Cabrillo Stage hits its stride in ‘Oklahoma!’

THROUGH AUG. 18 Cabrillo Stage, Cabrillo Crocker Theater, 6500 Soquel Drive, Aptos. $18-44; 831-479-6154 or www.cabrillostage.com.

By JOANNE ENGELHARDT features@santacruzensentinel.com

You'll be shouting “Oh, what a beautiful morning, noon and night!” after seeing Cabrillo Stage’s wondrous re-creation of Rodgers & Hammerstein’s much-loved musical warhorse “Oklahoma,” which opened last Friday at Cabrillo College’s Crocker Theater. It leaves a bright golden haze both on stage and off.

Director and choreographer Kikau Alvaro’s version of “Oklahoma” is sunnier and less threatening than some productions, all the better for youngsters to enjoy without alarm. Not even Jud Frye comes off as 100 percent evil.

From orchestra conductor (and CS artistic director) Jon Nordgren’s first downbeat, the expectant opening-night audience heard the familiar notes of the gorgeous overture played with clarity and liveliness by the 21-piece orchestra. It only got better when handsome Matt Taylor (Curly) bounds onstage full of energy, a touch of arrogance and a rich, powerful voice that fills the theater. Taylor proves to be a secret weapon (actually one of several) in this production because he not only commands the stage whenever he appears, he also has a relaxed charm that makes him instantly likeable.

Then there’s the coy charmer Laurey, played with tomboyish spunk by Emily M. Marsilia. Marsilia’s feistiness is the perfect foil for Taylor’s cool demeanor. Even better, the two actually look as if they are in love. Their voices blend skillfully so songs like “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” and “People Will Say We’re in Love” are palpable and real.

It’s actually quite moving when Curly goes to Jud’s room to tell him to leave Laurey alone, but instead he makes up a maudlin musical picture telling Jud how he could hang himself (“Poor Jud is Daid”), to which Jud haplessly joins in. They have a physical confrontation, and afterward Jud sings the gentle “Lonely Room” and vows to get Laurey for himself.

The reliable Alice Hughes doubles as both the musical director and as Laurey’s Aunt Eller, a jovial farmer who carries a lot of weight in the area described as Indian territory now known as Oklahoma. (Because it’s set in 1906, Oklahoma had not yet been admitted to the Union.)

The only inadequate castings are the older men who populate the community. None leaves a clear impression of who they are and what they are contributing (although Richard Dwyer as Annie’s father, Andrew Carnes, does a good job of pointing guns at anyone who doesn’t have honorable intentions toward his daughter).

There’s a feeling of authenticity in all of scenec designer Skip Epperson’s versatile sets, beginning with the front of Laurey’s farmhouse replete with a big-as-all-outdoors sky that changes hues in the background. The set reverses for Jud’s smokehouse room. Later, it becomes the Skidmore ranch and the finale is at the backside of Laurey’s farmhouse.

It couldn’t have been easy for costume designer Maria Crush to create all the costumes for the 21 ensemble members and 11 main characters, yet she not only came up with an array of sassy outfits for the female dancers, but also appropriate cowboy and/or farmer attire for the men. Both Kyle Grant’s lighting and Michael Meek’s sound were exceptional, save for a few times when mics didn’t come on in time to hear the first line or two of someone’s song or dialogue.