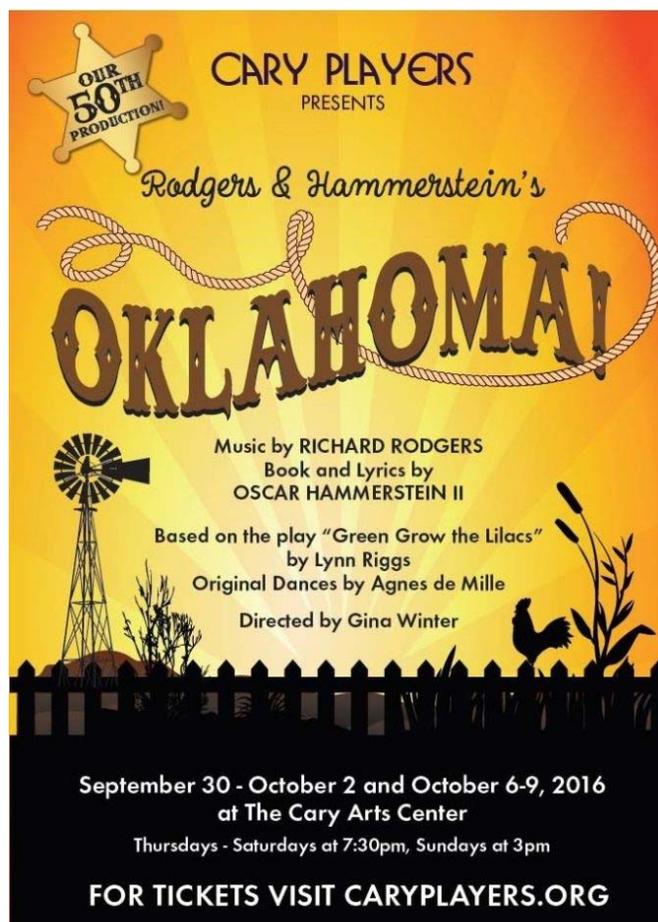


## Cary Players' 50th Show, *Oklahoma!*, Is Charming and Satisfying

by **DUSTIN K. BRITT+** • OCTOBER 5, 2016



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Cary Players' 50th production, **Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!***, opened last Friday night in the **Cary Arts Center**. **Cary Players** has served the community for over 15 years, and has continued to up the ante on production value, with last season's record-breaking ***The Wizard of Oz*** being one of their most technically ambitious to date. ***Oklahoma!*** is a decidedly simpler production.

With **Lynn Riggs'** 1931 play ***Green Grow the Lilacs*** as their source, first-time collaborators **Richard Rodgers** (composer) and **Oscar Hammerstein II** (librettist) secured their place in theater history with a musical set in the pre-state territory of Oklahoma, circa 1906. Cowboy Curly McLain and his wooing of farmer's daughter Laurey Williams is one of the best-known romantic entanglements in American musical theater.

The show's **1943 Broadway premiere** led to a record-breaking 2,212 performances and special Pulitzer Prize for the writing team. The play was still running at the time of the first-ever Tony Awards® in 1947; but, like R&H's ***Carousel***, it had opened too early to be considered for nomination. That was the year of ***Finian's Rainbow***, ***Brigadoon***, and ***All My Sons***.

After its opening, countless tours, revivals, community theater and high school productions, and a **1955 film adaptation** followed. Over the years, several chart-topping covers of "People Will Say We're in Love" soared across the radio waves, crooned by the likes of **Frank Sinatra** and **Bing Crosby**.

Building on a newly-developed structure, the "book musical," which valued integrating story and song, as opposed to musical revue, ***Oklahoma!*** was lauded for its complex plot, connecting musical motifs, and the 15-minute "dream ballet" — something that R&H would revisit in later shows. **Cary Players** director **Gina Winter** took a twist from the 1998 London revival; and, rather than casting a "Dream Laurey" and "Dream Curly" to dance this piece, had the two leads serve as the dream duo themselves.

Luckily for director Winter, she got ahold of **Randi Winter** as her Laurey. Randi Winter, who won a Triangle Independent Theatre Award last year for her choreography of *Reefer Madness* at **North Raleigh Arts and Creative Theatre**, has the chops necessary to pull off this task. She is a funnier, tougher, and less prissy Laurey, and packs a light and crystal-clear soprano, despite a few minor squeaks.

