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Kristina on "Kristina"

September 23, 2009 | By Elisabeth Vincentelli

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What better way to wrap up this multi-installment preview of the concert version of "Kristina" at Carnegie Hall than to speak to Helen Sjöholm, who plays the show's heroine, and Kevin Odekirk, who gets to sing the big hit "The Gold Turned Into Sand" as the doomer Robert?

Helen, you originated the part of Kristina in 1995. What did you come from before that, pop or show tunes?

Helen Sjöholm: I was coming from the northern part of Sweden [laughs]. I was doing jazz and folk songs. Benny called me, I did a demo. They did auditions in the whole country and I got the part.

Liv Ullmann played the part in the movie adaptation of the original books, back in the early 70s.

HS: I saw the movies but I had no intention of watching her too closely. I knew the musical was going to be so different, so that was not a problem. We had our own world.

Has your take on the character evolved over the years?

HS: It's got to be 10 years since I did it, 15 years since we started. I'm older, I have kids. I've found more depth in it. Also at the beginning everything was so important: I was trying very hard to do a good character. Then she got into me and it became more natural.

The show was very successful in Sweden, but the country is depicted as a hell hole.

HS: Sweden is special, we're not afraid to look at the dark side [laughs].

You also sing in the Benny Andersson Orkester, and notably did the lead vocals on its latest single, "Story of a Heart," a song that should make Abba fans feel really misty. What's the band like?

HS: It's crazy, it's like a gypsy orchestra that plays everything. We had a hit in Sweden, "You Are My Man," that has been on the charts for 10 years or something. "Story of a Heart" sounds like an old Abba song but it didn't do as well as "You Are My Man," which sounds like a song from the '50s [she starts singing it].

Kevin Odekirk isn't new to "Kristina" either: He participated in workshops of the show a few years back, and seems to enjoy the concert format.

KO: It's pure story at this point. You don't have the costume and sets. You just get the story very purely and pristinely.

The score is very symphonic but there are little pockets that drift into pop and almost rock.

KO: Every time you find a little pocket, it's there for a specific reason. With "Wild Cat Money" for instance, that's a moment of real serious passion, real serious anger, and what better way to tell that story than to have some electric guitar, some distortion? It's wildly varied, the breadth of things that Benny does, but it's always for a specific reason that fits the story.

How did you approach the part of Robert?

You see in Karl Oskar and Robert two of the main reasons people came to America. Karl Oskar wanted to get his family a better life. First and foremost he wanted to be

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Elisabeth Vincentelli joined the New York Post as theater critic in February 2009. She previously was arts and entertainment editor at Time Out New York. In the past she's also contributed to publications such as The New York Times, The Village Voice, The Los Angeles Times, Entertainment Weekly, Rolling Stone, The Believer, Slate and Salon. She lives in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

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good husband and father, and to secure his family's future and well-being. Robert is about unabashed adventure and entrepreneurship, he wants excitement. One comes for solid ground, the other for excitement. One without the other is a little incomplete, and they represent these wonderful ideals that made this country. For me approaching Robert was about bringing that excitement, that adventure to the story. On a personal level, I always tried to remember how important these people were to me, going back and doing my own genealogy. It's pretty special for America to recognize that what we have today is the result of the hard work and effort and crazy trials these people went through.

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