

<REVIEW MUSICAL

Dutch Travel Opera

A Little Night Music

DUTCH TRAVEL OPERA PRESENTS DELIGHTFUL SONDHEIM



Thea Derks

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KEUZE VAN
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After a successful production of *Sweeney Todd* in 2014, the Dutch Reisopera again hits the mark with a musical by Stephen Sondheim, *A Little Night Music*. Everything is good about this performance: an excellent singer cast, beautiful sets and costumes, costly staging and an excellent playing Gelders Orchestra under the direction of Ryan Bancroft. Director Zack Winokur cleverly exploits the possibilities of the cynical-humorous libretto of Sondheim and regularly gets the laughs on his hand.

Based on the film *Smile of a summer night* by Ingmar Bergman, Sondheim zooms in for a little over three hours on a range of triangular proportions of the type 'one wants another, but the other does not want that one ...' from the well-known Ramses song Shaffy. These find a musical equivalent in a variety of waltzes, polonaises and other dances in triple time signature.

The pivotal figure is Desirée Armfeldt, an aged actress who has an affair with the jealous - but married - soldier Carl-Magnus Malcolm. But actually she still loves the somewhat boring lawyer Fredrik Egerman, the (ignorant) father of her daughter. Fredrik is now married to eighteen year old Anne, who is still a virgin despite eleven months of marriage. When Fredrik comes to get his convenience from Desirée, her old love flashes again and to win him back she organizes a 'Weekend in the Country' on her mother's estate.

After an endless amount of complications - including a Russian roulette and a suicide attempt - everything ends up nicely on its feet. Mother Armfeldt, like her daughter, strung from one lover to the next, but longed for her old-made lover back in her old age. Finally, while debiting humorous-melancholy lifestyles to her granddaughter, she happily gives her life and the musical is finished. This is a starring role of Inez Timmer, who speaks and sings the vileine texts of Sondheim with perfect dictation and subcutaneous irony. "Do not press your breasts against the back of my chair, that will inhibit their growth." Bernadeta Astari with her inseparable dog and mercury appearance is the ideal granddaughter.

Susan Riggava-Dumas is just as convincing as Desirée Armfeldt. When she discovers that Fredrik prefers fledgling Anne to her, she sings the evergreen 'Send in the Clowns' with great empathy. With her restrained, sometimes almost whispered interpretation, she makes her shame and sadness very palpable. Many people - including your reporter - shed a tear. Paul Groot is also phenomenal, who as Fredrik links one striking one-

liner to the other. Job Greuter convinces as his grim son, who is secretly in love with Anne, is unsuccessfully seduced by maid Petra and also gives himself great support on the cello.

Sanne Franssen is a naughty-whore Petra, who buttons Henrik's fly with the words 'Give it a rest, and you'll be surprised how perky it will be by morning'. The soprano Laetitia Gerards sings excellently, but could convey the naivety of Anne a little stronger. Jessica Aszodi is witty as the deceived wife of Carl-Magnus, who is played somewhat woody by the baritone Hadleigh Adams. The choir of five singers expresses the unspoken feelings of the characters with contagious enthusiasm and delivers sharp comments.

Director Winokur is making good progress by making the scene changes part of the story. The protagonists themselves drag the props onto the stage, which they turn into a boudoir, a ballroom or a nocturnal garden with a simple handle. The first deed is bathed in a pleasant red light, the second is done in silver-gray hues. An exception is Desirée, who draws all the attention in her bright red dress.

Actually, *A Little Night Music* is more a play with music than a musical / operetta / opera. There is a lot of spoken text - with strikingly good English pronunciation and acting - and the music is outspokenly serving. Catchy waltzes and recurring melodies work as leitmotifs that nevertheless give it some windy libretto coherence. Sondheim is a gifted instrumentator. He colors the action with subtle soli from piano, woodwind and brass instruments and takes gas back when the singers speak.

The vocals are amplified by microphones. That creates some distance, but you are quickly used to it. Moreover, it improves the intelligibility and gives the singers the opportunity to sing very softly and intimately. The absolute highlight is the 'Send in the Clowns' mentioned above. The audience in the Wilminktheater erupted in a stormy, minute-long applause after the premiere. Once again the Reisopera has succeeded in putting down a top production in a genre that you do not expect in an opera house. This tastes like more.

Photo: Marco Borggreve