WORDS on PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

A Little Night Music

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim
Book by Hugh Wheeler
Directed by Mark Lamos
Orchestrations by Jonathan Tunick
Suggested by a Film by Ingmar Bergman

The Geary Theater
May 20–June 14, 2015

Words on Plays Vol. XXI, No. 6

Nirmala Nataraj
Editor

Elizabeth Brodersen
Director of Education & Community Programs

Michael Paller
Resident Dramaturg

Shannon Stockwell
Publications Associate

Anna Woodruff
Publications Fellow

Amy Krivohlavek, Dan Rubin
Contributing Writers

Made possible by
Table of Contents

1 Overview of *A Little Night Music*
6 A Rich Variety of Visions
   The Creation and Development of *A Little Night Music*
   by Nirmala Nataraj
12 Today’s Shakespeare
   The Relentless Relevance of Stephen Sondheim
   by Amy Krivohlavek
17 Accomplice to the Musical Masterpiece
   The Work of Hugh Wheeler
   by Amy Krivohlavek
21 The Beauty of Perplexity
   An Interview with Director Mark Lamos
   by Nirmala Nataraj
26 Love Affairs in Triple Time
   On Sondheim and His Score for *A Little Night Music*
   by Dan Rubin
33 Love’s Merry-Go-Round
   An Interview with Actor Karen Ziemba
   by Shannon Stockwell
38 A Return Home through Memory
   An Interview with Scenic Designer Riccardo Hernandez
   by Anna Woodruff
43 A Fantasy of Fools
   An Interview with Costume Designer Candice Donnelly
   by Shannon Stockwell
46 “Love’s Disgusting, Love’s Insane”
   Ingmar Bergman’s *Smiles of a Summer Night*
   by Shannon Stockwell
51 Love, Sex, and Other Revelations
   All on a Midsummer’s Night
   by Nirmala Nataraj
53 *A Little Night Music* Glossary
56 Questions to Consider / For Further Information . . .

COVER Scenic designer Riccardo Hernandez’s model for A.C.T.’s 2015 production of *A Little Night Music*

OPPOSITE Nordic Summer Evening (1889–1900), by Swedish painter Sven Richard Bergh
Overview of *A Little Night Music*

The world premiere of *A Little Night Music* opened on Broadway at the Shubert Theatre on February 25, 1973, and closed on August 3, 1974, after 601 performances. It was directed by Harold Prince. Under Mark Lamos's direction, it also received a production at Center Stage in Baltimore in 2008.

**Creative Team**

- **Music Director** .............................................. Wayne Barker
- **Choreographer** .............................................. Val Caniparoli
- **Scenic Designer** ............................................. Riccardo Hernandez
- **Costume Designer** ........................................ Candice Donnelly
- **Lighting Designer** ........................................ Robert Wierzel
- **Sound Designer** ........................................... Kevin Kennedy

**Characters and Cast in Order of Appearance**

- Mr. Lindquist ................................................ Brandon Dahlquist
- Mrs. Nordstrom ............................................... Christine Capsuto
- Mrs. Anderssen .............................................. Annemaria Rajala
- Mr. Erlanson .................................................. Andres Ramirez
- Mrs. Segstrom ................................................ Caitlan Taylor
- Fredrika Armfeldt ........................................... Brigid O’Brien
- Madame Armfeldt ............................................ Dana Ivey
- Frid ................................................................. Michael McIntire
- Henrik Egerman ............................................... Justin Scott Brown
- Anne Egerman .................................................. Laurie Veldheer
- Fredrik Egerman ............................................... Patrick Cassidy
- Petra .............................................................. Marissa McGowan
- Desiree Armfeldt ............................................... Karen Ziemb
- Count Carl-Magnus Malcolm ............................... Paolo Montalban
- Charlotte Malcolm ............................................ Emily Skinner

**OPPOSITE** Costume designer Candice Donnelly's renderings for Madame Armfeldt (left) and her granddaughter, Fredrika (right), for A.C.T.'s 2015 production of *A Little Night Music*
**Synopsis**

**Act I**

The elderly Madame Armfeldt plays solitaire as her 13-year-old granddaughter, Fredrika, watches. Fredrika asks her grandmother about the “summer night smiling.” Madame Armfeldt responds that the summer night smiles three times: first, at the young; second, at the fools; and third, at those who know too much. The two briefly discuss Fredrika’s mother, Desiree, a famous actress, of whom Madame Armfeldt clearly disapproves.

The scene shifts to the Egerman home. Anne Egerman, a beautiful 18-year-old girl, is in the parlor with her stepson, Henrik Egerman, a 19-year-old seminary student, who is playing the cello. Anne and Henrik are friendly with each other, but she teases him for being too gloomy. Fredrik Egerman, Anne’s husband and Henrik’s father, returns home from work. He is a lawyer who has had a busy day at court. He has purchased tickets to the theater later that night for himself and Anne; they are going to see *Woman of the World*, starring Desiree Armfeldt.

Anne excitedly retreats to the bedroom to get ready for the show, and Fredrik follows her, pondering ways in which he might seduce her; they have been married 11 months but have not yet consummated their marriage. He ultimately gives up and goes to sleep.

Meanwhile, Petra, the Egermans’ flirtatious maid, finds Henrik in the parlor. She teases him, but when he fumblingly attempts a sexual encounter, she turns him down. Alone and melancholy, he wonders if he will ever lose his virginity. Meanwhile, back in the bedroom, Anne is startled when she hears Fredrik talking in his sleep; he utters Desiree’s name as he blows a kiss into the air.

The scene shifts to the local theater. Anne presses Fredrik for information about Desiree, but, unaware that Anne heard him say Desiree’s name in his sleep, he claims that he doesn’t know the actress. When Desiree makes her grand entrance onstage, she immediately makes eye contact with Fredrik. He pretends not to notice, but Anne does. She questions her husband about why Desiree looked at him, but when he brushes her off, she jealously storms out of the theater. Fredrik follows.

Back at the Egerman house, Petra and Henrik fumble with their clothes. Petra’s consoling comments and Henrik’s frustration suggest a sexual encounter that did not end well. Anne and Fredrik come bursting in and retreat to their bedroom. They talk about their relationship, and, having somewhat comforted Anne, Fredrik leaves her to sleep and goes on a walk to Desiree’s home.

Desiree is pleased to see Fredrik; the former lovers have not seen each other in 14 years. He confesses that he had a dream about her, but both of them are with new lovers—he with Anne, and she with Count Carl-Magnus Malcolm. Fredrik tells Desiree all about how wonderful Anne is, but when he reveals that they have not yet had sex, Desiree is astonished. With some awkwardness, Fredrik asks her if she will sleep with him, and she laughingly responds, “Of course. What are old friends for?”
After their encounter, Desiree’s lover, Count Carl-Magnus Malcolm, barges in. He says that he only has 24 hours’ leave and intends to spend several hours with Desiree and the rest with his wife, but Fredrik’s presence incites Carl-Magnus’s jealousy.

The next day, Carl-Magnus, hiding nothing from his wife, Charlotte, tells her about the run-in with Desiree and Fredrik. He suggests that Charlotte pay a visit to her old friend Anne and alert her to her husband’s behavior.

At the Egermans’ home, Charlotte tearfully confesses to Anne that Carl-Magnus is an adulterous egomaniac and has been carrying on an affair with Desiree; despite her apparent nonchalance, she is actually miserable. She also reveals that Fredrik and Desiree used to be lovers and that Carl-Magnus found them both together. The two women commiserate about their mutual betrayals.

On the Armfeldt terrace, Desiree sweeps in to greet her mother and daughter. Desiree tells her mother that she is on hiatus from touring and would like to invite some friends to the country house for the weekend. Madame Armfeldt obliges by sending formal invitations to the Egermans.

Upon receiving the invitation, Anne is distraught. She discusses the matter with Charlotte, who insists that the Egermans should accept the invitation; when Fredrik sees Anne next to the aging actress, Charlotte says, he will naturally choose his young and beautiful wife. Charlotte sardonically tells Carl-Magnus about the weekend in the country but is disappointed when he impulsively decides that they too will attend, albeit uninvited.

Act II

The Armfeldts are on the lawn of their estate when Carl-Magnus and Charlotte drive up. They have fabricated an excuse involving their cousin’s house being quarantined for plague. Desiree is shocked to see her lover and his wife, but graciously agrees to host them. Fredrik, Anne, Henrik, and Petra arrive as well, and everyone retires to their respective rooms, but Carl-Magnus and Fredrik both attempt to get Desiree alone so they can speak with her. Desiree, flustered, runs back to the house.

Anne is full of doubts about the weekend, but Charlotte reassures her and shares her plan: she (Charlotte) will seduce Fredrik; when Carl-Magnus sees this, he will beg her forgiveness and swear long-lasting fidelity to her, while Fredrik will naturally realize that Anne is much more suitable for him than Desiree is.

In the garden, Henrik finds a sympathetic ear in Fredrika. She tells him she never knew her father and was raised in the theater. Henrik confesses that he himself wishes he had never been born—he is tormented because he is in love with Anne.

On the terrace, Fredrik and Carl-Magnus are waiting for dinner. Independent of each other, they contemplate what their lives would have been like had they never fallen for Desiree, but they both conclude that, despite it all, they love her. Fredrika tells Carl-Magnus that Desiree would like to meet him in the Green Salon, and he eagerly exits. With Carl-Magnus out of the way, Desiree enters for a moment alone with Fredrik, who warns her that Anne doesn’t know anything about their amorous encounter the other
night. They are interrupted by the voice of Carl-Magnus, and Desiree tells Fredrik to meet her in her bedroom later. Carl-Magnus jealously confronts Desiree, but she assures him that Fredrik is merely taking care of Madame Armfeldt’s legal matters. Carl-Magnus informs Desiree that he will visit her in her bedroom later that night.

The guests assemble for dinner. Charlotte sets about seducing Fredrik, which infuriates Carl-Magnus. As matters intensify, Henrik smashes his wine glass, tells everyone that they disgust him, and runs from the table. Anne attempts to follow him, but Fredrik orders her to stay.

Fearing that he is upset enough to hurt himself, Fredrika goes to comfort Henrik. Anne, having escaped from the dinner table, also calls out to him, but he runs off when he hears her voice. Fredrika frantically explains to Anne that Henrik is in love with her; Anne is flattered, but worried for his well-being. The two girls set about to find him.

Fredrik comes to see Desiree in her bedroom, and the two can’t help but laugh at the events of the evening. Desiree suggests that perhaps they are both fools, and she confesses that she invited him to her country home because she wants to revive their love. Despite his feelings for his former lover, Fredrik tells her that he cannot desert Anne and leaves Desiree alone in her room.

Henrik walks into the garden carrying a rope. Anne and Fredrika call out to him, but he runs to a nearby tree, from which he intends to hang himself. However, he falls to the ground, his suicide attempt a failure. Anne finds him and pulls him off the ground. They kiss passionately and finally declare their love for each other.

Fredrik goes to the garden and sees Charlotte sitting on a bench. She apologizes to him for her behavior and explains that she was trying to make her husband jealous. Fredrik tries to console her. Just then, Anne and Henrik come out of the house bearing suitcases, not noticing Fredrik and Charlotte sitting nearby. After sharing a kiss, the two young lovers quickly head toward the stables to make their escape. Fredrik, realizing what has happened, is stricken by grief.

Carl-Magnus goes to Desiree’s bedroom, but she demands that he leave. He begins to disrobe and Desiree screams at him, insisting that their affair is over. At that moment, he looks out the window and sees Charlotte and Fredrik together. He instantly pulls up his trousers and runs to get his dueling pistols.

In the garden, Carl-Magnus challenges Fredrik to a game of Russian roulette. Fredrik, still stunned from seeing Anne and Henrik run off together, nonchalantly agrees and the two leave for the pavilion. Charlotte excitedly realizes that Carl-Magnus is jealous of Fredrik, which she believes proves his love for her. Suddenly, a gunshot rings out. Desiree enters and asks Charlotte what has happened. Carl-Magnus returns with Fredrik over one shoulder and dumps his limp body onto the ground. The scene looks bleak, but Carl-Magnus explains that the bullet only grazed Fredrik’s ear. Carl-Magnus forgives Charlotte and insists that they leave immediately. She agrees.

Fredrik admits to Desiree that Anne and Henrik ran off together. Although he has lost his son and his wife in one fell swoop, he feels strangely relieved. Fredrik and Desiree then realize that they are destined to be together and begin planning their shared life.
Musical Numbers

ACT I

“Night Waltz” ................................................................. Company
“Now” ................................................................. Fredrik
“Later” ................................................................. Henrik
“Soon” ................................................................. Anne, Henrik, Fredrik
“The Glamorous Life” .......................................... Fredrika, Desiree, Madame Armfeldt,
Mrs. Anderssen, Mr. Erlanson,
Mr. Lindquist, Mrs. Nordstrom,
Mrs. Segstrom
“Remember?” ......................................................... Mrs. Anderssen, Mr. Erlanson,
Mr. Lindquist, Mrs. Nordstrom,
Mrs. Segstrom
“You Must Meet My Wife” ........................................ Desiree, Fredrik
“Liaisons” .............................................................. Madame Armfeldt
“In Praise of Women” .................................................. Carl-Magnus
“Every Day a Little Death” ........................................ Charlotte, Anne
“A Weekend in the Country” ......................................... Company

ACT II

“The Sun Won’t Set” ................................................ Mrs. Anderssen, Mr. Erlanson,
Mr. Lindquist, Mrs. Nordstrom,
Mrs. Segstrom
“It Would Have Been Wonderful” ......................... Fredrik, Carl-Magnus
“Night Waltz II” ......................................................... Mrs. Anderssen, Mr. Erlanson,
Mr. Lindquist, Mrs. Nordstrom,
Mrs. Segstrom
“Perpetual Anticipation” ........................................ Mrs. Anderssen, Mrs. Nordstrom,
Mrs. Segstrom
“Send in the Clowns” ................................................ Desiree
“The Miller’s Son” ....................................................... Petra
“Finale” .................................................................... Company
A Rich Variety of Visions
The Creation and Development of *A Little Night Music*

By Nirmala Nataraj

*A Little Night Music* opened February 25, 1973, at the Shubert Theatre on Broadway. Staged by renowned Broadway director Harold Prince and starring Glynis Johns as Desiree, Len Cariou as Fredrik, and Hermione Gingold as Madame Armfeldt, the musical closed on August 3, 1974, after 601 immensely successful performances.

