

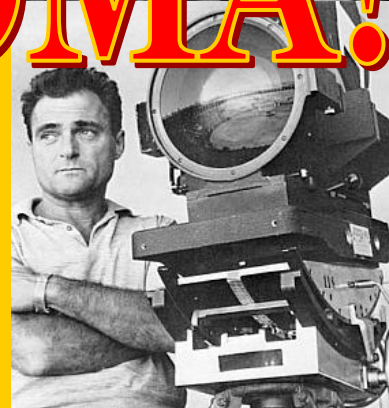


OKLAHOMA!

RETURNS...problematically so

by Nick Zegarac

The story behind 1955's film version of Oklahoma! is more fascinating than anything that ultimately materialized on the big screen. Maverick film producer Mike Todd never thought small. A garish visionary with a penchant for wandering and gambling, Todd ditched his stock and efforts invested in the cumbersome three camera widescreen Cinerama process to introduce a single camera system with lens manufacturer American Optical: Todd A-O.



Todd's timing could not have been more perfect. 20th Century-Fox had managed to reestablish the old adage that 'bigger is better' with their patented Cinemascope that utilized standard 35mm film stock but with special lenses; one to squeeze the image during photographing, the other to stretch the same image when projected. However, Cinemascope had its growing pains and problems. Furthermore, Todd wanted a genuinely big image on the screen; one not manipulated in any way or diminished by the stretch and squeeze of 'scope' but rather incorporating a larger film gauge.

To help bolster support for his fledging endeavor Todd made a short subject 'The Miracle of Todd A-O' which he showed to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Then basking in an unprecedented string of Broadway successes, Rodgers and Hammerstein had been skeptics over Hollywood's interest in their property. Todd's footage convinced the composers that Oklahoma! was an ideal candidate for immortalization on celluloid. In earnest – and with an already proven hit title at his disposal – Todd launched into a grandly elegant production directed by Fred Zinnemann. Akin to his showmanship roots, Todd mounted Oklahoma! as a road show complete with overture and intermission.

The importance of the road show cannot be overstated. Unlike the conventional night out at the movies, a road show presentation meant something quite





unique and special. One paid considerably more for a road show – almost as much as would be expected for a live theatrical performance. As with attending live theater, one dressed elegantly for a road show. Programs were printed up. Intricate lighting cues and staging were involved. In short then, by launching *Oklahoma!* as a road show, Todd ensured that its introduction – and that of his newly christened process – would become event highlights of the 1950s.

PLOT: The story concerns cowboy Curley McLain (the robust

Gordon MacRae) and his infatuation with Laurie Williams (fresh-faced songbird, Shirley Jones). Recognizing Curley's love, though misinterpreting it as fleeting lust, Laurie thwarts his advances by choosing to attend a social dance with hired hand, Judd Fry (Rod Steiger). Laurie's Aunt Eller Murphy (Charlotte Greenwood) is vexed by her niece's disposal of the handsome cowboy. Eventually, Laurie realizes what a gross error in judgment she's made – though not before she is pawed by Judd, then nearly killed after their runaway carriage careens dangerous close to a speeding locomotive.

Meanwhile, in a nearby thicket, Laurie's good – if dim-witted - friend Ado Annie Carnes (the marvelously obtuse Gloria Grahame) has romantic problems of her own. Her one-time beaux, Will Parker (Jean Nelson) has returned with prize money – enough to buy off Annie's father, Andrew (James Whitmore) for the right to marry her. However, in his absence Annie has become attached to the spurious peddler man, Ali Hakim (Eddie Albert). Assuming that Ali really loves her, Annie pleads with him not to challenge Will in a fight for her honor, a request the weak-kneed chicken-hearted Hakim is all too happy to comply with. However, Annie's father (James Whitmore) is not about to let Hakim get away without a marriage license. Through a series of light-hearted miscommunications Hakim eventually gives up Annie to Will.

The trajectory of Laurie and Curley's romance is less easily resolved. After it becomes obvious that Laurie Williams will never be his girl, Judd attempts to seriously injure Curley with a toy called 'the little wonder' – a tube-like kaleidoscope inside which pictures of naked women may be viewed, only by pressing a button on the end a sharp implement juts forth to poke out the eye of the admirer.

Failing to maim Curley with this device, Judd plots a more sinister revenge for both Laurie and Curley. The two are nearly murdered by Judd who first sets fire to a haystack they are standing on, then attempts to stab Curley with a knife. In the end it is Judd who is murdered, with a verdict of self-defense in Curley's favor allowing for a prerequisite happy ending of young love and marriage to endure.





