

Everything I Know I Learned From Musicals

Musings on musical theater from Chris Caggiano

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Sunday in the Hall With Sondheim

If you're in the Boston area this weekend, and you're looking for a lovely way to spend this Sunday evening, why not head over to the [Boston Conservatory](#). A bunch of my BoCo students have put together a revue entitled Sunday in the Hall With Sondheim. The "hall" in this case is venerable Seully Hall, which is on the fourth floor of the Conservatory's main building at 8 The Fenway. And, well, if I have to tell you who Sondheim is, then you really have no business reading this blog.

Two of my best students from last semester have put together this review: Joe Longthorne and Neil Reilly. Joe is the show's director, and Neil has created all the orchestrations and arrangements himself. And he's put together some really interesting numbers and sequences. Featured songs include "Take Me to the World" from [Evening Primrose](#), "Being Alive" from [Company](#), and "The Best Thing That Ever Has Happened" from [Bounce/Road Show](#). The cast comprises more than 20 the best performers that the school has to offer, accompanied by an 18-piece orchestra selected from the Conservatory's many talented musicians.

The shows are at 7PM and 9PM this Sunday evening. Tickets are \$7 in advance and \$9 at the door. For advance tickets, contact sundayinthehall@gmail.com. The proceeds go towards the school's [Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS](#) efforts. In keeping with the BC/EFA tradition, there will also be a number of autographed goodies from various Broadway shows available through silent auction and raffle.

So, a great cause, and a great show. We hope to see you there.

October 02, 2009 in [Concerts](#), [Shameless Self-Promotion](#), [Stephen Sondheim](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#) [ShareThis](#)

The Most Overrated Musical - Fall 2009





Yesterday, my students passed in the first of their papers, this one defending their choice for the most overrated musical. It's a task that I acknowledge is unfair and arbitrary, but I find it useful nonetheless. Writing the paper gives them a chance to get to know what I'm looking for, and for me to get to see how they think. And it encourages them to start thinking critically about the shows we're discussing, the shows that they see, and the shows that they do.

Here's a list of shows that they chose to write about this semester, along with the number of students who chose that particular show:

- 7 [Spring Awakening](#)
- 5 [Legally Blonde](#)
- 2 [Footloose](#)
- 2 [Jekyll & Hyde](#)
- 2 [Mamma Mia](#)
- 2 [Thoroughly Modern Millie](#)

The following shows received one "vote" each:

[42nd Street](#), [In the Heights](#), [Nunsense](#), [We Will Rock You](#), [The Who's Tommy](#), [Victor/Victoria](#), [Camelot](#), [Sweet Charity](#), [Les Miserables](#), [Rent](#), [Wicked](#), [The Phantom of the Opera](#)

We seem to have a very clear winner, as well as a strong contender in second place. Both Spring Awakening and Legally Blonde seem to have followed a similar trajectory in terms of public opinion. When the shows first appeared, there were certain contingents that were thrilled, albeit a drastically different set of folks for each show. Legally Blonde, although not a blockbuster, became a clear favorite with teenage and tween-age girls, most likely including a number of the young women who are currently enrolled in my course. But as time has passed, it appears the that bloom has faded from that garishly pink rose, at least for some people.

I find the case of Spring Awakening to be even more interesting. When the show first came on the theater scene, many heralded it as the future of musical theater, a bold and vital statement on the power of live theater to attract younger audiences. And, in many respects, they were right. However, I think these people -- and that includes this blogger -- were temporarily dazzled by the energy, style, and presentation of the show. And there's no denying the power that Spring Awakening has to engage, anger, and move. But I think as many people have taken a second look, the flaws of the show have become all too apparent: the minor plot points that go nowhere, the songs that bear scant relevance to the plot, the lyrics that veer past poetry into pretension.

Bear in mind that, in our first class, a number of my students chose Spring Awakening as one of the [best musicals ever](#). So the theater-going public hasn't executed a complete about-face with regard to the show. However, it will be interesting to see how Spring Awakening weathers the passage of time, especially when the amateur performance rights become available.

September 29, 2009 in [Lists](#), [Musical notes](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(11\)](#) [ShareThis](#)

Review - Kristina Concert at Carnegie Hall

I'm in New York for a two-show quickie. Last night I saw Kristina in concert at Carnegie Hall, and tonight I'm taking in a preview of the new musical Memphis. Look for my review of the latter sometimes after October 19th. (Press embargo, don'tcha know.)

Kristina had been intriguing me for quite some time. As you may know, the show began its life in Sweden in 1996 as Kristina Från Duvemåla, which became the biggest hit musical in Swedish history. (Exactly how many hit Swedish musicals have there been?) The show is based on the novels of Vilhelm Moberg, and concerns a group of Swedish farmers who immigrate to America during the 19th century.

