

## The new pioneer spirit Dancing with joy



Photo: Laurie Lewis

### **The original *Oklahoma!* revolutionised musical theatre. David Gritten asks director Trevor Nunn how the National intends to top a classic production; Ismene Brown meets the choreographer stepping into Agnes de Mille's shoes**

A DEAFENING cacophony of chicken clucks crackles out of an invisible loudspeaker, followed by a moo that makes our seats quake. Yellow-haired and apple-cheeked, Susan Stroman flinches, then cackles almost as loudly as the chickens.

We are sitting high in the National Theatre's Olivier auditorium, during preparations for the staging of that venerable warhorse of a musical, *Oklahoma!* Down below us on stage, stagehands are hammering at Laurey's plain, realistic prairie house, others are evidently checking the sound effects.

"If this were the usual American production, that house'd have geraniums all over it," comments Stroman, who is nowadays probably Broadway's pre-eminent choreographer of musicals. Those who have seen her routines in *Crazy For You* and the current *Show Boat* in the West End know that she manages to be both energetically in period and subtly up-to-date in emotional inflection.

She knows she needs all of both for the NT. Her choreography, in Trevor Nunn's new production, is replacing the original dances of Agnes de Mille, a now legendary figure who almost singlehandedly reinvented the musical with the 1943 *Oklahoma!*, where the morning is beautiful, the corn as high as an elephant's eye, and Laurey dreams about two different men she's attracted to.

Familiar from afternoon movie slots and 100 amateur productions every year, Rodgers and Hammerstein's story takes us to 1905 Oklahoma, where pioneer girl Laurey is wooed by good cowboy Curly and bad farmhand Jud, who fight for her till death (a plot, by the way, uncannily similar to Petipa's classical Russian ballet of 1898, *Raymonda*).

It was unusual by all standards of the time, but two things in particular broke new ground: its realistic portrayal of Jud's violent death, and Agnes de Mille's psycho-sexual "dream ballet", so powerful that 46 of the 72 Broadway musicals opening in the three years following included ballets.

It's the "dream ballet" that hooked Susan Stroman in 1998 when Nunn invited her to dare to hoist her own flag on de Mille's revered territory.

"When he said the word, '*Oklahoma!*' I nearly stopped breathing, because I couldn't believe he was going to do this. In the States it is very much revered, sacred ground. But if I were to say to a creative team in 1998 working on a new musical, wouldn't it be swell to have a 15-minute ballet at the end of Act I?, they would think I was crazy. To be given the opportunity to do a ballet within a musical comedy is rare, and very appealing."

Stroman is a most attractive woman, short, smiley, with long blonde hair that when we met had a schoolgirlish bunch coming out of the top that didn't seem uncharacteristic, somehow. She says the words "The National" with a mixture of delight and awe, wearing a National Theatre T-shirt like one of the gang. She must charm the male-dominated world of American musical theatre to bits, though she gave me a very stern look when I asked whether womanly wiles were useful or not. De Mille used to yell at her male colleagues - Stroman says it's still probably the best tactic.

The International Encyclopaedia of Dance lists the award-strewn Stroman as the possible successor of the great Jerome Robbins, who moved with effortless distinction between Leonard Bernstein's musicals and George Balanchine's ballet company - there never was much of a line between "serious" and "popular" work in America.

Stroman has made her impact in only 10 years. She performed in Kander and Ebb's *Chicago*, then made her choreographic break with a small Kander and Ebb called *Flora, the Red Menace*, which became a cult hit. Since then she has become a celebrity, choreographing for Liza Minnelli, Hal Prince and the Martha Graham Company.

She knew she wanted this from the age of five ("When I heard music - any music, whether rock and roll or classical - I always imagined hordes of people dancing to it in my head"). And she knew it was musical theatre she wanted to be in.

WHETHER in Hollywood or Broadway, American musical theatre has always revelled in dance. For a while the Lloyd Webber trend towards more operatic musicals squeezed choreography out, but the pendulum is swinging back again towards period dance-musicals. *Cabaret*, *The Sound of Music*, *Chicago* and *Show Boat* have all been refreshed for new generations.

In Britain the return to the big American musical has come, unexpectedly, from the National Theatre, now becoming as noted for Oscar Hammerstein II as for David Hare. Many will remember Nicholas Hytner's 1993 *Carousel*, with new choreography by the master of ballet, Kenneth MacMillan; Nunn's revision of *Oklahoma!* is similarly thorough.

"We have approached it as if it were a new play," says Stroman. "Trevor has gone back to the original play, Lynn Riggs's *Green Grow the Lilacs*, hired a new orchestrator and a new dance arranger, to open out the melodies for my choreography.

"The choreography can make or break a show, frankly. For one thing, it has to be believable. You just have to believe they are dancing for the joy of it, or the agony of it, because if you don't, it'll end up looking *naff*, as you say here. I love that word!" And she cracks up with laughter.

"In musical theatre, the choreography is servicing a plot, a lyric, an era, a geographical place that you have to be true to. You can have your own style, but you can't incorporate something that wouldn't be believable in that time or place.

"Most musicals in the Twenties and Thirties, the dance wasn't about the plot - there was no excuse for a group of girls to come on and dance. But the audience of 1998 will not accept choreography that doesn't have anything to do with the plot or character. The dance has to propel the plot forward, be danced in character."

Realism, in her era, is what Agnes de Mille was famous for - *Oklahoma!* was the first musical that used dance to show the state of mind of the leading characters. She also had an extravagant imagination - her note for the climax of the dream-ballet read, "If it is possible to suggest a rape accomplished in midair in the heart of a hurricane, I want that there..."

Should the original choreography of such master-musicals as *Oklahoma!* be as sacred as the score or lyrics? Stroman points out that Rodgers' score isn't sacred - it has been rearranged to be truer to the Riggs play - and thus perhaps today - than the Hollywood convention. Her dream-ballet also aims for today's realism, not the Forties' - for one thing, it won't have dancers substituting the three lead actors, as happened in the original de Mille production.

Such a clean-up, she exclaims with pleasure, could never happen in the States. It's the privilege of Britain's subsidised theatre to new-mint an American trophy.

"I love it at the National. This is exactly the way it should be. Everything here is about the art, the creation process, so you feel somehow protected as an artist. It's much more stimulating. When you work in commercial theatre in the States, all you can think is, If this doesn't work out right, all these dancers are going to be out of work, and this producer is going to be out of 10 million dollars. But *this* is about the art."

The art, she says, will bring out the seriousness of *Oklahoma!*, "its theme of death", its evocation of America's pioneer past. And all this will enhance what finally matters most in any musical, which is, as Stroman concludes, "that two people end up dancing together".

*'Oklahoma!' opens at the National Theatre July 17*