



A Little Night Music: A Primer

Music and Lyrics by STEPHEN SONDHEIM

Book by HUGH WHEELER

Suggested by a film by Ingmar Bergman

A collaboration between the Departments of Dramatic Arts and Music of the Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, Brock University

November 12, 13, 14, 2009 at 7:30 p.m.; November 13, 2009 at 1:30 pm
Sean O'Sullivan Theatre, Centre for the Arts, Brock University
St. Catharines ON

THE SHOW

...heady, civilized, sophisticated and enchanting. It is Dom Perignon...It is a mixture of Cole Porter, Gustav Mahler, Antony Tudor and just a little of Ingmar Bergman. And it is more fun than any tango in a Parisian suburb...Good God!—an adult musical!" [Clive Barnes' *New York Times* review of the original production of *A Little Night Music* in 1973]

Hit song: "Send in the Clowns"

Plot synopsis

Act One

In the country, the elderly Madame Armfeldt is imparting wisdom to her young granddaughter Fredrika, who lives with her while her mother, Desirée Armfeldt, tours as an actress. Madame Armfeldt tells Fredrika to watch for the three smiles of a summer evening. In the city, Fredrik Egerman, a middle-aged lawyer, takes his young second wife, Anne, to the theatre where Desirée is performing. Fredrik

and Desirée were once lovers. Passion rekindled, Fredrik visits Desirée later that night, only to be caught by (and successfully escape) her current lover, the very jealous Carl-Magnus, Count Malcolm. Meanwhile, Fredrik's grown son, Henrik, a divinity student, who is in love with his step-mother (Anne), has a brief encounter with Petra (the Egerman's maid). Desirée realizes she is finally ready to settle down (with Fredrik) and persuades her mother, Madame Armfeldt, to invite the Egermans for a "Weekend in the Country". Desirée's daughter, Fredrika, is delighted her mother is coming home. Charlotte Malcolm (Carl-Magnus' wife) learns about the weekend invitation from Anne Egerman. Charlotte encourages Anne to accept and then Charlotte reports back to Carl-Magnus. He decides they must crash the house party.

Act Two

The Egermans and the Malcolms arrive in the country with their servants. Desirée now has a delicate balancing act between Fredrik and Carl-Magnus. The situation is further complicated by Charlotte's plot to make Carl-Magnus jealous by pursuing Fredrik herself. After many encounters in every possible combination, the characters are rearranged and the night smiles the third time.

Characters

Madame Leonora Armfeldt - an elderly woman, living on an estate

Desirée Armfeldt - her daughter, an actress

Fredrika Armfeldt - Desirée's daughter

Fredrik Egerman - a lawyer

Anne Egerman - his young, second wife

Henrik Egerman - Fredrik's son by his first marriage

Count Carl-Magnus Malcolm - a dragoon

Countess Charlotte Malcolm - his wife

Frid - Madame Armfeldt's butler

Petra - the Egermans' maid

Malla - Desirée's dresser/companion

Bertrand - Carl-Magnus' aide/valet

The Liebeslieders: Mr. Lindquist

Mrs. Nordstrom

Mrs. Anderssen

Mr. Erlanson

Mrs. Segstrom

The Composer/Lyricist

Stephen Sondheim was born March 22, 1930 into comfortable circumstances on Manhattan's Upper West Side. When Stephen was 10 his father left the family. This had an enormous impact on his life. The young Sondheim soon met the highly successful musical composer, Oscar Hammerstein II (*Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, *The King and I*, *South Pacific*, *The Sound of Music*). Hammerstein became a role-model, a mentor and something of a surrogate father to the young Sondheim. Hammerstein gave him his first show business job, when he hired him at 17 as an office boy on Hammerstein's production of *Allegro*. Hammerstein was also responsible for the introduction to Leonard Bernstein, which led to Sondheim being hired to co-write the lyrics of *West Side Story* (1957) with the great composer. Sondheim went on to write the lyrics for *Gypsy* (1959). *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962) was the first show for which he wrote both lyrics and music. Other shows include: *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964), *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), *Into the Woods* (1987), *Assassins* (1991) and *Passion* (1994). *Company* was the first show on which Sondheim collaborated with director Harold Prince, the man he credits for much of his success. Sondheim has won numerous Tony and other awards for his shows, which are now enjoying many revivals around the world.

The Inspiration

When Harold Prince, Arthur Laurents (book-writer) and Sondheim failed to persuade Jean Anouilh to let them make a musical out of his play *Ring Round the Moon*, they looked at several films and were drawn to Ingmar Bergman's film *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1956). It is a somewhat atypical film for the Swedish director, who is known for rather darker films. The team was drawn to the romantic comedy and to the device of city people who behave strangely when set down in the country.

