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A Little Night Music



The Gilbert & Sullivan Society. Arts Theatre. 26 Apr 2018

A Little Night Music is arguably one of the wittiest, most well-written and elegant musicals in the business. With music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, it was inspired by an Ingmar Bergman film and a book by Hugh Wheeler. It shines as Sondheim at his best, albeit very demanding on the cast.

Pam O'Grady, with Richard Trevaskis as her sidekick, has directed the latest Adelaide production for the G&S Society and it is a delight.

She has brought an excellent, salon orchestra onto the stage which scenic artist Brian Budgen has adorned with a handsome background of towering birch trees. The chorus arrives, swishing and swaying in a lavishness of period costumes, and ostentatiously tune up their voices around the grand piano - the first clue that this musical has a touch of the tongue in cheek.

The tale unfolds of the widowed middle-aged lawyer whose vapid 18-year-old second wife remains a virgin 11 months into the marriage. He reconnects with his one-time lover, the fading stage star, Desiree, and is challenged by her pompous militaristic current lover. A comedy of marital manners and sexual mores unfolds as all the protagonists head off for a notorious *Weekend in the Country*.

The musical features one great hit song, *Send In the Clowns*, but tunes such as *Night Waltz*, *The Glamorous Life* and *Weekend In the Country* linger in the mind long after the curtain has fallen.

O'Grady has assembled a cast with lots of musical nous and has chosen lead players who deliver the level of acting prowess which can convey the comic nuances of hypocrisy and betrayal on which this show's success must lie. As they say of this show, it was written for actors who can sing and not singers who can act.

Nerves were evident on the first night and the early bedroom scene is hard to play but one soon could see the cast settling into their skins and then the production was humming along in a life of its own with the audience right in the groove, catching the delicious darts of humour and responding with hearty laughter.

That's the contenting point in a production, the sweet spot where the audience and cast meet as one, having made that connection that makes the living magic of theatre, the *raison d'être* of the whole ancient art form. It makes a critic's heart sing.



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simpatico. The audience understands why men love her. They love her, too.

And they love bristling at Nicholas Bishop who braves the role of the licentious hypocrite, Count Carl-Magnus. It's a role of stuck-up buffoonery and Bishop, of the beautiful baritone voice, plays it to the hilt. Has the man ever turned in a half-hearted performance? One thinks not.

Ah, and there is Deborah Caddy as his elegant and long-suffering wife, Countess Charlotte. Caddy's professionalism and her powerful stage presence are stand-out. She sings to suit and, oh, plays irony with a capital "I". She's another joy in the wonderful casting of this show.

But there's more.

Norma Knight plays the crusty old matriarch, Madame Armfeldt. From a wheelchair she resonates like a latterday Bette Davis. She's wise and facetious, and as she comes to the song, *Every Day a Little Death*, audience members find themselves holding their breath.

And going from the elderly of this Norwegian family to the youngest, there is also Frederika Armfeldt. Henny Walters has been a popular nominee for best emerging actress awards and here with her crystalline fresh voice she works true to the high standard that attracted such acclaim and doubtless will garner more.

As the ingenue bride, Anne, lovely Emmeline Whitehead is delightful to behold but in this difficult role of simpering silliness, she has taken something of shrill tumble over the vocal top. A spot of direction would soften those twittering high registers.

Amid the chorus, Vanessa Lee Shirley shines and is hilarious with James Nicholson, Josine Talbot, Monique Watson, Laurence Croft, and Macintyre Howie Reeves in sterling vocal and physical support. Megan Doherty plays the maid, Petra, and holds the house to ransom as she delivers the overly long and difficult solo, *The Miller's Son*.

Christine Hodgen and her lovely orchestra are just there on the stage throughout, mellow and well-balanced against the vocals and with an aesthetic of their own.

And thus does the G&S have another hit show on its hands.



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