**Seth Packham**, in his stage debut, offers up a chill, boyish Curly, eschewing some of the more grandiose characteristics on the page. While Packham does not quite have Randi Winter's polish, he has made a noticeable entry onto the Triangle stage. He is a solid vocalist, and keeps Curly sweet and funny.

From lights-up, **Virginia O'Brien** grabs this show, stuffs it in her purse, and flees the theater, having stolen it singlehandedly. Her Aunt Eller is jovial, hilarious, and endearing. It's a fine performance by a true natural talent, and you can't take your eyes off her. I kept hoping she'd sing "You'll Never Walk Alone" until I realized that was the wrong show.

**Scott M. Peters**, a longtime backstage artist, serves as our primary antagonist, Jud Fry. Peters is not as terrifying as one might hope, but he finds great sincerity. Peters may have found a new way of playing Judy Fry: less like an ogre and more like **John Steinbeck's Lennie Small**.

**Harper Cleland** finds the comedy in Ado Annie Carnes, and plays the ditzy sweetheart to great effect. She had a cold this weekend, so her voice was not where it could be; but she pushed through and sold the character on charm. An accomplished local actor, Cleland's well-rested voice will likely impress next weekend. Her comedic timing is certainly worthy of praise.

**Ryan Miller's** Will Parker is swoon-worthy. He is handsome, funny, and not a half-bad dancer. His strong tenor shines in this part, and the audience is always pleased when he comes on stage.

**Mark Anderson** finds humor in Ali Hakim — one of Rodgers and Hammerstein's most wildly racist characters — and his scenes with Cleland and Miller are some of the production's most entertaining. He doesn't quite sound Persian, but he's fun nonetheless.



*Oklahoma!* stars Scott M. Peters as Jud, Randi Winter as Laurey, and Seth Packham as Curly

A strong ensemble rounds out the show, with many strong dances (choreographed by director Gina Winter) suited to the actors' abilities, though "The Farmer and the Cowman" has some big gaps in activity.

A few of the younger ensemble members are difficult to hear, and don't have the stage presence of some of their more experienced co-actors. But everyone fits together as a cohesive company.

Vocal director **Heather Copley** and conductor **Darylene Hecht** have teamed up to create a strong sound from the cast and the orchestra. These songs, like most of Rodgers and Hammerstein, are straightforward in structure, but have complex harmonies and colors that can go unnoticed by an untrained ear. These harmonies are tight and blended well, especially among the female ensemble. Overall, the show is vocally strong, though some bigger moments, such as the title song "*Oklahoma!*" lack some of the expected punch. Hecht's orchestra is on-point throughout.

**Dan Chadwick's** sound, assisted by **Bob Kulow**, helps keep orchestra and cast on track and vocal solos are clear, but dialogue scenes need much more projection from the cast. The show's greatest technical work comes from lighting designer **Liz Grimes Drossler**, whose dreamlike palette appropriately favors mood over realism.

The set, co-designed by Winter and **Ian Robson** serves the story well without becoming a "Show About a Set." The windmill is a terrific piece. Most scene changes are smooth, but some of the behind-the-scrim moves were overly lit and distracted from the scene in front ("I Cain't Say No" became "A Song About a Mobile Home"). The transformation of Aunt Eller's house into Jud's smokehouse is particularly clever.

A few glitchy lights appeared near the top of the show, but were quickly dealt with by some techie ninjas. Any minor technical hiccups (there were a few on Saturday night) were fixed quickly and without distraction — a sign of a strong running crew chief (**Ashton Schlachter Marquie**) and stage manager (**Natasha A. Jackson**).

Any other problems are the writer's fault. A steadily developing storyline is followed by a climax and resolution that occur in the span of 15 minutes with what might be the most ridiculously rushed and haphazard ending in musical-theater history. Even in Gina Winter's able hands, the final scene, which should be riddled with intensity and shock, comes across as campy.

As with other R&H shows, misogyny takes a front seat, with a grand deal of slut-shaming, women-buying, and emotional manipulation. Winter manages to eliminate some of this problem, pulling strength and assertiveness from her female actors and minimizing the machismo of some of the guys.

One despicable character flaw presents itself when our hero attempts to convince Jud Fry to commit suicide, but Winter has worked with Packham and Peters to play it with more comedy than the 1955 film, in which **Gordon MacRae** briefly turns into **Hannibal Lecter**.

"Lonely Room" should not have been cut. It adds much to Jud's character, and Peters appears more than able to sing it.