THE PRODUCTION

This is a very complex show, with many intertwined strands and themes. Here are some of the ones the artistic team is pursuing.

3 Generations/3 families

A Little Night Music is written in 3/4 (waltz) time. The number three is very significant throughout the show. It is the story of three households and three generations. There are three generations of the Armfeldts, two awkward mixed



generations of Egermans and one tense generation of the Malcolms. Mme. Armfeldt opens the show with the three smiles of the summer night (modified from the film). The three Armfeldt women may also be regarded as three stages in the life of one Armfeldt woman. The tangles of the story are in the form of triangles trying to become couples.

Escape to the Country

The creators of the original show were drawn to the phenomenon of city folk being bewitched into strange behaviour and/or discovering their true selves when they escape to the country. The summer/country/vacation spot is a place to let your hair down, let go, be free. With endless hours of nothing to do, the characters begin to deal with endless hours of nothing to do, the characters begin to shed baggage and clothing.

Baggage

There is a great deal of baggage in *A Little Night Music*, much of it literal. The itinerant Desirée is constantly surrounded by it. The guests are in a flurry of it, preparing for their weekend at Mme. Armfeldt's. This is a reflection of the heap of psychological baggage being dealt with, for better or for worse, during the course of the piece. The characters have complicated pasts, stifling conventions and attitudes, conflicting needs and exhausting burdens. When they all come together it is like a pile-up on a luggage carousel when a big jet touches down in a busy airport. There is an ongoing struggle to pack it all away, organize, re-arrange, justify and finally, just dispose of baggage. Clothing is another form of baggage. The characters are laden with it, obsessed by it, from the most intimate inner garments to the frills and accessories. They bring it all with them on the weekend and gradually they strip, shed, simplify.

Game playing

Sondheim has a lifelong fascination with games. He collects, plays and displays them. *A Little Night Music*, a musical comedy of manners, is full of game playing. Sometimes the players are not even aware that they are in the game. On the other hand, the game masters do not always succeed, as their games turn into games of chance. The theme of game-playing is reflected in the production design and direction. All games have rules.



The rules of the dance

The waltz has its own rules of course. Sondheim set himself the challenging task of writing this entire musical in 3/4 or related time (with a little cheating). The waltz was considered decadent for many years - too much physical contact between partners. It rapidly became a dance for all classes in society. Most "ballroom" dance is a structured set of moves, governed by the music and a received set of moves and patterns.

Liaisons

It may be a little difficult for an early 21st century audience to grasp the accepted norms of the world of *A Little Night Music*. In upper and upper middle class society, even in buttoned-up Sweden at the turn of the 20th century, it was perfectly acceptable for a man to have affairs and/or keep a mistress. However, there were rules. It was the privilege of a man, not a woman, although some women could have a succession of lovers, provided they were unmarried or widowed, "artistes" or professional courtesans. Discretion was expected; one was expected to avoid flaunting the liaison. They were certainly not to disrupt normal family life.

Endless day

We Canadians can certainly relate to the Scandinavian horror of the endless nights of winter and the joy of the long days of summer. But those of us in one of the southernmost parts of Canada may not be able to comprehend the lassitude and frustration of the endless day as it is presented in *A Little Night Music*. As visitors to the far north we are captivated. But as a steady diet? Certainly as the days grow longer we move outdoors; we use every last hour of daylight. But what if the activities you are longing to engage in are those of the night?

Chorus

The Liebeslieders function as a Greek chorus, ever present, commenting on the action. They foreshadow some of the drama; they reflect it back and finally they reprise the music of several of the lead players. They also enjoy a complex set of intertwined encounters among the 3 women and 2 men.



COLLABORATION

All theatre is created of collaboration. Lyric theatre often requires a larger and more varied team. *A Little Night Music* is no exception and marks a very important major collaboration between the Departments of Dramatic Arts and Music at Brock. Faculty, staff, students and outside professionals are involved in this new collaboration. It is proving to be a wonderful learning and artistic experience.

Director	Virginia Reh, Dramatic Arts
Scenographer	David Vivian, Dramatic Arts
Music Director	Dr. Harris Loewen, Music
Choreographer	Jane Johanson, Shaw Festival
Production Manager	Brian Cumberland, Marilyn I . Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts
Assistant Director	Graham Shaw, alumnus, Dramatic Arts
Assistant Designer	Maggie George, student, Dramatic Arts
Assistant Conductor	April Curran, student, Music
Assistant Choreographer	Rebecca Pleschke, student, Dramatic Arts
Stage Manager	Finn Archinuk, student, Dramatic Arts

Please join us for *A Little Night Music*.

Tickets are available through the Box Office of the Centre for the Arts
905.688.5550 x 3257

For the Matinee performance please contact Marie Balsom for more information, at 905-688-5550 x 4765; e-mail: mbalsom@brocku.ca

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