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Oklahoma! – South Downe Musical Society

Date – 7th November 2019

Director – Jane Pegler

Musical Director – Alan Pring

Choreographer – Kate Walsh

Venue – Ferneham Hall, Fareham

Type of production – Musical

Oklahoma! was the first musical written by Richard Rodgers (music) and Oscar Hammerstein II (lyrics) and made its debut on Broadway in 1943, becoming an immediate success with many of its songs going on to become standards that are still popular today. It is generally credited with being the first musical of the modern era with its songs being used to move the plot along. Although it's a show that I've seen many times before, the overture still brings a thrill of excitement and Jane Pegler's thoughtful production managed to shine some new lights on a familiar story.

The cleverly designed set made full use of the width of the Ferneham Hall stage, using wings at the sides for Aunt Eller's front porch and the smokehouse (both nicely rustic), leaving the main stage free for everything else. Very appropriate props and high quality projected images and videos set the scenes, along with great lighting and well-timed sound effects. Without the need for scene changes, the action moved along swiftly, making this a very pacey show. Costumes were excellent, most colourful and appropriate for the time, showing great attention to detail.

Perry Ralls gave a great portrayal of Curly, with the confident swagger of the most handsome man in town and a silky smooth baritone voice to match. But he's hiding a dark side which Perry brought out clearly in the scene where he tries to talk Jud into committing suicide. As Laurey, Helen Stoddart was the perfect foil, really sassy but still retaining an air of innocence, not wanting to admit she's in love with Curly – a superb singing voice too. Emma Brown shone as Aunt Eller, the organiser and peacemaker, determined to see the good in everyone.

Emily Horner gave an outstanding performance as Ado Annie – sheer exuberance! She wants everyone to be happy but she's not too good at choosing a man to marry. She has set her sights on Will Parker – a nicely understated performance by Sam Townsend as the nice but dim cowboy - but is tempted by travelling pedlar Ali Hakim, a great comic turn by Alan Jenkins. I have to mention Emma Hall, who gave Gertie Cummings the most wonderful laugh – like a chainsaw cutting through your brain!

Matt Sackman was the best Jud Fry I have ever seen: dark, brooding and moody throughout. A thoroughly unlikeable character you would think, but he still made me feel real sympathy for him as the outsider who has worked really hard to take care of Laurey and Aunt Eller. What a powerful voice he has too, yet still capable of immense subtlety.

Singing by the principals and chorus was to a very high standard and the imaginative choreography (Kate Walsh) was executed with great precision and enthusiasm. Everyone maintained their accents well throughout, and the fight scenes (thanks to Chris Blatch-Gainey) were convincingly realistic. The ballet, depicting Laurey's dreams and usually my least favourite part of the show, was performed to perfection by Charlotte Coqueral and Finley Hughes and kept me entranced throughout.

The orchestra, under the baton of Alan Pring (sadly, for the last time) produced a great sound, always accompanying and never overwhelming the singers. Together with the Ferneham Hall's excellent sound system, they made sure we heard every word.

Outstanding performances by everyone involved really made this a show to remember and a fitting end to South Downe's current run at the Ferneham Hall. Well done everyone!

Mark Donalds
NODA SE District 10 Representative

National Operatic and Dramatic Association

15 The Metro Centre, Peterborough PE2 7UH

Tel 01733 374 790 **Fax** 01733 237 286 **Email** info@noda.org.uk **Web** www.noda.org.uk

Twitter @NODAtweets **Facebook** NationalOperaticDramaticAssociation

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