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Radical Rethinking of Oklahoma! at Bard SummerScape

David Sheward · Wednesday, July 8th, 2015

There is a homey, welcoming feeling as you enter the intimate Luma Theater in Bard College's Fisher Center for the innovative SummerScape production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's classic musical *Oklahoma!* Friendly ushers greet you. Audience members are seated at long wooden tables with napkin holders and crock pots full of chili for a down-home meal during intermission. The denim-clad six-piece band is tuning up, greeting patrons, and looking like they're ready for an old-fashioned hoe-down. But your eye may stray to the racks of shotguns on the wall of Laura Jellinek's town-hall set (based on an original concept by John Conklin), which could instill a slight sense of foreboding.

At first, Daniel Fish's sunny, stripped-down staging offers few glimmers of disquiet. The folks living on and visiting Aunt Eller's farm are mostly good-natured and kind. They sweetly sing the classic songs like "People Will Say We're in Love" and "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top" with a country-western twang in Daniel Kruger's flavorful new arrangements and are dressed by costume designer Terese Wadden in contemporary duds.

Damon Daunno and Amber Gray in *Oklahoma!* at Bard SummerScape
Credit: Cory Weaver

But then, close to the end, Fish throws in a startlingly violent twist not in Hammerstein's book or Lynn Riggs' original play *Green Grow the Lilacs* that seems to come out of nowhere and this warmhearted favorite becomes an anti-NRA commercial. I don't want to give away too much, but this new piece of staging involves the final confrontation between the good-natured cowpoke Curly and the sour-souled farmhand Jud, his rival for the beautiful Laurey. In Fish's radical rethinking of the show's final moments where frontier justice takes on a totally different tone than the comic bonhomie of the original, the characters transform from hearty neighbors to a cold coven out of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." It's too much of the director inserting himself into the event. Fish does foreshadow his ultimate dark climax with frightening stagings of the scene in Jud's smokehouse (starting in total darkness and then shadowy video) and Laurey's dream ballet (a nightmarish, cross-gendered pop concert from hell). But the ending still feels imposed and wrenching rather than creepy and inevitable as was probably intended.

Aside from the bizarre finale, this is an enjoyable, ingenious, and fresh interpretation of a beloved classic with the audience cast as townsfolk, joining in on the rites and travails of the territory community. Everyday activities blend seamlessly with the familiar Rodgers and Hammerstein show tunes such as Aunt Eller mixing corn bread during "Oh What a Beautiful Morning" and

Laurey angrily snapping corn cobs while she claims she's not in love in "Many a New Day." Damon Daunno and Amber Gray are attractive and appealing as Curley and Laurey while Broadway veteran Mary Testa invests Aunt Eller with grit and wit. James Patrick Davis is an agile, eager Will Parker and Allison Strong wonderfully captures the flirtatious recklessness of Ado Annie. Benj Mirman gives a subtle spin to the peddler Ali Hakim rather than the usual broad comic relief. Mitch Tebo, John Carlin, and Mallory Portnoy make the most of supporting roles in this small ensemble.

The standout here is Patrick Vaill's complex Jud Fry. Usually played as a dangerous villain, Vaill expresses not only Jud's obsessive, psychotic tendencies, but also his heartbreaking loneliness. Despite his antisocial behavior, you actually feel sorry for this Jud. Vaill achieves the ambiguity Fish wants to convey and would have been just as effective without the director's forced reinterpretation.

June 25—July 19. Bard SummerScape at Luma Theater/Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. Thu.—Sun., 7:30 p.m.; Wed., Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission; $25—$55. 845-758-7900 or www.fishercenter.bard.edu.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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