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Seance on a Wet Afternoon

(Granada Theater, Santa Barbara, Calif.; 1,550 seats; \$188 top) An Opera Santa Barbara presentation of an opera in two acts by Stephen Schwartz, based on the novel by Mark McShane and the screenplay by Bryan Forbes. Directed by Scott Schwartz. Conductor, Valery Ryzkin; musical staging, Matt Williams.

Myra Foster - Lauren Flanigan
Bill Foster - Kim Josephson
Mrs. Clayton - Hila Plitmann
Mr. Clayton - John Kimberling
Adriana - Kelsey Lee Smith
Arthur - Aaron Refvem
Inspector Watts - Craig Hart

By [BOB VERINI](#)

In crafting his first opera, "Seance on a Wet Afternoon," Stephen Schwartz combines everything he knows about Broadway songwriting and Hollywood scoring -- which is plenty -- with a lyrical streak rarely seen from the composer of "Wicked," "Pippin" and "Godspell." Those gifts beautifully serve this quirkily Freudian ghost story about a psychic's uncertain relationship with the material world. Opera Santa Barbara's commissioned premiere production doesn't bring out the work's full potential, but it's terrifically involving and entertaining, sure to excite the interest of opera impresarios (and maybe even legit ones) seeking new audiences for a rigorous art form.

Adaptation of Mark McShane's Edgar Award-nominated novel "Seance" and Bryan Forbes' esteemed 1964 pic transfers neatly from London to San Francisco, where parapsychological interest is high and there are always opportunities for wet-afternoon roundtables with the dead, moderated on the cheap by Myra Foster (Lauren Flanigan).

Several amusing sequences involving her regulars bring out the vanity at the heart of all seances -- all presume the dead have nothing better to do than serve our needs -- with another critical conceit in play: Myra's ambition to validate her second sight to the world.

Arthur Foster (Aaron Refvem) hatches a plot to "borrow" Adriana (Kelsey Lee Smith), the young daughter of prominent financier Mr. Clayton (John Kimberling), hiding her chez Foster until Myra can come forward to bring her psychic powers to the rescue. Headlines and fame must follow.

But since mastermind Arthur is actually Myra's long-dead son, and it's hapless, long-suffering husband Billy (Kim Josephson) who must carry out the scheme, it's no surprise when nothing goes exactly as planned by those on either side of the great beyond.

The occult is highly conducive to operatic treatment, with Britten's "Turn of the Screw" and Menotti's "The Medium" as prime examples. A seer's trances or the keening of a grieving mother (Hila Plitmann) almost seem to write themselves for the opera stage, while a deceased loved one can be readily evoked in a recurring motif (Arthur's is based on the gorgeous faux-Scottish "My Faraway Laddie," played on a gramophone).

If Schwartz isn't exactly breaking new ground here, his assured, evocative melodies are worthy of the tradition in which he's working. Several arias are indistinguishable from stand-alone songs, each offering an oasis of melody and meaning: Flanigan chillingly explaining how "One Little Lie" will reveal her truth; Josephson schooling us in what Myra was like "When I First Knew Her."

At the same time, the audience is invited into the tale with excitement akin to that of classic thrillers. Transitions reminiscent of Bernard Herrmann with Hitchcock -- nervous, violent pizzicati or great, thumping chords from the underworld -- instantly set the mood while ratcheting up suspense. On press night, maestro Valery Ryvkin gleefully worked through these passages as if anticipating the fatal cymbal crash in "The Man Who Knew Too Much." (Actually, much of "Seance" boasts the same sweaty-palms tension.)

The piece is spooky enough in addressing the other side; Flanigan never leaves any doubt as to this woman's implacable bond with the spirits. But it doesn't yet delve deeply enough into the here and now. Slighted is the dynamic between frustrated mama Myra and husband Billy -- note infantilizing nickname -- as mates and partners in crime.

The weird, stiff-upper-lip dominatrix vibe between Kim Stanley and Richard Attenborough in the '64 classic finds no equivalent here, as helmer Scott Schwartz hasn't particularized their contact moments. We should utterly believe Billy's in her thrall but instead find ourselves wondering why this sensible fellow is going along. Myra repeatedly promises, "I'll do anything to please you," but it seems bizarre for neither singer, nor the music, even to hint at a carnal reward.

The physical bond between the Claytons also warrants attention, though the dazzling Plitmann breaks one's heart as the shell-shocked mother desperate for otherworldly

solace. (Kimberling's material is limited by the husband's skepticism, tough to render lyrical.) An occasional reporters' chorus is conventionally employed, but Craig Hart brings considerable presence to the chief inspector who happens to be a believer.

Helmer makes efficient use of Heidi Ettinger's marvelous multilevel representation of the Foster dwelling: Imagine the "August: Osage County" house spinning in either direction to afford multiple perspectives, transparent walls suitable for ghostly drop-bys. Throughout, David Lander's lights exploit the ominous overlaps between the normal and paranormal, picking up the surrounding floor-to-ceiling silver-beaded curtains simultaneously evoking a gypsy's doorway and the shimmering, saddening rain.

Sets, Heidi Ettinger; costumes, Alejo Vietti; lighting, David Lander; orchestrations, Stephen Schwartz, William David Brohn; stage manager, Valerie Wheeler. Opened, reviewed Sept. 26, 2009. Runs through Oct. 4. Running time: 2 HOURS, 50 MINS.

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