

'OKLAHOMA!' IS A MOVIE MILESTONE; R. & H. MUSICAL IN TODD-AO GREAT!

Hornblow Prod'n, Zinnemann Direction Top Standout Job

Telling a story as wholesome and comforting as a farm-cooked dinner and filled with songs that have become the unofficial anthems of the American people, "Oklahoma!" is one of the milestones in the history of the screen and of the theatre. The picture has practically everything that makes for entertainment—a flirtatious youthful love story, a clear-cut and dramatic conflict, lovable characters interpreted by a cast of stars giving top performances, down-to-earth comedy and tongue-in-cheek satire, a minor but important background of American history, a sweet nostalgia, a lusty and vigorous ballet and, most important of all, an infectious and all-pervading sense of fun.

The wide crescent shaped screen of the new Todd-AO process (almost as large as Cinerama, but lacking its disturbing photographic seams) reaches out to embrace the spectator and make him a part of the action until he seems to be living on the prairie and breathing the invigorating rural air.

The screenplay by Sonya Levien and William Ludwig, based on the book by Oscar Hammerstein from a play by Lynn Riggs, tells of life in the Oklahoma Territory just before it was admitted to the Union as a state. It was a time of transition from open range to an agricultural community. Here Aunt Ella (Charlotte Greenwood) and her pretty niece, Laurey (Shirley Jones), have a farm as neat and pretty as an angel cake and as independently self-sustaining as a crossroads general store. Laurey is loved by a young cowboy, Curly (Gordon MacRae), who has been made happy-go-lucky by his irresponsible career in the saddle. Curly is so cocky and self-confident that Laurey feels the best way to handle him is to pretend to think he isn't such a much and to make him jealous of Jud, the farm hand (Rod Steiger). Jud's passions have grown brutal under the harness of drudgery and his whole character has been warped by gaudy and ugly romantic dreams.

On an evening before she goes to a dance with him, Laurey has a grim premonition (told in super-dramatic choreography) of what her life could be with the man. Fearful of where her caprice is leading her, she causes an excitingly photographed runaway and escapes from him. After a taut bidding for supper baskets which becomes a contest between good and evil, she becomes engaged to Curly, who leaves the free and easy life of the range (not without some regrets, shared by the audience) to take up the settled duties of husband and farmer. Upon this simple story line has been grafted almost everything that a spectator looks for in the theatre.

The scripters, shunning small vanities, fixed such things in the Hammerstein libretto as needed to be fixed and refrained from changing such things as didn't. But, probably due to a producer decision to lengthen the musical version so as to have a balanced second period after intermission, there is one lag in the last quarter of the story. Some downbeat material from the final act of the original Lynn Riggs stage

play is resurrected and, since Rodgers and Hammerstein did not gild this with their magic, the effect is momentarily disjointed. This flaw is not disastrous.

Music Tells Story

Todd-AO, by showing the women's little farm in the foreground and cattle grazing on open range in the background, keeps the theme visually present through most of the action. Hammerstein's libretto has been closely followed so that Rodgers' music, in addition to being superlatively tuneful, sets moods, reveals character, and supplies editorial comment. Gordon MacRae makes his entrance as Curly singing "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" as he rides through corn that literally is as high as an elephant's eye. Music, words, scenery and the remarkably ingenious personality of an actor perfectly cast, sell the hedonist joy of life of the hero before a word of dialogue is spoken.

MacRae couldn't be better. He is teasing and cocky without once seeming conceited or losing the inner strength of the character. And to do justice to Shirley Jones, who plays opposite him, the critic needs to borrow the press book's stock of adjectives. She is winsome, adorable, dewy, youthful and full of sure-fire theatrical know-how. Her scenes of half snippy love-making during "People Will Say We're in Love" and of intensely practical day-dreaming during "Surrey With the Fringe on Top" are just about tops in corn belt savoir-faire and rural sophistication. She seems to be perkily speaking from everybody's home town.

Charlotte Greenwood fills her characterization with a mature and wholesome bloom that never descends to being a hick old maid. She is everybody's aunt as she churns real butter while encouraging the lovers. She's also a terrific asset to the "Everything's Up to Date in Kansas City" number, which features dancing done with humorous dash by Gene Nelson and a male ensemble that looks more like actual wranglers than chorus men. Nelson's nimble hoofing takes him all over a railroad station, a horse's back, and a moving train.

An Unusual Heavy

Rod Steiger, rugged, menacing and gloomily self-pitying, is fine as Jud, both in the lugubriously satiric "Pore Jud Is Daid" duet with MacRae and in his highly emotional part in the smashing dramatic ballet. Hammerstein's remarkable libretto made ingenious use of a startling paradox inherent in the original play. It seems contradictory that a story extolling the beauties of farm life should have a farmhand for its villain. Yet, as Hammerstein worked it out, this becomes the profoundly philosophic obverse of a medal that might otherwise have become phonily glittering. In the free and easy world of the cowboy, a man takes love's relaxations where he finds them. But in the farm community, a man is encompassed by female conventions and restrictions, and the man who cannot win a woman is doubly frustrated. He must buy his relaxations in brothels whose atmosphere breeds

ugliness and evil. Steiger keeps this incidental overtone of great drama ever present. By making Steiger the menace of her passion-charged ballet, Agnes de Mille creates one of the great non-dancing roles of dance drama, such as Hilariion in "Gizelle" or the Caliph in "Scheherazade."

