



Photo by David Bazemore

***Séance on a Wet Afternoon* Premieres at the Granada September 26**

Stephen Schwartz Opera Continues October 2 and 4

By Charles Donelan

Tuesday, September 29, 2009

Stephen Schwartz and Opera Santa Barbara have pulled off the season's first major coup with this world premiere of what is likely to be among the most talked-about new operas of the decade. Boldly beautiful in its conception and staging, *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* takes audiences on a wild, suspenseful, and at times even hilarious ride to the limits of tragedy. If this latter-day *Medea* catches on, and there's a good chance it will, Santa Barbara audiences will be able to say that they saw it when it was new. With Maestro Valéry Ryvkin and his orchestra giving Schwartz's gorgeous score a splendid reading and

all the major roles sung with gusto, the only remaining question is how audiences elsewhere will respond to Myra Foster, the very wicked woman at the center of the story. Curtain calls at the Granada were met with a prolonged standing ovation, but the ambiguous morality of this thriller walks a tightrope between Edgar Allan Poe's psychological terror and the moody, sexually charged romanticism of Tennessee Williams. As with many a groundbreaking work before it, it's hard to know if people are ready for this *Séance* and what the spirits it unleashes seem to be saying.



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Although there was an announcement from the stage before the overture that Lauren Flanigan was suffering from a head cold, it was hard to tell that this extraordinary singer was not in top shape. The role of Myra demands both strenuous singing and considerable acting skills, and Flanigan brought both to her performance, which kept the audience on the edge of its seat throughout the evening. As Bill Foster, Kim Josephson was simply superb, and his arias consistently provoked well-earned ovations. Soprano Hila Plitmann carried off the role of the distressed mother, Rita Clayton, with compassion and flair. Tenor John Kimberling and bass Craig Hart were excellent as Mr. Clayton and Police Inspector Watts, respectively.



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Heidi Ettinger's truly magical sets nearly stole the show. The two-story home of the Fosters, a fantastic mindspace that alternated from opaque to transparent, spun and lit up in a variety of different configurations according to the needs of each individual scene. The enormous beaded curtains suggested drops of San Francisco rain at one moment, and the hazy boundary between the living and the dead at another. Taken all together, this *Séance* is a must-see triumph of contemporary operatic art.