A NEW EXPERIENCE IN SIGHT AND SOUND

The resulting film proved one of the resounding highlights of the 1950s. Agnes DeMille, who had choreographed the stage version, lent a daring exuberance to the dream sequence ballet in which Laurie surmises the dangers of becoming involved with Judd Fry. However, because Todd A-O was a new process it could not be utilized in every theatre in America. To hedge his bet, Mike Todd was forced to shoot **Oklahoma!** twice; once in Todd A-O (which is how the film had its premiere engagement), and once in the more user friendly Cinemascope.

Because of its limited release and accessibility, most people saw only the Cinemascope version – a vastly different experience than the one Todd originally envisioned. **Oklahoma!** was therefore shot twice by Zinnemann with very different lighting and staging techniques for several key sequences. Those differences are immediately evident during the title sequence; Cinemascope's is set against a backdrop of corn fields, the Todd A-O is matted against a black background.

For decades only the Cinemascope version was screened. Then, in the late 1990s Fox Home Video undertook a restoration of **Oklahoma!** in Todd A-O. Released on laserdisc in 1996, the home consumer was at last afforded the prospect of being able to compare the version they had grown up with, with the one Todd had hoped would endure.

THE DVD TRANSFER: Fast track to 2005 and the long overdue debut of both versions of **Oklahoma!** on DVD. The results – unfortunately, are not what one would have hoped for, despite Fox's snappy packaging which advertises this edition as 'fully restored'. Let us begin with a review of the Cinemascope version, sadly the more favorable on this 2 disc 50th Anniversary Edition.

This anamorphic 2:55:1 version of **Oklahoma!** exhibits a very sharp and well balanced image, with striking colors, deep blacks and a minimal amount of film grain. Fine details are present, though some scenes tend to have a bit less sharpness than one would imagine the widescreen image was originally capable of delivering. Age related artifacts are present but digital anomalies have been very well concealed. The audio has a fine 5.0 remix that, while dated, effectively recaptures the melodic splendor of R&H's illustrious score.

(Right: Screen captures from the Cinemascope version of Oklahoma! Top: Will Parker regales Aunt Eller and the town's folk with the spectacles of Kansas City. Middle: Curley courts Laurie with dreams of the surrey with the fringe on top. Bottom: Aunt Eller attempts to bring together the farmers and the cowboys.)

Now, for the Todd A-O version: in short, it is a disaster of digital engineering. Previously made available in a non-anamorphic transfer, this newly enhanced version ought to have been the gem of this 2 disc set. Instead, and quite unlike the image that was presented on both the earlier released DVD and the laserdisc – this installment is both inexplicably faded and excessively blurry.



JUDGE FOR YOURSELF: Side by Side Comparisons

CINEMASCOPE



TODD A-O



Above: screen captures from the two versions. Note the clarity of the image and color density in Cinemascope when directly compared to the inexplicably color faded and out of focus Todd A-O version.

Because Todd A-O utilized 30 frames of film per second (as opposed to the standard 24) the image should have been bolder, brassier and sharper than Cinemascope's. It is none of these superlatives. In fact, on the whole, it is a miserably dark, dull and soft image with little to recommend one's investment in time or, for that matter, money. Several key sequences suffer from a distorted flickering effect (something the upgrade from 24 to 30 frames was supposed to eliminate). Age related artifacts are more glaringly represented on this version as well.

Aside: This reviewer is at a genuine loss to explain how such a fine camera negative could so haphazardly have found its way onto this disc. The audio is remixed to 5.0 stereo but with a slightly more pronounced characteristic than its Cinemascope rival since Todd A-O initially carried six tracks of stereo, as opposed to scope's four tracks.

Extras include audio commentaries on both versions of the film: by Ted Chapin and Hugh Fordin for Cinemascope; by Shirley Jones and Nick Redman on Todd A-O. There's also a brief, though informative featurette on the differences between the two widescreen processes, Todd's original '*Miracle of Todd A-O*' featurette, as well as another '*The March of Todd A-O*'. Something, advertised as the film's original theatrical trailer, is actually a shoddy reissue junket from the mid-80s that is quite pathetic. Photo galleries round out the extras.

The bottom line here for the consumer will be the purchase of the much seen and widely revered Cinemascope version of the film. But for aficionados of Mike Todd, this DVD release represents yet another failed attempt to rekindle the glory and splendor that was Todd A-O for the home video market: abysmal and dissatisfying to say the least!