Curly, and I'm sure that after a few performances he'll become more confident in the nerve-testing task of opening the show with *Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'*.

Newcomer Rosemary Robbins is a lovely Laurey and is going to win many fans in Nairobi. She is an accomplished actress and her clear, ringing soprano is a delight in *Out of My Dreams* and *Many a New Day*.

Johanna Scanlon is a real sassy Ado Annie, and if her *Cain't Say No* appears to be modelled on Gloria Grahame's version in the film of *Oklahoma!* then there's nothing wrong with that: it's exactly how the song should be put across.

Howard Clarke is amusing as Ali Hakim the peddler, always chasing the girls but never wanting to get hooked into

marriage. Howard has some of the funniest lines in the show, but needs to improve his delivery so the wisecracks don't get lost.

Mike Noel, hirsute and deep voiced, is a suitably glowering "bad guy" Jud Fry, and the much-experienced Ken Latham is perfectly cast as Ado Annie's gun-toting dad.

But where this *Oklahoma!* really scores is in its superb chorus work and brilliant dancing. The Dream Ballet sequence is one of the best I've ever seen staged by an amateur company, with principal dancers Sheila Barker and Vicky Udall stunning.

Sheila floats on stage as a beautiful and graceful dream Laurey, in complete and exciting contrast to Vicky, who explodes into a dynamic and breath-taking routine.

Vicky danced throughout opening night with a painfully chipped foot bone — an incredible performance!

The fact that leading male dancer Jeff Arnold reckons he's lost more than 20 pounds since rehearsals started is testimony to the glorious vitality of Margaret Haddad's choreography.

*Oklahoma!* really takes off in the second act, which is vibrantly alive and a joy to see and hear.

I'm sure that when this production settles into its stride it's going to be a very, very good show indeed and another runaway success for the City Players.



MARLENE Docherty, who has the leading role of "Aunt Eller" in the Nairobi City Players' production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's famous musical "Oklahoma!" now running at the Kenya National Theatre.



"Oklahoma!". Tonight's opening at the Child Welfare Association of Kenya.