*A Little Night Music* was inspired by filmmaker Ingmar Bergman’s romantic comedy of errors, *Smiles of a Summer Night*, and emerged from Stephen Sondheim’s vision of a musicalized tale about the games that men and women play in sex and love. With a grand and magical scope that is meant to generate nostalgia for turn-of-the-twentieth-century elegance, the musical was a marked departure from Sondheim’s previous collaborations with Prince, such as *Company* (1970) and *Follies* (1971), which feature upper-class New Yorkers in a contemporary setting.

Before librettist Hugh Wheeler came onboard, Prince and Sondheim had already been toying with the idea of writing a chamber opera, ever since their collaboration on the 1957 musical *West Side Story* (for which Sondheim was the lyricist and Prince the producer). Scandinavia in midsummer (a time of year during which the sun rarely sets throughout the region) provided the ideal backdrop for Sondheim and Wheeler’s piece about sexual frustration, perpetual anticipation, and romantic foolishness. After settling on Bergman’s film for source material, Sondheim drew the title for the musical from an English translation of the German name for Mozart’s Serenade No. 13 for strings in G major (*Eine kleine Nachtmusik*). Bergman himself had drawn heavily from three comedic masters while working on *Smiles of a Summer Night*: Marivaux, Molière, and Mozart. Both Bergman and Sondheim were particularly interested in making their respective creations period pieces; they believed that laughter would be more easily elicited from audiences with an extra layer of pretense (for example, grand costumes, aristocratic characters, and nebulous social interactions).

Sondheim also paid homage to the music of such classical luminaries as Maurice Ravel, whose *Valses nobles et sentimentales* inspired the opening chords of the song “Liaisons” in *A Little Night Music*. Other musical elements, including three-quarter time, counterpoint, and harmonically complex melodies, evoke the grandeur and convoluted
social hierarchy of a bygone era. And, as Sondheim has said, a score of waltz variations offered a structural thread that could help connect a disparate group of songs and match the tone of the story.

The Inspiration

Prince, Sondheim, and Wheeler’s accounts of their individual inspiration for *A Little Night Music* provide distinct windows onto the ideas and themes from which the musical was shaped. Although the collaboration began with Sondheim composing dark music “almost out of Strindberg,” he remembers that while “I usually love to write in dark colors about basic gut feelings . . . Hal has a sense of audience that I sometimes lose when I’m writing. He wanted the darkness to peep through a whipped-cream surface. Hal had once described the show as being ‘whipped cream with knives,’ but he was more interested in the whipped cream and I was more interested in the knives.”

Prince believed the piece should be “a kind of Chekhovian musical,” as he relates in his memoir, *Contradictions: Notes on Twenty-six Years in the Theater*. He conceived of a show with a fair amount of exposition in the beginning and a tragic-farcical feel that would still allow for some effervescence. (Although many critics have later suggested that Sondheim’s works are decidedly Chekhovian, he has vehemently denied this, saying, “I don’t think Chekhov and music go together at all.”)

Finally, Wheeler wished to create a book that summoned up the levity and puzzle-like structure of a Shakespearean comedy of errors. He notes that his inspiration was a line spoken by Puck, the mischievous fairy in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: “Lord, what fools these mortals be!”

Although the discrete accounts of Sondheim, Prince, and Wheeler may differ, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive; Wheeler wrote in a letter:

> Three individuals, when they collaborate, can remain individuals and I think that is the way it should be. A work need not be splintered if, as in this case, the book writer is thinking of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the director of Chekhov and the composer of something else. With any luck what comes out is the richer for the variety of visions.

The Story

Sondheim’s original story for *A Little Night Music* was comparatively darker than the piece he ultimately developed with Wheeler. An early draft relates the story as a parlor-room fantasy with three distinct endings. As he writes in his annotated book of lyrics *Finishing the Hat*, his incipient plot concerned Desiree’s attempts to regain Fredrik’s love by fanning the flames of their past affair. Sondheim writes:

> [The story] was to take place over a weekend during which, in almost game-like fashion, Desiree would have been the prime mover and would work the characters into different situations. What if her plan doesn’t result
in a happy resolution (as in the film) but an unhappy one, and what if she screams in frustration at its failure, prompting her mother, a Norn-like figure who repeatedly plays solitaire, to redeal the cards, causing the weekend to start all over again? What if the first deal works out as a farce (characters falling in love with the wrong partners), the second one as a genuine tragedy which results in Henrik’s suicide (ending the first act) and the third as a romantic comedy, in which everyone would be properly paired off and Desiree would be left alone with Fredrik? And instead of restating the theme at the end, as often happens in the classic form, I would leave something emotionally unresolved, calling for a coda, in which Desiree has to make a straightforward commitment to the man she has manipulated. I thought the show could be about the danger, and inevitable failure, of trying to maneuver people emotionally.

Wheeler, however, felt that Sondheim’s idea was overly confusing and outlandish. As Sondheim explains in *Finishing the Hat*, “[Wheeler’s] work had always been linear, not fanciful.” Although Wheeler attempted to write the libretto that had been asked of him, he ended up generating a piece that Sondheim found “boring and literal.” Wheeler’s book had erased all traces of gravity, darkness, and melancholy from Sondheim’s initial idea, leaving “a graceful but fluffily light comedy version of Bergman’s movie.” Although Sondheim was ready to call it quits, he received sage advice from a woman whom he considered his real-life muse:

She pointed out that, despite its not being what I had wanted, this project was more than “fluff” and that a score for it would let me show off; I could let loose with verbal dazzle and technical prowess, something I had been able to demonstrate only sporadically before. So I did, and I showed off, and everyone was impressed.

**The Elements of the Musical**

Although Sondheim’s original dark, moody, and surreal vision for *A Little Night Music* never came to fruition, the musical that was eventually produced was hardly received as vacuous or fluffy. In fact, many critics saw through its insouciant facade; as Richard Watts commented about the characters: “On the surface they appear to be enjoying their sins, except at moments when they are embarrassingly caught in them. But the atmosphere, for all its gaiety, seemed to me that of men and women who are leading hollow lives and are only too aware of it.” The labyrinthine relationships between the characters are demonstrated by counterpoint rhythms and melodies, which results in a complex overlapping of lyrics and a heightened state of frustration, anticipation, and deferred gratification—all qualities meant to provoke anxiety more than mirth in an audience.

Sondheim’s complex vision, musical and otherwise, led to a number of mishaps and delays throughout the creative process. During the development of the musical,
which continued right up until the 1973 Broadway premiere, several challenges arose in ensuring that the music, staging, and storyline coincided seamlessly, particularly with the song “A Weekend in the Country.” The script necessitated a musical scene in which the characters work out the details of the weekend sojourn at the Armfeldt estate. Sondheim was behind schedule in producing the music, so Prince got tired of waiting and proposed that the actors simply adlib the lines while he devised the blocking. Sondheim watched the scene and wrote the music specifically to match what he saw. Prince recalls that Sondheim’s creative process was aided by observing the actors in rehearsal: “[Sondheim] suggested that next time we should stage our libretto without any music, show it to him, then let him go away for six months to write the score.” Although most of the songs in *A Little Night Music* were not created under such collaborative circumstances, “Send in the Clowns,” like “A Weekend in the Country,” was an exception. Sondheim wrote it in one evening, after sitting in on a rehearsal and recognizing that Glynis Johns, who played Desiree, had effortlessly stolen the scene from Fredrik; this warranted a song written especially for her.

One of the most recognizable elements in *A Little Night Music* is the presence of the so-called *Liebeslieder* (German for “love songs”) quintet, comprising the characters Mrs. Anderssen, Mr. Erlanson, Mr. Lindquist, Mrs. Nordstrom, and Mrs. Segstrom. Unlike some of the accidental discoveries made by the creative team during rehearsals,
the quintet was a vital aspect that Sondheim, Wheeler, and Prince conceptualized at the beginning of their collaboration. The singers would function much like a Greek chorus, offering pertinent details about the main characters and their histories, as well as subtle commentary on the larger themes and story. Together, the quintet opens and closes the show, and provides meaningful interruptions to the action—for example, by relating the details of a romantic weekend from Desiree and Fredrik’s past when we first see them onstage together. As the two lovers freeze, the quintet offers a dreamy musical reminiscence:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ALL:} & \quad \text{Ah, how we laughed! Ah, how we drank!} \\
\text{MR. ERLANSON:} & \quad \text{You acquiesced—} \\
\text{MRS. ANDERSSEN:} & \quad \text{And the rest} \\
& \quad \text{Is a blank.} \\
\text{MR. LINDQUIST:} & \quad \text{What we did with your perfume—} \\
\text{MR. ERLANSON:} & \quad \text{Remember, darling?} \\
\text{MRS. SEGSTROM:} & \quad \text{The condition of the room} \\
& \quad \text{When we were through . . .} \\
\text{MRS. NORDSTROM:} & \quad \text{Our inventions were unique—} \\
& \quad \text{Remember, darling?} \\
\text{MR. LINDQUIST:} & \quad \text{I was limping for a week,} \\
& \quad \text{You caught the flu.} \\
\text{ALL:} & \quad \text{I’m sure it was . . . you.}
\end{align*}
\]

While critics have suggested that the *Liebeslieder* quintet represents memory, which may as well be an auxiliary character in *A Little Night Music*, Sondheim simply thought it would be “nice to get away from the realism of the evening. I wanted something to make it a little more poetic.” Prince believed that the quintet made the work more accessible because it created inroads into the main characters’ unstated intimate thoughts, highlighting the role of sexual intrigue and everything that remains unspoken yet manages to linger in the air. In addition, he felt that they acted as “the positive spirits in a negative household, pointing out that the foolishness of these people is not to be taken too seriously.”
The Productions

The original 1973 Broadway production of *A Little Night Music* secured eleven Tony Awards (including Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical, and Best Original Score), six Drama Desk Awards, and a Grammy for Best Musical Show Album. *New York Times* critic Clive Barnes summed up the show as “heady, civilized, sophisticated and enchanting . . . the real triumph belongs to Stephen Sondheim . . . the music is a celebration of ¾ time, an orgy of plaintively memorable waltzes, all talking of past loves and lost worlds.”

The musical went on to enjoy an equally successful run on London’s West End in 1975 and a number of revivals throughout Europe, with productions spanning from Paris to Stockholm. In the last four decades, the show has enjoyed numerous Broadway revivals, and it continues to be a popular selection among opera companies throughout the world. Prince also went on to direct a film adaptation of *A Little Night Music* in 1977, which starred Elizabeth Taylor as Desiree, Diana Rigg as Charlotte, and Lesley-Anne Down as Anne. And, of course, the music endures. The nostalgic and wistful “Send in the Clowns” is one of Sondheim’s most immediately recognizable standards and has been covered by everyone from Frank Sinatra (1973) to Judy Collins (1975), who earned a Grammy Award for her rendition, to Grace Jones, Dame Judi Dench, and Megadeth.

Although Sondheim isn’t exactly given to sentimentality or self-congratulation with his own work and has expressed continued befuddlement over the popularity of “Send in the Clowns,” it seems that much of his early ambivalence about the musical has transformed into admiration over the years. In *Finishing the Hat*, Sondheim describes Wheeler’s libretto as supple and surprisingly ageless. Although he jokingly admits to feeling dread as an audience member during a major revival or a school production of *A Little Night Music*, he writes:

> Once the lights have been dimmed, I have an exhilarating time watching it. . . . I underestimated Hugh’s work shamefully when I first read it. After living with it through numerous productions for more than thirty-five years, I’ve come to the conclusion that it is one of the half dozen best books ever written for a musical.

**SOURCES**
Today’s Shakespeare
The Relentless Relevance of Stephen Sondheim

By Amy Krivohlavek

On March 22, 2015, composer Stephen Sondheim turned 85, a birthday that marked not only his unmatched 60 years of contributions to American musical theater, but also his undisputed status as cultural icon. Even the sassy and lighthearted website BuzzFeed felt compelled to mark the occasion, posting a reverential collection of birthday wishes from Sondheim’s friends and collaborators. Reporter Louis Peitzman introduced the accolades: “Calling Sondheim the greatest living composer is an understatement: to many, he’s the greatest musical theater composer of all time.”

This statement was underscored by the sweeping range of well-wishers, who represented a thrilling assortment of eras, from musical theater’s glittering history (Liza Minnelli, Carol Burnett) to its ever-evolving present (composer Jason Robert Brown, performer Anna Kendrick). Sondheim’s music strikes a shared emotional chord, reflecting the composer’s ubiquitous presence from generation to generation. The young actor Chris Colfer (of television’s Glee) said, “Performing Sondheim is more than just singing a song; it’s exposing a soul—sometimes a character’s, sometimes your own,” while the legendary Barbara Cook (a Tony Award–winning Broadway star of the 1950s who has since become a renowned Sondheim interpreter) said, “I’ve often referred to Stephen Sondheim as today’s Shakespeare. Like Shakespeare, there are so many layers to his words and imagery. You can revisit their works time and time again, and there is always something new to discover.”

Despite his work’s sophistication, cool edge, and (often) supreme New York-ishness, Sondheim has mapped the human condition onto musical theater with indelible precision and universality. From film adaptations to Broadway revivals to starry revues to school productions, anyone, it seems, can find a way into Sondheim.

Sondheim’s Early Years

Born in New York City, Stephen Sondheim was the only child of fashion-industry parents who spent very little time with their son—other than to arrange for his schooling and piano lessons. Sondheim called himself “an institutionalized child . . . in that I was brought up either by a cook, a nanny or a boarding school or camp.” After his parents divorced, his mother left Manhattan, moving herself and her young son to a
farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. There, by brilliant chance, 11-year-old Sondheim was taken under the wing of Broadway playwright, lyricist, and producer Oscar Hammerstein, now most famous for his collaborations with the composer Richard Rodgers, such as *Oklahoma!* (1943), *South Pacific* (1949), and *The Sound of Music* (1959).

