

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Three Diverse Broadway Musicals: Oklahoma!, Hometown, Proud

David Sheward · Wednesday, April 24th, 2019

Like our current political climate, Daniel Fish's sex-drenched nightmare version of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* has polarized the theatergoing public. You either hate it or love it. After engagements at Bard College in 2015 and St. Ann's Warehouse Off-Broadway earlier this season, the radical revival has forced audiences to examine their assumptions about this supposedly wholesome staple of high school and community theater. Naysayers moan that the director has distorted and ruined a beloved classic of Broadway's Golden Age. But the sex, violence and discord Fish has mined beneath the sunny farmlands and corn as high as an elephant's eye was always there, he's just brought it to the surface.



Rebecca Naomi Jones and Damon Daunno in *Oklahoma!*

Credit: Little Fang Photo

Rather than presenting a 1943 musical comedy version of a loving and friendly prairie family, Fish delivers a modern, disturbing view of a divided country. The disorientation starts as you enter the Circle In the Square Theater which set designer Laura Jellinek has transformed into a huge Western community center, festooned with tinsel, colored lights and gun racks. Some patrons are seated on stage at long tables with crockpots full of chili to be served at intermission. The house lights remain on as triangular libidinal tensions between jovial cowboy Curly, haughty but sexually curious farm owner Laurie, and brooding hired hand Jud play out. Occasionally we are plunged into darkness as the inner depths of the characters' psyches are explored. The Freudian implications Agnes de Mille hinted at in her original rendition of the dream ballet are fully exposed in choreographer John Heginbotham's disturbing fever vision of Laurie's repressed urges, embodied by Gabrielle Hamilton's visceral, sexy dancing.

Costume designer Terese Wadden outfits the cast in modern garb and music director Nathan Koci and orchestrator/arranger Daniel Kluger have given Richard Rodgers' sweetly romantic score a country-western twang. The effect is that of a town meeting where "traditional" values of family and firearms are maintained and outsiders like the misfit Judd and the foreign peddler Ali Hakim are either tragically pushed out or comically taken into the fold.

Without altering the text of Oscar Hammerstein's folksy adaptation of Lynn Riggs' *Green Grow the Lilacs*, Fish transforms *Oklahoma!* into a modern examination of American contradictions about interpersonal and community connections. No, it's not the expected feel-good evening, but

it's a startlingly fresh and dangerous take on a familiar favorite.



Ali Stroker and Will Brill in *Oklahoma!*

Credit: Little Fang Photo

Damon Daunno and Rebecca Naomi Jones expose Curly and Laurie's tentative, hidden attractions and deliver the beloved duets "People Will Say We're in Love" and "The Surrey with the Fringe on the Top" with tenderly aching vocals. Ali Stroker nearly steals the show as an uninhibited Ado Annie, steering her wheelchair like a rodeo queen while James Davis and Will Brill provide laughs as her dueling beaus Will Parker and the peddler Hakim. The reliable Mary Testa is a flinty, tough-as-nails Aunt Eller. Patrick Vaill's open wound of a Judd is the twisted heart of this production, bursting to belong, but not knowing how, he is like the lone wolf gunmen/stalkers plaguing modern America. We can't totally reject him and we don't know how to deal with him.

Another musical with a long production history also recently finally arrived on Broadway and employs familiar tropes to interpret modern society. Anais Mitchell's *Hadestown* comes to the Main Stem after concept albums, workshops, a 2016 Off-Broadway run at New York Theater Workshop and a London engagement at the National Theater. Mitchell's delightfully funky folk opera weaves together the myth of Eurydice and Orpheus with that of Persephone and Hades to create an allegory of the conflicting strains of passion, art, and commerce. Hades, king of the underworld, forces his wife Persephone, goddess of the harvest, to live with him in his gloomy subterranean domain for half the year. She emerges on the surface annually bringing spring with her. Bored with the arrangement, the wife rebels and the sinister ruler draws down Eurydice, a financially desperate young woman, to replace her. But Eurydice's lover, the gifted musician Orpheus, follows her and attempts to rescue her from Hades' clutches with his enchanting songs.



Amber Gray in *Hadestown*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

Mitchell makes hell into a dreary factory where the damned souls are exploited workers laboring on a concrete wall to protect them from outsiders and Hades is a ruthless business tycoon preaching isolationism (sound Trump-ily familiar?). The fact that the show began incubation before our current president took office does not lessen its relevance. Director and developer Rachel Chavkin has made the current incarnation sleeker and slicker than its more intimate and affecting NYTW version, but *Hadestown* is still a moving and rousing celebration of community and love. Mitchell's score retains its juicy pop flavor with more than a hint of Dixieland tang, echoed in the New Orleans ambience of Rachel Hauck's set and Michael Krass's costumes. Reeve Carney and Eva Noblezada are heartbreaking and tender as the separated lovers. Patrick Page's rumbling bass and stern presence make for a frightening and powerful Hades while Amber Gray contrasts as a loose-limbed, boisterously joyful Persephone. Veteran Andre De Shields is an elegantly arch narrator Hermes for this hot and captivating *Hadestown*.

While *Oklahoma!* and *Hadestown* offer modern slants on traditional templates, *Ain't Too Proud: The Life and Times of the Temptations* is an example of a relatively recent and already clichéd genre: the jukebox musical. Like *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, *Summer: The Donna Summer Musical*, *The Cher Show*, *Motown*, and *Jersey Boys* before it, *Proud* recycles the songbook of its subject, the phenomenally successful R&B male group The Temptations, to rake in nostalgic box office dollars.



Ephraim Sykes (center) and cast in *Ain't Too Proud: The Life and Times of the Temptations*.

Credit: Mathhew Murphy

There is an overlap of material from *Motown* and the basic thread of Dominique Morisseau's efficient book based on Temptations founder Otis Williams' memoir is a worn one—humble beginnings, skyrocketing success leading to personal problems, redemption in the end. Fortunately Morisseau, director Des McAnuff and choreographer Sergio Trujillo have crafted an effective delivery system for us to enjoy such hits as “Get Ready,” “Ball of Confusion,” and “My Girl.” The story and staging move rapidly and a spectacular cast led by Derrick Baskin as Williams displays magnificent pipes along with dance and acting skills. Special kudos to Ephraim Sykes who stunningly conveys the pyrotechnical vocals and shattering inner demons of David Ruffin, the most volatile member of the group.

All three of these Broadway shows are entertaining and absorbing, but *Oklahoma!* is the most challenging and disturbing.

Oklahoma!: April 7—Sept. 1. Circle in the Square Theatre, 1633 Broadway, NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including intermission. \$69.50—\$159.60. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

Hadestown: Opened April 17 for an open run. Walter Kerr Theater, 219 W. 48th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 7:30pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 7pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: 2 hours and 30 mins. including intermission. \$49—\$199. (800) 653-8000. www.ticketmaster.com.

Ain't Too Proud: The Life and Times of the Temptations: Opened March 21 for an open run. Imperial Theater, 249 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. \$49—\$179. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

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