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Gonna Treat You Great!
Oklahoma! ‘marriage’ represents all that is good at ETSU

The farmers and the cowmen in the classic Rodgers and Hammerstein musical Oklahoma! can’t seem to get along, but the students from ETSU’s Department of Music and the Division of Theatre and Dance have taken to each other like chaff on wheat.

Although it has been nearly a decade since the two campus academic areas collaborated, with just days to go until its Nov. 19 opening, all the members of the stage family are working to make this marriage harmonious.

“What is so great about this production is that everyone has something to learn from each other,” says director Cara Harker, a faculty member in Theatre and Dance and head of ETSU’s dance program. “We have music majors who are really, really strong in voice. We have theater majors who are really, really strong in acting, and I love how that one night we are working on a scene and theater people come over and are helping the music students work on the scene, and then the next night we are learning music and there are the music majors helping everyone find the harmony. Everybody has something to give in that way, and the spirit is giving, not competitive. It’s a director’s dream.”

Partnering with Harker have been Dr. Matthew Potterton, director of the ETSU Chorale and East Tennessee Belles, and Karen Smith, director of ETSU’s Opera Workshop. Potterton has been arraying the orchestra and working with the chorus, while Smith has been working one-on-one with the leads. “They came in right at the first week of rehearsals and taught everybody the music,” Harker says, “and have been coming in weekly and they sound great already … I think it’s the start of a ‘long happy marriage.’ ”

For this marriage of programs and talents, Oklahoma! was one of the first and definitely the best choice, Harker and Potterton say. “Oklahoma! was the first musical to seamlessly integrate dance and song into the plot line,” Harker says. “It first premiered on Broadway in 1943 and that was something that audiences had never really seen before. We take it for granted today, but prior to that, dance was really seen as an entertaining distraction in a musical. Oklahoma! changed the face of musical theater.”

“I really like how there’s a focus to this show,” says music performance major Mason Van Horn, who plays the lovable romantic lead, Curly. “It seems like every line and movement has a purpose.”
The show does offer the whole package, Potterton says. “There is a lot dance, a lot of singing and a lot of great acting, together with the great, ageless writing of Rogers and Hammerstein,” he says.

Van Horn, a junior from Kingston, Tenn., calls it “bringing the two powerhouses of arts together.”

The friendly cross-pollination will also affect the show’s orchestra of about a dozen, which will intermingle music students, alumni and professionals from the area, Potterton says.

Not only does this cast embody a unique mixture of actors, musicians and dancers, but the classic stage show also includes an equally happy combination of entertainment fare for the audience, as a grudging romance blossoms between spunky Laurey and cowman Curly and comedy and conflict abounds betwixt neighbors in the new territory of Oklahoma.

“What I love about this musical is that there is a little bit of everything,” Harker says. “You have the romance. You have the swashbuckling stage combat – choreographed by Bobby Funk – which is really fun. You have comedy, danger … It really does have something for everyone. It’s something you can bring the whole family to, as well.”

As a BFA graduate of Belmont University, Luke Hatmaker, a 24-year-old business major at ETSU, is a veteran of stage plays and some musicals, but Oklahoma!’s unique mixture is a new experience for him. “Oklahoma! really blends the comedic and the dramatic,” says Hatmaker, whose character “poor” Jud incites much of the show’s drama. “A lot of musicals will throw a couple funny jokes in there. This show touches every part of the spectrum. ‘The Dream Ballet’ is a very dark scene. You go from that to ‘Oh, What a Beautiful Morning’ and you cover the whole spectrum of emotions.”

Dance is an integral part of this marriage of theater, arts and disciplines, and Harker is “honoring the original production” with a pared down version of Agnes De Mille’s legendary Dream Ballet with a Dream Laurey, as well as the numerous other high-energy dances sprinkled throughout this pioneer of musicals. “I’ve never had a director that comes from such an extensive dance background,” Hatmaker says. “This is very evident in the way she directs. I like it when the director is active and ready to get up on stage and literally direct the movement.”

“People Will Say We’re in Love,” “I Cain’t Say No,” “The Farmer and the Cowman Should be Friends” and, of course, the title song and finale “Oklahoma!” should be show-stoppers, Harker and Potterton say.

The blockbuster show and amiable cast have made the ETSU production a delight to work with, Harker says, but there have been challenges, as well – mostly in fitting this extravaganza into the intimate Bud Frank Theatre. “There is not a lot of wing space,” she says. “There’s not a lot of fly space, so in terms of the set design, we can’t have wagons coming on the stage area, so those are practical applications that we needed to face …
“Melissa Shafer is the set designer, and Dr. Delbert Hall, the lighting designer, and they have come up with ways of indicating different spaces through lighting and set design, rather than having a fully structured set. We also have so many people in the cast that having a full set wouldn’t quite work, so we’ve been creative in setting the scene in Oklahoma! without the complete representation. I think it’s working well.

“But we do want to honor this classic so with costume, music and choreography, it honors the original production. It just takes some adjusting to fit a cast of about 25 on the Bud Frank stage.”

But the sizable production is good practice for the future, says Anita DeAngelis, director of the sponsoring Mary B. Martin School of the Arts. “Musical theater is big and it’s hard with our current facilities to do make this work,” she says. “By the time you have all the actors and musicians – if you want instrumental music to be live – and leave room for dance numbers, it can be very challenging – a lot of different moving parts all at once.

“But this joint production is helping us to prepare for our new facilities, when we’ll be able to produce more of these kinds of performances. So, we’re pretty excited about it a little nervous about it, as well.”

This multi-faceted collaboration represents “all that is good about ETSU,” says Pat Cronin, head of the Division of Theatre and Dance, now in the Department of Communication and Performance. “We know how to work together and we come together to make not only art but all things wonderful. The opposite of the word silo is ETSU and Oklahoma! is the best of that spirit.

“How wonderful that in the spirit of the Arts Initiative we come together to celebrate all the arts – music, dance, painting, theater – in this one joint adventure. That’s not really happening too many other places.”

Oklahoma! will run Wednesday-Sunday, Nov. 19-23, with performances each evening at 7:30, including Sunday, as well as a Sunday matinee at 2 p.m. in the Bud Frank Theatre. To purchase tickets, please visit www.etsu.edu/theatre.