

## '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.

mealy 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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