

# All about the state of its women in terrific 'Oklahoma'



Colte Julian, left, plays Curly and Allison Sill is Laurey in Paramount Theatre's Broadway Musical Series season opener, "Oklahoma!" (Liz Lauren)



By **Chris Jones** · Contact Reporter

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**A**t the top of director Jim Corti's gorgeously staged and emotionally sophisticated revival of "Oklahoma" at the **Paramount Theatre** in Aurora — with an 18-piece orchestra in the pit — the curtain rises on Aunt Eller messing with a saddle and Laurey putting her back, and her plunger, into the serious business of churning butter. Here, that is not the bucolic task it is traditionally staged to be.

As played by Allison Sill, Laurey is pioneer stock, all right. She doesn't bother with a dress, preferring farm-friendly pants. And she seems taller, and a good bit stronger, than Colte Julian's lightweight Curly, whose attempts at seduction of this woman of the territories via some fake surrey with a fringe on the top never have seemed more pathetic.

That's the first clue that some fresh ideas are in play in this spectacular production, which focuses relentlessly on the show's major theme — sexual trepidation — and adds one of its own: the fate of a woman in early America. Sill's Laurey — a very sophisticated piece of acting — has a look of panic in her eyes throughout the show and you get the sense that this hard-working landowner would be happier without any men in her life, without any need to navigate her first sexual experience, except that in her moment, in her territory, she has figured out that a woman must have protection. And her judgment with men, events prove, reflects a total lack of experience.

Before you cancel all your kids' tickets, rest assured that this 1943 musical masterpiece has not been modernized in some explicit way. On the contrary, this is an earthy, rooted "Oklahoma," in tune with women and the land. "Many a New Day," for example, is a song wherein Oscar Hammerstein's lyrics articulate women declaring their independence from men. Yet the original Agnes De Mille choreography, beautiful as it is to watch, hardly reflects such determination. Katie Spelman, who choreographs here, turns her ensemble of women away from being merely Laurey acolytes and toward a powerful, supportive tribe. Since the men in "Oklahoma" are vastly inferior to the women — morally, emotionally, in terms of the amount of work versus talking they do — this feminist tilt works quite beautifully.

That said, there is something deeply sad about Sill's performance (far different from, say, the Lyric Opera incarnation of this show). Corti and Spelman extend this melancholy to the famous Dream Ballet, which at one point has three Laureys on the Paramount stage: one wondering with Curly, one writhing with Jud and one standing there frozen with indecision, overwhelmingly frustrated, it seems, that a woman with a farm finds herself in such a position, her emotions and physical impulses be damned! The ballet is updated — huge digital images of Jud Fry stare down at Laurey, but that does not feel anachronistic because set designer Scott Davis has taken care that the slats of the architectural era dominate Jud's intrusive visage — it's as if Sigmund Freud was being batted back by the hardscrabble landscape and value system of the American pioneers.

If you've seen scores of productions of this show, like me, I'll venture you'll be fascinated by what is done here with this scene; I'm not sure I've seen another that made me so ache for the fate of the one dreaming.

Even Ado Annie Carnes, the show's comic lead who, as the song goes, is defined by her inability to say no, achieves an unusually steely core in the hands of Lillie Cummings, manipulating her suitors (Kareem Bandealy is Ali Hakim; Carl Draper is Will Parker) for her own desires. Julian sounds fresh and appealing as Curly, although this is not his show, and he understands, just as Peter Saide's Jud is unusually impotent, his awkward aggressions always little more than pathetic, which is well supported by the material. Curly and Jud's choice are made from the start — it's Laurey and her fledgling state that have to decide how to steel themselves against the uncivilized earth.

Davis's set for the show is truly a stunner — the design uses silhouettes of the requisite farm buildings and recreates the contours of the Plains, emphasizing young American's fragility against the undulating earth. But some productions of this Rodgers and Hammerstein masterpiece, especially ones that emphasize its current of sexual unease, end up being dark and heavy. Not so here. There is a light sun rising and stars in the heavens —

together a kind of mystical nod to "Carousel," it feels. Davis's work owes something to the Trevor Nunn revival of "Oklahoma," which I still remember, although Nunn's conception of the time and the land was very much a British point of view, importing weight and stereotype (and Hugh Jackman). In the City of Light, the sun offers some hope.

The only disappointment all night is the end of the piece — it just kind of stops when I was craving some culmination of the progressive ideas that are so much in evidence until that surrey makes its inevitable final appearance. Perchance they all ran out of time. Perchance there's no way to fight the traditional romantic ending, even though Corti and Spelman have forged a much stronger relationship between Laurey and Caron Buinis' Aunt Eller. You can't have everything — and here we get some sumptuously intimate staging from a director who is able to work in a Broadway-sized picture-frame and make it feel like the inside of a young woman's head.

Little in this show would work without Theresa Ham's earth-hewn costumes for the women — each seems selected to empower, or to reveal, and they tell a story all their own.

So all this transpires in Aurora. It's a city that sits on the edge of urbanity — corn fields to its west, everything's-up-to-date to the east. Its historic theater, older than the show, is thus the perfect place to wonder what it means to belong to the land.

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**REVIEW: "Oklahoma" at the Paramount Theatre**

**4 STARS**

**When:** Through Oct.18

**Where:** Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

**Running time:** 2 hours, 45 minutes

**Tickets:** \$41-\$56 at 630-896-6666 or [paramountaurora.com](http://paramountaurora.com)

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