The show is well-paced, clocking in at 2.5 hours, but not feeling nearly as long. With visually striking design, some very fine performances, and many laughs, any minor hiccups are overshadowed and do not sour the production. It is certainly worth the ticket price to pay a satisfying visit to the town of Claremore, Oklahoma.

The show is in **PG territory** for some stage combat, mild language, gunshots, and some intense emotional moments.



*Oklahoma!* also stars Tim Wiest (center) as Andrew Carnes and Virginia O'Brien as Aunt Eller

**SECOND OPINION:** Sept. 27th Cary, NC Cary Citizen preview by Michael Papich: <http://carycitizen.com/2016/09/27/cary-players-bring-classic-musical-to-town/>; and Sept. 24th Raleigh, NC CVNC preview by Kathryn Trogdon: <http://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/community/cary-news/article103710637.html>.

The **Cary Players** present **OKLAHOMA!** at 7:30 p.m. Oct. 6-8 and 3 p.m. Oct. 9 at the **Cary Arts Center**, 101 Dry Ave., Cary, North Carolina 27511.

**TICKETS:** \$20 (\$18 students and seniors), except \$17 per person for groups of 20 or more.

**BOX OFFICE:** 800-514-3849 or <http://caryplayers.org/shows/oklahoma/> (right-hand column).

**GROUP RATES** (20+ tickets): Purchase in person at the Cary Downtown Theatre Box Office, 122 E. Chatham St. Cary, NC 27511, from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday and from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday.

**SHOW:** <http://caryplayers.org/shows/oklahoma/> and <https://www.facebook.com/events/641479902692155/>.

**PRESENTER:** <http://www.caryplayers.org/>, <https://www.facebook.com/CaryPlayers>, and <https://twitter.com/CaryPlayers>.

**VENUE:** [http://www.townofcary.org/departments/parks\\_recreation\\_cultural\\_resources/facilities/cultural\\_arts\\_centers/caryartscenter.htm](http://www.townofcary.org/departments/parks_recreation_cultural_resources/facilities/cultural_arts_centers/caryartscenter.htm), <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Cary-Arts-Center/235735853122351>, and <http://www.caryplayers.org/cary-arts-center/>.

**DIRECTIONS/PARKING:** <http://maps.google.com/>.

**NOTE:** **Arts Access, Inc.** of Raleigh will audio-describe the show's 3 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 9th, performance.

**OTHER LINKS:**

**Green Grow the Lilacs** (1931 Broadway play with music): <http://www.ibdb.com/show.php?id=4099> (Internet Broadway Database) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green\\_Grow\\_the\\_Lilacs\\_%28play%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Grow_the_Lilacs_%28play%29) (Wikipedia).

**Lynn Riggs** (Claremore, OK-born playwright, 1899-1954): <http://www.ibdb.com/person.php?id=7452> (Internet Broadway Database) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynn\\_Riggs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynn_Riggs) (Wikipedia).

**Oklahoma!** (1943 Broadway and 1947 West End musical): <http://www.rnh.com/show/78/Oklahoma!> (Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization), <http://www.ibdb.com/show.php?id=6697> (Internet Broadway Database), and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oklahoma!> (Wikipedia).

**Richard Rodgers** (New York City composer, 1902-79): <http://www.rnh.com/bio/175/Rodgers-Richard> (Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization bio), <http://www.ibdb.com/person.php?id=8323> (Internet Broadway Database), and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\\_Rodgers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Rodgers) (Wikipedia).

**Oscar Hammerstein II** (New York City librettist, 1895-1960): <http://www.rnh.com/bio/154/Hammerstein-II-Oscar> (Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization bio), <http://www.ibdb.com/person.php?id=7965> (Internet Broadway Database), and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar\\_Hammerstein\\_II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_Hammerstein_II) (Wikipedia).

**Gina Winter** (Fuquay-Varina, NC director): <https://www.facebook.com/GinaWin> ().

#### **EDITOR'S NOTE:**

**Dustin K. Britt** is a Triangle native, holds a master's degree in special education from **East Carolina University**, and teaches locally. He can be spotted all over the Triangle area either painting scenery or chewing on it. He has received local theater award nominations for doing both. He is a devoted cinephile and author of **Hold the Popcorn**, a movie blog on Facebook. Click [here](#) to read his reviews for **Triangle Review** and **Triangle Arts and Entertainment**. He can also be found via [his official Facebook page](#) and on Twitter [@dkbritt85](#).