

A Little Night Music @ Stray Dog Theatre

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by Hugh Wheeler

Based on the film *Smiles of a Summer Night* by Ingmar Bergman

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In between Union Avenue Opera and Stray Dog Theatre's productions of *A Little Night Music*, I took the time to watch the musical's source material, the 1955 Ingmar Bergman film *Smiles of a Summer Night*. I have never seen a Bergman film before in my life, and I'm honestly really happy that this was my introduction to his work. *Smiles of a Summer Night* is one of the best comedies ever made, featuring gorgeous shot composition, brilliant use of naturalism, and stirring intimacy. Besides only a couple of major details, *A Little Night Music* is a surprisingly faithful adaptation, and out of the two St. Louis productions this year, I felt that Stray Dog Theatre better captured the spirit of the film.

Set in Sweden in the year 1900, *A Little Night Music* tells the story of glamorous actress Desiree Armfeldt and ordinary middle-aged lawyer Fredrik Egerman, a pair of former lovers who have been apart for fourteen years. The two have reunited after Fredrik takes his much younger wife Anne to see a play starring Desiree. Anne married Fredrik after the death of his first wife, and she refuses to consummate their relationship, resulting in Fredrik seeking Desiree after the play to relieve his sexual frustration. During their liaison, the two get caught by Desiree's latest paramour, the vainglorious Count Carl-Magnus Malcolm. The philandering dragoon then proceeds to humiliate them both by tattling to his jealous wife Charlotte. Anne, who just so happens to be a family friend of the Malcolms, learns from Charlotte about Fredrik's infidelity, causing her to experience much emotional distress. Tensions high, Desiree orchestrates "A Weekend in the Country" at the estate of her mother, the courtesan Madame Armfeldt, so the Egermans and the Malcolms can air out their grievances respectfully. Which they don't.

A Little Night Music is a brilliant social commentary on just how selfish, shallow, and immature aristocrats can be. Every character in the show is a controlling, manipulative, petty hypocrite – and yet, you don't hate them. The dialogue of *A Little Night Music* is Wildesque in its wit and its passive-aggressive politeness; the songs consist of waltzes that are densely packed with information about the characters' various pasts, the mistakes they have made, and their insecurities. You find it impossible to hate these characters because the music allows us to see deep into their hearts in a way that feels so real and even kind of nostalgic.

I wrote in the intro that Stray Dog Theatre's *A Little Night Music* better captured the spirit of *Smiles of a Summer Night* than Union Avenue Opera. Even though that production was very well done, I will say that Union Avenue placed a much heavier emphasis on presenting the sophisticated vocal arrangements and the operetta-style orchestrations as faithfully as possible. For Stray Dog, however, director Justin Been focuses much more on the material's farcical

complications and sensual intimacy. Been's directing perfectly translates the film language of Ingmar Bergman to the small Tower Grove Abbey stage: many moments of the show either take place in the audience's space, on stage with the actors' backs turned to the audience, or with the actors in a state of undress. Moments like this that come to mind are "Now/Later/Soon," "You Must Meet My Wife," the climactic dinner scene, and "The Miller's Son." It makes the audience feel as if we are voyeurs invading the characters' privacy, which only makes us all the more emotionally invested.

Justin Been's minimalist scenic design consists of stark white wooden planks that hang above the stage, reminiscent of Scandinavian abstract art (a perfect visual match for a Bergman property). Combined with Been and Gary F. Bell's props, as well as Tyler Duenow's lighting, the production easily transitions between all of the different locations, contributing to the show's tight comedic pacing. The rest of the production design is also an auditory and visual marvel, with immaculately detailed costumes by Eileen Engel, period-accurate hair and makeup by Sarah Gene Dowling, and atmospheric sound design by Jacob Baxley. Michael Hodges brilliantly uses his waltz-like choreography to convey the awkward stuffiness and pigheaded confidence of the characters, and musical director Leah Schultz capably leads the sumptuous seven-piece chamber orchestra.

Paula Stoff Dean as Desiree and Jonathan Hey as Fredrik are fantastic; with every breath that they take, you can feel their vulnerability, their inner strength, and the spark that they had in their youth. Dean and Hey portray the progression of their own self-awareness flawlessly. Eileen Engel gives an exceptional performance as Anne; Engel infuses this character with emotional layers beyond just being a flirty, teasing coquette, and transforms Anne into a complex young woman trying to find her place in this new life. Engel also has sparkling chemistry with Bryce A. Miller as Henrik, Fredrik's adult son who has fallen in love with his new, younger stepmother – a love complicated further by Henrik's training to be a clergyman. Through Henrik, Miller has given possibly the most accurate portrayal of crippling anxiety I have ever seen on stage. Scott Degitz-Fries and Madeline Black are great as the Malcolms; they do a wonderful job of making it clear that these two are not at all right for each other, and will do anything they can to keep it that way. Sarah Gene Dowling is also great as Petra, the Egerman's housemaid who is a total vamp; Dowling gives Petra just the right amount of vixenish gremlin energy. Liz Mischel gives a very understated performance as Madame Armfeldt, the story's elderly narrator who comments on the action in the form of witty-yet-wise conversations with her teenage granddaughter Fredrika, charmingly played by Adeline Perry. Both of them are accompanied by a "Greek" chorus (quotations because we're in Sweden) called the Liebeslieders, who not only offer their own commentary (in song form) but also play multiple roles in the story as they are needed; the strong chorus performers are Cory Anthony, Shannon Lampkin Campbell, Jess McCawley, Kevin O'Brien, and Dawn Schmid.

I had a little difficulty writing this review because of the risk that comes with critiquing a show one has already seen before, especially when two separate productions of it are so close to each other. Despite this creative hurdle, I greatly enjoyed Stray Dog Theatre's *A Little Night Music*. This was a Stephen Sondheim show that I never really got into before this year, and I'm

glad that I got the chance to really appreciate this material through these two productions, and through watching *Smiles of a Summer Night* as well. Each production revealed two separate things about the show that made me think about it on a really deep level: Union Avenue Opera revealed just how gorgeous and ingeniously constructed the score and the songs are, and Stray Dog Theatre revealed some of the most tightly-written dialogue and well-paced farce in musical theatre history. *A Little Night Music* appears in many Top 5 lists for Sondheim's best musicals, and it's deserved – it's a beautiful, timeless show that I'm most likely going to be reviewing multiple times in St. Louis until the day I die.