

'OKLAHOMA!'

THE BILL RAUCH ERA COMES TO AN END WITH A GAY UTOPIA AT OSF *by Bob Keffer*

When Bill Rauch became artistic director at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2007, one of the first things he did was to validate my deep love for musical theater by staging *The Music Man*.

That was at a time when musicals were essentially unheard of at the festival. Some mild grumbling was heard when audiences saw the shy Harold Hill trying to seduce Marian the Librarian right there in the Bowmer Theatre, where non-Shakespeare fare was more likely to be by Anton Chekhov or August Wilson than Stephen Sondheim or Meredith Wilson.

Rauch wasn't deterred. "The American musical is our country's largest contribution to world drama," he told me in an interview soon after. "It's important for us to look at that canon."

And look he has. Since *Music Man*, OSF has staged *My Fair Lady*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Head Over Heels*, *The Wiz*, *Pirates of Penzance*, *The Yeoman of the Guard* and *Into the Woods*. In 2019 it will put on *Hairspray*.

So it's fitting that *Oklahoma!* is, in a sense, Rauch's swan song at OSF — the last show he directs before departing next year to become the artistic director at the Perelman Center, a new theater being built at New York City's Ground Zero.

For me, musicals used to be a guilty pleasure. When I was a kid growing up in L.A. I was entranced by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's shows (which I saw in those days only in the movie versions) like *Carousel*, *The King and I* and *Oklahoma!* Even though I loved them I considered them sappy and quaint, with syrupy romantic themes worthy of no more serious attention than, say, an episode of *I Love Lucy*.

Ah, the arrogance of youth (and the superficiality of Hollywood, which dumbed down the movie versions I saw).

Now, with another half century of living behind me, I see that, beneath all that syrup, Rodgers and Hammerstein's best work deals with the dark foundations of American culture, from racism (*South Pacific* and *King and I*) to crime, punishment and forgiveness (*Carousel*) and the vital importance in American life of uniting divided groups who hate each other, as is the case in *Oklahoma!*

The show, which opened on Broadway in 1943, is a monument in theater history. Musical theater had its roots in turn-of-the-century vaudeville, and early musical



comedies treated songs as simple breaks in the variety show. Not until Jerome Kern's *Showboat* in 1936 did the music become part of the fabric of a coherent story.

In *Oklahoma!* the whole show is seamless, with song lyrics moving the story along. The show even includes dance: Act I ends with a wordless 10-minute "Dream Ballet," choreographed in the original Broadway production by Agnes de Mille.

That first production would run for 2,212 performances; it won Rodgers and Hammerstein a Pulitzer Prize in 1944. It's been revived endlessly on stages around the world and, of course, was made into that 1955 movie of the same name, which won two Oscars.

The only problem is this: How do you put on a serious version of *Oklahoma!* in 2018 and find something interesting and new to say?

No problem for Rauch, who can be as flamboyantly creative as *The Music Man*'s Harold Hill. Rauch's 2018 season announcement last year ended up in *The New York Times*: "Oregon Shakespeare Festival Season Includes a Same-Sex 'Oklahoma!'" the headline said.

Same-sex romance in 1906 *Oklahoma!*

Rauch uses a program note to explain in greater detail. "The idea of a production with same-sex couples has been hibernating in my heart for more than a quarter of a century," he writes. "Despite the extraordinary social progress that the LGBTQ2+ community has made, I didn't believe that I would see the production I dreamed of in my lifetime."

His vision of the *Oklahoma!* of the play includes "an alternative utopian community that reflects progress and acceptance for our time."

All this was swirling around my head as I drove down to Ashland to see *Oklahoma!* late last month in — untypically for a critic — a mid-run performance (the show opened in April at a time I couldn't go). "Mid-run" means the audience is comprised not of the wealthy patrons, OSF board members, company members and theater fans who jet in from distant cities for opening night shows, but of ordinary tourists and, in this case, busloads of regional high school students who fairly mobbed the Bowmer lobby before the show.

You could hear them chattering nervously away, giggling about the notion of same-sex cowboy couples in such a familiar bit of Americana.

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