A prodigy of puzzles and mathematics—in addition to music—Sondheim acknowledges that, had he not pursued a musical career, his chosen field would have been mathematical research, and he managed to bring the precision and objectivity of his analytical mind to compositions for the stage. (In a recent interview about the film version of *Into the Woods*, Sondheim couldn't help but point out, with a wink, that Bernadette Peters, who originated the part on Broadway, and Meryl Streep, who plays it in the film, were both destined for the role of the Witch. His reasoning? Their last names are anagrams of one another.)

For the studious, introverted Sondheim, the Hammerstein home provided the warmth and support that his own lacked, and Hammerstein himself became a father figure and mentor whose presence would guide Sondheim for the rest of his life. At the age of 17, Sondheim was hired as an assistant for Rodgers and Hammerstein’s new musical *Allegro*, an ambitious work that failed to find its footing with critics or audiences. However, for Sondheim, who would become a musical maverick of sorts over the ensuing decades, the production’s bold, experimental aspects—including a Greek chorus and cinematic flourishes—revealed a world of possibilities.

Although Hammerstein is most remembered for his romantic, sentimental lyrics—as the “cock-eyed optimist” to Rodgers’s brooding presence—Sondheim argues that his mentor’s greatest contribution to musical theater was his push for theatrical innovation. For example, Hammerstein helped weave dance into *Oklahoma!* and introduced a miscegenation plot into *Show Boat*, both of which felt radical at the time. While his own style would deviate greatly from Hammerstein’s, whose lyrics lacked the irony and piercing wit that would come to define Sondheim’s work, Sondheim would never forget his mentor’s relentless focus on each musical’s story, as well as the advice to cut anything that failed to advance it.
After studying music at Williams College, Sondheim wrote his first musical, *Saturday Night*, which debuted off Broadway in 1954; Sondheim was 24 years old. Two years later, he made his Broadway debut as the composer of incidental music for N. Richard Nash’s play *The Girls of Summer*. Sondheim met his first major collaborator, director and producer Harold Prince, in 1949; after Sondheim was hired to write lyrics for Leonard Bernstein’s musical *West Side Story*, Prince became a producer on the show, which opened in 1957. At 27 years old, Sondheim was sharpening his skills alongside such luminaries as Bernstein, Prince, choreographer Jerome Robbins, and book writer Arthur Laurents.

Sondheim went on to write lyrics for Jule Styne’s *Gypsy* (1959) before making his Broadway debut as a lyricist with the comedy *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), which he also composed. His next show, *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964), was short-lived, but became a cult favorite. Sondheim then agreed to join Rodgers for *Do I Hear a Waltz?* (1965), completing lyrics that Hammerstein had begun before his death in 1960. Based on Arthur Laurents’s play *The Time of the Cuckoo*, the musical spins the romantic and bittersweet story of an American woman who finds love in Venice. Inflamed by Rodgers’s constant drinking and mercurial rages, the atmosphere of the production quickly turned “rancid,” according to Sondheim, who attributed the discord to the composer’s fear “that his well had run dry” without his longtime partner. Despite its gorgeous score, the show became the only project Sondheim would later regret.

**Critical Acclaim and the Era of Definitive Sondheim**

It was only in 1970 that the era of definitive Sondheim began, first with the musical *Company*, an inventive, fearless look at a bachelor on the brink of turning 35—and his (less-than-happily) married friends. Close on its heels was *Follies* (1971), which paid homage to the pastiche styles of an earlier era with poignant flashbacks about its aging stars. While critics complained that Sondheim’s material had become too esoteric, cutting, and sophisticated for popular audiences, along came *A Little Night Music* (1973), with a sweeping, romantic score and story that beguiled critics and audiences alike. All three productions earned Sondheim Tony Awards for music and/or lyrics.

In 1974 Sondheim adapted the classical Greek comedy *The Frogs* for Yale University and contributed additional lyrics to Leonard Bernstein’s new Broadway revival of *Candide*. Then, in 1976, he went in a completely new direction with *Pacific Overtures*, a bold, deftly stylized dramatization of nineteenth-century relations between Japan and the United States—from the point of view of the Japanese. The musical thriller *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979) followed, captivating Broadway audiences with its macabre gore, searing satire, and evocative score—and earning eight Tony Awards, including another set for Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler, who had also taken home the award for his book for *A Little Night Music*. *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981) ambitiously attempted to tell the story of three friends through scenes set in reverse chronological order, beginning with the heartbreak of their adult years and ending with
their young, starry-eyed idealism. The show ran for less than two weeks after it opened, becoming a famous Broadway flop and ending the more than 20-year collaboration between Sondheim and director/producer Harold Prince.

The next decade kicked off Sondheim’s partnership with director and playwright James Lapine. Their first collaboration, *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), a meditation on the life of painter George Seurat, won them the Pulitzer Prize for Best Drama, an honor rarely awarded to a musical play. *Into the Woods* (1987) turned familiar fairy tales upside down, showing audiences the complicated reality that follows “happily ever after.” *Assassins* (1990), a collaboration with John Weidman, bravely took up the disturbing subject matter of presidential assassins, investigating their motivations and humanity, while *Passion* (1994), again with Lapine, presented a dark, haunting love triangle.

Sondheim’s last major musical followed the daring exploits of the Mizner brothers, a real-life con-artist duo who flourished during the 1920s gold rush. It floundered in development, first appearing as *Gold!*, *Wise Guys*, and *Bounce* before settling into its final form (and fourth title), *Road Show*, which ran at The Public Theater off Broadway in 2008. Despite its struggles, the production earned Sondheim a Drama Desk Award for Best Score.

*Road Show* was directed and designed by John Doyle, who has become a major Sondheim interpreter over the past decade. His scaled-down productions of Sondheim’s work, most notably Broadway revivals of *Sweeney Todd* in 2004 and *Company* in 2006 (both with actors accompanying themselves on instruments as their own orchestra), opened up a new understanding of the ferocity, potential, and inventiveness of Sondheim’s work. An off-Broadway production of *Into the Woods*—directed by Noah Brody and Ben Steinfeld, and featuring just ten cast members and a piano—opened in January 2015 to ecstatic reviews, revealing “the aching, hopeful heart beneath the artifice,” according to the *New York Times*.

Beyond the stage, Sondheim has also written scores for films, most famously for *Dick Tracy* (1990), which won him an Academy Award for Best Song with “Sooner or Later.” His prolific catalogue of music has been compiled into revues, including *Side by Side by Sondheim* (1976), *Marry Me a Little* (1981), and *Putting It Together* (1992). The most recent, *Sondheim on Sondheim* (2010), was directed and conceived by James Lapine and featured filmed interviews with the composer.

**The Legacy of Sondheim**

Feared and respected for its challenges, yet passionately pursued for its artistic rewards, Sondheim’s work continues to propel the musical forward, inspiring new generations of composers and theater-makers to experiment with the art form. With each passing birthday milestone, writers have lamented the lack of a worthy Sondheim successor. In a lengthy, personal interview with the composer in 2000 (commemorating Sondheim’s seventieth birthday), former *New York Times* theater critic Frank Rich worried that
Sondheim “may have even outlived the genre itself, which was long ago exiled by rock music from center stage to niche status in American culture and is now barely a going concern.” In 2010, as Sondheim turned 80, reporter Stephen Holden voiced a similar anxiety: “As we plunge into the 21st century, there is no next Stephen Sondheim waiting to step into the master’s shoes and perpetuate the tradition that he carried to its pinnacle. There is only new and different in a largely unimaginable future in which we are simultaneously more and less human than in the pre-digital age.”

Undeniably, the musical has changed dramatically throughout Sondheim’s lifetime, but just as Hammerstein nudged him along, Sondheim has been guiding future generations of composers with mentorship, encouragement, and criticism. In particular, he has supported the career of composer and lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda, enlisting the young writer to translate some of his lyrics into Spanish for a 2009 revival of West Side Story. When Miranda accepted his Tony Award for Best Music and Lyrics for In the Heights the same year, he rapped his acceptance speech, with a special shout-out to his mentor while referencing the song “Finishing the Hat” from Sunday in the Park with George: “Mr. Sondheim / Look, I made a hat! / Where there never was a hat! / It’s a Latin hat at that!”

Sondheim now has more Tony Awards than any other composer (eight, including a Lifetime Achievement Award) and more awards, accolades, revivals, and attention than most composers could ever hope to attain. To commemorate his eightieth birthday, the Henry Miller Theatre was renamed the Stephen Sondheim Theatre, giving the composer a permanent home in the heart of Broadway. In her BuzzFeed birthday message to the composer, Barbra Streisand, whose 1985 recording of the Sondheim standard “Send in the Clowns” featured additional lyrics written especially for her by the composer, said, “It’s so hard to think of Stephen Sondheim as aging, because his words and his music never do.”

Accomplice to the Musical Masterpiece
The Work of Hugh Wheeler

By Amy Krivohlavek

Born March 19, 1912, in Hampstead, London, Hugh Callingham Wheeler studied at Clavesmore School in Dorset, then received his B.A. in English with honors from the University of London in 1933. He left England the following year for the United States, where he would spend the rest of his life, becoming a naturalized citizen in 1942 and serving in the U.S. Army Medical Corps during World War II.

A versatile wordsmith who flourished as a playwright, novelist, librettist, and screenwriter, Wheeler is most remembered and revered for his work on several successful and historically significant musicals, beginning with the charmed reception of A Little Night Music, which won him his first Tony Award at the age of 61. Although prominent accolades came late in life to the prolific Wheeler, he had already spent decades writing his way toward his seemingly overnight success. In fact, long before his foray into writing for the Broadway stage, Wheeler found fame—but under a different name. At the age of 22, the intrepid Wheeler aimed his literary skills at the genre of crime fiction. For more than 20 years, under the pseudonyms Q. Patrick, Patrick Quentin, and Jonathan Stagge, Wheeler published a vibrant and acclaimed library of criminal thrillers, including 33 detective novels, a true-crime paperback (The Girl on the Gallows, 1954), and a collection of short stories (The Ordeal of Mrs. Snow and Other Stories, which would earn him a Special Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America in 1963). Several of his novels also became films, including Black Widow (1954), from the novel Fatal Woman, starring Van Heflin, Ginger Rogers, and George Raft; Female Fiends (1958), from the novel Puzzle for Fiends; and The Man in the Net (1959), starring Alan Ladd.

Wheeler’s efforts were hardly solitary; he co-wrote most of his novels with other authors, which set a precedent for future collaborations with some of musical theater’s most legendary artists. As he devised his suspenseful tales, Wheeler developed an inimitable technique for creating complex plot lines filled with compelling characters that kept his audiences eager to turn the page. According to R. E. Briney in Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers, “All of the Q. Patrick/Patrick Quentin/Jonathan Stagge novels are characterized by intricate plots, cleverly planted clues, and endings which legitimately surprise the reader.”
These clever twists of story and technique eventually made Wheeler a savvy, celebrated, and sought-after librettist for Broadway musicals, but his career stalled somewhat along the way, especially as he turned to the stage. His works were often short-lived and under-praised when they premiered, although several were later revived off Broadway. His first play, *Big Fish, Little Fish*, starred Jason Robards and Hume Cronyn, and was directed by Sir John Gielgud. A fish-out-of-water comedy about a disgraced college professor stuck in a subpar publishing job, the production closed after only 101 performances, despite receiving a mostly warm reception from critics. In his review, *New York Times* critic Howard Taubman wrote that Wheeler “writes of strange relationships with an integrity that is occasionally beguiling.”

Wheeler’s focus on unexpected relationships would continue; perplexingly, so would his plays’ brief runs. In 1961, *Look: We’ve Come Through*, his clever story about the percolating relationship between a girl (with a questionable past) and a young man (with a homosexual one) closed after just five performances. *We Have Always Lived in a Castle*, his 1966 adaptation of Shirley Jackson’s gothic novel, held on a bit longer for nine performances. But *Rich Little Rich Girl*, a dark comedy with a murder plot involving a South American dictator, quickly shuttered after a pre-Broadway tryout in Philadelphia in 1964, while the musical *Truckload*, a 1975 tale about hitchhiking across the country, survived just two weeks of previews, never officially opening on Broadway.

After the premiere of *Look: We’ve Come Through*, Wheeler began to work on musicals. Despite his best efforts to write the book of Harold Arlen’s musical *Softly*, he was unable to arrive at a satisfying ending, eventually abandoning the project, which never made
it to Broadway. But in 1971, a meeting with composer Stephen Sondheim changed his fate. After Sondheim and director Harold Prince talked about creating a romantic musical, Prince “called Hugh Wheeler and we got together,” remembers Sondheim. “In the course of talk, Bergman’s movie [Smiles of a Summer Night, 1955] came up.” It turned out that Wheeler and Sondheim shared a fascination for the film, and a collaboration was born.

That providential interest set the stage for A Little Night Music. Wheeler made an initial attempt to reinvent the story, using a structure (suggested by Sondheim) in which Madame Armfeldt shuffled cards that would determine the fates of the young lovers, as if by chance. Wheeler, however, was uninspired by this fantastical plot and eventually returned to the original, more straightforward structure of the Bergman film.

Orchestrator Jonathan Tunick remembered Wheeler’s precision and mathematical flair in streamlining the intricate plot: “Hugh Wheeler brought to the material the exactitude of the mystery writer . . . creating between the various characters an effectively geometrical pattern of interrelationships, based, like the score, upon the number three. [He created] a chain of triangles: in each of these connected relationships, the unstable number three is drawn to the stable two, as the various mismatched couples disengage and find their proper partners.” This structure effectively echoed the waltzing, 1-2-3 rhythm of Sondheim’s score.

A Little Night Music opened in 1973 and ran for 601 performances, winning numerous Tony and Drama Desk awards, including Best Book of a Musical. Wheeler had a busy year, also contributing the book for the musical Irene. The production, an adaptation of
a 1919 musical about a fashion designer’s secret romance with his associate, ran for an impressive 604 performances, just outlasting *A Little Night Music* in its longevity, but (despite marking Debbie Reynolds’s Broadway debut in the title role) never matching its historic resonance.

