

COLUMBUS DISPATCH
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APR-30-99

'Night Music' at Otterbein a lavish, lovely production

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Shimmering with beauty, melody and wit, *A Little Night Music* becomes a jeweled music box in the deft hands of Otterbein College's theater and music departments.

Lavish but unerringly tasteful, lovely but not gaudy, comically broad but often delightfully subtle, the co-production ranks with Otterbein's best spring musicals.

Night Music is one of the most challenging Stephen Sondheim shows. Yet, Otterbein brings the 1973 Tony winner for best musical to glittering life with grace, sophistication and seemingly effortless ease.

Director Dennis Romer and music director Kevin Purcell enhance the wistful romanticism of Sondheim's gorgeous score and author Hugh Wheeler's portrait of four Swedish couples linked by the ironic complications of 19th-century love.

Purcell conducts the 24-piece orchestra with crystalline clarity, lifting rhythm and passion.

The 18-member cast did not appear to have a weak link at Wednesday's student preview, although the laughter and applause occasionally drowned out lyrics.

As the widely admired actress Desiree Armfeldt, Allison Sattinger embodies the jaded sophistication of a socialite used to having her way with other women's husbands.

Guest Equity actress Linda Dorff adds welcome maturity to the production as Madame Armfeldt, Desiree's mother "who has outlived her illusions by centuries." Her elegantly sung *Liaisons* is a wistful remembrance of amours past — and an amusing display of Madame's ageless greed.

Although Christopher Sloan ini-

Theater review

A Little Night Music, Otterbein College's student production of composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim and author Hugh Wheeler's musical. Directed by Dennis Romer.

Desiree.....Allison Sattinger
Madame Armfeldt.....Linda Dorff
Fredrik Egerman.....Christopher Sloan
Anne Egerman.....Amanda Wheeler
Carl-Magnus.....Ayler Evan
Charlotte.....Chrisi Carter
Petra.....Jen Minter
Henrik.....Matthew DeVriendt

Send in the bouquets

Being performed at 8 tonight and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — and 8 p.m. May 6-8 — in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville.

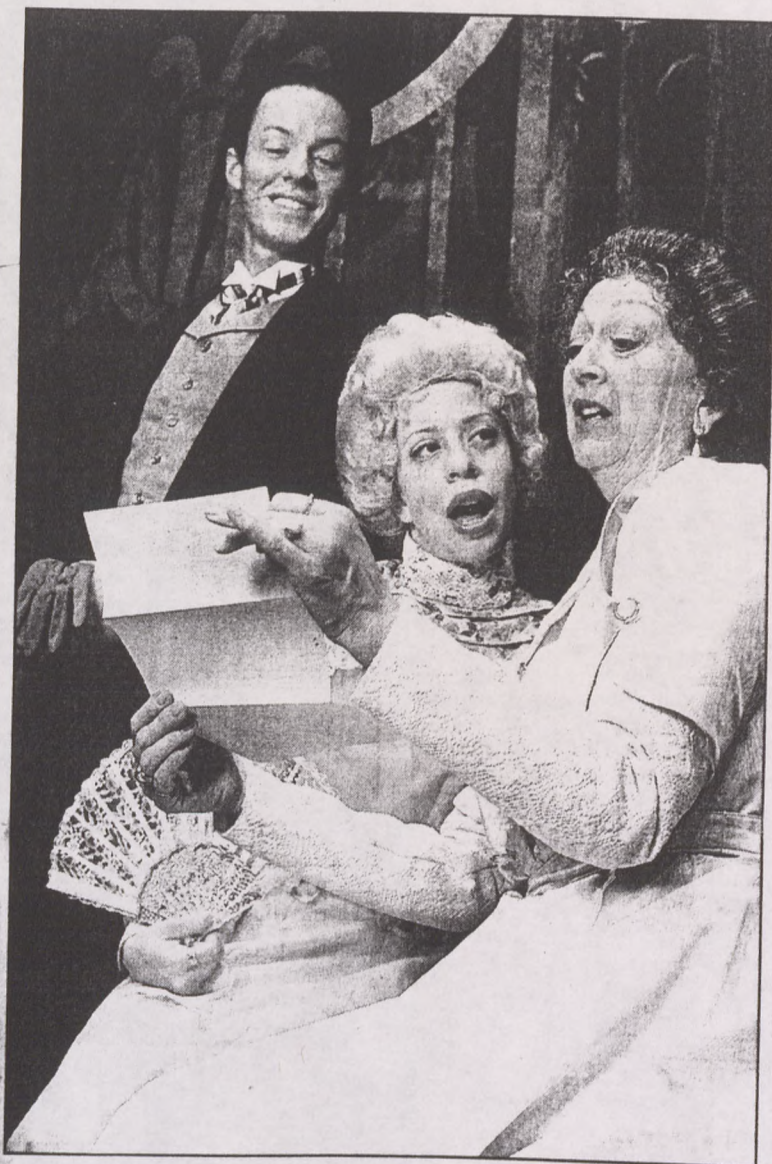
Tickets cost \$12 and \$14. Call 614-823-1109.

tially seems too young as Fredrik Egerman — especially in his opening scenes with his adult son Henrik (Matthew DeVriendt) — Sloan's performance grows into a convincing portrait of middle-aged ambivalence.

