



Society : ROS Stageworks Summer School
Production : Oklahoma!
Date : 30th July 2011
Venue : Winston Churchill Theatre
Report by : Tony Austin

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My invitation from this year's Summer School was not only to see one of the two end-of-week performances (taken up by my wife and myself for the 2.30 matinee, which we much enjoyed) but also to watch some of the production and rehearsal process during the week to gain insight into how the performances could have been put together in the space of only seven days. My arrival for that purpose on the Thursday morning happened to coincide with the "School's Out" exodus from the Theatre of the fifty or so participants for their morning break, so the insight started on the theoretical side with School Secretary **Eric Martin** abandoning his break to show me round and explain the whole set-up, with my questions and responses I hope not too disturbing to Director **Ann Hertler-Smith** and some of the Principals as they continued working. By the time the cast returned, I was full of admiration for the many volunteer **Security Staff, Chaperones, Refreshment Providers** and others and of the efficient organisation, under Chairman **Malcolm Unwin**, by **Gordon Beck** (Administrator), **Peter Clout** (Finance), **Dawn Perry** (Chaperone Manager) and **Jackie Lack** (Operations Manager) with the support of the **Ruislip Lions**, a great basis for the thriving Summer School – and the first people I want to congratulate on its 2011 result.

Fast forward to the Saturday afternoon for the congratulations to Director and Choreographer **Ann Hertler-Smith**, voiceless after her exertions of the week but lucky to have Drama Coach **Helen Bailey** with her on stage to read her words of welcome to the audience and to introduce Musical Director **Gill Barrett** and Assistant MD **Richard Fairhead** (also together half the Band for the performance) – the four people together responsible for the high standard of singing, acting and dancing we saw. But no room here for more than a mention of the excellence of the **costumes, props, make-up, scenery** and its **crew, lighting** and **sound equipment**, whose skilled designers, executants and operators have their names displayed filling a page in **Kinetic's** fine programme.

On then to the **Chorus of 55 youngsters** (every one of the cast took their place in the chorus even if they were major principals in one of the Acts) who should be pleased to hear the unsolicited opinion of their Director: that they were much better than the adults in most operatic societies at paying attention to the instructions given and at remembering them! Quite a commendation, and very evident from what we saw on Saturday afternoon, after only a week for everyone to prepare the fourteen songs, five dance routines and the ten-minute-long ballet as well as all the dialogue and business to link the show together. A nice idea to let some of the **Chorus** get onto the stage to introduce them to the limelight and us to their fine country-style costumes during the overture, and almost all of them looked happy to cross the stage in their groups, talk together and greet others, before the story really started and the responsibility of remembering words and set steps kicked in. There was then quite a long pause for the chorus until *Kansas City*, when they showed fine attack in their singing and made good patterns with their movements and Will Parker was stylishly chaired off. **Hanny Alcock, Sophie Hodges** and **Alice Green** joined Ado Annie for *I Cain't Say No*, singing and moving well together, putting over attractive personalities and earning a share of her applause at the end, before four waves of girls (29 in all) came forward singing and dancing a memorable addition to Laurey's *Many a New Day*. And afterwards the boys showed their mettle with good comedy singing and moves well in unison to accompany Ali Hakim in *It's a Scandal*.

The Dream Ballet had a fine introduction in dialogue and song with **Hollie Summerfield** as the Fortune Teller aided by **Claire Knight, Beckie Miles** and **Katherine Lack** for the solo sung lines in *Out of My Dreams* and accurate harmonies with all the words clear when the rest of the girls joined in. It clearly showed Laurey's dream becoming a nightmare, although the cuts in this shorter version made some of the episodes less easy to understand. But the amazing thing was that every cast member had a part to play in the ballet. I've recorded five girls dancing prettily around Laurey and giving her her bridal veil and bouquet, followed by a very smart little dance by four each of the smaller girls and boys. Then some shy and less confident types who tried not to look at the audience, although they performed their boxes perfectly well. Then bigger boys and girls as the audience to Jud's intervention, freezing beautifully on cue and making no reaction when Laurey, in her nightmare, tried to shake them. And eight of the biggest boys on to ogle the eight saucy dancing girls (Postcard Girls in the original), the sequence ending spectacularly with four of the girls on the boys' shoulders and the other four around Jud, with the sad finale (after the fight) of the apparently dead Curly carried off above their heads. Congratulations to everyone!