Following the success of *A Little Night Music*, Leonard Bernstein recruited Wheeler to write the book for the 1974 revival of *Candide*. Bernstein had collaborated on an adaptation of Voltaire’s eighteenth-century novella that had flopped onstage in 1956, but left behind a wildly popular recording. Wheeler’s book, accompanied by some new lyrics by Sondheim, helped transform *Candide* into one of the most popular musicals of the decade. It ran for 740 performances on Broadway, again earning Wheeler Tony and Drama Desk awards.

Wheeler continued his collaboration with Sondheim by providing additional material to John Weidman’s book for the 1976 musical *Pacific Overtures*, but the macabre musical thriller *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, which ran for 557 performances in 1979, would be the next smash hit for the Sondheim-Wheeler duo. With an original story steeped in urban legend (rumors of questionable pie fillings and a nefarious, throat-slitting barber in London), the character of Sweeney Todd first appeared in a serialized story, *The String of Pearls: A Romance*, which was published in 18 parts during 1846–47 in *The People’s Periodical and Family Library*. Once born, the character and his tale seized the imaginations of artists and the public, reappearing onstage and in print for more than a century to come. While in London for a 1971 production of *Gypsy*, Sondheim saw a performance of playwright Christopher Bond’s 1973 dramatization of *Sweeney Todd* and was immediately entranced. Wheeler, with his background in crafting plots of murder and mayhem, seemed the obvious choice to adapt the material into a musical. *Sweeney Todd* slashed irresistibly across the stage, earning Wheeler his third Tony and Drama Desk awards.

Wheeler’s work extended to Hollywood, where he co-wrote screenplays for *Five Miles to Midnight* (1962), *Something for Everyone* (1969), *Travels with My Aunt* (1973), and *Nijinsky* (1980). He continued to work on musicals following *Sweeney Todd*, but would never again achieve the success he earned alongside Sondheim during that decade.

---

**SOURCES**

The Beauty of Perplexity
An Interview with Director Mark Lamos

By Nirmala Nataraj

Lauded as a “poet of the stage” by the New York Times, director Mark Lamos was an established off-Broadway actor before it became clear that his theatrical calling was elsewhere. Over 35 years ago, Lamos was unexpectedly asked to take over the direction of the California Shakespeare Festival, which would eventually lead him to an illustrious career as a stage director.

“The egocentricity required by acting was becoming a burden,” he explains. “Directing called more parts of me into play.” All the same, Lamos’s early endeavors as a violinist and actor well prepared him for a kaleidoscopic journey through plays, musicals, operas, and the institutional complexities of building a season from the ground up. “I work best on a large, densely textured scale,” Lamos has said, although he also quips about being on a “constant artistic diet,” given the challenges of helming ambitious productions within budgetary constraints.

In 1989 Lamos accepted a Tony Award for Hartford Stage, where he was the artistic director for 17 years. There, he garnered a number of accolades for his skill in filling the commodious stage with large casts that performed everything from Greek tragedy to Shakespeare to contemporary works. Lamos is perhaps most celebrated for his deft reimaginings of classical plays; while at Hartford Stage, he received national attention for his bold staging of Cymbeline and a sweeping production of nine Greek dramas entitled The Greeks.

Since 2009 Lamos has been the artistic director of Westport Country Playhouse, and he is also a freelance musical and opera director. His Broadway work includes Our Country’s Good (Tony nomination, Best Direction for a Play), The Rivals, Cymbeline, and Seascape (Tony nomination for Best Revival). Off Broadway he has directed Tiny Alice and Measure for Measure (he received Lucille Lortel Awards for both), as well as productions at Playwrights Horizons, Primary Stages, Signature Theatre Company, and The Public Theater. Lamos was the first American to direct a company in the former Soviet Union (Moscow’s Pushkin Drama Theatre, Desire Under the Elms). His work in opera is equally notable and includes new productions of I Lombardi, with Luciano Pavarotti, and Wozzeck (both televised for PBS’s Great Performances). Lamos also created several pieces for New York City Opera, including televised PBS productions of Paul Bunyan, Tosca, Central Park, and Madama Butterfly (Emmy Award).
When Lamos directed *A Little Night Music* at Center Stage in Baltimore in 2008 (35 years after the musical’s explosively popular debut), critics lauded his unconventional choices. Critic Michael J. Bandler called Lamos’s vision “frothy and acerbic,” noting that Harold Prince’s description of the play as “whipped cream with knives” was perfectly realized in this production, with its energetic physical comedy and unmistakable sexiness. Lamos shared with us his vision for A.C.T.’s production, as well as some insight into Sondheim’s beloved romantic musical.

Your theater background is multifaceted; you were an established actor before you became a director, you’re known as being one of the most important directors of classic plays in the United States, you have dramaturged the creation of a ballet, and you have directed opera. How do all these experiences coalesce and diverge?

Everything coalesces and comes together in one’s work—and the more multifaceted, the better. I enjoy working in different types of musical theater, such as opera, and I love larger-scale works, such as Shakespeare, restoration comedy, and other plays that feature rich language and a broad scope. But I also appreciate smaller canvases, such as the works of A. R. Gurney and Noël Coward. Opera feeds so-called straight theater, music feeds speaking, and vice-versa. I’ve loved ballet and modern dance since I was a kid, so physical movement and the placement of bodies on a design has been fulfilling for me to explore. I started out as a violinist, so learning music from an early age and being taught how to interpret it became integral to my work as an actor in Shakespeare, as well as musical theater—and it’s the backbone of my work as a director in hearing and understanding texts, shifts of tone, and contrast.

Are there any elements of the production at A.C.T. that will diverge significantly from the Center Stage version?

The cast, energy, and dynamics are totally different for this production. We have a new choreographer, Val Caniparoli, and brand-new movement. I believe this will give us license to think about the production in a new way. In order to jog my memory, I watched an archival video of the production at Center Stage, which was useful, as I hadn’t thought about the piece since [A.C.T. Artistic Director] Carey Perloff
approached me last year. When I spoke with [set designer] Riccardo Hernandez, we decided to throw out what we had previously come up with. Now, the Geary stage provides more space, which helps us create a more classically romantic musical. I would like to have a dreamlike, diaphanous feeling, and with the possibilities offered by The Geary, this will be a more magical show.

In general, I think it’s healthy to keep a blank slate when working. Maybe this is because I was an actor for a long time and never entirely felt the freedom I needed to bring a role to life. I've never given people the director speech that says, “This is how I see it all playing out.” There is a wonderful Joseph Brodsky quote: “Every choice is a flight from freedom.” I suppose that I feel the same way. So many choices are already made in the design process, and the one place where I don't have to bind myself to that is in rehearsal, where the creative vision emerges in a more organic way.

How does the musical complexity of A Little Night Music affect your direction?

The waltz, for me, is all about flirtation and eroticism. When it was first popularized, it was banned in certain places. It transformed from the minuet, a slow and stately ballroom dance for partners in triple time common in the eighteenth century, into a more lilting style. In essence, it was like a rock beat—you had to move to it. Many people don't realize how revolutionary the waltz was, and how much it liberated men and women, who were encountering a proximity to each other that had never previously been possible in other social situations. It is one of the many aspects of pure genius in this piece. The amount of variation in Sondheim's work is staggering. He was the first person to have devised an entire evening in this particular time signature. The play must be fleet of foot and swirl in front of an audience. It reminds me of Edgar Degas's pastels in terms of the softness, shimmer, and movement.

In your production at Center Stage, you chose to highlight the comedy of the play over the more bittersweet themes of lost love and middle-aged folly. Was that a conscious decision?

It was not. One of the things I decided to do was make the Liebeslieder quintet much younger, although in most productions they tend to be mature, older lovers who have been around the block and are offering songs of remembrance. By casting them more youthfully, I was hoping to make them more fresh, less the terribly elegant old singers who seem archly knowing, and thereby a bit camp. I asked myself, “Why are you doing this, Mark?” and I realized that in memory, we are always younger. Similarly, I didn't want the beginning of the play to be elegiac, but overtly sexual. This is a piece that is about sex—it is about having it, wanting it, missing it, remembering it, and being frustrated by it. In the arena of sexuality, comic elements tend to come to the forefront. For me, the play is bittersweet, but no more so than an operetta like Franz Lehár's The Merry Widow, another piece that both Sondheim and Ingmar Bergman admired. Bittersweetness wasn’t an aspect that needed to be overemphasized.
At the end of the play, I think you wonder whether people are actually getting what they want. This is very different from most Broadway pieces, in which everything is tied up neatly and there is usually a sense of closure. Here, there is a feeling of refraction at the end. It reminds me of a room full of waltzing people, in which everyone is whirling into a feverish, ecstatic state.

**Have you seen the Bergman's film *Smiles of a Summer Night***?

Yes, but I was not at all inspired by it. Actually, I was surprised that I found it vaguely disappointing, as I am a tremendous Bergman fan. I hadn't seen *Smiles* until I began working on the musical, and it took me two or three days to get through the whole thing. The characters in the film are much more mature, and Madame Armfeldt is relegated to a minor role, whereas her significance is elevated in the play. I didn't think it was cinematographically relevant to my vision for the musical, either. I was surprised at the slow pace of the film. *Night Music* has three-quarter time, zippy dialogue, and the rapidity of the waltz underscoring it. For me, there wasn't much crossover between the film and my vision for the play, which I think is good.

**How are you engaging with the play's themes of memory, nostalgia, and lost or revived love?**

I think of nostalgia as being more specific to nineteenth- and twentieth-century work. For example, there is a lot of nostalgia in Chekhov, but you rarely see this in the work of someone like Shakespeare. In the latter, you don't have characters remarking on an Edenic past. This is in contrast to works like *Der Rosenkavalier*, a twentieth-century opera in which the main character spends the majority of her stage time looking back.

In *A Little Night Music*, there is a backward and forward movement of characters. Fredrik remembers his past with Desiree, while she comments on how different they are today. Charlotte is nostalgic for a better life with her husband, but absurdly, she seems...
to require the torment she experiences with this man in order to experience passion for
him. Anne is practically an old woman at the age of 18, and at the same time, she is
completely misguided and nostalgic for her childhood.

Desiree is perhaps one of the only pragmatic characters when it comes to thinking
about the past. She is the only one who could sing a song as skeptical as “Send in the
Clowns,” which is basically saying, “Look how ridiculous, how stupid and off we are in
our timing. This isn’t working!” I think the song works best when it’s dry-eyed, when
there is the accompanying sense that there is nothing we can do or really be sad about;
this is just how it is.

And then there is Madame Armfeldt; I’m not sure that what she is saying about
her previous life as a courtesan to noblemen is entirely true, but in a way, she provides
the nostalgic architecture of the piece. She gives us a glimpse deep into the past, into
a former century. This offers tremendous breadth to the work, as her nostalgia is for a
Habsburg Empire type of time and place.

What are the challenges of directing a big show that demands so much of
its artists?

Not wasting people’s time is the biggest challenge. I learned in opera that it is crucial
to budget your time and to let go of certain things when the ideas you have just aren’t
falling into place. When you have a cast that is eager to do good work, you can’t leave
people waiting around to make their entrances. You have to trust that the ideas will come
at a later time. As a former actor, I know very well what it is like to lose the energy you
originally brought while a director is attempting to figure everything out, so I prefer to
keep people constantly engaged.

What have you learned from the sheer variety of your work in theater?

I’m extremely catholic in my tastes. That’s been a huge help to me in the craft of directing,
but also in my work as an artistic director in choosing plays and musicals to produce. I
respond viscerally to a wide variety of aesthetic stimuli, which I don’t think is unusual
in people who call themselves directors. From an early age, I responded positively to
contemporary classical music, as well as mainstream musical comedy. But, hey, so did
a guy named Leonard Bernstein! And we are the luckier for it. I like very much to be
challenged artistically. I like the way art can do so many different things to you, how it
can perplex you. Perplexity can be exciting—for me, at any rate—and beautiful.
Love Affairs in Triple Time
On Sondheim and His Score for *A Little Night Music*

By Dan Rubin

While American musical theater before Sondheim witnessed a growing integration of its various parts, it was atypical for Broadway composers to do more than capture the general mood of the lyrics in their music. Rare was the song whose music sought to comment on the lyrics, to question or contradict them, or to reinforce them with a musical logic that owes more to classical music and opera than to popular song. The goal generally was to write a hit tune, not to engage in musical drama. But musical drama is fundamental for Sondheim.

—Steven Swayne, *How Sondheim Found His Sound*

As early as 1957, Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince were intrigued by the idea of creating a romantic musical comedy about mismatched lovers and the intertwining foolishness that surrounds them. They wanted to adapt Christopher Fry’s hit play *Ring Round the Moon* (an adaptation of Jean Anouilh’s *L’invitation au château*), but they weren’t able to secure the rights. More than a decade later in 1971, after their reputations had been buoyed by a number of successes, they tried again; they were so confident that Anouilh would agree that they brought librettist Hugh Wheeler onto the project. When *Ring Round the Moon* remained out of reach, the team decided to look for a replacement in source material: something similarly elegant, a high comedy that was contained to a country home over a single weekend. Sondheim remembered Ingmar Bergman’s film *Smiles of a Summer Night*, and Prince and Wheeler concurred it would make a solid foundation for what they wanted to do.

Rather than creating a straightforward musical adaptation of the film, Sondheim was interested in adding layers of complexity to the dramatic structure that echoed his favorite musical form: theme and variation. He envisioned a show in which Desiree’s attempts to regain Fredrik’s affections played out three different times, each time with a different outcome. Following a farcical treatment and then a tragic one, the last iteration would nearly result in a happy ending before slipping into one of ambivalence, leaving the audience to forever wonder whether Desiree and Fredrik would end up together. Wheeler’s linear libretto disappointed Sondheim’s expectations, but the songwriter
decided to keep himself energized by challenging himself to musically fulfill his original theme-and-variation concept. Even if the story followed a straight path dramaturgically, that did not mean that his music needed to.

