

Portland Center Stage's Oklahoma! Makes Waves

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Of The Skanner News

Making waves in the local theater scene this month is Portland Center Stage's all-Black production of the musical Oklahoma! The show is brilliantly staged with the original score, choreography by Agnes de Mille and a cast chosen from theaters around the country -- backed by Portland's very best production artists including direction by Chris Coleman, scenery by William Bloodgood and voice coaching by Mary McDonald-Lewis. Nevertheless the refiguring of this classic prairie love affair -- for the first time ever set in an African American town -- has touched a nerve among Portlanders who've never heard the history of Black cowboys. The Skanner News recently sat down with the two leading actors in the show, Brianna Horne, who plays Laurey, and Rodney Hicks, starring as Curley, to talk about their work in Oklahoma!

The Skanner News: When people come here to see this show is it going to be the musical they remember?

Brianna: I think absolutely -- the music is intact, the story is intact, it's just new faces to the story. So people that are looking for that traditional show that they love with the music and characters, it's all there. It's a different spin on it and I think people will love it and embrace it.

Rodney: To add onto that, it's just from a different perspective: same story, just different location.

TSN: What does it mean to you to be here in Portland performing this show?

Brianna: It's such a joy. I mean we can't say enough how exciting it is to take on roles like this -- traditional musical theater roles. To sing the score of Rogers and Hammerstein. It's...we don't get to do it. We don't get to do it ever. So to express this love story between two people every night is...it's such a gift.

Rodney: And to do it in a way that's rooted in reality makes it that much more palpable and enjoyable for the both of us.

TSN: Chris Coleman, the director, has taken this musical which -- love it or hate it, everyone knows the music from this show -- and used it to open a window on

Impeccably produced --
and for the first time ever,
set in an all-Black town

a different experience than most Portland audiences have ever had. All-Black towns in Oklahoma? Most people don't even know what you're talking about. Yet this is American history. So you did learn something from doing this show. Talk a little about what was surprising to you.

Brianna: I think just the history of Black cowboys. My dad is a fan of cowboy movies so I've seen them onscreen, in the black and white movies and everything. But to understand the history of Blacks -- prosperous Blacks in Oklahoma at that time, that they were owners of land, that this was a prosperous time for people -- I didn't know that. I didn't know that before taking on this project.

Rodney: And that Oklahoma at that time had the largest population of Black Americans, because of the Black exodus in, I believe, 1889, of Blacks

coming from the South looking for a better life because of the Jim Crow laws. When slavery was done the Jim Crow laws became even worse. And then realizing that Black cowboys, but also the Black frontier men -- that we were also instrumental in, Black Americans and also Mexican Americans were also instrumental in building Los Angeles. And I didn't ever hear that.

Brianna: Didn't know it.

TSN: So as you perform this play, are any of the lines changed? No -- you already said it, nothing's changed.

Rodney: But what it does -- it leaps off the page in a new way because you have new people, new voices speaking these truths. And a lot of it -- for example, 'The country's changing, gotta change with it.' 'They're gonna make this territory into a state, they're gonna put it in the union.' And what that means, it's very different -- for white Americans at that time it just means they're going to get ratified. For Black Americans, it means there's a sense of freedom -- another sense of freedom for us, that we can be equal, and I think Curley says to you (turning to Brianna), 'Now that I have you to help me, I'm gonna amount to something yet.' It's just powerful. And you have a monologue of what you want.

Brianna: Absolutely. And it was attainable at that time. I think that's the joy, the desire that they had at that time, and the hope that was so prevalent. It just grounds the piece -- you feel the hope of the characters.

Rodney: Hope, yes, from the minute the show starts. It's ...without struggle there's no hope. And what's great about this casting Black actors, you don't



have to see the struggle -- we already know the struggle. We already know the history of it. Now you're going to see the hope. And I think that's what this does. Because we've seen the struggle; we've seen all the plays, all the musicals about Black America, it's always about the struggle. And this is hope.

TSN: One of the things that struck me when I first

heard of this show -- first of all I had to just stand and think about it. But do you feel as though this show, and this production of it speaks to the universality of the very best theater?

Brianna: Absolutely.

Rodney: Very much. Very much so. You can tell in our audiences, you can feel the energy coming in with expectations -- not knowing,

how are they going to sing it? And Mary Mac, she does the dialect. She grounded it in Southern dialect, so therefore that switches things as well. Southern people -- there's a groundedness to them. And there's an at-ease and at-home feeling, and when we speak that dialect you forget that we're Black.

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PORTLAND CENTER STAGE

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