

LOS ANGELES

by Sharon Perlmutter

Séance on a Wet Afternoon

Stephen Schwartz may have written the world's most accessible opera. Don't get me wrong, *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* is most definitely an opera—with a lush score, supertitles, lots of vibrato, and sopranos going off to hit lyricless heights just because. But by the time you reach the second song, there's something oddly familiar here. In "One Little Lie," Myra encourages her husband Billy to commit a kidnapping (well, "borrowing a child," as she likes to say), and, as she starts to sing about how the kidnapping will eventually lead to her getting the recognition she deserves, it slowly dawns that this is ... a standard Stephen Schwartz "I want" song. And while it doesn't have the driving optimism of "The Wizard and I"—being as *Séance* ... is a much darker, twisted piece, there's still something comforting to a musical theatre person attending an opera and finding something so darned relatable.

The plot, for those unfamiliar with the 1965 movie or the book on which it is based, follows medium Myra Foster, who brings messages from beyond through the spirit conduit of Arthur, her dead son. Her talents are impressive but the world is not yet impressed. She reasons (actually, it's Arthur's idea) that if Billy kidnaps a child, she can then pretend to use her psychic talents to help the police find the child, and the world will celebrate her for her abilities. Myra has always known that she is special; soon everyone will know. And that particular emotion is certainly something Stephen Schwartz can put to music.

In fact, what really makes this opera work is that it's all about emotions being put to music. And Schwartz does this in the most raw, straightforward, grab-your-attention-even-if-you're-not-an-operagoer way. Lauren Flanigan (who turned in a remarkable opening night performance, despite the pre-curtain announcement that she had a cold) plays Myra with layers of contradiction. She dominates her milquetoast husband, yet constantly needs his assurance that he loves her. She's full of joy because of the connection she shares with the spirit of her son—and yet, once she's kidnapped the girl and sings about how lucky Adriana's parents are that they have her, there's clear anguish in her voice over the loss of her own child.

There's talent aplenty here. Baritone Kim Josephson as Billy initially seems as unremarkable as the character he plays. But in act two, when he has his own moment of conflicting emotions, he shows Billy to be much stronger than we'd imagined. Hila Plitmann plays Adriana's mother, a wealthy woman torn between being the well put together woman her class demands her to be, and a mother nearly at her wits' end at the disappearance of her child. And young Kelsey Lee Smith brings a clear voice (and a good deal of spunk) to the pivotal role of kidnapped Adriana.

Heidi Ettinger has created a set curtained by strings of chains; David Lander's lights play on the chains to create the illusion of rain with, at times, a breathtaking beauty. Director Scott Schwartz

has a very clear idea of how to put his father's material across—while the operatic singing doesn't necessarily seem natural, everything about the staging does. There's a realism surrounding the entire production—even when the characters are interacting with spirits, they're real people experiencing paranormal things.

But the heart and soul of this show is the music and libretto by Stephen Schwartz. To be fair, sometimes his lyrics have banal rhymes and would probably be better if he hadn't bothered with the rhyme. Nonetheless, the score is absolutely enthralling. We're dealing with characters at their most desperate—a psychic who commits a crime in a last-ditch effort to be appreciated; a husband who listened to his wife and got himself in way too deep; a woman hoping against hope for some word of her missing daughter—it's about parental love, spousal love, even self-love, and how far you're willing to go. And it's all sung in a way that it could never be expressed in mere dialogue.

I'll be honest with you—I don't know enough about opera to say whether this music is particular inventive or sophisticated by operatic standards. But I can tell you that it works.

Séance on a Wet Afternoon continues through October 4, 2009 at the Granada in Santa Barbara. For tickets and information, see www.operasb.com.

Opera Santa Barbara presents *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*. Music and Libretto by Stephen Schwartz. Based on the novel by Mark McShane and the screenplay by Bryan Forbes. Conductor Valéry Ryvkin; Director Scott Schwartz; Scenic Designer Heidi Ettinger; Costume Designer Alejo Vietti; Lighting Designer David Lander; Musical Staging Matt Williams. Commissioned by Opera Santa Barbara; Executive Producer Michael Jackowitz.

Cast:

Myra Foster - Lauren Flanigan

Mrs. Wintry - Jane Shaulis

Miss Rose - Caroline Worra

Mr. Bennett/Irish Tenor - Michael Marcotte

Mr. Cole - Benjamin Brecher

Bill Foster - Kim Josephson

Arthur - Aaron Refvem

Adriana Clayton - Kelsey Lee Smith

Mr. Clayton - John Kimberling

Mrs. Clayton - Hila Plitmann

Inspector Watts - Craig Hart

Policeman - Bray Wilkins

The Reporters - Deborah Bertlin, Danielle Marcelle Bond, Eric Carampatan, Julie Davis, Andrew Fernando, Thomas Hurd, Jr., Gabriel Manro, Darla Mattern, Jesse Merlin, Victoria Robertson, Jennifer Wallace

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