Sondheim’s Taste for “Serious Music”

Avant-garde composer Milton Babbitt, who served as Sondheim’s mentor during a two-year fellowship in music composition following college, once remarked that Sondheim “wanted his music to be . . . sophisticated and knowing, with the obvious restraints of a Broadway musical. After all, very few Broadway composers were all that educated. Richard Rodgers, who was considered the smartest of that gang, had no real connection with the world of serious music.” In contrast to the majority of his contemporaries, Sondheim has dug a broad and deep musical reservoir from which to pull inspiration for his work. He knows the languages of Broadway, Hollywood, and Tin Pan Alley, but he has been able to add complexity to his scores because of his dedication to “the world of serious music.”

Sondheim was raised on musical theater by Oscar Hammerstein, a close family friend and pioneer of the musical play. But at the age of 17, when he began building a record collection that would eventually total somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000 albums, Sondheim was most attracted not to show tunes but to late-nineteenth-century Romanticism and tonal music, because these were the genres popularized in cinema. In his twenties, his tastes continued to lean decidedly toward classical music. Very little of what he was drawn to was contemporary. And beyond his favorite three—Show Boat, Porgy and Bess, and Carousel—there were very few musicals he thought were truly good, combining quality scores with quality librettos. Sondheim explains:

My period is from Brahms through 1930s Stravinsky. I like music before and I like music after, but that’s where I live. Britten shows up a lot in the stuff I write. Sunday in the Park with George is a Britten score, I think. I’m very fond of English music. As far as American music goes, I was brought up on show tunes from the so-called Golden Era, a phrase I deplore, but there it is. You know, Kern and Gershwin. Those are influences, too. So it’s Ravel, Rachmaninoff—another wonderful harmonist—Britten, Stravinsky, Kern, Gershwin, Arlen.

By the time Sondheim began working with Babbitt, he had studied technique from his “sensational” music professor, Robert Barrow, at Williams College. “[Sondheim brought with him] a great deal of musical intelligence, and through a certain amount of listening to records and piano playing, he had quite a broad background,” Babbitt remembered. “He made it clear immediately that he wasn’t interested in becoming what one would call a serious composer, but he wanted to know a great deal more about so-called serious music because he thought it would be suggestive and useful.”
Where Sondheim Found His Waltz

Of particularly strong “usefulness” to Sondheim was nineteenth-/early-twentieth-century French composer Maurice Ravel, to whom professor of music Steven Swayne, author of How Sondheim Found His Sound, refers as “Sondheim’s childhood musical sweetheart.” He explains that Ravel’s waltzes present “an increasingly passionate and exhausting whirlwind of dancers” whipped into a frenetic ecstasy that eventually leads to collapse. “Ravelian reharmonization [taking an existing line of melody and altering the harmony that accompanies it] becomes a compositional staple,” Swayne says of Sondheim’s work. “Nearly every time a waltz appears in Sondheim’s work, the ghost of Ravel is not far away.” Sondheim’s artistic indebtedness to Ravel is particularly pronounced in A Little Night Music.

In 1957, when Sondheim and Prince first went after the rights for Ring Round the Moon, Sondheim wrote an instrumental waltz styled after Ravel to convince Anouilh that he understood the story’s milieu and was worthy of the project. That waltz was the seminal idea when he began working on the score for A Little Night Music 15 years later. Sondheim points out that most musicals contain a disparate group of songs held

Excerpt from Stephen Sondheim’s “Rhyme and Its Reasons”

The notion that good rhymes and the expression of emotion are contradictory qualities, that neatness equals lifelessness is, to borrow a disapproving phrase from my old counterpoint text, ‘the refuge of the destitute.’ Claiming that true rhyme is the enemy of substance is the sustaining excuse of lyricists who are unable to rhyme well with any consistency. . . . A good lyric should not only have something to say but a way of saying it as clearly and forcefully as possible—and that involves rhyming cleanly. A perfect rhyme can make a mediocre line bright and a good one brilliant. A near rhyme only damps the impact. . . .

Craig Carnelia, a first-rate composer-lyricist, put it exactly:

True rhyming is a necessity in the theater, as a guide for the ear to know what it has just heard. Our language is so complex and difficult, and there are so many similar words and sounds that mean different things, that it’s confusing enough without using near rhymes that only acquaint the ear with a vowel. . . . [A near rhyme is] not useful to the primary purpose of a lyric, which is to be heard, and it teaches the ear to not trust or to disregard a lyric, to not listen, to simply let the music wash over you. . . .

Using near rhymes is like juggling clumsily: it can be fun to watch and it is juggling, but it’s nowhere near as much pleasure for an audience as seeing all the balls—or in the case of the best lyricists, knives, lit torches, and swords—being kept aloft with grace and precision. In the theater, true rhyme works best on every level.

—The Sondheim Review (April 1, 2011)
loosely together by the personal stamp of the composer; very few have an overarching compositional plan. With *A Little Night Music*, Sondheim realized he could build a cohesive tapestry of songs by committing to forms with triple meter. He remembers:

> For someone who loves the perennial puzzle of trying to make a score into something more than a string of numbers, the idea of a theme and variation in which the theme was a metric one seemed workable. An evening of waltzes alone would soon become monotonous, but variations on the basic three-beat meter could supply plenty of variety: polonaises, mazurkas, sarabands, gigues and more are all versions of triple meter, or of duple meters subdivided into six or twelve beats—enough so that even with a relentless succession of threes throughout the evening I should be able to avoid repetitiousness.

In a piece about mismatched lovers, the triple-meter musical theme resonates strongly with the dramatic one. As *A Little Night Music*’s original orchestrator, Jonathan Tunick notes: “These songs of alienation and yearning for cohesion and balance all represent the unstable number three drawn to the stable two—the triangle yearning to be reconciled to the proper couple.”

**The Songs of *A Little Night Music***

When he began to put pencil to paper, Sondheim was thinking of *A Little Night Music* in terms of dark colors and gut feelings. Writing for Bergman’s film and not Wheeler’s play, he got six songs into the score before Prince finally persuaded him that the piece required something different, something lighter—at least on the surface.

Possibly because of the initial disconnect between the collaborators, *A Little Night Music* went into rehearsals with just ten of sixteen songs written, and two of these (“Two Fairy Tales” and “My Husband the Pig”) were cut within the first week. Looking back, Prince called it “sheer lunacy,” an experience he hoped never to repeat. Starting in a disadvantaged position, Sondheim had to write faster than he ever had before or has since.

Not yet written were what would become perhaps his most famous songs from the show: the intricate “A Weekend in the Country” and the iconic “Send in the Clowns.” Fortunately, scholar Meryle Secrest notes, Sondheim was something of an expert “in the subspeciality of tailoring melodies to fit individual voices.” Sondheim explains that, in fact, many of his best ideas come out of watching the actors rehearse; moreover, he works best under pressure, when he doesn’t have the luxury of being his typically neurotic, hypercritical self.

When auditions began in 1972, Prince was not looking for musical-comedy stars with huge voices, but quality actors who could sing if required, so Sondheim found himself writing for performers with a range of skill. On the one hand, he had Victoria Mallory, whose impressive vocal talents he knew from her work on *Follies* and the first revival of *West Side Story*. Mallory was cast as Anne Egerman, a character that required an actor to be “beautiful, young, and . . . able to play a selfish girl without being a bitch,” Sondheim explains. Not only could Mallory strike that balance, she also had singing chops of
which Sondheim took full advantage. By the time *A Little Night Music* opened, Anne’s songs required an actor who could sing an octave-and-six, someone who was able to hit the high notes in “A Weekend in the Country,” but also able to live in a low register elsewhere in the score. Sondheim admits that by writing songs that capitalized on Mallory’s abilities, he made casting subsequent productions very tricky: “I really utilized the versatility of Vicky’s voice, and screwed myself by doing that.” He discovered that there were very few performers with the required range who could also convincingly play the role.

At the other end of the spectrum was established British comedic actress Hermione Gingold, who wanted the part of Madame Armfeldt so badly that she did something she hadn’t done in years: audition. With limited singing experience, she won the role on pure chutzpah. For both Gingold and Mallory, Sondheim successfully molded their songs to their respective strengths. This was unfortunately not the case with Garn Stephens, the original Petra, who was fired not long before the show opened in Boston. When the show was cast, only the first verse of Petra’s “The Miller’s Son” had been written. Over the course of rehearsal, the song outgrew the actor’s ability. Choreographer Patricia Birch recalls, “Garn’s acting was fabulous but she was simply having desperate trouble with the song. It was purely a vocal problem.” Sondheim admits, “I let it go the way it wanted to go and it became this rather bravura piece and Garn couldn’t handle it.”

---

**Listen for the Variations in *A Little Night Music***

**Waltz**
A popular triple-meter ballroom dance that originated in the eighteenth century
Example: “You Must Meet My Wife”

**Mazurka**
A lively Polish dance, typically in ¾ or ¾ time, with the accent usually on the second or third beat
Examples: “The Glamorous Life” and “Remember?”

**Sarabande**
A Baroque dance in triple meter; characteristically the second note of the measure is lengthened, giving it a stately, majestic feel
Examples: “Later” and “Liaisons”

**Polonaise**
A Polish court dance in triple meter, popular in nineteenth-century Europe
Example: “In Praise of Women”

**Étude**
An artistic exercise in technique; usually a short musical composition for a single instrument that is meant to demonstrate the player’s skill
Example: “Every Day a Little Death”

**Gigue**
A lively dance standardized in the eighteenth century as the last of the four regular dances of the suite; it is in 6/8 meter
Example: “A Weekend in the Country”
While going into rehearsal with an unfinished score was not without its hardships and casualties, it was also responsible for some spellbinding results. Secrest notes that because it was written so late in the staging process, “A Weekend in the Country,” the finale to Act I, “could be tailored right down to the last semiquaver.” By that point in rehearsals, Prince and Wheeler knew exactly what the moment needed: a Gilbert and Sullivan–style operetta with the entire cast, showing the characters’ reactions to Madame Armfeldt’s invitation to the country. Armed with that information and an understanding of how the piece would work onstage, Sondheim was able to write the complex song relatively freely and quickly, even though the form was new to him. “Although it was my first attempt to tell a story with motivations and complications within song form (as opposed to recitative), I had such a good, if exhausting, time writing it that I did it again subsequently whenever I got the chance,” explains Sondheim.

Perhaps Sondheim’s most widely recognized song, “Send in the Clowns,” would not exist had it not been for Glynis Johns, the actor who originated Desiree Armfeldt. Assuming they would not be fortunate enough to find a leading lady who could command the role and also sing, Sondheim had written Desiree as a non-singing part. He remembers:

When we were casting Desiree, we knew we needed someone in early middle age, charming and seductive enough to make Fredrik think of cheating on, and perhaps leaving, his beautiful and very young wife. She also had to be an actress capable of playing light comedy. . . . With all those qualities necessary, we could hardly expect that whomever we cast would also be a strong singer, so I wrote the score to lean heavily on the voices of the other characters.

After casting Johns, Prince and Sondheim made the delightful discovery that she had what Sondheim describes as a “small but silvery voice that was musical and smokily pure.” By design, Desiree had few numbers: two songs in the first act (neither one a solo) and none in the second. During rehearsals, Prince realized that her scene with Fredrik might be the ideal place for a solo. The director had been waiting on a song for Fredrik for this moment, but Sondheim had been unable to write it, so Prince rearranged the scene to shift the focus onto Desiree. After witnessing the effectiveness of the new staging, Sondheim wrote “Send in the Clowns” over the next day and a half; it usually took him no less than a week to write a song.

Sondheim has described “Send in the Clowns” as a rhapsody that is “a very deliberate Rachmaninoff imitation” with a “wandering, liquid quality”; Swayne suggests that it was likely inspired by Sondheim’s favorite Rachmaninoff piece, Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. Much of the song’s distinct character stems from Sondheim’s solution for masking Johns’s vocal shortcomings. He explains, “Her chief limitation was an inability to sustain a note; the breathiness that I loved was, ironically, her liability as a singer. The solution was to write short breathy phrases for her, which suggested to me that they should be questions rather than statements. Once I’d reached that conclusion, the song wrote effortlessly.” In addition to the short phrases, he avoided open vowel sounds: “You
use little cut-off things so that the audience doesn’t think it is the actress’s fault. And that makes the song specifically for someone who can’t sing,” Sondheim expounds. “One of the reasons I like the song is that nobody can sing it as well as she.”

As thoughtful as his approach was, when he first presented the song to his collaborators, he had doubts. Prince remembers Sondheim sitting down at the piano to play it for them, apologetically muttering, “I don’t know what I think of this. Sounds like a piano bar song.” Prince and Johns adored it immediately, but Prince suggests Sondheim “always suspected it was too pretty, too easy to remember, too whatever.” The songwriter’s misgivings about the song linger to this day:

Why so many fine (and not so fine) singers have recorded “Send in the Clowns” is a mystery to me. Not that I don’t think that the song is eminently worth singing, but why this ballad of all the ones I’ve written? For two years after A Little Night Music opened, the only even faintly known vocalist who took an interest in it was Bobby Short. . . . Then Judy Collins recorded it in England, where it incomprehensibly became a hit, after which Frank Sinatra’s recording made it an even bigger one, and soon enough virtually everybody in the pop field climbed on the bandwagon. To this date [2010], there are more than 500 separate recordings of the song, and new ones pop up every month. . . . The success of “Send in the Clowns” is still a mystery to me.

“Night Music was a show that gave me pleasure for different reasons than the other musicals I’ve written,” Sondheim said after the show won trophies and praise, much of which was directed at his score. “I like writing elegant stuff sometimes, although I generally like to write shows that are more openly emotional because they are more satisfying to me personally. I also don’t think the show was as great a departure for me as some have said it was. It’s all of a fabric—just another segment of my work.”

If not a departure, it was, and is, a “triumph . . . a celebration of ¾ time,” as critic Clive Barnes wrote following the Broadway opening. With its level of technical sophistication and consistency, the score of A Little Night Music is unique. It truly became a vehicle through which Sondheim could show off.

