

The state of things to come

A word frequently associated with Rodgers and Hammerstein productions is 'lavish', but for director Thom Southerland, his adaptation of the film *State Fair* is based on telling the story in an intimate fringe setting. **Jo Caird** finds out more

After the extravaganza that was *The King and I* at the Royal Albert Hall, you'd be forgiven for thinking of Rodgers and Hammerstein shows as purely big budget affairs. But director Thom Southerland would disagree. Following small-scale productions of *HMS Pinafore*, *Annie Get Your Gun* and *The Mikado*, he has chosen Earl's Court's tiny Finborough Theatre as the venue for the European premiere of *State Fair*, one of Rodgers and Hammerstein's least known works.

The musical is unusual for its time because it began life not as a stage show but in the guise of a very successful 1945 movie musical, which was then remade in 1962. It was only in the early nineties when amateur groups in the United States began petitioning the Rodgers and Hammerstein estate for the release of further material that the film was adapted for the stage.

The show follows the story of the Frake family over three days at the Iowa State Fair, as parents Abel and Melissa hope to win blue ribbons for their livestock and produce, and son and daughter Wayne and Margy find themselves tangled up in romantic scenarios. A successful US tour led to a Broadway run that earned the show two Tony Award nominations despite not being a critical success.

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Southerland contrasts his approach to that championed by the director of the recent Royal Albert Hall production of *The King and I*.

"Jeremy Sams wrote in the programme notes all about how people love Rodgers and Hammerstein because of the spectacle, the grandeur of the music and huge lavish costumes and I couldn't disagree more," he says. "People love the music and love the story and want to see it in a fresh way."

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His production comprises just 14 actors – two of whom are actor-musicians – as well as a pianist, a violinist and a reed player. According to Southerland, this pared down approach actually allows him to get more out of the original music.

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The 25-year-old director’s vision was to strip *State Fair* “right down to its bare bones”, allowing him to focus attention on the core of the show.

“The story can sometimes get lost in the huge orchestration and the spectacle of the costumes and set, and your attention can quite often be taken by someone’s beautiful hat or a piece of scenery flying in or how wonderful the music sounds underneath it,” says Southerland. “In the Finborough, the closest thing is an actor

