

Oklahoma!

By Phil Hall

One of the most ambitious independent film productions of the 1950s was the cinematic adaptation of the long-running Broadway landmark "Oklahoma!" Perhaps the most unusual aspect of this endeavor was the decision by the show's creators, composer Richard Rodgers and librettist/lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, to swat away offers by the major Hollywood studios and take a gamble with the start-up Magna Theatre Corporation, which aimed to use the beloved musical as the vehicle for bringing the widescreen Todd-AO format to theatrical venues. But working outside of the studio system enabled Rodgers and Hammerstein to retain greater control of the adaptation of their material, and this set-up assured them that any changes to the content would be made only with their approval.



Gordon MacRae sings to Shirley Jones about his dream of owning "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top." Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

Even more unusual was the decision to hire Fred Zinnemann as the director of the film version. Zinnemann never helmed a musical before and was best known for his intensely riveting dramas such as "The Search," "The Men," "High Noon," "The Member of the Wedding" and the Oscar-winning "From Here to Eternity." One would imagine that a production of this scope, which incorporated iconic songs as well as a groundbreaking ballet centerpiece, would require the guidance of a veteran musical director such as Stanley Donen or Vincente Minnelli, rather than the creator of emotionally intense works.

But Zinnemann's predilection for the dramatic gave the frothy "Oklahoma!" a sense of complex gravitas that was absent from other mid-1950s musicals – not to mention the original Broadway production. When viewing "Oklahoma!" today, it seems unusually modern in its expression of human angst and its portrayal of how minor jealousies and petulance can metastasize into painful crises. Part of this impact was achieved in the off-beat casting of Rod Steiger (who transformed the character Jud Fry from a stock villain into an intellectually tortured untouchable) and film noir diva Gloria Grahame (who played the comic relief Ado Annie without a trace of wink-and-nudge farce, thus making her character's sexual cluelessness more invigorating).

Zinnemann might have taken the film into even darker territory, as witnessed in his unusual eagerness to audition non-musical young Method actors Paul Newman and James Dean for the Curly role. (Sadly, their audition footage, which included the singing of the "Poor Jud Is Dead" number with Steiger, disappeared years ago.) But under Zinnemann's direction, Gordon MacRae, a usually bland leading man of forgettable musical comedies, tapped into hitherto unknown dramatic abilities. MacRae's Curly went beyond the one-dimensional aspect of the role as a mischievous but lovable cowboy and located an insouciant malevolence that clouded the character's personality and motivation. His actions towards Jud by trying to influence his suicide is not, by any stretch, a comic highlight, but a disturbing attempt to push an unstable soul into a horrible act. And MacRae's Curly's attitude towards Laurey goes so far beyond a harmless teasing that it dilutes much of the character's initial sympathy – although his inevitable redemptive mature behavior compensates for his early boorishness.

Still, "Oklahoma!" is a musical and not a melodrama, and Zinnemann responded to the material with an imaginative style that took full advantage of the widescreen format. Actually, it took advantage of two widescreen formats: since the rollout of the 70mm

Todd-AO technology was slow and expensive, the film was simultaneously filmed in the 35mm CinemaScope process to ensure a wider distribution. Although Zinnemann never directed in either color or a widescreen format, the visual aspect of “Oklahoma!” was uncommonly vibrant, with cinematographer Robert Surtees (backed by uncredited Oscar-winner Floyd Crosby on second unit) capturing the crisp beauty of the film’s rural locations. (Exteriors were actually shot in Arizona, as Oklahoma proved oddly incompatible for the production). And despite the dimensional differences between Todd-AO and CinemaScope – a 2.20:1 format versus a 2.35:1 format – the film was barely different between the rival exhibition technologies.

In moving much of the story outdoors, the classic score was wonderfully enhanced with boldly conceived outdoor sequences. The songs “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’” and “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” were playfully visualized as odes to a laconic farm country, while the complicated “Kansas City” dance number was effectively staged with a large ensemble in a compact open air train depot. Working within a studio, Zinnemann provided expert framing for Agnes de Mille’s groundbreaking dream ballet (with Laurey in a conflict between Curly and Jud), which offered an astonishing avant-garde sequence laced with a Freudian psychosexual menace that bore no resemblance to anything being turned out by the major Hollywood studios.

It also helped that the film brought in reliable performers to inhabit the story’s broader roles with unapologetic hamming. Eddie Albert’s oleaginous Persian peddler Ali Hakim, Gene Nelson’s handsome but dim cowboy Will Parker and the sublime Charlotte Greenwood’s earthy Aunt Eller offered a jolly presence to keep Zinnemann’s edgier elements in check, creating the cinematic equivalent of a yin-yang balance.

The biggest surprise was the film’s greatest gamble: putting unknown Shirley Jones in the central role of Laurey. The young actress had never appeared in films before – and it is impossible to imagine that any major Hollywood studio would have given such a key role to someone with no previous big screen track

record – but being under personal contract to Rodgers and Hammerstein assured that she would be front and center in this endeavor. Jones was not lacking in photogenic charms and she possessed a fine voice, and Zinnemann carefully guided her through the role’s light comedy and difficult emotional turns, which resulted in one of the most startlingly effective film debuts of the era. Laurey’s difficult relationship with Curly and the disastrous friendship with Jud was the core of “Oklahoma!” and Jones gave a mature performance that beautifully reflected the self-indulgence of her naïve young character.

“Oklahoma!” was first presented in a roadshow re-release – involving limited, theatrical-style exhibition with advance-sale reserved seat ticketing and two screenings a day. For its New York City premiere in October 1955, the Rivoli Theatre underwent a \$350,000 renovation that included a new booth to accommodate the massive Todd-AO projector and a \$12,000 screen curtain decorated with Oklahoman motifs. “Oklahoma!” ran 51 weeks at the Rivoli and Magna Theatre Corporation handled the Todd-AO roadshow release to major cities around the U.S., with a wider national release in the CinemaScope version outsourced to RKO Pictures. This was one of the final releases by RKO, which shut down in early 1957 after years of mismanagement and financial instability. 20th Century Fox took over the general release rights following RKO’s demise, and Rodgers and Hammerstein were satisfied by the studio’s work that they engaged it for the general release of the 1958 film version of their musical “South Pacific,” with Magna again handling the roadshow distribution.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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