



Society : Ruislip Operatic Society (ROS)
Production : Oklahoma!
Date : 22nd May 2013
Venue : Winston Churchill Theatre
Report by : Tony Austin

Report

It is amazing to think that when *Oklahoma!* took Broadway by storm in 1943, the Ruislip Operatic Society, now celebrating its 90th year, was already 20 years old, and by the time that storm came to England in 1947 (since in those days, even more amazingly, the music in American shows was not available in our shops or on our wireless programmes until they were produced in this country) the Society had become a mature adult at the age of 24. The glorious musical numbers (of which the first night Drury Lane audience insisted the *main* ones should be repeated after the final curtain before it was prepared to leave the theatre) were part of the reason, along with the glorious singing of the cast led by the previously unknown *Harold Keel* (assured of stardom from then on and only changing his name to Howard after a mistake in a later review by a leading Broadway critic). But its story and setting among ordinary American people portrayed naturalistically was another, although one generation's naturalism is always old hat to members of succeeding generations and the show followed tradition in many ways, particularly perhaps in its un-naturalistic *comedy* second couple.

In those seventy years the technical side of things has changed immeasurably and the scenic solutions acceptable to an audience are hugely more varied. **Alan Bailey's** fine design (realised with the help of **John Field, Jeff Smith** and **Les Dearlove** with **Tim Leman's** painting skills) provided not only the atmosphere of the Southern States farm with its gently turning windmill but also the means for the action to continue seamlessly, with the conversion of the shed on the left forestage into Jud's Smokehouse achieved by the swinging of one panel and the addition of rustic table and stools, while the house piece in its skeletal form allowed the second act change to be made (by **Jeff, John, Pete White** and **Alison Bailey** under the Direction of SM **Gary Hockham** and ASM **Amanda Jones**) with the swift addition of a little more of the skeleton while the action continued. The hay bales used as seats at various times were another useful invention, although I think the combine harvester needed to produce them didn't appear until several decades later. Such clever use of scenery depends on lighting subtleties not easily available in 1943, with the Smokehouse particularly effective against the darkened main stage (allowing the concerned folk to arrive convincingly in the half light after the gunshots) but noticeable all through (despite a couple of first night miscues). Responsible for both lighting and sound, **John Coman** and **Denis Cater** (advised by **Jonathan York** and **Rebecca Arnold**) also kept the vast majority of the sung and spoken amplified words audible although, inevitably without the deadening effect of a pit, that did not include words spoken over underscoring by the unusually large 14-piece orchestra.

But it was the accurate replication of the comedy style of 70 years ago which gave the show a great lift. **Andy Sonden**, as Will Parker, had the advantage of looking and acting like a callow teenager (despite it being five years since he played Sondheim's *Hero* for ROS) showing the joy, the incomprehension and the occasional confused anger at the complications of possessing 50 dollars. His clear diction and singing started *Kansas City* well, although dancing the Two-Step as set proved a bit much for both him and the male chorus (except surprisingly for the buck and wings well-performed by all) and the attempt at a cabriole was a step too far on the first night. Making a great physical contrast with him, **Tasha Ewing** as Ado Annie played up well and their comedy all through hit the mark with *All er Nothin'* one of the second half highlights. Tasha's *I Cain't Say No*

was delivered brilliantly at breakneck speed, while still getting all the points over, and her scenes with Ali Hakim were wonderfully coy and funny. **Jevan Morris** got more fun from that character than I recall seeing before, with his selections from his huge carpet bag made with the air of a conjuror, his protestations to Annie and her father (a real back-woodsman in **Les Dearlove's** closely observed portrait, getting every nuance over in speech and song) belied perfectly by his body language and facial expressions, and his Persian farewells really enthusiastic. His *It's a Scandal* (well supported by the men) came from the heart and was improved by the changed ending. His more serious moments in the Smokehouse and with the Little Wonder were equally well done, as was his huge regret on his final entrance, married to **Deborah Maycraft's** Gertie Cummings, the only performance of that character I have seen to explain her popularity, really good-looking and with a most attractive laugh, which only became hideous when it was constantly repeated. And her tangle with Ado Annie towards the end of the show was the most realistic fight of the evening.