Ayler Evan struts and pouts as Count Carl-Magnus Malcolm, adding comic and dramatic dimension to the "conceited, puffed-up, adulterous egomaniac" (as the Count's wife describes him to a friend).

Other strong performances: Jennifer Minter, brash and earthy as Petra; Amanda Wheeler, vibrant as Egerman's wife; and Chrisi Carter, foolish but sympathetic as the Count's easily manipulated wife.

As the chorus that comments on the story and voices the hidden thoughts of some characters, Josh Gilliam, Elizabeth Harold, Crystal



Cliff Jette / For The Dispatch

Fredrik Egerman (Christopher Sattinger) watches as Desiree Armfeldt (Allison Sattinger) and Madame Armfeldt (Linda Dorff) read an invitation to a weekend in the country in a scene from *A Little Night Music*.

Edwards, Jonathan Yount and Faith Talley sing stylishly and knowingly.

All 17 songs are performed well. Especially good are Minter's *The Miller's Son*, DeVriendt's *Later* and Evan's *In Praise of Woman*. In a class by itself: *Send in the Clowns*. Sattinger delivers Sondheim's signature song with rueful emotion.

The first-act finale is a beauty. Romer orchestrates a rondelet of rising expectations as the couples respond to Madame Armfeldt's invita-

tion to spend *A Weekend in the Country* at her palatial estate.

Rob Johnson's swirling scenic design enhances the mood with islands of bedroom intimacy. The 2½-hour show also boasts luscious lace-trimmed gowns and stylish tuxedos by costume designer Katie Robbins, sun-dappled lighting and twilights by Dana White and just enough waltzing by choreographer Stella Hiatt Kane to reinforce the flirtatious atmosphere.

The Theater and Music departments at Otterbein College join forces every spring to stage a musical, but they don't often tackle the challenging works of Stephen Sondheim.

More than most other musicals, a Sondheim show weaves clever lyrics, subtle melodies, conflicted characters and mature themes into a seamless, sophisticated whole.

A Little Night Music, opening tonight on the Westerville campus, is the fifth co-production of a Sondheim musical, after *Into the Woods* (1992), *Sweeney Todd* (1989) and *West Side Story* (1977 and 1985).

Sondheim ranks as "the last of the master craftsmen," said music director Kevin Purcell, who conducts the 24-member orchestra.

In Melbourne, Australia, where he grew up, Purcell conducted four Sondheim shows: *A Little Night Music*, *Into the Woods*, *Follies* and *Merrily We Roll Along*. More recently he spent four years in London, where he conducted *Cats* and *Les Miserables*.

Sondheim scores are complex, "hard to play and hard to understand but artful to the nth degree," he said.

A Little Night Music, the 1973 Tony winner for best musical, was adapted by Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler from the 1955 Swedish film *Smiles of a Summer Night*, about 19th-century manners, mores and romantic affairs.

It revolves around four couples sorting out their lives during a weekend in the country.

"Sondheim wants to be openly romantic, but he just can't help himself and adds a real twist in the tale," said Purcell, who joined the Music Department in September. "When the words are saying something, the music is often diametrically opposed to it, bringing out a greater level of the complexity of the characters. They often don't say what they really mean and don't react as you'd expect them to react."

The conductor, with his background in classical music, appreciates Sondheim even more.

In *Night Music*, he said, the composer uses the harp and the "tinkly bell-like sound" of the celesta, a keyboard instrument like the glockenspiel — picked up from Ravel.

"The *Night Music* score is all in waltz time, so it's like sex in music," Purcell said. "To do it justice, you have to play the sensual nature all the way through. (Director) Dennis (Romer) and I are going after a skating-on-glass effect, a very provocative waltz. It requires a high degree of flamboyance, which I show in my hands and in my body."

"I suspect my conducting will annoy some people because my arms and hands will move through some sightlines to show the company onstage the nature of the expression."

Guest Equity artist Linda Dorff — who plays wealthy, jaded Madame Armfeldt — is another Sondheim fan.

"So many of his lyrics are so full of words," she said. "You almost have to see a Sondheim show twice to fully appreciate everything."

Her big number, *Liaisons*, is a wistful solo in which the wealthy Madame remembers her love affairs "and what she obtained from them."

She also sings part of *The Glamorous Life*.

With Players Theatre Columbus, Dorff played Charlotte in a 1978 staging of *A Little Night Music*; the beggar in a legendary 1984 production of *Sweeney Todd*; and Amy in *Company*. She also appeared in a Cleveland production of *Gypsy* and, with Little Theatre Off Broadway, in *Side by Side by Sondheim*.

"Romantic love and passion are Sondheim's favorite subjects," she said. "Sondheim's treatment of love is edgy, deep, dark and very emotional."

A lot of Sondheim

*With 'A Little Night Music,'
Otterbein interprets a 'master craftsman'*



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■ Otterbein College will present *A Little Night Music* at 7:30 tonight, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 2 p.m. Sunday — and 8 p.m. May 6-8 — in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$12 and \$14. For more information, call 614-823-1109.

Madame Armfeldt (Linda Dorff), left, Fredrik Egerman (Christopher Sloan) and Desiree (Allison Sattinger) in *A Little Night Music*

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