



PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM, OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

Curly (Tatiana Wechsler, right) tries to entice Laurey (Royer Bockus) into accompanying her to the box social in "Oklahoma," a LGBTQ+ focus production now showing through Oct. 27 at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Rare Perspectives on Stage

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their absence from the spaces that do exist? How do we model and live exclusiveness, even while the spaces that exist are tainted by oppression? OSF'S current production of "Oklahoma!" lives into these questions in a powerful way.

It's an interesting choice of material, this most American of musicals, which feels about as straight and as white as they come. But the truth is, LGBTQ+ people and people of color exist in most communities, even if they are hidden or not allowed to fully participate.

For more than two decades, director Bill Rauch has held onto an ambition to produce "Oklahoma!" in an LGBTQ+-focused way, with the four leads cast as same-sex couples. It is the first Rogers and Hammerstein collaboration and one of the first true musical plays, where songs and dance emerged from the dialogue. The songs have permeated American culture like no other in the canon.

And yet as a gay man who loved musicals, Rauch felt unrepresented and shut out. His instinct to change that with this specific musical feels like a powerful one: to watch this playful, open-hearted, and conventional love story, sentimentally set in the American frontier, celebrating the love of two gay couples; to hear them sing these familiar songs – It communicates that America is for the LGBTQ+ community too. No holding back; sing it with full voices and hearts.

I'll acknowledge that, as musicals go, "Oklahoma!" is not my favorite. There are some unsolved problems in the play; for example, a Persian peddler is comic relief, an angry farmhand is treated as an unredeemable pariah in this idyllic world where "the farmer and the cowhand should

be friends," and the plot is hardly subtle. I gravitate toward original material that aims to tell new stories in new ways.

And yet, this production helped me appreciate how embodying old material in a new way has a particular value in pushing us past our failures of imagination. Hearing two female voices sing "People Will Say We're in Love" and watching two men playfully negotiate their commitment in "All 'Er Nuthin'" is strangely moving. With a multiracial cast that includes a transgender Aunt Eller and characters who present at several places along the range of gender expression, the cast lives, sings, and embodies community more openly than we are used to seeing -- infusing the pioneer setting with new meaning. Part of what made "Oklahoma!" so remarkable when it premiered in 1943 was its focus on a pioneer story, departing from the usual more urbane musical settings. This production presents a new community of pioneers.

I expect there will be naysayers in every audience; this production aims to move the collective conversation, using a beloved traditional vehicle. I was there at opening, likely one of the most receptive audiences the company will experience, and felt a lot of negative energy from the couple to my left. But the show is selling well, and expanding our vision of inclusion -- due in large part to Rauch's vision and to a company of artists who bring their whole selves to the stage with each performance. [Runs through Oct. 27.]

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column Opinionated Judge appears regularly in The Portland Observer. Find her movie blog at opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com.

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