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Culture Monster

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Opera review: 'Seance on a Wet Afternoon' at Opera Santa Barbara*

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With the world premiere of Stephen Schwartz's "Séance on a Wet Afternoon" on Saturday night in Santa Barbara's Granada Theatre, various forces came together to make for a gala night at the opera such as this tony town has never experienced before.

In one corner, we had the maiden operatic venture by the seasoned man of musical theater song, Stephen Schwartz. Now 61, Schwartz, whose hits included "Wicked," "Godspell" and "Pippin," [has longed to try his hand at opera](#), essentially to bump to the bigger leagues, in terms of musical seriousness and respect. He found a ripe proving ground in [Opera Santa Barbara](#), a small but impassioned company dating back 15 years.

The company is eager to spread its wings and fly higher, particularly since moving last year into the grand quarters of the lavishly remodeled Granada Theatre.

High hopes on the part of both parties made for a symbiotic pact, enabled by a \$1-million funding for the project's commission and production (and that production is impressive, with seamlessly moving sets by designer Heidi Ettinger). By "Séance's" end on Saturday, though, questions rattled us, not the least of which was: Does Schwartz really have opera chops?



This piece, in which arias behaved more like Broadway songs and orchestration as glossy as it is substantial, clearly belongs to the current blurring of lines between the traditionally considered domain of grand opera and the domain of musical theater, a distressing trend. From the first tuneful murmurings of the opera's overture onward, with a musical vocabulary more akin to watered-down Leonard Bernstein and modern-day show tune-smithing than anything akin to John Adams, we know we're in for an easy-does-it ride, harmonically.

“Séance” also belongs to a category of new operas with direct links to cinema, alongside such recent examples as Howard Shore’s “Fly,” André Previn’s “Brief Encounter,” Jake Heggie’s “Dead Man Walking” and Gerald Barry’s “The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant.” Schwartz takes as his source material the haunting yet oddly sweet 1964 British film, based on Mark McShane’s novel, written and directed by Bryan Forbes and featuring a beguiling, Oscar-nominated lead performance by Kim Stanley. Stanley seized the key role, as a mad, fame-lustful medium woman who channels her dead son’s spirit and leads her husband into a kidnapping scheme, with a dramatic trajectory moving dizzily through light and dark turns.

For his opera, much of the Schwartz-penned libretto yokes closely to the narrative and feel of the original but with significant differences, including a radical rewiring of the ending and a swapping of the film’s cool, almost Hitchcockian British air for a breezier, feelgood atmosphere in Schwartz’s retooling. Ironically, given this story’s emotional complexity and even supernatural perversity, the piece would seemingly benefit from stronger stuff in the compositional department. One could easily imagine a more tonally tense score, à la Alban Berg or even Benjamin Britten, doing greater justice to the story, whereas Schwartz’s musical patter seems precisely the wrong approach, trivializing the strange -- and strangely moving -- tale.

As the conniving medium, Myra Foster, soprano Lauren Flanigan mostly acquitted herself with winning strength. The audience was informed ahead of time that Flanigan was battling a head cold, thus inviting a forgiving ear when her voice cracked on a few high notes. Mostly, though, she hit the right ones, vocally and dramatically. As her long-suffering but love-blinded husband, Billy, baritone Kim Josephson was a solid, anchoring presence, and admirable supportive voices were supplied by Hila Plitmann and John Kimberling, as parents of the nabbed child. Young Kelsey Lee Smith as the nabbed one summoned a lovely vocal sound, although her parts were more glibly Broadway bound than other characters’ parts.

In the orchestra pit, company conductor (and artistic director) Valery Ryvkin kept a steady, sturdy hand. Onstage, Schwartz’s son Scott, with the help of Ettinger, lighting designer David Lander and costume designer Alejo Vietti, saw to a smooth-moving machinery of sets and emotional dynamics. The opera moves from interactions of separate spouses and houses -- the kidnapers and the parents of the kidnapped -- and raucous crowd/chorus scenes with the seedy sensationalist press hordes scrambling for scoops (Schwartz’s sly dig at the press, given his uneven critical cred?).

To some degree, “Séance” is an opera for people who don’t like opera. Appearances of operatic tradition, including the requisite blend of love and death and liberal touches of the irrational, are intact but are presented in a too-soft, palatable musical package.

Even so, Schwartz commands a sure skill with a tune and the arc of a dramatic evening. With an ultimately comforting charm, despite its wicked plot turns, “Séance” exists somewhere between Opera Lite and Opera Middling. That could win the opera populist favor and, by extension, that rare quality for new operas -- a shelf life.

-- Josef Woodard

"Séance on a Wet Afternoon." Granada Theatre, 1214 State St., Santa Barbara; 7:30 p.m. Oct. 2, 2:30 p.m. Oct. 4; \$23 to \$188; (805) 899-2222 or www.operasb.com/; running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes

*Updated: An earlier version of this review said that Kim Josephson is tenor. He is a baritone.

Photos of "Séance on a Wet Afternoon." Top, from left, Benjamin Brecher, Caroline Worra, Lauren Flanigan, Hila Plitmann, Jane Shaulis and Michael Marcotte. Credit: Anne Cusack / Los Angeles Times