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Oklahoma! PICK

October 10, 2007

By Les Spindle

Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1943 show, a watershed accomplishment in the book musical genre, perfected the art of seamlessly combining literate storytelling -- based on Lynn Riggs' play *Green Grow the Lilacs* -- with artful songs and dances. Misguided revivals of this musical are often soaked in soggy cornpone mush, but Downey Civic Light Opera's invigoratingly fresh rendition, stylishly directed by Marsha Moode, is musically sublime and dramatically powerful. It demonstrates why this piece is regarded as a classic.

Though the production boasts sparkling characterizations, choreographer Miriam Nelson creates the most exhilaration in her breathtaking adaptation of Agnes de Mille's original work. As in many R&H shows, a marvelous centerpiece ballet -- in this case "Dream Ballet," which ends the first act with a bang -- eloquently dramatizes the inner emotional life of the characters. Nelson does full justice to the number here, and she likewise elicits stellar results from the lighter numbers, such as the exuberant hoedown "The Farmer and the Cowman." Music director-conductor Eddy Clement complements Nelson's effort with his TLC treatment of the indelible score.

Leading a crackerjack ensemble, charming Robert Standley and golden-voiced Jill Van Velzer -- real-life spouses -- share an irresistible chemistry as strapping cowpoke Curly and the hard-to-get Laurey. Standley aces the beloved opening song, "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'," and Van Velzer glistens when leading group numbers such as "Many a New Day." The two are resplendent in the duet "People Will Say We're in Love." They're supported by exceptional performers: Karen Volpe's impishly flirtatious Ado Annie; high-kicking and charismatic Casey Garritano as her understandably jealous suitor, Will; Ann Peck McBride's delightfully droll Aunt Eller; August Stoten's chilling embodiment of the sinister Jud Fry; and George Champion's hilarious portrayal of the fast-talking Persian peddler. Courtney Burfeind deserves applause for her spectacular dancing as Dream Laurey in the aforementioned ballet sequence. The large ensemble -- including very young performers -- exhibits grace and polish.

Design elements match the production's overall excellence, particularly the lovely uncredited sets, Elizabeth Bowen's fine costumes, and the lighting by Design Partners Inc. In this production, the lyrics "You're doin' fine, Oklahoma" seem particularly apt.

*Presented by Downey Civic Light Opera at the Downey Theatre,*

*8435 E. Firestone Blvd., Downey.*

*Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2:30 p.m. Oct. 5-21.*

*(562) 923-1714.*