

BARNSTORMIN' COURTIN'

Marianka Swain was won over by *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre on July 23

Rather than trying to mitigate the outlandishness and supremely dodgy sexual politics of this classic American musical, Rachel Kavanaugh's smartly knowing production makes its absurdity a giddy virtue. A 1954 MGM Golden Age oddity adapted for the stage in 1978, it loosely transposes the Roman rape of the Sabine women to 1850s Oregon, where eligible gals are scarce.

Spirited Milly (Laura Pitt-Pulford) is swept off her feet by hunky backwoodsman Adam (Alex Gaumont), but there's an unwelcome surprise in store: he has six younger brothers, and expects her to keep house for them all. Undaunted, Milly teaches the

hairy brood how to win their own wives, but they cut the wooing short



Charlene Ford as Dorcas and James Leece as Benjamin with Brides and Brothers

and make off with six gingham-clad prospective partners in the night.

Kavanaugh wisely stresses the consensual acceptance of this otherwise alarming abduction, showing the girls' boredom with the stuffed-shirted townsmen and attraction to the semi-civilised young farmers, whose actions read as rash rather than predatory.

The women might be stuck in antediluvian gender roles, but they're not without agency, and the men convincingly earn their love. Yet this is also an irresistibly silly show, packed with great sight gags, physical comedy and brash, technicolour

cartoonishness. The brothers bound out of hedges and learn to dance while wearing long johns, switching from stumbling, slack-jawed yokels to soaring Baryshnikovs in a wonderfully ludicrous instant.

Though nothing could top Michael Kidd's extraordinary original choreography, Alistair David superbly honours its ballet-meets-hoedown combination of

classical elegance and rugged athleticism. The standout competitive harvest social features exuberant elevation, daring acrobatics, crisp partnering and impressively fluid formation work, plus the signature axe jumping and teetering on wobbly planks.

However, the resulting fistfight is too careful. Gaumont's roguish Adam undergoes a satisfying identity crisis and redemptive arc, while Pitt-Pulford's good-hearted fighter gives as good as she gets. Crucially, there's

a real erotic charge between them, making sense of her decision to persevere with this ornery fella. The jaunty ditties and yearning ballads get a fine airing from the universally strong company with Gareth Valentine's jazzy new orchestration, while Peter McKintosh's sliding timber design has rough-hewn charm. Joyful frontier farce at its foot-stompin' best. ●