Love’s Merry-Go-Round
An Interview with Actor Karen Ziemba

By Shannon Stockwell

As a young ballet student, actor Karen Ziemba traveled to New York to take classes at the American Ballet Theatre School. While in the city, she and her classmates could each select one Broadway musical to see, and Ziemba happened to choose A Little Night Music. “I didn't know anything about it,” she remembers. “I just thought it sounded like a beautiful title.” It was the first show she ever saw on Broadway.

Already a passionate dancer, Ziemba was attracted to the waltz rhythm that permeated the opening number with the Liebeslieder quintet. She recalls the song setting the tone for the evening; the actors seemed to be saying, “This night will be very mysterious, but let’s have fun and play.”

After the quintet finished, Ziemba felt transported by the set design. “It was like I was outside, but I was in the Shubert Theatre in New York City,” she says. Beyond the stunning visuals, however, the themes of the play were what truly thrilled her. “It was set at the turn of the century, but it had very contemporary themes. It was sexy and witty. It was sweeping and sensuous. It was titillating. I thought I was in heaven.”

Ziemba has come a long way from that young girl in awe of Sondheim’s musical; today, she is a singer/dancer/actor on the Broadway stage and beyond. She received Tony, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle awards in 2000 for her performance in Contact at Lincoln Center Theater. Her other honors include an Outer Critics Circle Award and a Tony Award nomination for Curtains in 2007, an Outer Critics Circle Award and a Tony Award nomination for Never Gonna Dance in 2004, Tony and Drama Desk award nominations for Steel Pier in 1997, a Drama Desk nomination for I Do! I Do! in 1996, a Joseph Jefferson Award for Crazy for You in 1994, and a Drama Desk Award for And the World Goes ’Round in 1991. She is no stranger to the work of Stephen Sondheim, either—she played Mrs. Lovett in Opera Theatre of St. Louis’s production of Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street in 2012, and she performed “Sooner or Later” from the film Dick Tracy for PBS’s Sondheim: A Celebration at Carnegie Hall. “There’s a learning curve with Sondheim shows, because he is so erudite,” she says. “His score, music, and lyrics are so intelligent, witty, and tricky. He gets into his characters’ psyches, and he writes these little one-act plays for every song.”
A few weeks before rehearsals began in San Francisco, Ziemba spoke with us about playing the role of Desiree Armfeldt, taking on one of Sondheim’s most iconic songs, and finding the similarities between her experiences as an actor and the life of her character.

What have you been doing to prepare for this role?

Desiree Armfeldt is an acting and singing role, but the singing is secondary. It was originally written for Glynis Johns, a wonderful comic and dramatic actor from British stage and film. Singing wasn’t the main thrust of her career, but she was musical and carried a tune well, so some lines were sung, and some were spoken-sung. While learning the score, I tried to find how I could best express Desiree’s feelings by either speaking with music underneath or actually singing the lyrics.

One of the things that makes this play so fun is that it weaves such a tangled web of lovers.

We know how it is when you’re walking under the stars in the summer, or when the sun is setting, and how romantic it feels. This is the show’s setting. The characters in that setting are attracted to certain people, but those people may be attracted to someone else. As a human being, one can’t help those feelings of love and lust. In giving in to those feelings, we may have a delightful experience, but affairs of the heart can also turn bittersweet.
In this story, many of the characters fall into each other’s arms. My character, Desiree, had a lover in the past, Fredrik, but he is now married to someone else. Desiree has a new lover, but she still has feelings for Fredrik. This merry-go-round of love is endless.

**Have you seen Ingmar Bergman’s film, *Smiles of a Summer Night***?

I saw part of it a long time ago on late-night television. I wasn’t prepared at that age to sit through an Ingmar Bergman film with subtitles, so I stopped halfway through. But that just means I get to enjoy it now!

**In the film, Desiree and Fredrik don’t sleep together in the beginning. Do you have any thoughts about why that was changed in the musical?**

In the actual time period in which the film is set, they may not have slept together, even though they had been lovers in the past, because Fredrik is now married to Anne. However, the man has not been truly intimate with his wife since they married a year ago. Desiree and Fredrik’s intimacy creates tension, but ultimately brings relief. They have great feelings for each other, and they pick up where they left off. It’s like when you have an old love from the past and years go by and you get in touch again, and you think, “Oh my god, I still have feelings for this person.”

**Do you think that Fredrik and Desiree are meant to be together?**

They finish each other’s sentences, they make each other laugh, and they find each other very appealing—all important things in a relationship.

**How is Desiree’s profession as an actor significant?**

Desiree is a star of some note, but she isn’t like Eleonora Duse or Helen Mirren. However, she does well because she is very attractive, charming, and unique. She is a creature of the stage, so she is much more free-spirited than some other women are. She has suitors and people who admire her. Actors can enter a room and take all the attention. Somebody’s wife could find that hard to compete with. Also, Desiree is away from home so often because of her touring schedule that it keeps marriage and motherhood at a distance.

Actresses of that time dressed very glamorously and wore the latest fashions, the largest hats, and the biggest fur coats. When my mom was a little girl in the 1940s, my grandmother (her mother) was an opera singer. She would come to pick my mother up at school and she would look very grand, and my mother was so embarrassed because everybody would turn and stare at my grandmother wearing her enormous hat, platform heels, and “Joan Crawford” shoulder pads. She was bigger than life, but my mother just wanted a regular mom. Fredrika sings, “Ordinary mothers lead ordinary lives. . . . Mine acts.” How does Fredrika feel about that? She might just want a regular mom.
As Desiree, you will perform “Send in the Clowns,” which has been recorded by scores of people and is such a moving song. Sondheim has said that he’s not sure why it’s so popular, but do you have any thoughts about why the song has endured?

When it’s sung in the play, it makes so much sense. It’s saying, “I’m the one who has been running around all my life, and I’m ready to make a commitment and stay in one place—but now you’re the one who is running off. What can we do but laugh? We would probably make a wonderful pair, but we’re not on the same page.” That happens to many lovers. That’s why the song endures.

Like the book of A Little Night Music by Hugh Wheeler, “Send in the Clowns” is spare, simple, and clear. In a way, it’s very unexpected—it’s an example of Sondheim’s extraordinary writing. It’s not like a song you’ve heard before. It’s his voice, and his alone.

How are you approaching that song?

Right now, my work is about learning the words and making them ring true to me. Until I get in a room with my cast members and my Fredrik [played by Patrick Cassidy], and until I experience telling the story from beginning to end, I won’t be able to truly figure out the thrust of that song. So currently, I’m not putting any pressure on myself. My take on it will come organically and evolve when I am in rehearsal and in each performance. That’s what’s so great about doing live theater: I will get many chances to play it.

LEFT AND RIGHT Costume designer Candice Donnelly’s renderings of Desiree Armfeldt for A.C.T.’s 2014 production of A Little Night Music
Are there any conversations you think you will have or that you would like to have in the rehearsal room?

When I’m creating a role, I spend time with the designers and we talk about what my clothes and hair are going to be like. I will be discovering how I move; a lot of that is going to come from my personality, and from the research I have found about the period and about how a woman would conduct herself in public versus her boudoir.

As far as the relationships of the characters go, they will come from playing with the people in the cast, working off each other, and being responsible for each other. Rehearsal is about opening yourself up to something that you don’t expect, making mistakes, and making progress.

What are you most looking forward to about performing in A Little Night Music?

It’s almost like coming full circle for me. When I saw A Little Night Music as a young woman, I never thought, “Someday I’m going to play that role.” I was just taking in the entire piece. As a teenager, I related to Fredrika, Anne, and Petra, who are the younger characters in the show. And now I relate to Desiree. “Send in the Clowns” means much more to me now at this point in my life.

When I saw the show back in the mid ’70s, I was a ballet dancer. But I loved the theater. Thank goodness I had sung all my life and was fortunate to become a singing/dancing actor. I am so proud to play Desiree. I have had such affection for A Little Night Music from a very impressionable time in my life, and to now be a part of that story’s legacy is thrilling.
A Return Home through Memory
An Interview with Scenic Designer Riccardo Hernandez

By Anna Woodruff

Riccardo Hernandez is a Tony Award–nominated scenic designer. A graduate of the Yale School of Drama, Hernandez has gone on to work in many New York–based theaters, regional stages, and operas. He has designed sets for such Broadway productions as Bring in ‘da Noise, Bring in ‘da Funk (1996), Parade (1998), and Caroline, or Change (2004).

Hernandez brings his imagination to The Geary for A Little Night Music. He is intimately familiar with Stephen Sondheim’s period masterpiece, having worked on Mark Lamos’s 2008 production at Center Stage in Baltimore, but a change of venue necessitates a wholly different set of considerations. With the help of Lamos’s fluid direction, Hernandez’s set relies on natural theatrical elements to move the story. Lamos describes the set as “typical Riccardo Hernandez”: both simple and complex. Madame Armfeldt’s country estate is three-dimensional, with lights in the windows. Another scene features seven chandeliers that go up and come down. But despite these seemingly elaborate elements, the set is minimal, as it is meant to allow the actors to float across the space of the stage. Hernandez’s set also offers the other designers, including lighting designer Robert Wierzel, a plethora of opportunities. “The set can turn from pink to purple to white to gray to rainy to sunny to midnight, which is great, because A Little Night Music is all about light,” Lamos explains.

And just as Madame Armfeldt muses over distant memories of past lovers, and Desiree and Fredrik long for the simplicity of young love, Hernandez’s creative process also directly engages with memory. In a recent conversation, he told us that his recollection of his 2008 design has informed the choices he made in creating a multi-layered set for A.C.T. In fact, Hernandez believes that intentionally evoking nostalgia to create a new set is infinitely richer than starting from scratch.

When you first read a play that you are designing, what details are you looking for?

I’m not thinking about any specific details. On the first pass, I’m trying to get a sense of the piece, either through the music or the words. I don’t try to preconceive anything before I have my first meeting with the director, because sometimes you get enamored with ideas and things that have nothing to do with the approach that the director wants to take with a play.
Do you approach musicals differently from straight plays?

I’ve done quite a few musicals, and each one is different. When they are brand new, they are in process, which means songs and scenes are being composed and interchanged with one another, so it’s a very slow, methodical journey. For example, when I did Bring in ‘da Noise, Bring in ‘da Funk with George Wolfe at The Public Theater in 1996, I would come to rehearsal and watch how things were being developed and written. I would do very quick mock-ups with a model, and the idea of the design was born as Wolfe created the musical. That is something that usually doesn’t happen with a straight play, even if it’s a new play. Though it can completely change throughout the rehearsal process, it doesn’t depend on music.

What are some of the challenges of designing for a musical?

The most difficult thing about theater for any designer is just to allow space for the words or the music to be heard. That sounds very simple, but it’s the key to designing or creating a world for a brand-new opera, a classic opera, or for the world of Sondheim.

Do you find any parallels or differences between designing operas and designing musicals?

My father was an opera singer and I’m obsessed with music, especially opera, which is such a huge form. There’s a big difference between tackling a seventeenth- to eighteenth-century Baroque piece or a late-Renaissance piece, like L’Orfèo [written in 1607 by Monteverdi], which is very different from a nineteenth-century hard-core verismo, like La bohème [Leoncavallo, 1892] or Pagliacci [Puccini, 1896]. The form is the same, but verismo is almost like method acting and Baroque is much more classical.

I find that Shakespeare, the Greeks, and opera invite the audience to listen to the words and suspend their disbelief in the reality that the actors create. That allows a kind of theatrical freedom for me to do something more imaginative as opposed to something like a Neil Simon comedy, which is so detailed and so specific that I have to follow certain rules.

Have you been listening to the score for A Little Night Music while working on the show? If so, does this help you get into the world of the piece?

When Mark Lamos told me we were doing the show at A.C.T., I not only listened to the music, but I also went back to the original material that inspired it: Ingmar Bergman’s Smiles of a Summer Night. I thought, “What if this time around we create something that is overtly theatrical?” The play would self-consciously use the vernacular of theater, utilizing things like drops and low footlights, which visually remind the audience that this is theater.
This time around, we are focusing on the questions, “What is theater?” “How do we allow for the almost unending repetition of a waltz?” “How do we use nostalgia in the piece?” For me, finding the spirit of Bergman’s film in this beautiful musical was worth investigating.

Did you watch the film again in preparation for A.C.T.’s production?
I deliberately didn’t watch it again, although thinking about it inspired my design. I’m actually banking on using my own remembrance of the film. I want to evoke it rather than reiterate it.

Will the set at The Geary contain elements from the set at Center Stage?
Center Stage has a beautiful, old brick wall. We tried not to impose anything onto that very specific space, so we used the rawness and the beauty of the brick wall and built around it. The simplicity of the space, as well as the way Mark articulated the show with the music and choreography, made for a beautiful production.

It would have been very easy for Mark and me to do the same design again. But now we’re in a beautiful, large, operatic theater. So we thought, “Let’s really do it again, while preserving all the things that we know will work.” For A.C.T. the design is not a completely new idea, but an extension of what we didn’t get to do the first time around.
The play takes place at the turn of the twentieth century in Sweden. Will this setting be significant in your design?

I would say that you definitely sensed it was the late 1800s at Center Stage. I think you’re going to feel the time period even more at A.C.T., because we’re using a vernacular that has to do with old theater. And when I say “old theater,” I don’t mean that it is old-fashioned. I am referring to the evocation of something that, in a way, is already dead, which is a concept that Bergman tends to play with.

There is a sadness, a longing in both the film and in the music, that I think we will be able to achieve just a little bit more than we could at Center Stage. There, the audience was very close to the actors, physically. At A.C.T. we have distance because the Geary stage is a proscenium. With a sense of distance, you also get a sense of nostalgia. Also, with a bigger stage, we’ll be able to see a sunrise, or chandeliers can go up and down.

Settings change quite rapidly in this play; we move from the parlor to the dressing room to the bedroom. How do you design for such a large world?

In a very theatrical way—which is something that Mark has done with the blocking and that is actually written in the piece. In that sense, it’s no different from a Shakespearean play, such as *King Lear*, where you are inside a castle and, all of a sudden, you’re battling
the elements. Scenic design has to be fluid in order to be theatrical. What Mark has done with the quintet—with all the characters moving furniture to set the scene—feels like an homage to theater.

