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Andru Zodrow
Seattle University

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Somewhat Informed; “Oklahoma” is a Flawed but Enjoyable Classic

Andru Zodrow, News Editor

This week I watched a filmed production of the “Oklahoma” West End revival starring Hugh Jackman. I’ve been trying to watch more Rodgers and Hammerstein shows, and Oklahoma might be the most culturally impactful one.

“Oklahoma” is a 1943 musical written by the musical duo Rodgers and Hammerstein. The show was a smash when it hit Broadway in the early 40s, taking home a Pulitzer Prize and running for 2,212 initial performances.

The show centers around Curly McLain, a young cowboy courting Laurey Williams, the feisty niece of ‘Aunt’ Eller, the matriarch of the Oklahoman town in which the show takes place. In a plot to make Curly jealous, Laurey asks Jud Fry, a mysterious and gruff ranch hand, to take her to the town dance. This sparks a conflict between Jud and Curly which puts Laurey in a precarious position when the two men begin to quarrel.

When evaluating the merits of a musical, it is difficult to separate the script from the production around it. This is especially true in the case of Oklahoma. The character Ali Hakim is a Persian peddler who, unsurprisingly, has rarely been played by a non-white actor on the stage. Hakim is a problematic character in many ways, but his portrayal by Peter Polycarpou is undeniably charming. Similarly, the fact that Laurey’s status as a plot object may not read well with modern audiences. This creates a difficult push and pull for the viewer, in which the cast is impeccable, but delivering disappointing stereotypes about race and gender.

However, there is a reason the show is still being produced. It is an important part of theater history, and a classic that should not be forgotten. Remembering the failings of the past is as important as celebrating its triumphs. “Oklahoma” has both.

The 1998 West End revival is impressive in nearly every way. Hugh Jackman’s portrayal of Curly is electric. Jackman clearly loves what he does, and doesn’t act so much as he lives through the character.

Shuler Paul Hensley plays Jud and is the only American in the West End cast. Hensley seems to have a knack for playing Rodgers and Hammerstein’s antagonists, as he was also in a 2013 production of “Carousel.” He is a powerhouse performer who commands an impressive voice and physical presence.

Surprisingly, the strongest chemistry in the entire show is not between the couple, but rather Jud and Curly. This may have translated to a real-world relationship, as Hensley made a cameo in Jackman’s film “The Greatest Showman.”

Maureen Lipman plays Aunt Eller with a convincing southern attitude for a British actress and makes the role feel fresh. Eller needs to be both stoic and comedic and Lipman manages to achieve both.

Josefina Gabrielle plays Laurey. Although Gabrielle is a talented singer, she doesn’t feel right for the role. Laurey should have attitude and energy. In this production, she feels too stilted and reserved. She is usually paired with Jud or Curly, and it is clear that those actors are doing the heavy lifting in those scenes. Gabrielle isn’t distractingly bad, but she isn’t particularly impressive in her role.

The way in which the production is translated to film is interesting. Traditionally, Broadway and West End shows are shot in an industrial style. The audience can be heard, there are few cuts and the director’s job is to avoid intruding upon the stage play. In this case, the camera flies around the stage, and it is clear that at some points actual cameramen are on the stage with the performers. Additionally, the sounds of the audience are omitted. It makes for a unique viewing experience, in which the musical blurs the line between movie and stage show. In the end, it is a bold choice that is distracting at times for an avid theater fan, but likely makes the production less alienating for the average viewer.

“Oklahoma” is an important musical. It has impacted theater history immeasurably, from the structure of the modern musical to the longevity of the music. If you are searching for a production to watch in quarantine, it is worth visiting the 1998 West End version. For all of its flaws, “Oklahoma” is a seminal work that is worth watching.

