

**Reading Operatic Society**  
**"OKLAHOMA"**  
**29th September 2007**  
**The Hexagon, Reading**

On Saturday 29th September 2007, I was pleased to be asked to review Reading Operatic Society's latest presentation "Oklahoma". This show has retained its appeal since it first appeared in 1943, due to a wealth of catchy tunes, a humorous story line and some excellent characters, a format that cannot fail to entertain an audience, and this we had on the night of my visit with good characters, excellent dance routines and first class singing from both principals and chorus.

**Maria Lukeman** - (LAUREY) - This was a nicely presented role by Maria, she was suitably 'flighty' and her feelings towards both 'Curly' and 'Jud Fry' were well portrayed. Her diction and projection was of a high order, all coupled with an excellent singing voice which blended well with 'Curly's' - Congratulations.

**Damian Soliesse** - (CURLY) - This part appeared to have been made for Damian. From his first appearance with a well sung 'Oh What a Beautiful Mornin'' to the Finale he maintained an excellent characterisation. He showed good stage movement and a confident rapport with 'Laurey' and his detestation of 'Jud Fry' - Well done.

**Clare Brown** - (ADO ANNIE CARNES) - I loved this character, Clare was 'Ado Annie' getting the characterisation absolutely spot-on. We had good diction so that every word could be heard with a well sustained accented voice. Her rapport towards both 'Will' and 'Ali Hakim' could not be bettered - Congratulations.

**Lestey Philips** - (AUNT ELLER) - This was a good effort by Leslie portraying the part of 'Aunt Eller' but I am afraid you appeared to be mis-cast. You looked too young for the part and both your singing and speaking voice needed much more projection as the words could not be heard, and in particular the auction at the start of Act 2 when you have to be feisty and pick up the pace in this particular scene. Without the aid of personal mikes it is important to face front as much as possible and to project your voice to the audience.

**Andrew Phillips** - (JUD FRY) - This part was well played by Andrew, he was suitably menacing with an undercurrent of evilness which came to the fore in the 'Smokehouse Scene' being well portrayed, and in particular his feelings towards 'Curly'. A well sung 'Lonely Room' which I feel is always a difficult number to put across - Well done.

**Allan Watkins** - (WILL PARKER) - This was another good characterisation by Allan, he had captured the right feelings for 'Will Parker' and brought out all the comedy in the part with good timing. His negotiations with 'Ali Hakim' over the 50 dollars was well put over. Allan improves every time I see him and this time we had dance routines together with two well sung numbers in 'Kansas City' and 'All er Nothin'' - Congratulations.

**Mark Williams** - (ALI HAKIM) - It was good to see Mark playing the same role as he did in the 1996 version of 'Oklahoma'. Once again he gave a very good interpretation of the 'Persian Peddler Man' with an eye for the ladies. Mark showed a greater maturity in this role with some excellent comedy timing - Well done.

**Raymond Burton** - (ANDREW CARNES) - This is a nice 'Cameo' role of which Ray made the most of. He had developed a fine character which certainly made the audience sit up and take notice on his every appearance. His performance could not be faulted - Great.

**David Price** - (IKE SKIDMORE) - This was a nicely presented small role, well in character.

**Alex Renshaw** - (GERTIE CUMMINGS) - This is a small 'Cameo' role which Alex presented very well. It is essential in this characterisation that the person displays an inane laugh and this we certainly had on the night.

**Chorus of Cowhands, Farrn-Hands etc.** - As in shows of this nature there is not a great deal for choruses to do, but that said, this chorus made the most of the numbers allotted to them and really came to the fore in the numbers 'The Farmer and the Cowhand' and 'Oklahoma'. Movement was good with everybody entering into the spirit and which came across to the audience.

**Dancers** - This was an excellent group of dancers, their movements were precise and together and interpreted the choreography with feeling. The dancing in the 'Dream Scene' was a high spot in the show - Congratulations.

**Jilt Morgan** - (PRODUCER & CHOREOGRAPHER) - Jill's sure touch was once again seen in this production. It had generally been well cast ensuring a good line up of principals. Movement and positioning of both chorus and principals could not be faulted with good characterisations being achieved. Choreography was superb with excellent routines, well danced, in particular the 'Ballet Scene' which was spectacular - Well Done.

