

# 'OKLAHOMA'

## Box office bu

FROM producing a run of rather mediocre pre-war shows, Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society have hit a winning vein with post-war American musicals, and their production this week of "Oklahoma" at the Regent Theatre, Chelmsford, is a smash hit which is breaking all records.

"Annie Get Your Gun" last year started this run, and "Oklahoma" has clinched it, particularly from the box-office point of view.

It is full houses all this week and a nice fat return for the company in exchange for what can be classed as their most professional production yet, at least in my memory.

"Oklahoma" is a better production than "Annie" because a number of weak spots have been built up, noticeably the male chorus and dancers, and singing parts generally are in the hands of people who can sing.

### LAVISH AND COLOURFUL

The production is lavish and colourful and bound together with the magic of Richard Rogers' music, which has miraculously survived over 13 years of constant plugging.

There is no doubt the Society have hit a new high spot, but their "Oklahoma," with its minimum of story and maximum of singing does not have quite that same air of breathless excitement which marked their production of "Annie" last year. Maybe a second hit can never be quite as exciting as the first.

It is more competent and polished, but that touch-and-go sparkle of last year does not seem to come through in the same way, although this, I feel, is mainly due to the choice of play.

The show is built around the singing of Freddie Costello in the lead, and a fine, large voice he has, making the most of those now classic numbers, such as "Oh! What a Beautiful Morning" and "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top." He has the easy, self-confident manner so vital to the part.

Newcomer to the Society, Gillian Pownall, plays opposite him as Laurey with a voice, although well trained and pleasing, does not have the carrying power to really fill the theatre. Perhaps this is the legacy of a contralto singing a soprano part, or just plain nervousness.

Never-the-less, she is the charming, demure young lady called for by the part.

This year the smaller parts measured up far better than usual, particularly David Flatt, best actor of the lot, as the Persian pedlar, Ali Hakim. His accent is excellent and he expertly steers himself through some tricky singing passages. Stan Parson, too, makes a first-class job of the grim Judd Fry, particularly when he duets with

Freddie Costello. By sheer hard work and doggedness he has built himself up to be one of the Society's most valued members.

As amorous Ado Annie, "the girl who can't say no," Betty Hughes has the plum female part and one that she tackles with a will, producing a lively, lovable character.

Once more two stalwarts of the company, Helen Eldridge and Jim Welham, provide their own inimitable interpretations of eccentric characters; and John Daldry as a singing, dancing cowboy with a crush on Ado Annie is entertaining and extremely amusing.

### BEAUTIFUL DANCING

The dream sequence in ballet was handled well by Brenda Goddard, dancing beautifully, and Ray Marsh and Sid Collicott.

Male chorus and dancers are far better than in previous years and do much to raise the standard to a hitherto unattained height. The female dancers perform with precision and grace, although the female chorus still lacks power of voice.

Other principal parts are well taken by Ann Palmer, Mike Reed, Robin Sampson, Ken Collins, Gillian Farr and Ken Davison.

### A TRIUMPH

"Oklahoma" is without doubt a triumph in every way. The cast, about 50 of them, deserve the applause they have received throughout the week, and the £1,600 spent on the production will be amply recovered.

Production is again in the hands of Phyl Payne, and the musical director, to whom a great deal of credit for the improved standard of singing must go, is Dr. A. Stephens.

Dancers are: Trixie Brewer, Gillian Farr, Angela Gale, Brenda Goddard, Ann Jackman, Audrey Malyon, Pat Mathews, Kay Tros, Sid Collicott, Ian Haldane, Ray Marsh, John Morella, Mike Reed, Peter Smith, Andrew Steven.

Female chorus: Shirley Clark, Gillian Edwards, Win Follen, Lilian George, Grace Hawes, Myrtle Hiscock, Jane Horrocks, Sheila de Laspee, Agness McClellan, Ruth Robinson, Muriel Sampson, Peggy Welham.

Male chorus: Fred Anelli, Harry Catton, Ken Collins, Ken Davison, Fred Gisby, Donald Green, Walter Hartley, Herbert Heisterman, Robin Sampson, Peter Wallbridge, Frank Wilkinson.