The **Ensemble's** important scenes come mainly in the second half, with the first half for them dominated by the Dream Ballet, written for trained dancers to display their skills and difficult for any amateur society to replicate, especially so with first night nerves. The most successful parts were when Dream Laurey (**Fleur Noriega-Constable**) was joined by the real Curly and Jud and they could act in character, and the very impressive funeral procession at the end, while the most disappointing was the entrance of the Postcard Girls, saddled with costumes in which no one could be sexy. Back to reality in Act 2, *The Farmer and the Cowman* was superbly sung, acted and danced with a real Hoe-down atmosphere. As in so many scenes, there had to be a fight, which was enthusiastically portrayed, although opponents being knocked down by hay-maker swings which plainly miss are best avoided, with pulled punches being generally more convincing. And the difficult Auction Scene was brilliantly performed with good reactions from everyone to the clear dialogue (with no apparent hesitations, deviations or repetitions which most companies experience) and a real tension very well achieved. Equally good were the later scenes where dialogue was put over with style, and the singing of the solo lines and choral work in the title song with ensemble movements nicely worked out and beautifully co-ordinated (and quite different from 70 years ago). I hope those in smaller roles will forgive me if I lump my congratulations together, since the result was a true example of ensemble playing: Well done **Mark Lamoon** (as Cord Elam), **Paul Hunter** (Ike Skidmore), **David Hampton** (Fred), **Mike Fox** (Slim), **William Cody** (Joe), **Susan Maycraft** (Kate), **Janice Lim** (Ellen), **Anastasia Morton** (Virginia) and **Fran Hampson** (Vivienne)!

Pam Bailey made a superb Aunt Eller, pitching her first Act wise words with precision, getting every ounce of humour out of them with appropriate facial expressions and body language, and singing more lyrically than I recall for the character (was she rewarded with an extra few lines?) and in Act 2 leading the revels with incisive singing and dialogue and easily dominating the ensemble, hardly needing her gunshot to still the fight scene. Her conduct of the auction was completely assured, and her performance a great combination of feisty tenderness.

When Jud is portrayed as a monstrous thug I have difficulty in understanding how he could be employed on the farm, let alone anything else. **Carl Quaif's** repressed introvert interpretation explained both why he might have been chosen in Laurey's pique and why Curly should want to go to the Smokehouse (where both the humorous duet and Jud's chilling solo were well put over). And the revelations there with him seated and expressionless showing him to us as a psychopath (not known to Laurey, of course) laid the basis for the tension in the auction scene, where his paranoia became evident to all in the well-paced bidding dialogue. His death by falling on his own knife was well done, although I didn't see Curly do anything to cause it or warrant the possibility of his arrest.

I think both **Kevin Murray** and **Esther Watkins** as Curly and Laurey would have preferred me not to have come to the Wednesday performance as each seemed to be singing under par, possibly from a combination of first-night nerves and throat problems. I don't think they were helped by the

insistent pace of the accompaniment to their songs, which (apart from some planned rallentandos) seemed to lack the rubato needed to aid expressive singing. (And some members of the orchestra were plainly on automatic pilot and not looking at the conductor when they continued playing after a pause was signalled for the dialogue to catch up during *The Surrey with the Fringe on Top*.) I am sure such matters would have been attended to before the rest of the run and wish I could have been present for a later performance. Their dialogue had been thoughtfully set and rehearsed, and the uncertainties of both were well shown, with Laurey's rebelliousness and Curly's angst aspects a modern audience may well recognise. Curly played a fine scene and sang with full confidence in the Smokehouse, with his facial expressions being easier to make (and more easily seen by us) when he wasn't wearing his Stetson, performed his part in the Ballet well (while Laurey had to feign sleep through the whole ten minutes) and in the second Act seemed more assured even before he returned to sell all he possessed, winning Laurey in the process. In her relief at the result she suddenly found real strength to dismiss Jud from his job, and a couple of very well performed and convincing clinches and a duet reprise set her and Curly on track for a happy ending.

While I have expressed reservations about some of the music and some of the dancing as heard and seen on the first night, I want to stress that the presentation (including the dialogue and the comedy along with the well-rehearsed chorus singing) made a very enjoyable evening and was a credit to the planning and training by Director and Choreographer **Amber K Ould** and Musical Director **Robert Wicks** (and his rehearsal period assistant MD **Zena Wigram**).

With so many credits in **Mark Alcock**'s superb programme, I realise I can't do justice to all of them and hope those I have not mentioned will accept this as our thanks from my wife and myself for their hard work and dedication and to all of ROS for our invitation to *Oklahoma!* at seventy.

My final word is to thank President **Barbara Johnson** for so kindly looking after us (and NODA London Councillor Jacquie Stedman and her husband David), as well as the kind attention we received from your efficient Front of House Managers **Chris Unwin** and **Shirley Wootten**.

