

ROOTIN' TOOTIN' WOOING

Marianka Swain was won over by barnstorming musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* at the Richmond Theatre on April 29

It's a deal with the devil: accept this cheerfully absurd story and its eye-watering gender politics and you'll be rewarded with giddy tunes, jovial performances and dazzlingly dynamic dancing.

First, the bad part. The source material is the Roman legend of the Sabine women via Stephen Vincent Benét's *The Sobbin' Women*. A group of brothers in 1850s Oregon, tiring of stiff competition for the town's few eligible women, skip traditional courting and carry six of them off to their mountainous ranch.

It's up to the wife of the eldest brother, feisty Milly, to translate this frankly disturbing abduction into proper romance, while challenging the gruff authority of her husband, Adam.

There are hummable songs by Gene de Paul, Johnny Mercer, Al Kasha and Joel Hirschhorn, and a solid book from Lawrence Kasha and David Landay that refuses to engage with any sinister subtext, whether the lurking misogyny or dangerous

realities of frontier life.

There's another void at the centre of this touring production in the form of Sam Attwater, a soap actor possessed of vacant charm, but none of the required raw machismo. He struggles equally with projection, pitch and keeping his accent in one state.

Attwater is far outclassed by his opposite number, Helena Blackman. She has a vibrant soprano voice and crisp diction, each word and note clear as a bell, and proves a game physical comedian.

But the real star of the show is the dancing. The 1954 MGM film benefited from the talents of legendary choreographer Michael Kidd, who combined technically assured ballet with bravura athleticism appropriate for the rough-and-ready brood.

Director/choreographer Patti Colombo translates this brilliantly to the stage through her fearless triple-threat company. Nearly all the songs and dance numbers have strong narrative

purpose, propelling the story forward and delivering well-paced transitions, supported by designer Anna Louizos's scuttling flats.

The big set piece is the hoedown showdown where the brothers battle for partners against the townsmen, each group employing a specific vocabulary. It's a superb illustration of the ritual of dance: as courtship and contest, social formality and snatches of intimacy, communal harmony and individual expression.

There's outstanding formation work, inventive use of props, and a feast of movement: pas de deux and strong partnering, high kicks, big lifts, pirouettes, jump splits, flying jetés, backflips, elegant lines, explosive elevation, and thigh-slappin', foot-stompin', high-energy exuberance.

The threat of violence builds beneath the smiles and yee-haws, finally breaking out in spirited fight choreography. It's not unlike *West Side Story* in channelling conflict through soaring movement.

Most important, it proves that real men dance. And – nefarious means aside – they always get the girls. ●



Sam Attwater and Helena Blackman



The brothers courting