**John Lawes** - (MUSICAL DIRECTOR) - Once again, John had gathered round him an excellent group of musicians who played the music sympathetically with a good balance and tempo's throughout. The cast had obviously been well rehearsed in the music with a good sound being generated in the chorus numbers with the principals giving a good account of themselves.

**Stage Manager & Crew** - A well managed stage with swift silent scene changes throughout giving a good continuity to the performance.

**Lighting Design** - Overall this was a good lighting design and in particular the lighting on the backcloth for the ballet sequence which was spectacular. I did however notice some black spots stage left and right front. Was this lamps being in the wrong position or principals not standing in the correct place?

**Lighting & Sound** - The Hexagon - Lighting cues were well picked up by Hexagon staff but once again, sound left a lot to be desired, mikes at the front of the stage appeared to be working, but there was no indication that other mikes on stage were. If and when they build a new theatre, perhaps they can make sure it is fitted with a proper sound system with technicians who can work them!!!!!!!!

**Costumes** - An attractive set of costumes, they were colourful and were suitably 'western'. From the front they looked as if they fitted, clean and pressed.

**Scenery** - A superb set of scenery by Proscenium Ltd. It looked new and had been well painted, in particular the back cloth for the 'Ballet Scene' end of Act I, which when lit was spectacular.

**Properties** - A good set of properties which fitted the period with firearms that looked and sounded authentic.

**Make-up** - Overall the make-up was good and stood up well under the stage lights, I did feel however that the men could have had a darker base to indicate that they worked outdoors.

**Programme** - This was an excellent programme with a most eye-catching cover. It had been well laid out with items of interest and details that were easily readable in subdued lighting. Photographs had been well reproduced and it was good to see a programme not smothered in advertising. I strongly recommend that you submit this programme for the NODA Programme Award.

**Front of House** - The Front of House team ensured the usual high standard one has come to expect from this society, easily identifiable, welcoming and helpful to their audience.

Thank you for inviting me to review your latest production and your excellent hospitality which was much appreciated. May I wish you all success with your next production "H.M. S. Pinafore".

*Henry Hawes - NODA Representative - Region 13*

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**Oklahoma!  
The Hexagon,  
Reading**

READING Operatic Society completely captivated the ebullient and earthy abandonment of the Wild West in this most melodic of shows.

There are so many winsome songs including Oh What a Beautiful Mornin' and People Will Say We're in Love, which were performed with musicality by the principals and chorus alike.

Directed and choreographed by talented Jill Morgan this smooth running show delighted throughout.

Damian Sollesse (Curly) sang and acted brilliantly, incorporating a cocky, cowboy swagger which was refreshingly endearing.

Maria Lukeman (Laurey) performed with charm and vivacity in her first leading role with the company, whilst Andrew Phillips, as a still and sinister Jud Fry, was magnificently menacing.

I was particularly impressed with the panache of Clare Ryan in her flamboyant feisty portrayal of Ado Annie.

The entire company worked as a team and a highlight for me was a dream sequence. The orchestra, under musical director John Lawes, provided sensitivity in this lively production.

**3 October 2007**

This is just a short note to say how much Dorothy and I enjoyed Reading Operatic Society's performance of Rogers & Hammerstein's fabulous hit musical Oklahoma.

I know that for many decades your society has been putting on productions such as this for the enjoyment of Reading people. I have consistently said that whilst the town of Reading is an economic success, economics alone do not make a town a good place to live.

For a town to be a really good place to live it needs a heart beat, what you and your colleagues have been doing and continue to do is to give our town a heart beat.

Saturday night's performance was wonderful and will live long in our memory. Please will you congratulate every one who contributed to making Saturday a night to remember.

Reading Operatic Society has given countless people enormous pleasure over many decades, long may it continue.

Thank you very much for your kindness and hospitality.

Good luck and best wishes.

*Councillor Chris Maskell*  
*The Right Worshipful the Mayor of Reading*