In the second Act, more of the chances went to the boys, with odd dialogue and sung lines well taken by **Elliott Parsons** as Andrew Carnes (Ado Annie's father, so rightly played as a more serious adult character, even though his dialogue with the shotgun in Act 1 had been cut in this version), **Sean McLinden** as Ike Skidmore (also doing more lifts and twirls in the dancing), **Chris Knapp** as Cord Elam, **Nathaniel Faulls** as Mike (setting up the three-day bellyache gag), **Sean Sullivan** as Slim and others not so easy to identify. The party atmosphere and the occasions of conflict during *The Farmer and the Cowman* were managed well and the singing and dancing never lost its verve, with its spectacular finale as two girls spun in propeller turns and finished on their partners' shoulders while four more ended in swallow-dive holds – to rapturous applause. The difficult auction scene with so many interjected lines and everybody contributing to the atmosphere went without a hitch, the four couples sending up *All Er Nuthin'* knew just how to do so, and in the final scene *Oklahoma* sung beautifully by soloists, groups and the ensemble made a rousing finale.

Characters split between the Acts found Gertie represented by **Olivia Brennand** and **Rachel Bailey**, both able with dialogue and the latter's laugh probably the louder: Ali Hakim by **Josh Powell** in Act 1 with properly foreign speech and good timing in his number, shrinking to tiny **Archie Stevens** in Act 2, hardly visible on stage from where I was sitting but getting a great reaction from everyone for his three-day bellyache; Will Parker by **Daniel Brennand** with his eyes down a little too far for *Kansas City* but nevertheless getting all the words and their meanings over clearly and **Alec Coles-Aldridge**, who with **Katie Riches** as Ado Annie got all the laughs from some well-pointed dialogue and a nicely humorous *All Er Nuthin'* (stylishly smooching for the other couples to send up), while **Milly Stevens** in Act 1 got the plum number *I Cain't Say No* and made the most of every phrase in it as well as getting all the character comedy from her dialogue.

Aunt Eller's role changes between the Acts from witty, concerned bystander, well portrayed by **Katie Fox**, to ebullient community leader and her niece's fervent protector, giving **Hannah Bailey** the perfect role in which to dominate the stage in character and in song with great stage presence. **Glen Scott** made a properly brooding and menacing Jud with well judged dialogue and fine singing and a tremendous presence in the ballet, and **Callum Poltock** continued the menace (voluntarily having his red-gold locks dyed black to assist the process!) through the auction with great timing, - and got real tension into his final dialogue with Laurey; and each of the Juds managed to fight Curly with realism. I was a little sad that the sound operators didn't turn up Glen's microphone in time for us to hear his final dramatic line at the end of the ballet in Act 1, just at the time when the musical accompaniment had swelled equally dramatically. There was an obvious visual cue for that, which perhaps wasn't always the case when other mikes were late coming up. And while on the subject of swelling music, it was a shame that the drummer seemed to regard such occasions as the time for him to play a solo with no regard to the balance or anything we needed to hear on stage.

But the show is about the romance between Laurey and Curly, or perhaps in this instance the romances between Laureys and Curlys. What a challenge the opening is with Curly singing two songs and having virtually all the dialogue setting up the situation, and how well **James Riches** put it all over, easily coping with repetitive rallentandos and making the back-chat with Laurey sound properly believable. (I suppose he is nearer Curly's real age than most 'adult' interpreters). **Tanya Maxwell** as Laurey played up well in that dialogue, and showed how she cared while charmingly singing the opposite in *Many a New Day* before their well sung and well acted *People Will Say We're in Love* cemented their relationship. Curly's coming maturity was shown in his decision to confront Jud and their dialogue in the smokehouse was clear and the timing good, while the song was sung with fine harmonies and its humorous aspects pointed to good effect. Laurey's challenge came in the ballet where she showed in mime all the conflicting emotions from the happiness of the forthcoming wedding to the terror at Jud's intervention and real panic after the fight, while Curly suffered being beaten by Jud and carried off for dead – a real emotional triumph for both of them.

Changing to a different Curly for Act 2 could have been difficult, but isolating **Ben Schrodel** stage right for his punch lines and then getting him to lead the dancing in *The Farmer and the Cowman* was a fine way of introducing the rather maturer character Curly had become by this time. His entrance into the auction was handled with real authority, aided by superb timing on all sides of the dialogue with Jud and Aunt Eller, and his masterful return after Laurey had dismissed Jud, prompting a fine reaction from **Janet Peet** displaying at once her relief and her need for reassurance, led to fine dialogue and the well-sung reprise version of *People Will Say We're in Love* as touching and convincing as if they had played the first Act together as well. The return of Jud got a properly frightened reaction from her and another convincing fight, and as this one was won by Curly (and Jud almost dragged off like a sack of coals) all was set fair for the wedding celebrations with the carriage represented by twirling umbrellas, and a triumphant *Oklahoma* finale. Hooray!

My congratulations to all those involved, whether named above or not, on the amazing achievement of perfecting so much in a single week to produce a show of this standard. My best wishes to all those who have to move on at the age of 18 for similar triumphs in whatever fields they now enter, while I look forward to seeing the others in next year's Stageworks Summer School spectacular.

My thanks to your Director and to everyone concerned for the invitation to my wife and myself.