Mark and I are not dependent on theatrical mechanisms or automation, like a brand-new Broadway musical today might be. We’re dependent on how theater has worked for centuries, which is by creating a suggestion with very simple means. It’s no different from the Renaissance or Baroque theater or the theater of Strindberg.

There are many scenes in which two rooms are onstage at the same time. How does your design create some separation?

We [the actors and the design team] create a space that allows for that kind of logic. Mark’s staging and the way he deals with the focus between one space and the other is what makes the audience not question it. He can create theatrical language that we all understand. The way he tells a story with very simple means is amazing. It’s beautiful, not because of aesthetics but because it provokes no questions. It provides answers. It is just there. He’s not bogged down with thinking, “Oh, I need a wall to create an interior.” He’s beyond that, and he demands the same rigorous approach from all his designers and collaborators.

What have your conversations with Lamos and the other designers been like so far?

The designers have all worked together before on other productions, so we have a collective understanding of what Mark wants to achieve. That’s the beauty of working collaboratively. Even if you just relay certain points, ideas begin flowing and you understand the needs of each designer.

What excites you most about returning to Sondheim’s musical?

I am drawn to classics. Even if I were called to do Hamlet three or four times, I would say yes. Such plays are so deep and complicated that they leave room for multiple interpretations. And because of the subject matter and the score, A Little Night Music is a modern classic.

As I get older, I’m learning that what I used to see ten years ago is not what I see now, and what I used to think ten years ago is not what I think now. I feel more connected with the ideas of getting older and of dying, which this play explores. It also triggers people to rediscover or reinvestigate things from their past.

That is part of the beauty of theater, and that’s why I think theater will never die; it contains everything that happens in the world. To say that Othello is just about jealousy is too simplistic. It’s about much more than that. It’s about hatred, and it’s about racism—it’s about a lot of things. As long as questions exist, Hamlet will continue to be relevant. Similarly, Bergman and Sondheim are tackling amazing subject matter that will never die.
A Fantasy of Fools
An Interview with Costume Designer Candice Donnelly

By Shannon Stockwell

“For the sheer beauty of all the satin and ruffles, costume designer Candice Donnelly should have bouquets delivered to her sewing room every night,” wrote Washington Post journalist Peter Marks in his review of Center Stage in Baltimore’s 2008 production of A Little Night Music. Seven years later, Donnelly revisits Sondheim’s classic for A.C.T.’s production, directed, as it was in Baltimore, by Mark Lamos.

Donnelly’s vibrant costume designs were last seen on the Geary stage in Indian Ink, Tom Stoppard’s cross-cultural romance about the complex relationship between a poet and a painter, set against the backdrop of the struggle for Indian independence in the 1930s. Donnelly says she has an affinity for designing period pieces: “The research is very interesting to me. It’s a bit of a time travel experience.” A coproduction with New York City’s Roundabout Theatre Company, Indian Ink was recently nominated for a Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Costume Design. Since Indian Ink, Donnelly’s designs have been seen in the musical A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, a coproduction between the Guthrie Theater and the Acting Company.

A Little Night Music is set at the turn of the twentieth century, and designing the costumes of any era other than our own involves careful research and a watchful eye. Donnelly was happy to share with us her process of designing costumes for this sensuous musical.

Is your costume design at A.C.T. the same as it was for the Center Stage production?
There will be some tweaking, but it’s essentially the same. It’s a completely different cast, so that impacts things.

Do you design musicals much, or do you normally work with straight theater?
I do a little bit of everything. I’ve done several musicals and a few operas over the years. It’s actually the most fun to design a musical, because it is a bit more fantastical and very theatrical. It’s harder to design those types of costumes for film, and sometimes modern-dress plays end up being a little too similar to a filmed experience.
Compared to the costumes you might design for a straight play, what kind of practical elements do musical costumes require?

It depends on how much dancing the actors are doing and what the movement is like. The actors need to be miked, obviously, so you have to figure out a way to do that. Other than that, it’s not necessarily that different.

Does the dancing in *A Little Night Music* affect your design choice?

When we did the play at Center Stage, the dancing wasn’t so complicated that the actors needed special shoes. The shoes needed to be comfortable enough for them to move in, but they didn’t need to be dance shoes in particular.

How did you come up with the designs?

I did the same thing that I always do. I look at a lot of photographs and research, especially if it’s a period piece. *A Little Night Music* takes place at the turn of the twentieth century, which was a very feminine and extravagant era; the clothes, the fabrics, and the colors are very beautiful.

This is a romantic piece, and Mark [Lamos] feels that it’s very sexual. It’s about love and romance and the foolishness of people when they fall in love. It’s also about the whole idea of the midnight sun and how it makes people giddy. I put all of those factors together and came up with frothy, lacy, summery designs.

What kind of resources did you use in your research?

I used a lot of period magazines, and I have books of old photographs. I also used a French website, associated with the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. It has old photographs from 1860 up to the present.
You said that the period itself was very feminine. Does that hold true for the men’s costumes, as well?

Their costumes are much more formal. At that time, there were a lot more people who really dressed up. They wore clothes that were appropriate to their station. The people in *A Little Night Music* are upper class, so they adhere to rigidity in social roles. People are so aware of that kind of style now because of *Downton Abbey*—people dressing in tuxedos, tails, and gloves for dinner, even when they’re at home. That is a wonderful fantasy world for us today. It’s nothing that we would ever experience except in a play or a movie.

What are the costumes for the *Liebeslieder* quintet like?

Mark wanted to make the quintet young and sexy, so they’re getting in and out of bed, and they’re in corsets and underwear. I had research from dancers and carnival-goers from 1900, and the quintet is almost reminiscent of Pierrot [a stock character from the Italian comic theater of the eighteenth century that may have been the origin of the sad clown; he was often seen in white face paint and flowing white clothing]. The men are in black tails, and the women are in patchwork silk-satin dresses; the outfits are very fun and playful.

How do you decide what color a particular garment should be?

Sometimes it has to do with what the set looks like, because you want the characters to stand out from or complement the set. In this case, at the end of the show, the women are all in paler, shimmery, nighttime, starry colors.

What sort of costume choices have you made for Desiree’s play-within-a-play?

I had a lot of pictures of actors from the turn of the century doing various period plays, and what I tried to do was a nineteenth-century version of an eighteenth-century costume. If you look at these picture, you’ll notice that the costumes are trying to look like they are from the eighteenth century, but they’re cut like nineteenth-century clothing. So that’s what I did.

That’s fascinating; it’s a twenty-first-century version of a nineteenth-century version of an eighteenth-century costume.

Right!

What excites you about *A Little Night Music*?

It’s a perfect musical. It’s just very pleasing. *A Little Night Music* allows me to do what I love: design beautiful clothes.

**OPPOSITE** Costume designer Candice Donnelly’s rendering of a female member of the *Liebeslieder* quintet for A.C.T.’s 2015 production of *A Little Night Music*
“Love’s Disgusting, Love’s Insane”

Ingmar Bergman’s Smiles of a Summer Night

By Shannon Stockwell

As might be expected from an artist whose most famous films include such somber philosophical ruminations as The Seventh Seal (1957), Wild Strawberries (1957), Through a Glass Darkly (1961), and Persona (1966), Ingmar Bergman confessed to having a rather difficult relationship with comedy. “As a child, I was considered sullen and too sensitive,” he wrote in his memoir, Images: My Life in Film. “From an early age onward it was said that ‘Ingmar has no sense of humor.’ . . . Yet I wanted very much for people to laugh at my jokes.” Despite his discomfort with comedy, it was such a film—Smiles of a Summer Night—that first brought him international recognition, winning the Prix de l’humour poétique (Prize for Poetic Humor) at the Cannes Festival in 1956. The money he made with the film and the trust it earned him among producers allowed him to pursue more serious themes. He wouldn’t entirely divorce himself from comedy; in 1975 he directed The Magic Flute for television, and he considered Fanny and Alexander (1982) to have elements of humor, but most of his films following Smiles of a Summer Night were decidedly serious.

Bergman began to write Smiles of a Summer Night in 1955. He said he “thought of it as a technical challenge to write a comedy with a mathematical relationship: man-woman, man-woman . . . four pairs. Scramble them and then solve the equation.” Originally, he set the concept in contemporary times, but he eventually decided to place the film in the early 1900s following the success of his production in Malmö, Sweden, of Franz Lehár’s The Merry Widow, another turn-of-the-century tale. Film critic Pauline Kael noted that this was a smart decision: “The film is bathed in beauty, removed from the banalities of short skirts and modern-day streets and shops, and removed in time, it draws us closer.”

Although it is a comedy, Smiles of a Summer Night (Sommarnattens leende in Swedish) came out of a period of intense depression in Bergman’s life. He had traveled to an inn in Switzerland in the early spring in 1955 with the intention of writing the script for Smiles of a Summer Night, which then existed only as an outline, but the lack of sunlight combined with social isolation brought his mood to an all-time low. He was seriously contemplating suicide when a producer from the Svenski Filminindustri called upon him to return to Sweden to help doctor another screenplay. As soon as Bergman was in his home country, he said, “All at once it became a merry game to write.”
Bergman began shooting the movie in Sweden during the summer of 1955—a practical time of year in which to do so, because the sun remains in the sky for most of the day, leaving ample time to film outdoors without the technical challenge of artificial lighting. But summer is an extremely important time of year for all Scandinavians, not just moviemakers. “You have such a short summer period here in the Nordic countries, and only people who live here or visit here are aware of how intense everything is in that period,” says film historian Peter Cowie. “Everything has to be lived. People come out of their shell at the end of the spring, and they live these two months of summer very, very passionately.” This feeling is palpable in both Smiles of a Summer Night and A Little Night Music; in fact, it was one of the things that attracted Sondheim to the film. Sondheim explained that he was intrigued by “the notion of the summer night, in which it is light all the time, so that there is always the promise of sex, but it never quite gets there because the sun never sets.”

When he needed a film to adapt into a musical, Sondheim sought out a tragic farce. He chose Smiles of a Summer Night over Jean Renoir’s The Rules of the Game (1939); he said, “The Rules of the Game is the most respected example of [a tragic farce], but for my money Smiles of a Summer Night is more deserving of the accolade; it’s a subtler story, one in which the apparent tragedy is comically averted, but the submerged one not.”

It is appropriate that Smiles of a Summer Night was eventually adapted for the stage, given that a number of critics have commented on the film’s innate theatricality. “The relevance of theater to Bergman’s films is nowhere more conspicuous than in Smiles,” says film critic Robert Emmet Long. “One of the main characters is an actress; a scene
A Little Night Music vs. Smiles of a Summer Night

In A Little Night Music, Desiree’s child is a 14-year-old girl named Fredrika. In Smiles of a Summer Night, Desiree’s child is a young boy, about four years old, named Fredrik.

In A Little Night Music, Desiree only invites the Egermans to her mother’s estate with the intention of winning Fredrik back. In Smiles of a Summer Night, Desiree invites both the Egermans and the Malcolms, presumably because she has a plan to win Fredrik back, and she needs Charlotte’s help.

In A Little Night Music, once at the Armfeldt estate, Charlotte comes up with a plan and shares it with Anne. In Smiles of a Summer Night, once both the Malcolms and the Egermans arrive, Desiree pulls Charlotte aside to divulge her plan. The screen fades to black before we learn the specifics of the plot, but it seems to involve seating Henrik and Anne next to each other at dinner—many people suspect that they are secretly in love with each other, and Desiree somehow foresees that Henrik will become upset and thus require Anne’s comfort. Fredrik will suddenly realize that his wife is in love with his son, leaving him susceptible to Charlotte’s seduction. Charlotte does this in order to make Carl-Magnus jealous, causing him to profess his fidelity to her. With Anne out of the picture, Desiree will be free to win Fredrik back.

In A Little Night Music, Henrik attempts to hang himself while Fredrika tells Anne that Henrik is in love with her. Anne catches him just after his failed suicide attempt. They confess their love for each other. In Smiles of a Summer Night, after dinner, Anne retires to her room, which is next to Henrik’s. In his room, there is a special button that mechanically brings the bed in the neighboring room through the wall—a vestige from adulterous previous occupants of these two rooms. When Henrik attempts to hang himself in this room following dinner, he falls and hits the button, magically transporting the sleeping Anne through the wall. They confess their love for each other.

In A Little Night Music, Petra is decisively against marriage, as evidenced by “The Miller’s Son.” In Smiles of a Summer Night, Petra forces a proposal out of Frid.

In A Little Night Music, Carl-Magnus visits Desiree’s bedroom with the intention of having sex with her, but stops when he sees Charlotte sitting with Fredrik in the garden. When he realizes that his wife might actually be interested in another man, he leaves to confront them. In Smiles of a Summer Night, Carl-Magnus never has any intention of sleeping with Desiree while his wife is in the same house. Instead, Desiree sees Charlotte with Fredrik; suspecting that Charlotte might actually intend to sleep with Fredrik (instead of merely pretending to seduce him), she tells Carl-Magnus, who leaves to confront them.

In A Little Night Music, while Charlotte initially attempts to seduce Fredrik, they never come close to doing anything sexual. In Smiles of a Summer Night, Charlotte tells Carl-Magnus that Fredrik threw himself at her.
is set in the theater; and the party at Ryarp gives the sense of a theatrical entertainment transpiring there. The characters themselves all have their roles and masks and belong to one of life’s jests.”

About a year after *A Little Night Music* opened, Bergman asked Sondheim to help him write lyrics for a film version of *The Merry Widow*—the very operetta that had convinced Bergman to set *Smiles of a Summer Night* at the turn of the century. When Sondheim nervously inquired as to what Bergman thought of the show, the filmmaker said, “I enjoyed the evening very much. Your piece has nothing to do with my movie, it merely has the same story.”

*Smiles of a Summer Night* and *A Little Night Music* do share many plot points and almost all of the same characters. In the film, Desiree Armfeldt (Eva Dahlbeck), an actress, is reunited with her ex-lover, Fredrik (Gunnar Björnstrand). She invites him; his virgin wife, Anne (Ulla Jacobsson); and his son, Henrik (Björn Bjelfvenstam), to her mother’s country house for the weekend. Also present are Desiree’s current lover, the masculine and posturing Carl-Magnus (Jarl Kulle), and his put-upon wife, Charlotte (Margit Carlqvist). Once together, the summer air drives their passions until finally, each character settles with the proper partner.

