

Butte Theater Stage Takes on Grand Story of Oklahoma!

Oklahoma, the nation's 46th state, was a wild and woolly wilderness at the turn of the century – where the settlers took law and order into their own hands and where the war between wandering cowboys and farmers who fenced them out was hard to reckon with. The Sooner State experienced several conflicts on its way to statehood in 1907, and that sort of history makes for great stage drama.

The Butte Theater's newest show, the classic western musical *Oklahoma!*, tells some of the tales of the folks who helped settle the Oklahoma Territory. Set outside the town of Claremore in 1906, *Oklahoma!* tells the story of cowboy Curly McLain (David Craven) and his romance with farm girl Laurie Williams (Laurie Sutton). Their love is challenged by Laurie's threatening farmhand, Jud Fry (Mel Moser), and much of the play follows the tension generated by this conflict.

Written by composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist/librettist Oscar Hammerstein II, *Oklahoma!* was the longest running musical during its day. It is best known for songs like "Oh What a Beautiful Morning," "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top," "People Will Say We Are in Love," and "Oklahoma".

True to its beginnings, the Butte production is the musical everyone loves. Curly and Will (Matthew Payne) sport voices as big and bold as the wide open prairies they sing about. Aunt Eller (Morgan Gengo), and a host of farmers and cowboys add their voices and dancing to the stage to create an energetic and playful scene.

The show includes a dream scene, a ballet, that transforms the stage into a dark and illusive fight for Laurie between Curly and Jud. "Now wait," you say, "ballet in a western musical? I thought this was about cowboys and farmers and farmer's daughters." That ballet, which is original to *Oklahoma!*, seems to have set the stage for the future of theatrical expression. *Oklahoma!* in 1943 set the precedent in theater for the use of dream ballet as means of clarifying an underlying plot. In this case, Laurie falls asleep with the help of some magical Egyptian salts she acquires from the visiting peddler. Her dream of marrying Curly ends in a violent frightful nightmare when Jud wakes her from sleep to carry her off to a box social, somewhat against her will and certainly against her better judgement.

While the main story focuses on Laurie's playing coy to court Curly's affection, another love plot involves roaming peddler Ali Hakim (JP Haynie), down to earth and homegrown Will, and flirty Ado Annie (Anna Malone). This latter triangle provides the laughs – Hakim is a romancer with marriage as the last thing on his mind, and he enjoys the flirtations of Annie much to the dislike of her intended, though more plain and traditional husband, Will. After succeeding in a scheme to avoid marrying Annie, Hakim, to his dismay, ends up shot-gun married to Gertie (Erin Woldford), a woman with the worst high-pitched cackle you can imagine.

The cast members put their voices together for some awesome renditions of the classic songs – including the *Oklahoma!* theme song, which they pour so much into it seems as if they are trying to fill the grand state from border to border with their music. This show is a great outing and will keep your toes tapping and your spirit laughing.

Oklahoma! shows at the Butte Theater in Cripple Creek through Sept. 27 as part of Thin Air Theatre Company's 2008 season. This classic western musical is packed full of old-time music and fun and is the perfect outing for a family or a special get-away.

This Production runs through September 27th. In August, show times are: Wednesday 1 & 7 p.m.; Thursday 1 & 7 p.m.; Friday 7 p.m.; Saturday 1 & 7 p.m.; Sunday 1 p.m. In September,

shows are offered Thursday at 1 & 7 p.m., Friday at 7 p.m., Saturday at 1 & 7 p.m., and Sunday 1 p.m. Tickets are \$14.75 adults/\$12.75 seniors/\$9.75 children. For information or to purchase tickets visit butteoperahouse.com or call 719-235-8944.