Technicians as Stars

Movie makers, captivated by the rural realism of the film, will wonder how Arthur Hornblow will be able to swing into the mood of epic symbolism necessary to the big ballet. His breathtakingly beautiful accomplishment of this difficult transition is assisted by some of the finest technical help the screen has ever seen. Oliver Smith's production design achieves unity by using backdrops showing infinite fields of wheat beneath lowering prairie skies and Joseph Wright's art direction keeps this constantly present by creating skeleton sets that prevent any shift in locale from doing violence to the overall mood.

Gene Ruggiero's editing is difficult and notable for, while the dance drama progresses as an uninterrupted flow, sets and props constantly are changing. In one setup a distant cyclone will be seen, in the next, supplementing the development of the music, it will be spiraling almost overhead. Keogh Gleason's set decoration, selecting precisely the right prop for each second of the ballet, sets a standard for members of his craft to shoot at. Alvord Eiseman, the consultant for Eastman Color, triumphantly explores the neglected field of light and shade in color photography to heighten dramatic effect. The slow dissolves, quick wipes and other optical devices of Paul Morrell, the lab consultant, constitute another stellar performance.

The entire dream ballet, showing what Laurey's life would be with the ill-starred Jud, is an emotional study of evil raised to Faustian proportions. In this, Bambi Linn dances the part of the dream Laurey and the switch is made with such continuity of audience interest and sympathy that you're scarcely aware of the substitution. James Mitchell is the dancing impersonation of Curly. Far from being content to merely repeat her success in the Theatre Guild offering, Miss de Mille has created many stage pictures and bits of business especially for the camera. Here the dancing is not an extraneous element of entertainment but an essential part of the main narrative line.

Great Dance Drama

The choreography is fine enough to justify an entirely separate review. Miss de Mille has combined modern and classical ballet with sound screen story-telling in a way to place her among the top movie showmen along with her distinguished father and eminent uncle. Her presentation of "Many a New Day," when the neighborhood girls stop at Laurey's to freshen up, danced in crisp slips and camisoles, is radiant with the untroubled confidence of girlhood. And, a surprising achievement on so large a screen, it is charmingly intimate.

Schuyler Sanford, the Todd-AO technician, had a legion of problems throughout this monumental production and he solved them brilliantly. But here, coordinating his talents with the ingenuity of director Fred Zinnemann, he really surpasses himself. Artfully

"OKLAHOMA!"

(Rodgers & Hammerstein - Magna)
 Producer.....Arthur Hornblow, Jr.
 Director.....Fred Zinnemann
 Screenplay.....Sonya Levien, William Ludwig
 From the Theatre Guild production
 Book, lyrics.....Oscar Hammerstein II
 Music.....Richard Rodgers
 Based on a play by.....Lynn Riggs
 Photography.....Robert Surtees
 Color consultant.....Alvord Eiseman
 Production design.....Oliver Smith
 Art director.....Joseph Wright
 Set decorator.....Keogh Gleason
 Music conducted, supervised by Jay Blackton
 Arrangements..Robert Russell Bennett
 Background music adapted, conducted by Adolph Deutsch
 Choreography.....Agnes de Mille
 Sound.....Fred Hynes
 Edited by.....Gene Ruggiero
 Todd-AO; Eastman Color
 Cast: Gordon MacRae, Gloria Grahame, Gene Nelson, Charlotte Greenwood, Eddie Albert, James Whitmore, Shirley Jones, Rod Steiger, Barbara Lawrence, Jay C. Flippen, Roy Barcroft, James Mitchell, Bambi Linn, Jennie Workman, Virginia Bosler, Kelly Brown, Evelyn Taylor, Lizanne Truex, Jane Fischer, Marc Platt.
 (Running time—147 minutes plus intermissions)

narrowing his screen, when necessary, by such devices as shooting through the back of a mirror, he manages to let Robert Surtees' suave camera concentrate on the whimsical charm of each girl. Cast for contrasting types of beauty, they have been deftly individualized by Miss de Mille to produce eye-catching variety. Lizanne Truex and Jane Fischer, a lithe and droll team of pretty young dancers, are particularly attractive here and elsewhere in the picture.

The Comedy

In a show where every performer delivers a wealth of warmly human humor, one has to draw an arbitrary line to identify "the comedians." The broad comedy (it is too good to be called "low") is expertly handled by Eddie Albert, who makes the role of the Persian peddler a lot funnier and infinitely more believable than it was on the stage. James Whitmore does wonders with what formerly was the merely routine role of Paw Carnes, the shotgun toting father of Ado Annie.

Gloria Grahame, eschewing the greasy makeup and the paralyzed upper lip mannerism that has handicapped her recent efforts, gets a lot of fun out of her part of the man-crazy Annie. Her singing of "I Can't Say No" and "All Er Nothin'" are good for many laughs and chuckles. Through a performance that might easily have gone off-key, she always is antiseptically sexy. Something of the care with which the show was produced can be gathered from the fact that a fine character actor such as Jay C. Flippen is present to sing one number, "The Farmer and the Cowman Should Be Friends," and that top male dancers such as Marc Platt and Kelly Brown lead the barn dance that accompanies it, as well as the exhilarating "Oklahoma" which celebrates statehood.

October 14, 1955