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Schwartz's 'Seance' avoids opera limbo

Contempo work heads to Oz

By [ROBERT HOFLER](#)

What were those "Wicked" producers Marc Platt and David Stone thinking as they sat front-row mezzanine at the third and final perf (Oct. 4) of Stephen Schwartz's new "Seance on a Wet Afternoon" at the Santa Barbara Opera?

Were they there merely to show support for their billion-dollar composer in his initial opera offering? Or were they crunching numbers: Could the 45 musicians be cut in half? Could the chorus of 16 reporters be reduced? And could the vocally demanding lead of the huckster clairvoyant, played by soprano Lauren Flanigan, be double- or even triple-cast a la "Billy Elliot" for eight perfs a week?

Schwartz made it to Santa Barbara, Calif., for his opera debut, and says the next perfs of "Seance" will take place at Oz's Opera Queensland. Beyond that, he isn't sure.

"Most contemporary operas receive a premiere and are never heard from again," he tells Variety. "I had to be prepared for that, and that may indeed be what happens here."

Not likely. Schwartz has created a crowd-pleasing contempo work that has the potential to reach a Broadway-size audience. And so, before we relegate "Seance" to opera limbo, let's look at the split reviews it received from the L.A. crits -- all two of them.

Variety's legit critic Bob Verini called the opera "terrifically involving and entertaining."

The L.A. Times' music critic Josef Woodard, on the other hand, wanted a "more tonally tense score" as written by someone like "Alban Berg or even Benjamin Britten."

Music critics never cover opera as the melding of music, words and narrative. It's like they're listening to a symphony with singers wearing costumes.

Schwartz tells a riveting story for the stage, and if impresarios don't want "Seance," some enterprising movie director should snap up the rights.

Basically, the tale of a medium who schemes to kidnap a child and collect the ransom money by using her clairvoyant talents is lifted from Bryan Forbes' 1964 screenplay, based on Mark McShane's 1961 novel. But Schwartz takes "Seance" to a place that no filmmaker, and few novelists, could explore 40 years ago.

The twist at the end is worthy of Hitchcock, and the events leading up to that shocker are very tabloidy -- just the kind of gothic stuff young movie auds eat up. (There's a reason Schwartz has a chorus of 16 reporters. "I couldn't do it musically with fewer than 11," he says.)

Forbes introduced changes, including the medium's dead son, and the movie offers a very different ending than the dark one in McShane's novel.

Schwartz takes the ending in a different direction than either. The major accomplishment of his music is that it makes the difficult character of the medium utterly sympathetic, and her climactic scene had the SBO audience in tears. Spoiler alert for operagoers: it's a moment that may recall the final scene in Puccini's "Suor Angelica."

Schwartz writes traditional setpieces of arias and recitative, and his harmonies would not fall all that uncomfortably on 19th-century ears, with melodies that are easy but never cloying.

In other words, opera/music crits will hate it, just as they have dismissed "Adriana Lecouvreur," "La Gioconda" and, until recently, "Suor Angelica," and other popular operas that have remained in the repertory because auds and singers adore them.

"Critics are more interested in the form and audiences are more interested in the content," Schwartz says. "The audience just wants to be told a good story."

Certainly Broadway auds educated on "Caroline, or Change," "The Light in the Piazza" and now "Next to Normal" are ready for this "Seance." Gotham's 2009-10 season has yet to debut a new tuner. Here on the other coast, I've already seen the best musical of my theater year.

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