

## **A Little Night Music @ Union Avenue Opera**

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by Hugh Wheeler

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

Ran August 19 - 27, 2022 @ The Union Avenue Christian Church

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*A Little Night Music* is a Stephen Sondheim musical that has always been on my radar but one that I never really got into. The show is adapted from the 1955 Ingmar Bergman film *Smiles of a Summer Night*, so it has a very Old World European aesthetic, the score consists entirely of waltzes, and the lyrics are very cerebral – it makes you feel like you’re watching an expressionist foreign film. It is very much not my bag. I thought I was going to dread seeing it twice in the same year, within months of each other, done by two different companies. But after seeing it at Union Avenue Opera, I was quite turned around; I found a lot to like about *A Little Night Music*, and a lot to think about, too.

Set in Sweden during the turn of the 20th century, *A Little Night Music* is a farcical comedy of manners centering around Desiree Armfeldt, a glamorous stage actress who is having an affair with two men at the exact same time: middle-aged lawyer Fredrik Egerman and the narcissistic Count Carl-Magnus Malcolm. Fredrik has just married his second wife, Anne, a much younger woman who is fiercely protective of her virginity. Fredrik and Desiree once dated each other in their youth, so when the sex-deprived Fredrik sees that she will be performing in a play near him, he decides to rekindle the old flame, not knowing that Desiree is already feeling up the pigheaded dragoon Carl-Magnus. Desiree and Fredrik do meet each other again and, after some initial reluctance, they decide to have a liaison. All seems to be going well until they get caught by a visiting Carl-Magnus, who immediately challenges Fredrik to a duel. Desiree and Fredrick successfully dissuade Carl-Magnus (after thoroughly embarrassing themselves, of course), which only leads him to go home and tell his wife Charlotte (who enables her husband’s infidelity) about the whole thing. It just so happens that Anne Egerman is a semi-close friend of the Malcolm family, so it’s not long before Charlotte tells her about Fredrik’s affair. Now realizing that tensions are high, Desiree invites everyone involved with this tryst to stay for “A Weekend in the Country” at the estate of her mother, the retired courtesan Madame Armfeldt, in the hopes that everyone will get together and resolve their grievances like adults. Spoiler alert: they don’t.

Every single character in *A Little Night Music* is a total asshole: they’re shallow, they’re moronic, they’re selfish, they’re petty, they’re braggadocious, they’re controlling, they’re manipulative. *A Little Night Music* is very much a social commentary on the immaturity of aristocracy, and what makes it so fascinating to watch unfold is that even though everyone is a complete idiot, their emotions are so genuine, their dialogue is so witty, and everything about them is so energetic – their movements, their voices, their timing, their pacing – that you just can’t look away from the absolute trainwreck that everyone is making of their lives. On top of that, the songs are mostly

reflections on the characters' mistakes, past and present; hell, "Send in the Clowns," the most famous song from the show, is Desiree's "come to Jesus" moment, the song where every moment before it is leading up to and where every moment after it follows. "Send in the Clowns" is the song where Desiree realizes that she has been so blind to her constant manipulation of not only her own family but also those of Fredrik and Carl-Magnus, and she shudders at the fact that her myopia is going to have serious, if not deadly, consequences. It's so achingly real how much the songs play around with time and memory. Because the score is written entirely in the vocabulary of waltzes, the songs essentially hypnotize you into a sense of nostalgic wistfulness, and it allows you to see into the insecurities of these characters on a level that is abstract but deeply profound.

It helps, too, that the actors are all fantastic. Director Annamaria Pileggi and choreographer Christine Knoblauch-O'Neal have assembled a top-notch cast of local performers of both musical theatre and opera, all of whom have amazing voices that are accompanied by a lush orchestra conducted by musical director Scott Schoonover. Befitting of an opera company, the actors are unamplified, which is noteworthy because the excellent acoustics of the Union Avenue Christian Church effectively balance out the actors with the orchestra. Debby Lennon as Desiree and Peter Kendall Clark as Fredrik are the perfect protagonists, commanding the stage with their mere presence while also portraying a deep vulnerability as they bare their souls before us. There are some really fun comic turns from Brooklyn Snow as Anne, Eric J. McConnell as Carl-Magnus, and Leann Scheuring as Charlotte. Teresa Doggett gives a hilarious, scene-stealing performance as Madame Armfeldt, the character who acts as the ornery narrator keeping the story on track. She is accompanied by the Liebeslieders, a "Greek" chorus (I use quotation marks because they're Swedish) who get a chance to sing their own reflections on loves lost and found: the strong chorus performers are Grace Yukiko Fisher, Gina Malone, Sarah Price, Joel Rogier, and Philip Touchette.

A few side characters also get quite a lot to share with the audience. James Stevens plays Henrik Egerman, Fredrik's 18-year-old son from his previous marriage. Henrik is a clergyman-in-training who is sexually attracted to Anne (and it's here that the jokes pretty much write themselves). Stevens wonderfully portrays Henrik's exasperation with his sexual awakening, as well as his fear of not living up to his own high-and-mighty ideals. Arielle Pedersen plays Fredrika Armfeldt, Desiree's teenage daughter who serves as the audience's surrogate, watching all this nonsense unraveling before her and offering her own wry commentary to Madame Armfeldt, who is always ready with a witty retort. The final standouts are Amy Maude Helfer and Jordan Wolk as Petra and Frid; Petra is the Egerman family's maid and Frid is Madame Armfeldt's butler. They meet during the "Weekend in the Country" and immediately fall in love with each other, though the two do eventually meditate on what "love at first sight" really means to them. Helfer and Wolk have very cute onstage chemistry and make for a fine pair of young lovers.

The production design is fairly minimal, which is appropriate for a musical that is so abstract. The versatile scenic design by C. Otis Sweezey consists of three flats that take advantage of the stage's considerable height; they also rotate to depict either the interiors of the characters'

aristocratic homes or the expansive garden of Madame Armfeldt's estate. Teresa Doggett's costumes and Patrick Huber's lights also contribute well to set not only the time but the mood as well. Philip Touchette designed the production's supertitles, a tradition that is more specific to opera companies where the lyrics and dialogue are projected on screens on either side of the stage while the performance is happening; I won't lie, the supertitles helped me enormously to understand the show as well as I did, especially the several moments of polyphonic harmonies that Sondheim loves so very, very much (and that I love, too). In fact, quick tangent, I think more theatre companies should have supertitles for their performances; many of them in St. Louis have made huge progress in the last decade in regards to accessibility (such as ASL interpreters and audio descriptors), and I think supertitles should be the next logical leap. I don't care how much of a logistical nightmare that would be for some venues, they need to make it happen anyway! My autism won't stand for it, goddammit!

I went into *A Little Night Music* expecting to hate it, but I came out not hating it. Quite the opposite, in fact. It's a fascinating work about a bunch of messed-up people whose lives are throwing them blow after blow in an attempt to make them grow up and not be just a bunch of jerks, while also giving them a chance to sing some wonderful music that is, in turn, given its due justice by Union Avenue Opera. It was very much my bag. This is a truly beautiful production, and I look forward to seeing Stray Dog Theatre's version in just a few weeks.