The score for Kristina is by Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson, of ABBA and Mamma Mia! fame. Yeah, I know, whatever. But I'm a huge fan of Chess, for which Ulvaeus and Andersson also provided the music, so I was hoping Kristina would fulfill the melodious promise of that tragically flawed musical.

Alas, no.

I knew there was trouble afoot when the show began with 10-plus minutes of bald-faced expressions of love by the two main characters of the show, Kristina (Helen Sjöholm), and her soon-to-be husband Oskar (Russell Watson). Thrown into the opening mix were some Greek-chorus-like chorale passages reminiscent of "Merano," the fun but un-stage-able opening number to Chess. The thoroughly static storytelling in the opening sequence brought me in mind of The Pirate Queen. (Note to show creators: you never want to put anyone in mind of The Pirate Queen.)

Things didn't get much better from there. The music to Kristina isn't all that bad; in fact, some of it is quite stirring. But the show is almost entirely sung-through, featuring huge swaths of bland recitative. The main problem with the show is that the authors didn't seem to have a firm grasp on what to musicalize. There is genuine drama to be found in this story, but the authors haven't yet found a way to bring it out. They really could have used an experienced librettist, or a strong developmental director to help steer them toward more effective song choices and placement. For example, on the boat to America, Kristina and Oskar sing "Peasants at Sea," in which they lament that they have to sleep apart on the boat to America. Well, boo-frickin'-hoo. How is that supposed to be dramatically compelling?

One major groaner of a song choice is "Lice," a song about -- you guessed it -- infestation, in which two characters accuse each other of spreading the bugs around. The song contains an atrocious passage in which one character actually talks about how you can put the lice between two slices of bread and feed them to your kids. Are you frickin' kidding me, here?! Another song, "Queen of the Prairie," regales us on how Oskar buys Kristina a stove for Christmas, and every one from the town joins in to sing about how beautiful this stove is. The show is full of similar questionable-at-best, ludicrous-at-worst musical missteps.

When the songs aren't ridiculous, they're typically either impenetrable or dull. In the act one finale, Kristina sings "Summer Rose," a God-is-my-witness anthem (yes, the show actually contains that phrase) to her newly born child. It's pretty, but it ends the act without creating any tension. There's no suspense, no cliff hanger, no reason for us to want to come back and see what happens to these people, which is typical of the show's complete lack of dramatic



buildup.

There are a few decent songs in the score. "American Man" is a charming piece about the aging pastor whom the women take a shine to upon arrival in America. The always dependable Walter Charles imbues the pastor character with humor and gravity, despite his minuscule stage time. And the second act contains two stunning solo numbers, one for Oskar's younger brother, who returns from the California Gold Rush and bitter as hell. Kevin Odekirk gives a positively stirring rendition of "Gold Can Turn to Sand," which is really more than the song and the show deserve. And Helen Sjöholm got the evening's first standing ovation for "You Have to Be There," a soaring number in which Kristina confronts her God to demand an explanation for his seeming absence.

Kristina's other major flaw is its lack of a dramatic motor. The show is detrimentally episodic, passing through a series of unengaging complications that are almost always immediately resolved, making it hard to build up any empathy. The story is a morass of random and under-developed plot points: the religious persecution in Sweden, Kristina's contracting scurvy on the boat to America, Kristina's supposed rivalry with the local strumpet, played by Louise Pitre. In the middle of the second act, once the characters have relocated to Minnesota, some random guy comes in spouting pseudo-Native American babble about how this land belongs to no one, or some shit. It makes you think that there's going to be a subplot about a struggle with the local tribe, but like most of the other plot threads in this show, that potentially intriguing possibility is left unrealized.

Because the songs alone don't tell the story, this concert presentation needed to employ some direct narration and expository projections, which only served to emphasize that the authors weren't doing their job with the songs themselves. Perhaps the work has lost a great deal in the translation from the original Swedish. The show's new English text by Herbert Kretzmer features one uninspired cliché-ridden lyric after another: "all my body and my soul," "with every breath that I am taking," "no matter what, we will always have each other," and the aforementioned "as God is my witness."

In fairness, I found the last ten minutes of Kristina to be genuinely moving. Suddenly, the songs take on greater complexity, and the drama becomes palpable and moving. The rest of the show needs this kind of focus. But, alas, it's too little too late, coming after a long, slow slog through an attenuated series of muddled scenes and songs.

I must admit that the Carnegie Hall audience was going wild for the show. I can only imagine that some of them were there just for the music, or the performers, and that they weren't necessarily considering the piece from a dramatic perspective. I was there to see if the show had legs to make it beyond the concert hall. My answer: not in its current form. Nothing short of a near-complete rewrite would make this Kristina truly sing.

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