



# Schwartz Conjures Up “Séance,” Opera Style

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Published Thursday, October 8, 2009

Opera, musical and theater fans, rejoice! Stephen and Scott Schwartz have together constructed a marvelous production which combines the most essential and beautiful elements of all three mediums to tell the tragic story of Myra Foster in “Séance on a Wet Afternoon.”

Presented by Opera Santa Barbara, the world premiere of Stephen Schwartz’s first opera ran for three shows at the Granada. The show’s premiere also brought a special visit to UCSB as Theatre & Dance Department Chair, professor Simon Williams held a conversation with Stephen Schwartz last Friday afternoon.

At the conversation, Schwartz, composer and lyricist for many major musical theatre works and films, such as “Wicked,” discussed his successful career and the new challenge of writing an opera.

“I did ‘Séance’ because I’ve always loved opera and thought I might write one,” Schwartz said. “There was a challenge of doing work of this size, but we’ve seemed to come through it okay. My son directed it, and he directed it as a play. The acting is great. What was great about what Scott did for me was I felt that he realized what I wanted the piece to be and then he took it further, but I didn’t feel he took a whole left turn.”

This father-son collaboration shown clearly as Stephen Schwartz’s haunting-but-beautiful melodies and lyrics were carried out through Scott Schwartz’s direction of actors who consistently delivered scenes with a powerful and honest intensity. The large orchestra seemed to present life’s underlying sinister qualities as the actor’s voices struggled to rise above it. Based upon a book and film of the same title, “Séance on a Wet Afternoon” opened with an eerie prelude which set a chilling and suspenseful tone for the entire opera’s action. The first scene then introduces us to the strange comedy of one of Myra’s séances, with four guests seated around a table with a single candle.

Brilliant lighting design gave Myra a perfect medium’s glow as she went into a trance and gave way to a ghostly blue tint on the black chain rain-curtain as the séance finished and the Foster’s home crept out of the shadows.

Heidi Ettinger’s incredibly designed Victorian San Francisco home created a fascinating environment in which Lauren Flanigan brought Myra Foster’s madness to life. Within the house, Myra explained the terrible kidnapping plan which her dead son Arthur devised to bring her fame and set it into play. Amongst the underpinning opposition of her husband Billy, presented in another wonderful performance by Kim Josephson, the conflicts surrounding her connection to the kidnapped girl’s parents and the attention brought in by the fantastic chorus-style reporters, something snaps and “one little lie” turns into “die, die, die.”

Suspense reignites as the Clayton's come for the special séance that Myra has offered them and without her son Arthur's voice to guide her, she becomes possessed by "someone else" as she finally succeeds in channeling a dead spirit. However the dead spirit is Adriana herself and unable to stop herself, Myra reveals the truth to the Claytons who surprisingly clutch at her arms in attempted contact with the spirit of their daughter inside, making clear that, as Williams said, "opera tends to make evil sympathetic."

The opera's final moment furthers this feeling as Arthur and Myra joyfully reunite in embrace only to have to show's final curtain of chains come down upon them forever.