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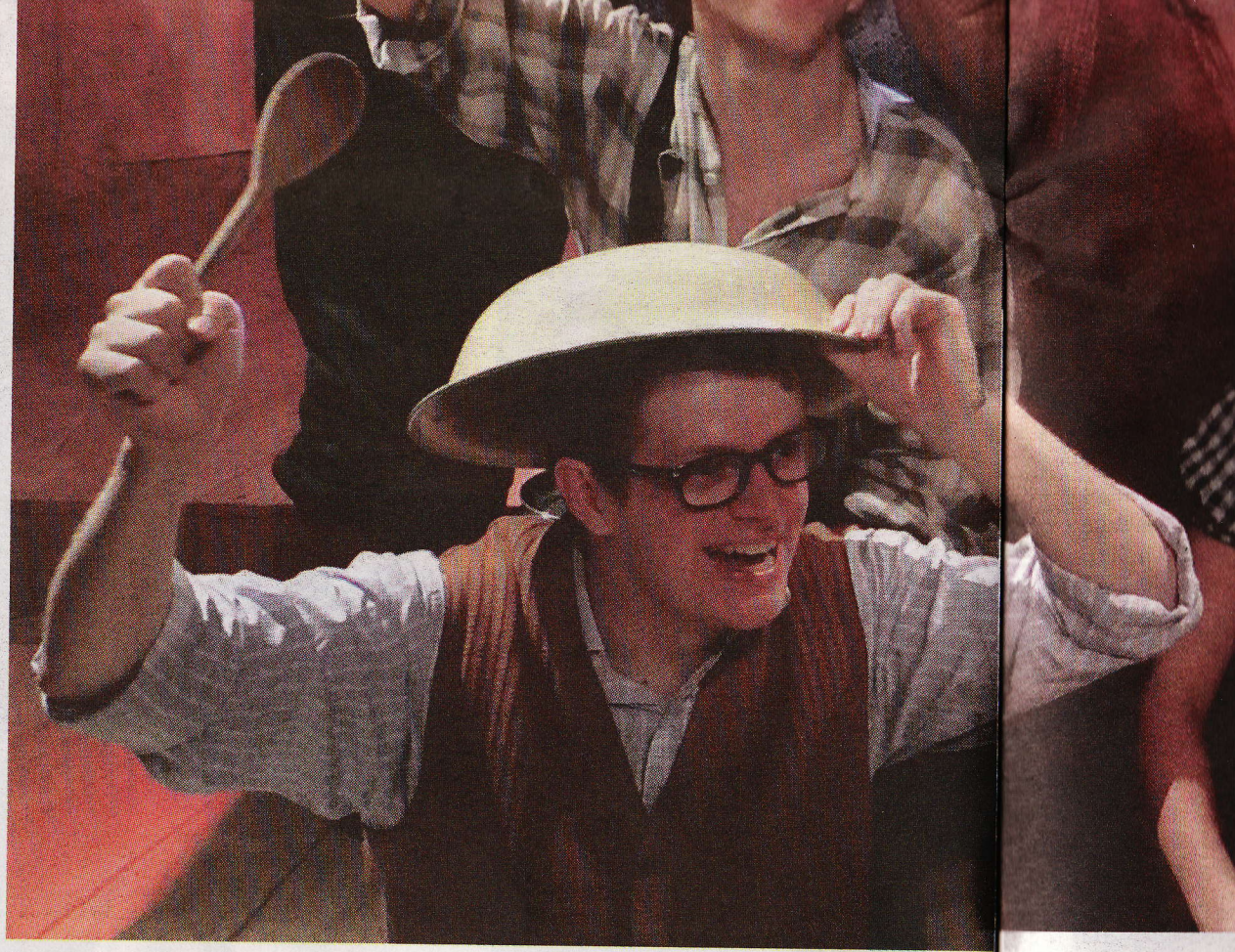
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“The basis of all the orchestrations and all of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s work is the beauty of the vocal line. In the big numbers such as *A Grand Night for Singing*, Magnus Gilljam [the musical director] has given the actors a harmony line which echoes the original huge orchestrations. Instead of an eight-part harmony, he’s made it a 14-part harmony.”

There is a danger in stripping things down, of course, and, despite his passion for this way of working, Southerland is not naive.

“You find out when the dialogue isn’t necessarily as well written as other places,” he says. “Without big sets and big costumes, it leaves you very vulnerable.” But the director,



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who graduated from a postgraduate degree at Rose Bruford College in 2005, is not intimidated by these potential difficulties – his answer is simply to “layer in more story” and make sure that his production values are high enough to guarantee total suspension of disbelief.

His decision to direct *State Fair* at the Finborough was informed largely by the venue’s reputation as a home for high-quality new work. He hopes that the theatre’s core audience, even those with no prior knowledge of

Rodgers and Hammerstein, will come and see the show from a combination of loyalty and curiosity.

“These musicals have to survive and these stories have to survive and my aim is to get a young audience involved,” he says.

Getting the true value of these classic shows recognised by the next generation of theatregoers is more than an end in itself, Southerland believes – it also offers the knock-on effect of enlivening the experience of the more mature fans of the genre:



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For *State Fair* the signs are already good. Since the day the press releases went out, claims producer Nick Robinson, he has been talking to various West End theatres about the possibility of a transfer. Yet Sutherland is cautious. “We have to be very careful about where it would transfer, if anywhere at all,” he says. “It would have to be somewhere with the same

kind of intimacy that the Finborough would bring.”

But his passion for this type of work endows him with an optimism that seems like it could overcome any logistical issues. “I really believe that these musicals have a worth beyond what people would necessarily think – just another *Oklahoma!* or just another *Carousel* and dismiss them – they have a real place in modern culture. It’s exciting for us all.”

State Fair runs at the Finborough Theatre, London until August 29.