Despite the similarities of their plots, there are significant differences between the film and the musical. Perhaps the most notable of these is the arc of the relationship between Desiree and Fredrik. In *A Little Night Music*, Fredrik visits Desiree after her play and proposes that they sleep together, to which she agrees. When Carl-Magnus arrives, they improvise the story of Fredrik falling into a hip-bath. In *Smiles of a Summer Night*, Fredrik visits Desiree after her performance, but while he appears to have an ulterior motive, Desiree refuses him. She does invite him back to her apartment for a glass of wine, and Fredrik falls into an enormous puddle right after he walks in the front gate. His clothing is sufficiently wet that he is forced to put on Carl-Magnus’s rather ridiculous-looking dressing gown. Fredrik and Desiree then argue about their past relationship. When Carl-Magnus arrives at Desiree’s apartment and sees Fredrik in his dressing gown, he becomes jealous. Certainly, the circumstances are suspicious, but the audience knows that nothing sexual has happened.

Fredrik and Desiree’s relationship at the beginning of *Smiles of a Summer Night* is strained; similarly, the resolution of their storyline at the end of the film is ambiguous. Instead of a profession of love and a kiss, as in *A Little Night Music*, their final scene together is decidedly unromantic: Fredrik is dazed from his game of Russian roulette with Carl-Magnus (unlike in the musical, Carl-Magnus loads the revolver with soot, leaving Fredrik completely unharmed). Desiree teases him:

Fredrik: Don’t leave me.
Desiree: I make no promises, Mr. Lawyer. You are a terribly dull and ordinary person, while I am a great artist.

The audience gathers that a reunion will take place, since Fredrik has lost Anne and Desiree is no longer interested in Carl-Magnus, but it is never explicitly stated.
Another difference is the character who provides the philosophy about the smiles of the summer night. In *A Little Night Music*, this idea begins the play and is related by Madame Armfeldt to her granddaughter, Fredrika. In *Smiles of a Summer Night*, this honor is given to Frid, Madame Armfeldt’s servant, who tells it to Petra. Indeed, Frid and Petra's relationship plays a more prominent role in the film, which may stem from Bergman's affinity for the working class. Film critic Peter Cowie says:

The things that Bergman identifies most with, you feel, are the scenes between Harriet [Andersson as Petra] and [Åke Fridell as Frid]. I think he’s happiest in those scenes, really, because they’re lusty, they’re down-to-earth, and when he’s dealing with the upper classes, he’s almost mocking them. . . . I think [Bergman] likes a more fundamental class of human being. He sides with them, the more earthy type of character. . . . Frid is someone with whom he identifies, or would love to be, much more than the Gunnar Björnstrand character [Fredrik].

In fact, *A Little Night Music* once contained a song for Frid called “Silly People,” in which he (presumably in addition to Madame Armfeldt at the beginning of the play) shares with the audience the philosophy about the smiles of the summer night, but the song was cut in Boston, because “the audience neither knew nor cared about who Frid was, and, as in the case of so many other songs . . . it impeded the flow of the story,” said Sondheim.

Although *A Little Night Music* feels emotionally lighter, the themes of the two pieces are quite similar. Bergman himself said, “[*Smiles of a Summer Night*] explores the frightening insight that it is possible for two people to love each other even when they find it impossible to live together.” This could easily be said about Sondheim’s musical, in which the characters make rash decisions and manipulate each other in the hope of finding true love at last. While they do eventually wind up with the right partner, at certain points the characters find it impossible to make their relationships work; Charlotte sings in “Every Day a Little Death”: “Love’s disgusting / Love’s insane / A humiliating business,” while Anne heartily agrees, “Oh, how true!”

---

**Sources**  
Love, Sex, and Other Revelations
All on a Midsummer’s Night

By Nirmala Nataraj

It all must be so beautiful in old Sweden now—Midsummer time—one almost chokes up thinking about the long, light nights; the still, clear bays where birch promontories are reflected, where cuckoos call and the thrushes sing wistfully in the woods in the twilight; the strains of a fiddle and the sounds of dancing in the distance . . . rustling in the birches; heart and eyes and hands full of love; the sun gone; but the rays remaining, like a Gloria around the general intoxication, in which all the secret longing that ripened during the long, cold spring releases itself like a shower of incorporeal flowers that are just scent, which the soul drinks in.

—Swedish painter Sven Richard Bergh,
in a letter from Normandy, France, 1887

Among the Vikings, Midsummer’s Eve, or summer solstice, was an important festival that promoted fertility. The maypole, which can still be seen in modern-day celebrations, was originally a phallic symbol that represented the fertilization of Mother Nature. In order to encourage a robust harvest, men and women celebrated with public orgies. Today, Midsummer’s Eve is a holiday that evokes these ancient fertility rites, as well as unbridled lust and the unpredictable impulses of the human heart. It offers the perfect pretext for men and women to throw off social masks and temporarily regress to their primal natures.

The entire summer season and its attendant long hours of daylight carry particular significance in the northern Scandinavian countries—in Stockholm, the sun typically sets around 10 p.m., whereas in Sweden’s northernmost town of Kiruna, the sky stays light for two months. After the long, dark winter of the region, the season carries with it a certain levity, while evoking the jubilant unearthing of desires that may normally remain hidden. Sexual and romantic relationships are thought to be heightened around this time, and unmarried girls are told that if they place seven types of flowers beneath their pillows at night, they will dream of their future husbands. Although it dates back to pre-Christian solstice rites, Midsummer’s Eve usually takes place on June 24, which is the feast day of Saint John the Baptist (possibly instituted by the Catholic Church.
to supplant the raucous pagan rituals). However, Sondheim’s story of a weekend in the country is apropos; in 1952 the Swedish Parliament decided that Midsummer’s Eve would always be celebrated during the weekend, between June 19 and 25.

Given its sensuous reputation, it is fitting that Midsummer’s Eve provides the backdrop for *A Little Night Music*. Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler’s romantic musical, *A Little Night Music*, summons the sensual mayhem of the festival and the season, which is in keeping with a body of works that choose this time of year as a framework for tales of sex and romance. These include William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, August Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, George Kukor’s *The Philadelphia Story*, Woody Allen’s *A Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy*, and Ingmar Bergman’s *Smiles of a Summer Night*. Such tales engage with issues of infidelity, unrestrained sexual appetite, and human folly, which, in traditional Midsummer’s Eve rites, is treated with much leniency.

Indeed, the festival is viewed as a time in which disguise, purposeful deception, and unchecked hedonism are perfectly acceptable. In Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, the decadent environment of feasting, maypole dancing, drinking, and revelry liberates its characters from their customary social roles. While Strindberg seems to suggest that such revelry is transgressive because it bridges the divide between aristocrats and their servants, *A Little Night Music* focuses primarily on the leisure time of the well-to-do, suggesting that a little midsummer fun can have salutary effects on repressed city folk. As the characters venture out to the country, nature’s magical, transformative power is revealed.

*A Little Night Music* follows in the footsteps of many midsummer tales in which nature is seen as a beneficent force. While coming into contact with nature’s elements can mirror the unpredictability and chaos of human emotion, it also creates opportunities for clear reflection and revelation. In *A Little Night Music*, the setting allows individual characters to make important realizations about their true desires, and such epiphanies enable them to gain perspective and release from self-delusion. Although nature’s presence is subtle in the world of Sondheim and Wheeler’s musical, it is one of the major players that brings the plot to a head. For Fredrik, Desiree, Anne, Henrik, and the others, the shortest night of the year is best spent indulging one’s passions out in the open.

The Bartered Bride is a comic opera written in 1865 by composer Bedřich Smetana and librettist Karel Sabina. Set in the country, the opera tells the story of how true love conquers overbearing parents’ desires and a scheming marriage broker.

Brigand refers to an outlaw or bandit, usually in a gang, who robs people in the forests and mountains.

Chiffonier refers to a high chest of drawers.

Cravat refers to a type of necktie or scarf worn by men tucked inside an open-necked shirt. Popular in the seventeenth century, this item has gone through many transformations and is still commonly worn today.

Digs is a slang term that refers to living accommodations.

Dragoon refers to a soldier who rides horses instead of marching and is trained in various fighting skills. The origins of mounted infantry date back to the beginnings of organized warfare. In most European armies, dragoon regiments were established in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It is believed that the word “dragoon” is derived from a firearm known as the dragon, carried by mounted infantry of the French army.

Duchy refers to a territory ruled by a duke or duchess.

The fandango is a lively Spanish dance in triple time with the accompaniment of guitar and castanets.

Gingham is a lightweight cotton fabric that usually has a bold checkerboard design.

Hip-baths are deep tubs meant for sitting, submerging just the hips and buttocks; they were popular in the Victorian era.

Martin Luther was a German priest, friar, and professor during the sixteenth century. His book, Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences, provided new doctrines for the Christian faith, rejecting the Catholic Church, protesting clerical abuses such as pluralism and nepotism, and acting as a catalyst for the Protestant Reformation.
Midsummer’s Eve is a holiday celebrated in many countries, particularly throughout Scandinavia. In Sweden, Midsummer’s Eve marks the longest day of the year, and in many parts of the country, the sun doesn’t set at all on this day. Romance, sexuality, nature, and supernatural forces tend to surround midsummer lore. Celebrations commonly occur in the country, and most city dwellers observe the festivities in nature. In Sweden, schnapps is the midsummer drink of choice; pickled herring, potatoes, and the first strawberries of the season are the preferred delicacies. Other traditions include dancing around a maypole, which represents fertility, and collecting flowers and placing them beneath pillows at night to dream of future lovers.

Mumms ’87 is a champagne distributed by G. H. Mumm & Cie, one of the largest champagne producers of northern France.

Orion is one of the largest constellations in the night sky. Named for the hunter in Greek mythology whom Zeus placed in the heavens, Orion has seven major stars: two for his shoulders, two for his feet, and three for his belt.

Russian roulette is a game in which a player loads a single round in a revolver, spins the cylinder, points the gun at their own head, and pulls the trigger. It is a violent game of chance wherein there is a high probability that a person will be killed.

Stays are boned lace bodices worn by women beneath clothes to raise and support the bust, creating an inverted cone shape for the body. This was a common feature in women’s clothing between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Titian was a sixteenth-century Italian painter whose work ranged from portraits to landscapes and contained significant mythological and religious subjects. He was considered the most important painter in the Venetian school of artists, known for its sensual and poetic themes.

Vespers is a Christian prayer spoken in the evening or at sunset. In Latin, the word “vesper” means “evening.”

 Literary References

The Brönte sisters—Emily, Anne, and Charlotte—comprise a renowned nineteenth-century literary family that enjoyed success in both their own and contemporary times. Emily is best known for Wuthering Heights (1847), Anne for The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848), and Charlotte for Jane Eyre (1847).

Charles Dickens was a nineteenth-century English writer and social critic most famous for such novels as A Christmas Carol, David Copperfield, A Tale of Two Cities, and Great Expectations.

Guy de Maupassant was a nineteenth-century French writer reputed for pioneering the short-story form. He wrote many works, including three hundred short stories, six novels, three travel books, and one volume of verse. His stories are
characterized by an economy of style, comedy, and simple everyday episodes in people’s lives.

**Hans Christian Andersen** was a nineteenth-century Danish writer famous for such fairy tales as “The Little Mermaid,” “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” and “The Ugly Duckling.”

**Hedda Gabler** was a play written by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen in 1890. Ibsen’s Hedda is one of the greatest roles in drama and is sometimes compared to Hamlet for female actors. In the play, Hedda is bored by newlywed life and seeks to change her fate in order to remedy the monotony of life.

**Marquis de Sade**, also known as Donatien Alphonse François, was a French author, philosopher, and politician during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He is known for his erotic works of literature, which combine sexual freedom with violence. The word “sadism” is derived from his name.

**Phaedra** is a mid-seventeenth-century French play by Jean Racine. It is a dramatic version of the ancient Greek myth. In the story, Phaedra is married to Theseus, king of Athens, but in love with his illegitimate son, Hippolytus. After being rejected by Hippolytus, Phaedra claims that he raped her. Hippolytus dies while attempting to escape his father’s kingdom. Phaedra kills herself out of guilt, and Theseus adopts Hippolytus’s lover, Aricia, an Athenian princess whose kingdom was conquered by Theseus. The French philosopher Voltaire called the play “the masterpiece of the human mind.”

**Stendhal** is the pseudonym of Marie-Henri Beyle, a nineteenth-century French writer known as one of the earliest practitioners of realism. In his 1830 novel, *Le rouge et le noir (The Red and the Black)*, Stendahl chronicles the life of a young man who attempts to rise above his modest upbringing but is ultimately defeated by his passions.

**The Wild Duck** is a play by Henrik Ibsen, written in 1884. The play tells the tragic story of an idealistic son who exposes the duplicity of his father, a corrupt merchant; in doing so, he only ends up destroying the lives of the people he intended to save.
Questions to Consider

1. *A Little Night Music* is set in Sweden during midsummer, a time when the sun rarely sets throughout Scandinavia. How does this time of year contribute to the overall backdrop of the musical?

2. Stephen Sondheim wrote the score for *A Little Night Music* in various triplet meters to create a more integrated sound for the production. How does the music affect you?

3. How do the set, costumes, choreography, and other stage elements contribute to the experience of memory in the production?

4. Sondheim said his musical engages “the notion of the summer night, in which it is light all the time, so that there is always the promise of sex, but it never quite gets there because the sun never sets.” What kind of commentary do you think Sondheim and Wheeler are offering about love and sex?

5. By the end of the musical, many of the characters have paired off with lovers who are not the same ones they had at the beginning. Do you think these pairings are appropriate or provide adequate resolution?

6. According to Madame Armfeldt, the summer night smiles three times: once for those who don’t know anything, once for the fools, and once for those who know too much. In which category does each character fall?

7. How are youth and age represented in this play? What are the benefits and challenges associated with each? Is one more desirable than the other?

For Further Information . . .


