

February 14, 2008

THEATER REVIEW
'Aspects of Love'

The Musical Theatre Guild version of the Andrew Lloyd Webber show is confusing but fun.

By Daryl H. Miller, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

A romantic roundelay, inflamed by an actress, heats up the European countryside.

Name the show.

The Stephen Sondheim-Hugh Wheeler musical "A Little Night Music" comes to mind, right? But this nutshell plot also happens to apply to the Andrew Lloyd Webber-Don Black-Charles Hart project "Aspects of Love."

Though it's no masterwork on the order of "Night Music," Lloyd Webber's "chamber opera," as his PR machine labeled it, was undeniably ambitious. In April 1989, it was introduced to London, where it remained a fixture for more than three years, and in April 1990, it opened in New York, where it lasted less than a year.

A comment overheard Monday at Glendale's Alex Theatre, where the Musical Theatre Guild presented a concert-staged re-exploration, partly explains why the show didn't do well on Broadway. "I don't know who ends up with who," a theatergoer said to a companion during intermission, "and which woman's pregnant?"

Keeping track of the amorous permutations -- taken from a David Garnett novel -- is a problem. Over some of us, however, this show holds inordinate sway.

The Musical Theatre Guild version -- which under the direction of Calvin Remsberg and musical direction of John Glaudini achieved remarkable nuance in just 25 hours of rehearsal -- is presented on a bare stage framed by translucent white drapery. The "orchestra" is two pianists, Glaudini and Steven Smith, who will accompany the cast of 13 again when the presentation is repeated Sunday in Thousand Oaks.

Lloyd Webber's popera score is built of recurring themes that signify shifts in romantic intensity. Musical Theatre Guild performs it passionately.

The story unfurls from 1947 to '64. Alex, whose impetuosity sets things in motion, introduces the score's big standout, "Love Changes Everything," right away. Roger Befeler floats the tune high in his register, gradually dialing up his fervor as the verses progress from rapture to devastation. Kim Huber gives Rose, the passion-igniting actress, a focused buzz befitting the character's high-strung emotions. The mild abrasion in Michael G. Hawkins' baritone suits Uncle George's suave gravity, which softens into fatherly adoration when he delivers another standout, "The First Man You Remember."

Portraying George's longtime mistress, Christina Saffran Ashford uses her sparkling soprano -- with its deep, dangerously sexy undercurrent -- to spectacularly deliver the number that encapsulates the story's philosophy: "Hand Me the Wine and the Dice."

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'Aspects of Love'

Where: Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, Scherr Forum, 2100 Thousand Oaks Blvd.

When: 3 p.m. Sunday

Price: \$39

Contact: (213) 365-3500; civicartsplaza.com

Running time: 2 hours, 35 minutes